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U.S. vs. Them. How Populism and Polarization Challenge the Liberal Order

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U.S. vs. Them

How Populism and Polarization Challenge the Liberal Order

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dual forces of populism and polarization as significant threats to the American liberal democratic order. It argues that the rising tide of populism in the United States, exemplified by the rhetoric and policies of figures like Donald Trump, is not merely a challenge due to its populist nature but because of its exclusionary tendencies that deepen societal divisions. Firstly, the Jacksonian populism of Donald Trump is analysed as a frame of a conflict between a marginalized white, and supposedly 'pure' working class and a corrupt elite, reinforcing a divisive 'us versus them' narrative. Secondly, the paper situates the rising populist tendencies into the wider context of deep ideological and affective polarization shaping the American electorate. Finally, the anti-populist response is examined from a critical perspective, arguing that despite being less regressive, anti-populism mirrors populism's divisive strategies by casting opponents as irrational, and perpetuates the cycle of polarization that undermines the liberal democratic script.

1 INTRODUCTION

The U.S. has long been considered a bastion of liberal thought, entrenched in the institutions guarding individual freedom, procedures for questioning the status quo, "checks and balances", legitimacy through a tacit social (and global) contract, and other remnants of the liberal script (Börzel/Zürn 2020). Ongoing or past internal contestations have often been interpreted as "growing pains" in the establishment of a matured liberal democracy, or as a natural result of a strong and active civil society – and, therefore, a strong and active democracy. However, the rise of more explosive rhetorics, radical political protests, and deeper divisions within the American society have created a strong scepticism about the harmlessness of internal contestations. To the extent that

the current illiberal practices can be weighed as a continuation of a history of contestations, i.e. a cycle of progressive leadership and backlash, they depict the implementation of the liberal script in the U.S. as flawed at best. To the extent that they contest the core liberal ideas, they might be a sign of a failing script – an abandonment, or a straying from a previously certain, linear, progressive, teleological path towards liberal democracy.

In analysing (internal and external) contestations we follow the work of Börzel and Zürn, who define contestations as "discursive and behavioral practices that invoke or challenge core components of a script and come with a certain level of social mobilization" (2020: 1). These contestations are often a result of "a loss of confidence in the ability of core institutions to provide solutions to an array of challenges" (Börzel/Zürn 2020: 1). In the case of the US, the rising economic and social inequalities, cultural insecurity, the dissolution of the welfare state, and culture wars have all contributed to the growing loss of confidence that a) the liberal script is being properly implemented, and/or b) the liberal script offers best possible solutions to create the most free, equal and democratic society.

This paper explores two aspects which are often described as some of the biggest threats to the American liberal democracy – populism and polarization. The failure to deliver on liberal principles and the loss of trust in political institutions, the government and, more recently, the media,

resulted in the political debate brimming with populist discourse, blended with forms of right- or left-wing radicalism. These populist affections function as a process of reinforcement for existing polarization – dividing society even more significantly into two mutually exclusive, opposed groups – Us vs. Them; especially on issues previously conceptualized as non-political (e.g. mask mandates). Firstly, we argue that the rise of populism in the US does not represent a contestation of the liberal script because it is populist – but because it is exclusionary. Secondly, we try to show that the anti-populist rhetoric, which builds its identity on opposition to populism, does not constitute a sufficient nor an adequate response to external contestations of the liberal script.

In the following, we present Trump's populist discourse from Laclau's theoretical perspective (2), outline the nature and the extent of political polarization in the country (3) and show that the rise of populism and deep polarization have developed a form of anti-populist reaction which is discursively similar to populism (4). Finally, we attempt to determine the relationship between the aforementioned concepts and theorize on the implications for the liberal script (5). In doing so, we argue that contestations of the liberal script do not lie in populism itself, but in its exclusionary forms, which exacerbate harmful polarization and are, in these conditions, more readily transformed into external challenges to liberal democracy.

2   'WE, THE PEOPLE?'

> "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." (United States Constitution)

Over the past decade, and especially during the period of the Trump administration, it has become increasingly common to characterize the United States as grappling with a populist challenge that has led to deep internal and external contestations of the liberal script (Börzel et al. 2024). The world closely followed the campaigns of charismatic leaders and the rise of populist sentiments that reshaped the political landscape and ignited fervent debates about the direction of the country's future. In no US election campaign in living memory has 'populism' been invoked as often as in 2015–2016 (Müller 2016: 1). Populism, moreover, has a long history in the United States. Although often identified in the US with "the idea of a genuine egalitarian left-wing politics" (Müller 2016: 8) – Main Street vs. Wall Street – populist motifs can be found across the full political spectrum: be it with Andrew Jackson more on the regressive side or the People's Party, or Franklin D. Roosevelt as a more progressive example (Campani et al. 2022: 5; see also Puhle 2024). Already the founding of the USA was based on the mobilization of 'the people' against the established, corrupt, and exploitative British rule (Schrock et al. 2018: 8). Given the longevity of populist claims, it is necessary to engage in two distinct discussions. Firstly, how can we conceptualize populism in order to grasp its diverse nature? Secondly, when does populism become a threat to American democracy, as opposed to "business as usual"? This chapter clarifies the operational definition of populism in line with Ernesto Laclau's framework, offers an analysis of the dominant populist trends in the contemporary US political arena, and extrapolates their potential challenge to the liberal democratic hegemony in the US.

