Populism and the US Elections, 2020

In August, the African Centre for the Study of the United States will be launching a virtual town hall to discuss the implications of the 2020 US Presidential Elections for Africa. The articles below, connected to the Centre’s work on Cultures of Populism, serve as a prelude to this initiative.
Two Interlocking Initiatives:

The “Cultures of Populism” Colloquium and “African Perspectives on the US Presidential Election”

From 10th until 13th July 2019, the African Centre for the Study of the United States (ACSUS) mounted its first international colloquium on “Cultures of Populism: Institutions and Hegemonic Practices”. This event was initially proposed by a group of scholars in American Studies from the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Uppsala and Sussex, who had been collaborating closely for at least a decade. They had already completed two successful research projects, one on “Mending Wounds” (or the writing of trauma in the North American and southern African contexts) and the other on “Fictions of Threat: Security, Speculation and Surviving the Now”. It soon became clear that the goals and interests of this research consortium meshed neatly with the objectives of ACSUS—and so a fruitful partnership was born.

“Cultures of Populism” was conceived as an attempt to investigate a global phenomenon that had strongly manifested itself in diverse—often disturbing and violent—forms since the beginning of the twenty-first century. The focus fell on the relations among democracy, populism and the Humanities as embracing a range of academic disciplines. Had populism gained purchase as a reaction of the effectively disenfranchised (the economically poor and the politically marginalised) to their exclusion from democratic processes? Yet it was a matter of concern that populist strategies had equally been adopted to serve narrowly racist, nativist and xenophobic ideologies. How might the Humanities contribute to the discussion of contemporary populism through their capacity for analysing and interpreting pressing social questions? Thirty-two scholars engaged with these issues, investigating populism on the political left and on the right, its transnational morphologies and its complicated, twisted genealogies. Speakers ranged across a wide variety of theories or philosophical approaches, while also drawing on anecdotes, allusions and surprising metonymic chains of association.

The colloquium did not set out to achieve a conclusive definition of populism, but to explore multiple points of view as openly and creatively as possible. Each session became a site of innovative intellectual exchange. Twenty of the rich papers delivered will be published as fully-fledged articles during July 2020; they will appear in two special journal issues entitled “Cultures of Populism”: Safundi 21.3 and English Studies in Africa 63.1.

Professor Virginia R. Dominguez, a distinguished anthropologist from the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign and co-founder of the International Forum for US Studies (IFUSS), was a participant in the colloquium. One of her purposes in visiting Johannesburg was to forge closer links between ACSUS and IFUSS. These discussions are in progress, although plans for several members of the Centre to take up fellowships at IFUSS have, of necessity, been deferred since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

At the conference, Professor Dominguez gave a paper entitled “Whose Populism?” Trump Supporters versus a New Left”. In this piece, she argued that the notion of populism
did not have the ready applicability to US politics that it had already acquired in European, South American and even African contexts. Contesting whether President Donald Trump should actually be termed “a populist”, she also identified the emergence of an influential “new left” in her country, a force that might constitute a significant challenge to Republican aspirations, as well as potentially changing the existing electoral landscape.

Professor Dominguez has graciously agreed to lodge the article based on her presentation on the ACSUS website. This essay is particularly cogent because it highlights certain trends that seem set to influence the US presidential election in November. Professor Dominguez had already begun to follow these political currents nearly a year ago. Because party politics is so fluid, with pertinent circumstances changing from day to day—and because we have been overtaken by the unexpected in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic—Professor Dominguez has supplemented her article with an “update” and some reflections that lead us to late May 2020.

Since ACSUS is launching a series of commentaries on the US presidential elections from an African perspective, keeping pace with events as they unfold, Professor Dominguez’s texts will provide a starting point for that discussion and a catalyst for further debate. Her “update” maps some possible consequences of the election for Africa—and South Africa in particular. It is hoped that African colleagues will respond to her evaluations and predictions. And so the exchanges will continue, until and beyond November.

