

# US Populism, a brief introduction

Fugger Gymnasium, Augsburg, Thursday, 12 December 2024.

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Preface:

# Populism

**(1) Social, cultural, political philosophy that supports rights & power of ordinary people in their struggle against the privileged elite. It's thin on ideology and fat on emotions.**

- **As such**, the philosophy & practice of populism *stretches back for centuries*, way beyond the existence of America.



When considering « -isms », « -ologies », « -osophies » & such...remember that:

- “Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described.”

-- Susan Sontag (*photo right*),  
"Notes on 'Camp' ", 1964.



The second specifically American definition of **populism**:

**(2) Begins with the specific philosophy of the US Populist Party, which flourished in America at the very end of the 19th century, based on agrarian complaints (mainly upper & mid Western) **against big business** (East Coast & G. B., mainly banks & railroads) -- and then evolves from there into various forms.**

# 1. Defning: Two US Kinds

- **Communitarian: US!**
  - Franklin D. Roosevelt, New Deal (1930s)
  - L. B. Johnson's « Great Society » program (1960s)
- **Contrarian: US Against Them!**
  - 1900s US agrarian Populist Party
  - Trump's « Make American Great » politics.

- “**Populism** is not an agenda [nor a particular political party]; it is a way of viewing the world. It can come from the left or the right. It can be progressive or reactionary—or both, in an incoherent mix.... There is a streak of populism in virtually every American—it’s no accident that the opening words of the Constitution are ‘*We the People.*’ ”

- — David von Drehle, “Barack Obama Reveals His Populist Blind Spot”, *Time Magazine* online, June 30, 2016, @:  
<https://time.com/4389939/barack-obama-donald-trump-populism/>

## Note:

- It's also highly intentional that the opening lines of the USA fundamental contract & highest law -- its Constitution -- begins with: "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union...'
- The "We" is **Popular Sovereignty** (versus the older form of Royal Sovereignty)
- Plus this is not a claim to utopia, to an ideal, but to an **ongoing experiment**: "in Order to form a more perfect Union".

Populism is synonymous with grassroots in US usage. As in:

\* grassroots movement:

widely known or commonly encountered;  
fundamental; of or involving the common  
people as constituting an authentic from-  
the-bottom-up political & economic group;  
not falsely created or artificially dominated.