2.1   POPULISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY

In his classic essay The Populist Zeitgeist, Cas Mudde (2004: 543) defines populism as an ideology "that considers society to be ultimately

separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'". In this understanding, populism is also described as the ultimate defence of "popular sovereignty", irrespective of the established liberal democratic constraints. While many scholars agreed with Mudde's approach (e.g. Decker 2006; Rensmann 2006; Müller 2016), others criticized it as a culturalization that overlooks socio-economic factors (Manow 2019: 31) or as essentialist (Mouffe 2018: 62). While much of the prominent conceptualizations of populism stress it's connections to "thicker" ideologies (cf. for instance Mudde/Kaltwasser 2013: 498, 502), we follow Ernesto Laclau in understanding populism as a discursive strategy that is not further defined by content, but articulates a conflict between "the people" and "the elite" (Laclau 2018: 156). Populism, in that sense, is a strategy to achieve hegemony by establishing a common identity through a demarcation from a constitutive Other (cf. Marchart 1998; Marchart 2019). Hegemonic and populist articulation requires the "presence of antagonistic forces and the instability of the frontiers which separate them" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001: 136). Only the presence of instability in the political realm – "a vast area of floating elements" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001: 143) – allows the articulation of opposing camps. It "constitutes the terrain permitting us to define a practice as hegemonic." (Laclau/Mouffe 2001: 136) A formation succeeds in designating itself precisely when it transforms its boundaries into frontiers (Laclau/Mouffe 2001: 143 f.).

Laclau extends this idea with the concept of the empty signifier. Social struggles reveal that the universality of our ideals is limited by the concrete practices of society and bound to sectors of society. Since the universal has no necessary body or content, various competing groups try to give their particular claims the function of universal representation (Laclau 2007: 35). In ordinary politics, the different sectors of society have their demands and negotiate with each other. Populist

politics extends a particular position to a 'universal' one (Marchart 2019: 36). "This [...] leads to one of the demands stepping in and becoming the signifier of the whole chain" (Marchart 2019: 131) – a particular position aims at representing the whole of society. Through this articulation, not only is a dichotomous frontier constructed, but the demand begins to represent the chain and loses its meaning – it becomes "a tendentially empty signifier" (Marchart 2019: 131). In the case of Brexit, for example, the demand to leave the European Union started to represent demands from different sections of society (for example, the demands of fishermen who were threatened by globalization). This allowed a heterogeneous group to unite under the label of the 'Brexiteers', which was constructed in antagonistic opposition to the elitist 'dominance of Brussels'. Through this process, the Brexit demand lost its specific content, i.e. became empty, and represented a chain of heterogeneous demands. In other words, populism arises, as Hallin (2019: 16) notes, "when a large number of demands accumulate which are not satisfied, and a political leader or movement is able to construct an equivalence among them, portraying them in terms of the opposition between the people and the bloc in power". This illustrates that Laclau's idea of the empty signifier is not so much about the content of populism, but rather understands it as a specific strategy that has to be filled with concrete content on a case-by-case basis. The tendential emptiness of the populist strategy is reminiscent of Mudde and Kaltwasser's understanding of populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde/Kaltwasser 2013: 498).

Taken together, besides the described instability, a populist articulation requires (1) equivalence between differential social claims (2). The equivalent claims must be reflected in a discourse that antagonistically divides society into two camps – the popular classes and those in power. Of course, the division can be informed by different

ideologies – for example, nationalism, socialism, or liberalism (3). Once the chain of equivalence is established, it must present itself as a totality. A particular claim or group of claims must therefore signify the chain as a whole. In this process, a particular represents a generality, i.e. becomes hegemonic. This hegemonic signifier is always more or less empty.

Emphasizing how populism operates as a discursive strategy devoid of predefined content but manifested through the empty signifier and centred on the antagonistic division between "the people" and "the elite" is essential to comprehend its potential impact on contemporary politics. This theoretical foundation sets the stage for our analysis of forms of populism in the US, beginning with the exploration of Donald Trump's populism as one of the most significant political phenomena of the recent decade.

2.2 DONALD TRUMP'S JACKSONIAN POPULISM

Trump's discourse, which is a populist discourse par excellence, divides society into two antagonistic camps: the elite and the people. Empirical studies show that Trump used anti-establishment rhetoric in his election campaign and during his presidency to mobilize this line of conflict (Schoor 2017; Schrock et al. 2018; Campani et al. 2022). According to him, the people are opposed by two types of elites: "the media" and political elites, who are portrayed in morally negative terms (incompetent, corrupt, maleficent, etc.) (Schrock et al. 2018; Weyland/Madrid 2019). At a rally, for example, Trump said, "The American people are victims of this corrupt system […]. The political class in Washington has betrayed you" (cited after Schrock et al. 2018: 22). The allegedly corrupt elite is further described as global and liberal – i.e. not really belonging to "the people" – and in a symbiotic relationship with marginalized groups and migrants, who are portrayed as different from

and dangerous to "the people" (cf. Müller 2016; Lacatus 2021, Campani et al. 2022). Most of the literature shows that the rejection of a liberal and global elite, the "globalists", becomes the leitmotif during Trump's presidency (Lacatus 2021) – with the infamous border as a metaphor for the opposition to globalism.