**Whose populism? Trump supporters versus a new left**

Virginia R. Dominguez

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The United States is deeply divided on ideological grounds. It looked that way already in the 2016 Presidential elections and in the 2018 Congressional elections, and it looks that way now in the 2020 Presidential campaigns. Three populations appear there: one supportive of Trump seems xenophobic, overly pro-American, and decidedly anti-immigrant; a second sees itself as anti-Trump but also anti-socialist and, hence, anti-Sanders; the third appears to veer unabashedly toward socialism. Democratic voters typically hate Trump, but about 35–40% of people polled in the country support him very enthusiastically. Many people think this indicates a surge to the right, but this article urges caution. Trump’s base is not new to the US; they simply did not vote before Trump. What is new (and unseen in decades) is that there is also a very audible and enthusiastic new left. This article explores whether such current phenomena can be considered populism.

Keywords: Trump, Sanders, socialism, pro-Americanism, populism, movement

It is quite easy to assume that Donald Trump rode to the US White House (that is, the presidency of the United States in the November 2016 US presidential election) on the wave of a right-wing populism in the United States. Many media pundits argued that, and many scholars did, too. There was indeed much talk four years ago of politicians, especially those in Washington, DC being out of touch with the general public. But this article urges caution in thinking that this means that the US is currently engulfed in a populist move to the right. Yes, there is indeed a visible (and audible) presence of the right in the US, but it is not as big a change as one might expect, if one looks at data historically and contextually. They were always there. They just did not feel well-represented by politicians in Washington, DC, and they often did not vote at all in US presidential elections before Trump. Richardson argues similarly but is primarily concerned to distinguish Trumpism (and Trump’s right-wing base of support) from Fascism, whereas I am more interested in exploring the far-less discussed rise of a large new left-wing movement in the United States.

There is a large, visible (and audible) movement to the left in the United States, one that involves millions of people, and not just academics, students, or intellectuals. This is a big enough movement that centrist or self-described moderates (both in the US Democratic Party and among Independents who would like to keep Trump from winning a second term as president of the US) worried that the Democratic Party would select Senator Bernie Sanders as its nominee to run against Trump in November and that this might duly ensure a Trump win. Indeed many of these self-described moderates breathed a sigh of relief when Bernie Sanders announced early in April that he was suspending his campaign for president of the US, though he also announced that he would keep his delegates so that they could all exert real pressure at the Democratic national convention. Senator Sanders announced this publicly via video to his supporters on Wednesday April 8, 2020, and it is interesting that just a few hours later I received an email from the Biden campaign, effectively thanking Senator Sanders for being passionate about the items he cares about and saying that he was going to work with Bernie Sanders to move the Democratic Party to a progressive platform.

Richardson, “Populism and a Divided America,” 1–29.

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when people—either in the US or elsewhere—stress Trump and his supporters (or, as the media often call it, his “base”).

The US is indeed deeply divided, as Richardson argues as well,\(^3\) and this division is not actually best understood in standard US political terms. The typical and long-standing division between the two dominant twentieth-century US political parties—the Democrats and the Republicans—has not been seen for years, by outsiders or even insiders, as a simple division between left and right. It is true that many people who consider themselves liberal have not joined the US Republican Party in recent years, and many people who consider themselves traditional or conservative stay away from the US Democratic Party, but some of that has to do with geography. The Western half of the US tends to vote Republican, so many people there are accustomed to voting Republican, even when they do not all think alike, and there are certainly different reasons for some of those voters behaving as they do. It is also true that Southern Democrats may be more centrist than Democrats in some other states of the US (or at least not explicitly leftist), but that is not always clear and it is not clear at all this year. Very many of those who voted in the Democratic Party primaries of southern states in the US in 2020 are African-American, and they may be supporting Joe Biden because he was vice-president under African-American President Barack Obama and they feel they know him from the Obama years. They may even support Biden in 2020 because his main opponent, self-described Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders, adopts a rhetoric of socioeconomic class, rather than a rhetoric of race or identity. We simply do not know. But neither the Trump presidency nor the rise of this new left can be explained readily by the long-standing division between Democrats and Republicans in the US, a division that lingers but is certainly stretched at the moment. Witness that neither Trump nor Sanders has a long history of being members of their current political parties.