## So What? #2



**Q.** Why should you care about **populism**?

**A.** Because it's one of those social & cultural movements that can come to birth quickly, move fast & break things.

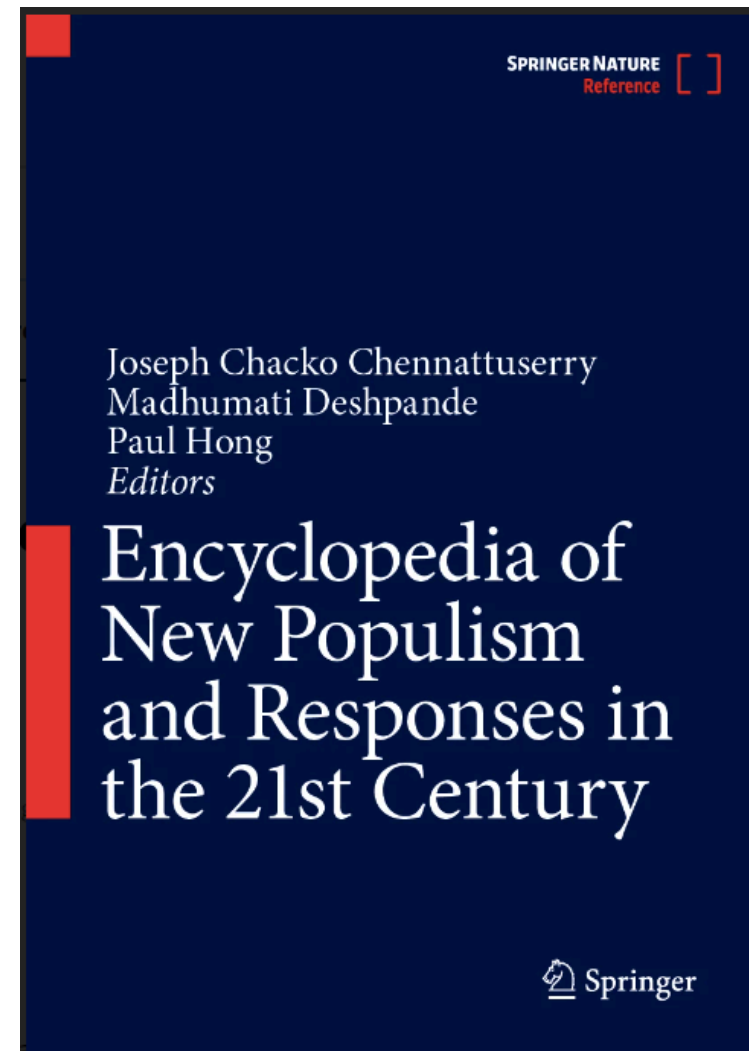
**populism**

 The existent order is usually not ready for a **populist** movements and **populism** tends to destroy --- in order to create. **IF** it can create.

#3



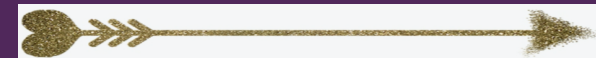
- The 21st century is an era of **new populism**. It's populism reborn; the same thing, but not the same thing.
- Immensely unpredictable even though it's already produced an immense critical mass.





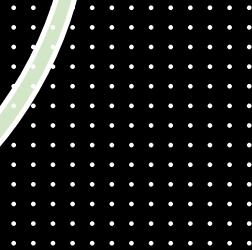


Europe and the United States are now both in an Era of populist resurgence -- which will ultimately be more to the right or more to the left? To whose benefit and why? Two reasons:





#4  
Populism uses  
two risky forces



- Charismatic Leader
- Emotive Reasoning

# Charisma.



Republican presidential candidate and former President Donald Trump speaks at a Get Out the Vote rally at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, S.C., Feb. 10, 2024. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)



# Previous two photos:

- First: Trump in full melodramatic mode on stage at one of his rallies
  - Second: Trump's mug shot -- the police photo when he was arrested in New York City and convicted of 32 felonies in 2024.
- the magnetism, the charisma.  
And there's the rub.
- Note: You may not feel  
But many people do.

Then  
the  
force  
of...




# Language & thought: Trump's populist communication relies on emotional reasoning

- When feelings decipher what's right or wrong.
- Emotional reaction defines reality.
- He proclaimed: *America is being 'destroyed' and it's an 'occupied country' under the control of immigrant criminals* (An outright lie!)

-- But it gets the audience reaction., " I feel anxious & therefore I'm in danger and need to be protected." .....**His promise** (quote):



I have joined the **political** arena   
so that the **powerful** can no longer  
beat up on **people** that cannot  
defend themselves.  
Nobody knows the **system** better  
than me, which is why I alone can  
fix it.





# He's come to represent the American people. Why? Who?

## Presidential results

From The Associated Press (AP) · [Learn more](#)