There are many other examples of this construction of "the people" threatened by enemies both foreign and domestic (Löfflmann 2022: 549). While Trump spread an anti-left conspiracy theory ("far-left fascism") after the brutal police murder of George Floyd, i.e. pointing to an elite enemy within the nation-state, he employed a similar but inverted strategy in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic by constructing a foreign enemy and promoting an anti-China narrative (for example, calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus") (Löfflmann 2022). Globally, during the COVID pandemic, this anti-globalism strategy led to the US's withdrawal from the World Health Organization (WHO) after Trump's accusation that it was under Chinese control (Kaltwasser/Taggart 2022), adding to the list of other international agreements abandoned by his administration – most notably the Paris Climate Accord and the Iran nuclear agreement. His right-wing anti-elitism continued after his presidency: after the 2020 election, Trump, as one of the most shocking examples, questioned the legitimacy of the election, blaming the "fraud" on corrupt elites (Gerhart 2024). In his speech at the January 6th rally in 2021, after which a number of his supporters stormed the Capitol, he attacked the "corrupt" media as the "single biggest problem" (Trump 2021). From the perspective of democratic theory, this is particularly fatal, despite all of Trump's problematic actions, as it calls into question the fundamental framework of liberal democracy – the willingness of the incumbent to stand down and accept defeat.

The anti-elitist construction is easily traced throughout recent statements and can be used

as major explanation for his politics. For example, he blamed a "corrupt political establishment" for the federal indictment against him (Slow 2023); or: his recent campaign for the 2024 elections promises revenge on the corrupt government and calls for a "final battle", a trope that illustrates the antagonistic nature of his populism (Axelrot 2023). But again, whether internal or external enemies, all constructions share an anti-globalist orientation that is summed up in the following words of Trump: "The future does not belong to the globalists. The future belongs to patriots" (cited after Campani et al. 2022: 14).

But who are these patriots? Who are "the people", whose voice Trump is? For a start, it is obvious that only some people are "the people". Nevertheless, they are presented as a homogeneous group (Schoor 2017). Along these lines, Trump proclaimed that "the other people don't mean anything" (cited in Müller 2016: 22). The "Trump-People", as the former president creatively named them, are also framed morally. They are loyal, honest, and thus have moral integrity. Mirroring the elite construction, Trump's idea of the people excludes migrants, minorities, the media, and the political elites (Schoor 2017; Lacatus 2021). After losing the 2020 election, Trump exclaimed that only those people who did not believe in the stolen "election victory" can be called "American patriots" – they are the real people, unlike the "emboldened radical-left Democrats" or the "weak Republicans" (Naylor 2021). More precisely, Trump's construction of "the 'American people' is synonymous with white disenfranchised workers from the Midwest and the South, who have suffered from lower incomes and loss of employment" (Lacatus 2021: 40; Holland/Fermor 2021: 66; Löfflmann 2022: 545).[1]

Trump here articulates a specific North American form of populism, namely Jacksonian populism. Like the seventh President Andrew Jackson[2], Trump mobilizes a specific vision of the national identity "as synonymous with the White (male) working class, which served to reify the group, elevating it become the mythical backbone of US society and, by extension, the US economy and foreign policy" (Holland/Fermor 2021: 65). Jacksonian logic tells an (emotionally compelling but racialized) story that renders many Americans invisible. Accordingly, it is not surprising that, for example, Trump won the election in West Virginia where traditional (white, male, working-class) industries are shrinking due to globalization. The social demands of this group are rearticulated in racist and anti-Semitic terms through Trump's discourse. It is the demands of the white working class, former workers and farmers, the lower middle class and low-skilled workers who perceive themselves as "globalization losers" due to the tertiarization of the economy and its relocation (Campani et al. 2022).[3] Trump's claim to represent this group of people, through measures such as anti-migration laws and protectionist trade deals, is also reflected in his current campaign for the presidency, as can be seen, for example, in his newfound closeness to the trade unions (Gibson 2024).

These workers' interests are presented as universal – the white, male working class becomes the people, and their demands become American. In this framing, the empty signifier 'Make America Great Again' means that this class has been betrayed by a "globalist" elite (Müller 2016: 38). The supposed betrayal of the white working class

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1   It does not seem to be a problem that a New York billionaire speaks for this group. Trump does not even shy away from saying that he is "a worker, and you are workers too" (cited in Schoor 2016: 668). A surprisingly successful strategy, as studies show (Schrock et al. 2018).

2   Jackson was president of the United States from 1829 to 1837. He was known for making polity on behalf of the "ordinary" (white, male, working class) people. At the same time, he fought the banks and enforced racial policies, such as the Indian Removal Act, which ethnically cleansed and displaced tens of thousands of Native Americans.