Nonetheless, since an earlier version of this paper was presented in July 2019 at a colloquium at the University of Witwatersrand focusing on “cultures of populism,” I will first attempt to frame the issue here in those terms. That is, I contemplate the possibility that there is in the US, as well as in many other countries, a culture of populism. I will also use ongoing US polling data and commentary to explain what I think is happening, even as the presidential polls shift—and some candidates drop out of the US presidential race on the Democratic side—in the period leading up to the US presidential election in November 2020.\(^4\) Yet the issue here is broader and not necessarily the product of specific presidential candidates. Trump may allow us to see that political shift more clearly. It is even possible that Trump’s decisions and actions since being elected president have accelerated the moves to both the right and the left but, I repeat, the issue here is broader than Trump’s election.

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\(^{3}\) Richardson, “Populism and a Divided America.”

\(^{4}\) Over 20 contenders declared themselves candidates for president on the Democratic side in this presidential race. In addition to Bernie Sanders, many have since dropped out, including west coast businessman Tom Steyer, former South Bend, Indiana, mayor Peter Buttigieg, Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar, former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren. Most withdrew after the South Carolina primary on Saturday February 29, 2020, while Michael Bloomberg and Elizabeth Warren dropped out after the primaries held on Tuesday March 3, 2020.
Populism

For most academics, “populism” refers to a non-elite movement that elites tend to decry because it is typically associated with a shift to the right—in other words, to a kind of nativism, anti-intellectualism, and nationalism whose unabashed rhetoric leads to certain candidates’ holding public office and other candidates being critiqued as too elite, too intellectual, and too complicated/thoughtful/hard to follow. Popular online sources define populism as:

(1) a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups;
(2) support for populist politicians or policies;
(3) the quality of appealing to or being aimed at ordinary people.

The phrase “ordinary people” looms large in these definitions but, as predecessors have already said, this phrase may have rhetorical value, yet its reference is hard to pin down. Hugh Gusterson starts off his 2017 article “From Brexit to Trump: Anthropology and the Rise of National Populism” by citing former US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s characterization of pornography as something that is hard to define, but that one knows when one sees it. In a similar vein, he cites historian Michael Kazin’s 2016 article in Foreign Affairs arguing that populism is a “contested and ambiguous concept.“\(^5\) That this is still true is interesting. In 1967 there was a Conference on Populism at the London School of Economics and its participants could not agree on a single definition of the term, although this did not stop certain people from using it.

Likewise, this has not stopped certain people—both in the US and elsewhere—from using the term and finding it useful. For example, I found a long entry in Wikipedia, clearly added to by interested parties.\(^6\) At one point, it says:

The confusion surrounding the term has led some scholars to suggest that it should be abandoned by scholarship. In contrast to this view, the political scientists Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser stated that "while the frustration is understandable, the term populism is too central to debates about politics from Europe to the Americas to simply do away with." Similarly, Canovan noted that the term "does have comparatively clear and definite meanings in a number of specialist areas" and that it "provides a pointer, however shaky, to an interesting and largely unexplored area of political and social experience". The political scientists Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell thought that "if carefully defined, the term 'populism' can be used profitably to help us understand and explain a wide array of political actors". The political scientist Ben Stanley noted that "although the meaning of the term has proven controversial in the literature, the persistence with which it has recurrent suggests the existence at least of an ineliminable core: that is, that it refers to a distinct pattern of ideas."

Outside Wikipedia, “populism” is currently a much-used term in some parts of Europe, Latin America, and South Africa—certainly in South African political discourse. I understand (or think I understand) why, but I urge caution in applying it to the contemporary situation in the US.