✔ Donald Trump wins

The AP has called this race



226  
Harris

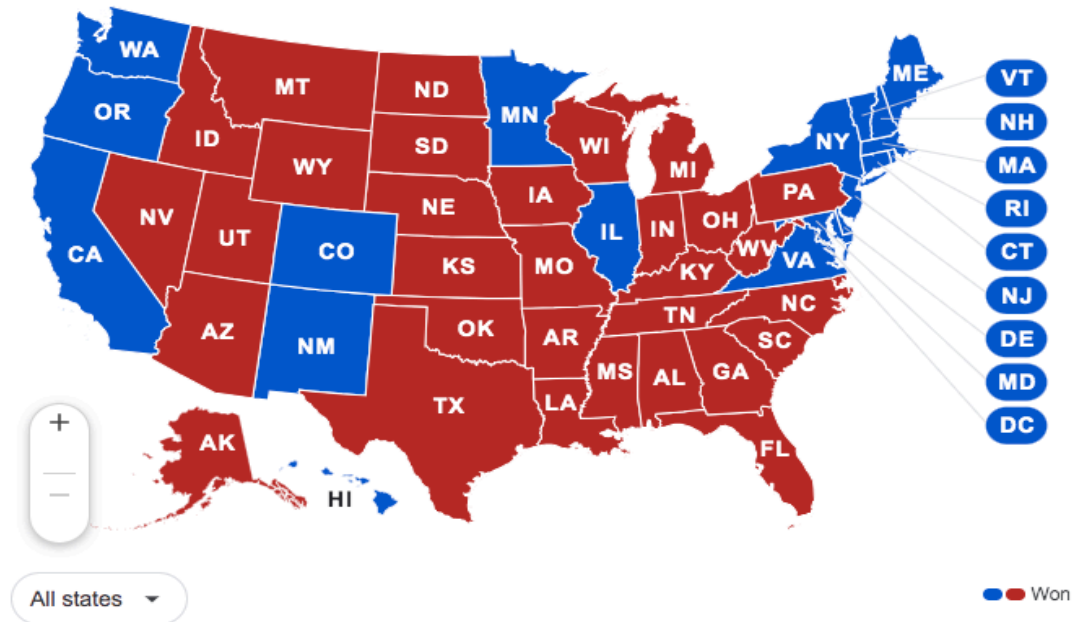
270 to win

312  
Trump




74,936,918 votes (48.4%)

77,234,090 votes (49.9%)





Trump represents the **American people who feel and experience** that they have been left out, excluded, disappointed or cheated in the 21st century -- for numerous reasons.

 How can one understand the indigenous experience?

- **Now comes...** one key expression of the current populist, Trump-producing forces: a **popular-populist** song!

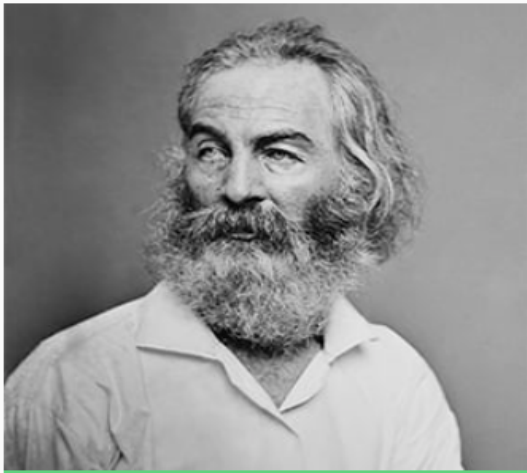
Song of social importance is a mountain peak of significance.

- “Words make you think a thought. Music makes you feel a feeling. A song makes you feel a thought.”

-- E. Y. Harburg (American lyricist, librettist & song writer, 1896-1981)



- One way to understand another culture is to listen to it...
- This song -- this aural communication, this « barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world” -- Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself - 52”



Born on May 31, 1819, Walt Whitman is the author of *Leaves of Grass* and, along with Emily Dickinson, is considered one of the architects of a uniquely American poetic voice.

--- has to do with a place, the US South, and a time, ***now***.