3   Empirical research shows that these socio-demographic groups are much more skeptical of globalization efforts such as free trade agreements and may also oppose immigration processes (Scheve/Slaughter 2001).

becomes symbolic of the "betrayal of the entire American nation" (Holland / Fermor 2021: 71). One part represents the whole and hegemony has been achieved (at least for a time), which is one of the reasons that Trump's election was possible. At this point, even Trump's opponents had to pay lip service to "this newly remembered backbone of American society" (Holland / Fermor 2021: 71), the "forgotten" rural America. The insecurities and fears of the described class are framed as the "ontological insecurities of the nation itself" (Löflmann 2022: 545).

Taken together, Donald Trump's populism articulates an equivalence between the claims of a white, male working class that perceives itself as the 'losers of globalization' (1). These claims are reflected in the antagonistic conflict between those 'honest' workers and the liberal elite who are causing the losses (2). Finally, the interests of this group are no longer seen as particular, but as a totality – a particular ("blue collar workers" etc.) represents a generality ("America") (3).

One of the most frequently asserted consequences of such populist articulations is the increase in polarization. This is obvious in the sense that populist politics produces conflict along two camps, read: poles. What often remains unclear is the socio-economic and political-cultural background of polarization tendencies, which in turn can be assumed to have enabling and preventing effects on populist politics. In the next step, we will therefore attempt to delineate the conditions and cleavages which animate and shape the clusters of political preferences within the American electorate.

3   POLARIZATION

While conflicts and cleavages are a normal phenomenon in liberal democracies (Deitelhoff/ Schmelzle 2023), and even crucial to vibrant

democratic life itself, polarization becomes a problem when it hinders liberal democracy from functioning properly. As Benson (2023) argues, from a normative standpoint, democracy needs a variety of different perspectives included in the political system to efficiently identify problems to solve. These perspectives are practical positions rooted in social structure and specific experiences such as being a woman or being Black. In an ideal democratic setting perspectives of different social groups are brought into the political process by responsive politicians who represent their voters with their problems.

Recent research distinguishes between ideological – disagreement over political issues – and affective – outgroup hostility or even hate – polarization. On the ideological side, some social science literature suggests that attitudes indeed cluster around certain socio-economic characteristics (e.g. De Wilde et al. 2014; Strijbis et al. 2020). Opponents of immigration are often said to also oppose diversity issues or climate change mitigation measures. It is typically the white working class, also called "communitarians", who helped Trump to power, whereas members of the urban, "woke" middle classes are strongly favouring the influx of migrants, fighting climate change, and advocating sexual and racial diversity (Lilla 2018). In this way, David Goodhart (2017) proposed a split into "Somewheres" and "Anywheres". Anywheres are characterized by high geographic mobility and high educational attainment. They move around other countries without any problems, doing study-abroad programs at foreign universities. Somewheres, in contrast, feel a stronger regional connection. In terms of values, the Anywheres represent a "progressive individualism" (Goodhart 2017: 5); for them, the individual is the central point of reference for social reality. They advocate multiculturalism, universal human rights, migration and often feel like citizens of the world. The attitudes of the Somewheres, in contrast, are characterized by a pronounced

social conservatism, a negative attitude towards immigration and changing gender roles. The spatial frame of reference for this group is largely determined by the nation-state. This situation where two camps or two poles standing against each other would be the extreme case of ideological polarization. This view was criticized by some authors (Fiorina et al. 2006) calling polarization a myth. But a growing number of studies find strong and growing divides between Americans in certain political issues – for example when it comes to the question of government aid to the needy or government spending on environmentalism (see Abramowitz/Saunders 2008; McCright et al. 2014; Graham/Svolik 2020). Generally, research shows that attitudinal gaps are widening and the ideological overlap between Democrats and Republicans is shrinking (Pew Research Center 2017; Pope 2021). However, Americans tend to overestimate ideological disagreement. Members of the opposing party are also perceived as "farther apart on issues than they really are, as well as more demographically distinct from each other" (Sides et al. 2022: 11). In fact, there still are significant overlaps even in hot issues such as gun regulation, and other partisans' beliefs are often misperceived (Kleinfeld 2023: 1).

Apart from ideological differences, affective polarization defined as growing animosity between social groups, namely partisans, has recently gotten scholarly attention (Mason 2018). Democrats and Republicans increasingly see each other in negative, even hostile terms and describe the out-group as "hypocritical, selfish or close-minded" (Iyengar et al. 2019: 130). Negative partisanship – the idea that voters are driven more by animosity toward the opposing party than by positive sentiments for their own – has continuously increased as research shows voters are more ready to describe the other party's members as "more closed-minded, dishonest, immoral and unintelligent than other Americans" (Pew Research Center 2022; Sides 2023), followed by an "increased belief