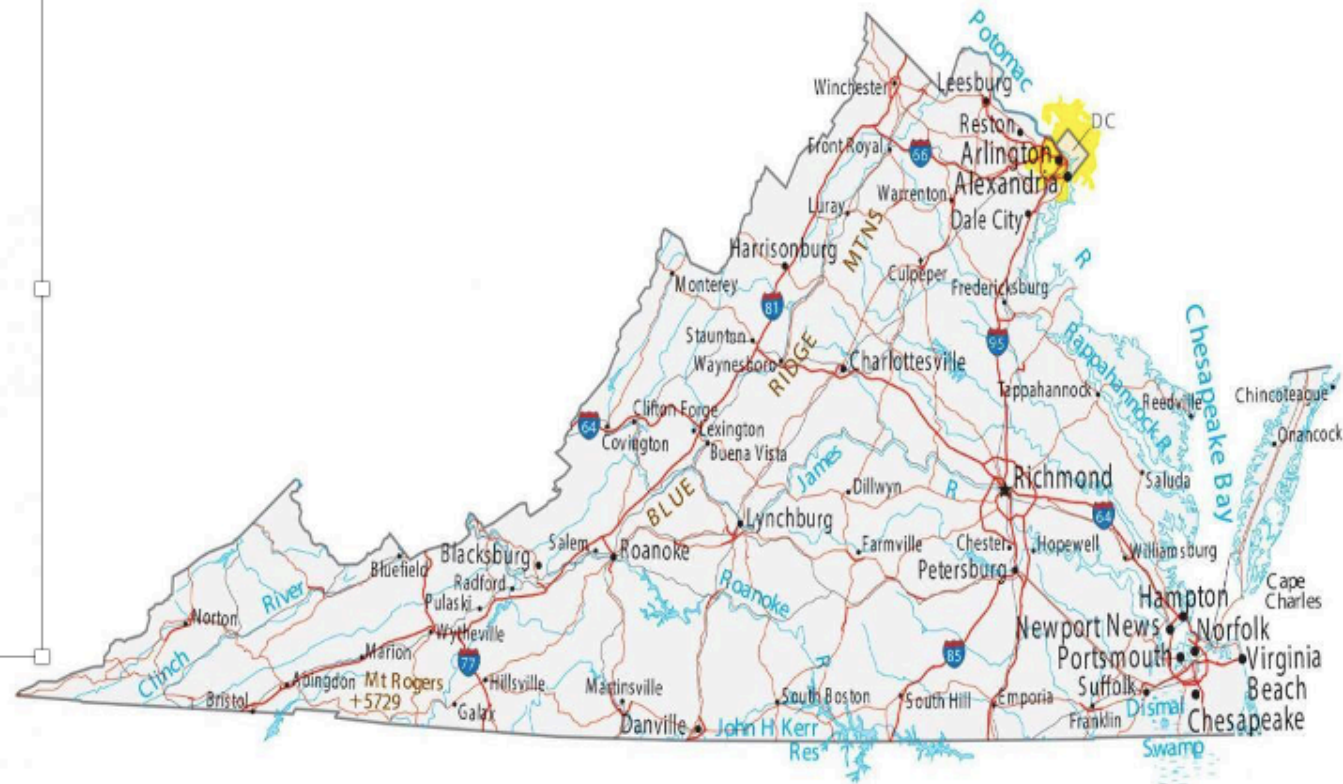
This song comes from a US area of great fighters, rebels, and losers..



# US Culture: Now it's a Time & Place & popular-populist opinion ripe for.....?



Map of the United States with Virginia highlighted



**There's a mood of anger --why?-- in this** post-pandemic American song, this grassroots popular-populist expression...

- A song **released August 2023**, in wake of Covid-19.
- Was overnight social media hit (viral hit). Within days topped sales & streaming charts. Quickly debuted at #1 on the Billboard Hot 100. Its singer-songwriter the first artist to debut atop the decisive Billboard chart without any prior hit parade history.

See, hear:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqSA-SY5Hro>

- Song: “**Rich Man, North of Richmond**”

by Oliver Anthony.

- I've been sellin' my soul, workin' all day  
Overtime hours for bullshit pay  
So I can sit out here and waste my life away  
Drag back home and drown my troubles away
- It's a damn shame what the world's gotten to  
For people like me and people like you  
Wish I could just wake up and it not be true  
But it is, oh, it is
- Livin' in the new world  
With an old soul  
These rich men north of Richmond

Lord knows they all just wanna have total control  
Wanna know what you think, wanna know what you do  
And they don't think you know, but I know that you do  
'Cause your dollar ain't shit and it's taxed to no end  
'Cause of rich men north of Richmond

- I wish politicians would look out for miners  
And not just minors on an island somewhere  
Lord, we got folks in the street, ain't got nothin' to eat  
And the obese milkin' welfare
- God, if you're 5 foot 3 and you're 300 pounds  
Taxes ought not to pay for your bags of fudge rounds  
Young men are puttin' themselves six feet in the ground  
'Cause all this damn country does is keep on kickin' them down

- Lord, it's a damn shame what the world's gotten to  
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'Cause of rich men north of Richmond
- I've been sellin' my soul, workin' all day  
Overtime hours for bullshit pay



## In this song:

- Who are “the people”?
- What is “true”?
- What’s “the new world”?
- What’s “north of Richmond”?
- What’s “minors on an island somewhere”?
- Who’s “obese milking welfare”?
- What’s wrong with “overtime hours”?

In this song:

- Are there any other reasons why American's lower & middle classes might now feel cheated?
- What's particular about this populism?

# Conclusion: Two kinds of American Populism

- **Communitarian**

- Classic example: end of *Grapes of Wrath*

(novel, 1939, movie, 1940)

. See visual quote:

- See @:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyEuarFhpcE>



- *Tom Joad*: “Well, maybe it's like Casy says. A fellow ain't got a soul of his own, just little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody, then...”
- *Ma Joad*: “Then what, Tom?”
- *Tom Joad*: “Then it don't matter. I'll be all around in the dark - I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look - wherever there's a fight, so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they build - I'll be there, too.”