that the out-group is motivated by purposeful obstructionism" (Lees/Cikara 2020). In this way, partisanship becomes a social identity reinforcing the divide because of the absence of broader cross-cutting identities (Mason 2018). In other words, Americans are becoming more socially sorted. What does that mean? First, the share of people identifying themselves as partisans has steadily grown (Levendusky 2009). Partisan identity, on top of that, becomes aligned with other social identities like religion or race (Huddy et al. 2015). White evangelicals, for example, are more likely to develop a Republican identity, while Blacks lean towards the Democrats (Pally 2024). In private networks, friendships, among neighbours and colleagues people meet other people with similar convictions and partisanships. Partisanship also structures relationships and attempts for partnering (Iyengar et al. 2019: 137). Studies on online dating behaviour show that being in the same party makes the other person more attractive and increases the likelihood of exchanging messages (Huber/Malhotra 2017). In a similar vein, survey data findings for friendship suggest that only few people report having friends from the out-party (Pew Research Center 2017). In short, there is a lack of social interaction between Democrats and Republicans in the US. In comparative perspective affective polarization in the US is not extreme, but it has grown faster than in other Western societies over the past 30 years (Gidron et al. 2020).

Along with social sorting, the media environment was identified as one of the main driving forces of affective polarization. In this strand of literature, the main point is that media coverage triggers and activates partisan identities and increases negative feeling vis-à-vis the outgroup (Iyengar et al. 2019: 76). Particularly partisan media, such as Fox News, depicts the political opponents in very harsh, disrespectful terms (Berry/Sobieraj 2013). However, the causal relationship between partisan media outlets and affective polarization

is not that clear, as more polarized people also tend to watch more partisan media. Still, experimental evidence shows an effect of partisan media consumption on extreme attitudes (Levendusky 2013). When it comes to social media, the notion of echo chambers is quite widespread among the public. Conventional wisdom suggests that social media users place themselves within a digital setting of like-minded individuals, where opinions are reinforcing each other (Cinelli et al. 2021). Indeed, studies find that polarization reaches the highest levels among those who regularly use social media (Lee et al. 2022). Other studies, on the contrary, suggest that social media use is more a result than a cause of affective polarization (Nordbrandt 2021). On top of that, social media itself is not a monolithic bloc but needs to be disentangled as dynamics of polarization on X, formerly Twitter, tends to be more virulent than on WhatsApp (Yarchi et al. 2021).

While social science could not univocally decide about the causal relationship between social sorting, media, and affective polarization, it seems to be quite clear that polarizing citizens is used as a political strategy. However, how far is polarization – be it in ideological or affective vein – a contestation to the liberal script? In a two-party system having two blocs of partisans is nothing new or threatening. In fact, a certain degree of polarization, amplifying political competition, is a sign for a lively democracy. So, nothing to see here? McCoy and Somer (2019) argue that polarization becomes pernicious when political entrepreneurs use polarizing strategies such as demonizing discourses and exploiting existing grievances. Negative campaigning contributed to negative images about the political outgroup (Lau/Rovner 2009). Politicians seek to elicit anger about the outgroup to strengthen their own position contributing to election results that hinge "on turnout and mobilization of a deeply but closely divided electorate" (Riley/Brenner 2022: 6). Anger results in an increasing level of polarization,

making people unwilling to engage in activities or political discussions with out-party neighbours (Webster et al. 2022). If cross-cutting identities or at least platforms where Democrats and Republicans can meet and exchange opinions are rare or completely absent, there is no place where those negative images can be adjusted. The result is that 87% of Republican voters deem the Democratic Party as too extreme, and 88% of Democratic voters think the same about the Republican Party (ABC News 2024).

As a result, polarization becomes toxic. Political opponents are not depicted as opponents you could argue with but as corrupt and/or criminal enemies, which makes political compromises nearly impossible. The functioning of liberal democratic institutions and decision-making in general becomes very difficult as parties are not able or willing to find compromises, resulting in gridlocks. On a more abstract level, a high degree of affective polarization leads to the erosion of a common democratic public where political discussions happen only in isolated, like-minded circles, without any exchange to partisan out-groups.

Additionally, polarization becomes a problem by constantly referring to a single cleavage and thereby creating "mega-identities". A polarizing frame then starts to gain discursive power and eventually becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The "divided and polarized society", the "other camp", the "cosmopolitan elites" vs. the "patriotic communitarians" is evoked all over again, which leads to a crowding-out of other frames that do not easily fit into the binary „Us vs. Them" order. In this way, identities of partisans get more aligned along the proposed societal divide. Republicans surrounding Trump use polarizing strategies in order to delineate themselves from the 'political elite', a course that finds support in the lowest levels of democratic trust and broad feelings of alienation from the political as a whole. Democrats, on the other hand, use polarizing strategies

in order to push against populist tendencies and for a restoration of 'politics as usual'. The very success of this strategy is built on growing partisan media echoing this rhetoric and portraying both Democrats and Republicans as an evil out-group (Pierson 2017).

The phenomenon of polarization in the US therefore not only intensifies partisan loyalty and animosity but also reshapes the political landscape. On the one hand, it fuels the rise of populist leaders who capitalize on societal discontent and present themselves as the true representatives of "the people" against a corrupt elite. On the other hand, it also gives rise to movements that seek to counteract the perceived threats posed by the other side. These "anti-populist forces" rally against the perceived dangers of populist rhetoric and policies, often inadvertently both deepening divisions and mirroring the exclusionary character of the populism it is supposed to undermine.

4   INTERMEDIATE REFLECTION – (ANTI) POPULISM

> But you know, around the country MAGA extremists are lining up to take on those bedrock freedoms. (…) That's why I am running for re-election. Because I know America. I know we're good and decent people. I know we're still a country that believes in honesty and respect… (…) Every generation in America has faced a moment when they have to defend democracy (…) And this is our moment. (Biden 2023)

In response to increasingly anti-democratic threats posed by Trump's Jacksonian populism, including the refusal to accept election results and the January 6th turn to violent means, the Democratic party has consistently built on a form of anti-populism as a countervailing strategy. Anti-populism is defined by Yannis Stavrakakis as a type of discourse where populism takes the role of "the empty signifier, but this time a negatively

charged one: as a discursive vessel capable of comprising an excess of heterogeneous meanings, operating as the synecdoche of an omnipresent evil and associated with irresponsibility, demagogy, immorality, corruption, destruction, and irrationalism" (2018: 25–26). Above-cited campaign video presenting Joe Biden as a 2024 presidential candidate illustrates such a discursive division within the American electorate – "the country MAGA extremists", whose only wish is to "take on bedrock freedoms" vs. the citizens who believe in "honesty and respect". Through a construction of the populist vs. anti-populist frontier, the Democratic voters are presented as motivated by objective civilizational 'values', while the support for Trump lies either in the lack thereof, or in the unsalvageable irrationality that results from falling prey to populist discourse. By leveraging themes of moral integrity and civic responsibility to consolidate a broader coalition of supporters built around the need to "defend democracy", recent Democratic candidates have capitalized on a new dimension of a political crisis. The previously developed characteristics of populist discourse also seem inherently present in anti-populist claims, creating a mirror-image contestation built on and around the polarized political landscape.

Similar to Trump, Democratic nominees have consistently used a Manichean rhetoric in their political speeches (Abbas/Zahra 2021). Comparative analyses show that Biden's rhetoric is still significantly less inflammatory when juxtaposed to Trump's (Abbas/Zahra 2021; Derki 2022; Gamio/Yourish 2024). Additionally, in Biden's case campaign discourse differed significantly from governance discourse, with post-election rhetoric shifting to calls of unity and a stricter avoidance of personal confrontation (Pérez-Curiel et al. 2022; Boussaid 2022; Al-Khawaldeh et al. 2023.). Nevertheless, in both the previous 2016 and 2020 elections, and in the ongoing 2024 elections, negative partisanship played a large role in shaping the strategies of the presidential campaigns.

Analysing multiple pre-election polls, Jacobson (2021: 20) points out that Democratic voters prioritized a candidate who could defeat Trump over candidates who were closer to them on issues. Biden's campaign frequently highlighted Trump's mishandling of the pandemic, framing the election as a choice between chaos and competent leadership (Abbas/Zahra 2021; Arnold-Murray 2024). While this anti-populist position was already developed in the opposition to the offensive language and explosive rhetoric of Trump in the 2016 elections[4], the identity conflict delineating Democrats as "normal" or "rational" in opposition to Trump has been strengthened during the pandemic with the rise of conspiracy theories and anti-expertise language.

Katherine Arnold-Murray (2024) follows an interesting example of the "Settle of Biden" social media campaign targeting progressive Democrats in 2020, which constructed Biden as an "average Joe" preferable to Trump due to his "normalcy". The campaign capitalized on a scalar production of normativity, emphasizing Biden's regularity as preferable to Trump's abnormality. For instance, a post featuring the text "Joe won't inject you with bleach" in April 2020 called attention to the dangerous claims made by Trump during the pandemic. Other posts compared Biden to an "unappetizing but safe" ice cream from Dairy Queen and stressed that "Joe Biden knows how to pronounce Yosemite" (Arnold-Murray 2024). This building on a middle-class sensibility created a perceived "normalcy voters can 'settle for', even if this normalcy is not particularly desirable" (Arnold-Murray

2024). The persistent demarcation allowed the Democratic party to construct a cohesive identity for its electorate by positioning themselves as the defenders of the normal and stable politics, thereby establishing a collective identity in stark opposition to the 'irrational' and 'dangerous' populists. Trump is thereby "stigmatized as a deviation from a reified and essentialized normality (…) violating or transgressing a natural order of how politics is properly, rationally and professionally done" (Stavrakakis 2018: 8). Another pertinent example are the strategic interventions of Democratic operatives in Republican primaries, which aimed to promote unconventional candidates deemed easier to defeat through emphasizing a straightforward contrast between "soundness" and "mania" (Nolan 2022). Through such acts, the "established" political actors also commonly undermine the functioning of truly democratic institutions, but do it in a less dramatic, public, or exclusive way. The focus on science and rationality as ideological values rather than universal features of the moral and capable citizen is then often overlooked in ensuing analyses (cf. Al-Gharbi 2024).