Also what Obama tried to build on with **Affordable Care Act (ACA)**, formally known as the **Patient Protection & Affordable Care Act (PPACA)** -- informally as **Obamacare**

~~-----~~ Gave social security medical coverage to roughly 50 million Americans who had no medical insurance nor accessible care before

**Contrarian:** Trump's Nativism is specially visible in his histrionic patriotism, racist & anti-immigrant stance, & his implicit support for such far-right groups as:

Nativism: a particularly US policy — which rears its head in times of economic or cultural stress — which argues that the interests of native-born or established inhabitants must be protected versus the interests of immigrants. With nativism, xenophobia is seen as a virtue.



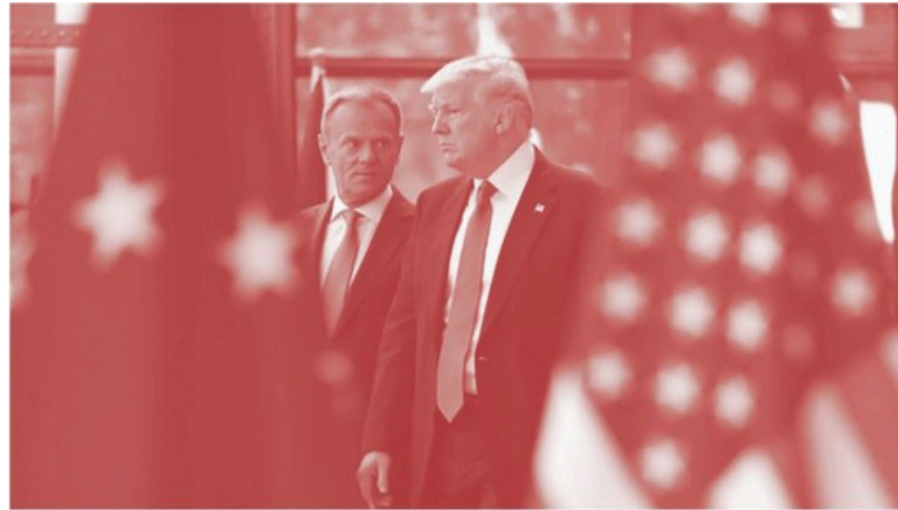
America's problem now: **Negative partisanship\*** worked for Trump.

- **Means to favor\*** one political party or opinion in opposition to another. Thus one's beliefs are formed not in and of themselves or via scientific reasoning — but because they are not what the opposition believes.



**POPULISM: TRUMP AND EUROPE. CAN IT HAPPEN HERE  
AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?**

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# **POPULISM:**

**Trump and Europe.  
Can It Happen Here and  
What to Do About It?**



Final points that help to refine populism...

1. On the national level, the Trump administration will encourage greater States' Rights
2. Local differences will intensify in the United States
3. The **US Democratic Party** will have to fall back and rebuild. But.....

Who are the likely new leaders -- who are *genuinely new* & not the same old same old?

As one of the students at the Gymnasium asked: *“Why, once again, did a white old man win the US presidency -- considering the diversity of the US population?”*

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Maybe the answer is due more to: (1) the poor offerings of the opposition party (the Dems.); (2) the system by which the candidates are initially chosen (the US Presidential primaries).

# 4

- Major problem with Trump's "populist" leadership is his actual popularity as shown in his Cabinet picks (*personnel is policy*).
- Americans look at some of Trump's nominations & about half of all U.S. adults in one poll say they're not at all confident he's picking well-qualified people.
- **Trump is by no means a unanimous choice of the American people.** There are 17 million Republicans who voted for Trump in the primaries. There are about 74 million people who voted for him in the general election. *There's a big difference between those 17 who were the hardcore MAGA and that 74.*

**5.** We're likely to see a certain degree of internal migration among the middle & upper classes that reflects a choice of lifestyles & culture

**6.** Note how American elections have been going in extreme waves: Obama, Trump, Biden, Trump. Why? What does this mean? All **populist**?

After Trump what will populism mean?

*"That's all Folks!"*<sup>TM</sup>



Cartoon Songs From

**MERRIE MELODIES & LOONEY TUNES**<sup>TM</sup>

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