Similar to presenting themselves as the objectively safer and therefore rational choice because of the pandemic, the Democratic candidates employed the same mobilizing strategy when depicting Trump as a threat to democracy and, by comparison, themselves as its defenders (Biden 2022; Stout 2024). In 2020, before and after the tight success in swing states, "the victory of the Democratic party" for American democracy, notably corroborated by the 'storming of the Capitol' (Ray 2020; Peoples 2020). Once again, by positioning themselves as the defenders of fundamental democratic values, the Democrats were aiming to establish a collective identity in stark opposition to the 'dangerous' populists. This broader hegemonic struggle is then "energized by real or/ and imagined crisis situations" (Stavrakakis et.al. 2018: 3) as anti-populism raises the equivalence

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4   For example, Hillary Clinton's speech on national security in 2016: „Donald Trump's ideas aren't just different – they are dangerously *incoherent*. They're *not even really ideas – just a series of bizzare rants,* personal feuds, and outrights lies. He is not just unprepared – he is temperamentally *unfit to hold office* that requires knowledge, *stability* and immense responsibility. (…) I have a lot of faith that the American people will make the right decision. This is a country with a deep reservoir of *common sense* and national pride. We're all counting on that." (Reilly 2016, our italics). Additionally, the issue of science in party programs has a much longer political life, e.g. Mooney, Chris 2006: The Republican War on Science. Basic Books.

between differential social claims to the level of totality, arguing it is not just individual policies which are at stake, but the future of democracy itself.

"Defending democracy" then serves as an empty signifier, standing for the totality of heterogeneous values and policies interpreted as solved just through stopping Trump from his second term. The apocalyptic rhetoric establishes equivalence between the fight against Trump, the value of democracy, the belief in science, as well as the fight against racism, inequality, global warming, and even political polarization. While Trump's and his supporters' refusal to accept election results, alongside other things, can fairly be described as anti-democratic, many of the values Democrats' claim to be pursuing through this were far from resolved – and they have been a problem even before Trump's political career. Bessner/Steinmetz-Jenkins stress that "constantly referring to a never-ending, always-urgent "crisis" does — indeed has done – little to improve the functioning of our democracy" (2024). In other words, even after Trump's defeat in 2020, most of these problems are still virtually untouched, with no clear policy on how to resolve them – besides not allowing Trump to get a second term. Trump, on the other hand, is deemed morally and intellectually irredeemable, representing a 'democratic pathology' (Mudde 2010) rather than a democratically legitimate (at least for a time) president with strong ties to his voters. Once again, this was clearly represented in the "Settle for Biden" campaign where progressive Democrats were willing to admit that Biden's policies might not be "progressive" enough, but that he is nevertheless the "rational" choice compared to Trump.

However, four years after, the US democracy is still becoming more polarized, political positions are becoming more calcified, the public trust in government has been consistently low at least since the Bush administration, and Americans'

views of politics are still overwhelmingly negative (Pew Research Center 2024a, 2024b). It is therefore important to ask the question what kind of "normalcy" the Democrats are actually representing. Arnold-Murray (2024) responds to precisely this question in her analysis of the "Settle for Biden campaign", stressing that Biden was successful in relating to his voters through the campaign focused on averageness and normalcy because of how the "unmarked power of normativity" generally functions. She argues:

> In the US, normativities surrounding middle classness, whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality tend to go unnoticed due to the hegemonic power held by those at the top constructing the scales. Those in power hold unmarked qualities because they adhere to and maintain the norms that they themselves create. By defining the normative by what it is not, the dominant classes establish a schema of commonsense negatives that are difficult to challenge. Commonsense ideas of what it means to be 'normal' are likewise exploited by Settle for Biden in its production of scalar judgements that seem objective, but actually rely on privileged middle-class value systems (Arnold-Murray 2024).

Admittedly, both Biden and Trump benefit from the normativities surrounding whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality, but what is considered "normal", "stable", or "safe" politics is precisely what led to this level of democratic crisis. Biden, with his lifelong experience in "normal" politics, represents precisely the hegemonic structures that get to define and create what is politics and how it is done. What is presented as irrational – then – is the break from normalcy, personified by Trump. By portraying Biden as the embodiment of middle-class values and common sense, the campaign tapped into seemingly objective and rational judgments to appeal to voters, leveraging the status quo to construct a political identity that positioned Trump as a dangerous outlier and Biden as the rational alternative.

As we argued before, populism is defined as a strategy to achieve hegemony by establishing a common identity through a demarcation from the constitutive Other and, while usually a normal part of politics, it becomes pernicious when it takes on an exclusionary character. Following the same pattern, it is noticeable that the very performativity of anti-populism builds upon similar discursive patterns to those of populism – the creation of equivalence between different social claims and their reflection in the formation of two mutually opposing groups (the populists vs. the "normal" people). They (1) create equivalence and unify them under the banner of "protecting democracy", (2) this value of "democracy" is emptied and constructed into the frontier that divides two antagonistic groups – the people vs. the corrupted elites, and (3) it presents this chain of equivalence as a totality, portraying the fight "for democracy" as the win-all-lose-all solution to a myriad of complex issues facing society.

While anti-populism is, admittedly, not nearly as authoritarian as Trump's Jacksonian populism increasingly became nearing the end of his term, it is still worth analysing as a contestation of liberalism. The claim for the 'salvation of democracy' and the imperative to stop Trump's populism in this way continues to perpetuate societal cleavages, exacerbate polarization, and overlook the underlying conditions that fuel Trump's exclusionary Jacksonian populism. Even more, the polarized identities of "autocratic populist" vs. "the experienced saviour of democracy", personified by Trump and Biden respectively, do nothing more than camouflage the reproduction of the same hegemonic structures which initially caused grievances and made the electorate crave a more radical response. By neglecting the roots of populist sentiments and reinforcing existing power structures, the anti-populist response becomes another symptomatic expression of a democratic crisis rather than a genuine solution to the challenges at hand.

5 CONCLUSION: POPULISM, POLARIZATION, AND THE LIBERAL SCRIPT

While concepts of populism and polarization are often discussed separately, we have pointed out what we consider to be a more complex connection. In the first sections of our paper, Trump's Jacksonian populism is shown to articulate an antagonistic and moralized conflict line between the 'honest people', i.e. a white, male working class suffering from the effects of globalization, and a corrupt, political and media elite that maintains a symbiotic relationship to migrants and minorities (2). After proposing a concept of polarization and discussing evidence from the American context, we highlight that polarization should be problematized when it is exploited by political entrepreneurs which produce 'mega-identities' and jeopardize the adoption of other perspectives, i.e. democratic pluralism (3). Finally, we argue that the anti-populist response, although clearly less regressive than the Trump's populism, re-constitutes the same frontier between 'us' and 'them', dismissing opposing claims as irrational and populist (4). The underlying political and systemic problems are then reinterpreted as caused by the 'abnormal' interventions from the side of populists, contributing to a vicious circle of polarization and a new iteration of the antagonistic divide. It is precisely this exploitation of existing polarization that is currently forming a contestation of the liberal script by populist and anti-populist actors alike, and therefore has the biggest impact on the prosperity of democratic ideals in the US. What constitutes the contestations of the liberal script in the US can, then, be articulated through two main points.

Firstly, both candidates claim to represent 'the people', argue for higher levels of either vertical and horizontal democratic accountability, and plausibly claim to be on the side of democracy in the long run. Instead of the programmatic level, we argue that the threat that populism and

polarization create for the liberal script depends strongly on how these two qualities of the political sphere are formed and instrumentalized. Political demands tend to resolve the tension between liberalism and democracy by favouring one side over the other. However, this does not mean that all demands which specifically invoke popular sovereignty or individual rights are always non-liberal or non-democratic. It is populists who see their opponents as enemies to be destroyed and no longer as antagonistic adversaries who must be considered both anti-liberal and anti-democratic (Mouffe 1993: 205). But this is not necessarily applied to all populisms: Bernie Sanders' construction of the people, for example, illustrates that the people can be an inclusive plurality, it can consist of "different groups, with different interests" (Schoor 2017: 670). If we understand the demos not as something fixed, but an unruly activity (Rancière 1995), populism can be a deepening of democracy and hence mean its salvation. The rise of populism and polarization in the US, therefore, does not represent a contestation of the liberal script because it is populist – but because it's exclusionary character (obviously articulated by Trump's racist and anti-immigrant discourse, and latently implied through anti-populist calls for 'normality') perpetuates the same flaws 'the people' are trying to change. If the current trajectory remains unchallenged, it risks leading to an entrenched cycle of authoritarian populism countered by reactionary anti-populism. This dynamic could result in the decay of democratic institutions, reducing them to mere tools for competing elites, further alienating the electorate and deepening public distrust.

Secondly, these tendencies towards pernicious populist polarization which are overwhelming the campaigns of the current candidates come as a result of the previous malformations of the US democracy. Michael Lind argues that modern democracies are embedded in "the transfer of decision-making power away from democratically elected legislatures and executives to entities that are highly insulated from election results: national and transnational judiciaries, central banks, international institutions, and corporations such as the social media giants that function as de facto public utilities but with no democratic oversight or control" (Lind 2020). This results in a system that, regardless of the voting patterns, blocks any initiative for change – in a progressive or non-progressive direction – resulting in feelings of powerlessness and lack of democratic trust. Structures like these create the perfect opportunity system for the capture of grand, historical, hierarchical organizations (such as the Republican party) by outsiders appealing to the enraged political audience (Lind 2020). In this sense, regardless of the ideological content (anti)populism takes, the exercise of tactics of demonization or dehumanization of significant portions of society does not defend a democratic, but a non-democratic normality. As argued by Colin Crouch (2004), elections and electoral debate became a 'tightly controlled spectacle' orchestrated by skilled professionals, relegating the majority of citizens to a passive and apathetic role as observers. The democratic return to political normality implies the shaping of politics between the government and the elites, and continued control over the political processes behind the facade of the 'salvation of democracy'. Instead, by reimagining the demos in an inclusionary way and pulling it out of the grasp of 'politics as usual', populist imaginaries could serve as a force for democratizing democracy itself. And while populism, depending on its inclusionary/exclusionary character, may or may not be a trigger for deeper polarization, and therefore a threat to democracy as a societal value, its post-democratic elite-driven rendition, the true source of hegemonic power in the US, unequivocally contests it.

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