The in-text references above are revealing and important. There is the citation of a book by Cas Mudde (who is a Dutch political scientist) and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (who is a Chilean political scientist) entitled *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (2017). There is the 1981 book *Populism*, by the late Margaret Canovan (a noted British political theorist). The Introduction to a 2008 book titled *Twenty-First Century Populism* by Daniele Albertazzi (a political scientist at the University of Birmingham in England) and Duncan McDonnel (a political scientist at Griffith University in Australia) is mentioned. And finally, an article by Ben Stanley (a political scientist at SWPS University in Warsaw, Poland), published in the *Journal of Political Ideologies* in 2008, is included. Since these texts are all by political scientists, mostly based in Europe or trained in the UK, these references seem regional, rather than global, and very disciplinarily narrow. It does not mean that they are not interesting or useful, but the question here is whether talk of “populism” is as prevalent in the US and whether it is useful to think of life, values, and political sentiment in the US in that way. This is not to exceptionalize the US; it is to pay attention to its political rhetoric which does not readily embrace or often use the term “populist” in its media outlets or political campaigns.

Certainly many aspects of populism do indeed apply to Donald Trump, and it is interesting to see that most of the scholarly articles in the US using populism as a term with reference to the contemporary setting refer to Trump’s supporters as right-wing populists. Many are also by scholars born and/or raised outside the US. German-born and Berlin-educated (though now on the faculty at Princeton) Jan-Werner Müller goes to great lengths to argue that Trump is a populist while Bernie Sanders is not. British-born and -raised Hugh Gusterson (though now on the faculty at George Washington University) writes in 2017 about “nationalist populism.” He cites scholars who use different terms but refer, in Gusterson’s view, to the same phenomenon. To him, Jamaican-born and British-trained Stuart Hall’s (1980) and British-trained Nicolette Makovicky’s (2013) phrase “authoritarian populism” refers to the same phenomenon, as does (in Gusterson’s view) British-educated Gillian Evans’ (2017) “cultural nationalism;” Brazilian-born and raised, though UK-trained, Ana Carolina Balthazar’s (2017) phrase “nostalgic nationalism;” Douglas Holmes’ (2016) “Fascism 2;” and Turkish-born Salih Can Aciksoz and Umut Yildirim’s (2016) “right-wing populism.” The great majority of these scholars are indeed concerned with “populism” but refer to elections and political movements to the right and do little to discuss the left. And by being in or from a number of different countries, they appear to be talking about a global phenomenon.

The complication with any analysis that uses Trumpism as an example of a right-wing populism taking over the United States is (1) that it seems to assume that many ordinary people in the US were not right-wing before Trump emerged on the scene, and (2) that there is no other sentiment in the United States, at least no other counter-balancing sentiment. There is indeed little evidence that Trump has created his supporters, and there is also much evidence that a large anti-Trump sentiment exists now in the US. (Actually those views were...
already there in 2016, when few people thought Trump had a chance of winning the presidency; moreover, those views were at least in part there in 2008 and 2012 when Barack Obama was elected president of the US).

**Trump and the audible right-wing in the US**

Many anti-Trump people in the US like to say that Trump did not win the popular vote in 2016, and that is indeed true, but Donald Trump did win the presidency of the United States based on the way the US Electoral College works. Trump had many rivals in the 2016 Republican Party campaign season, but it was Trump who won the nomination of the US Republican Party and went on to win the national election in November 2016. Over the past few years, he has been impeached by the US House of Representatives (which currently has a Democratic Party majority), become known for his many Tweets, alienated Democrats but also many Independents and even a lot of traditional Republicans, been applauded by many in his “base” of support, and entered into nothing less than a war with what he calls the liberal media. It is perfectly reasonable to say that he is and has been a very controversial president, one frequently described by his opponents as divisive.

This, then, is the context for his low approval ratings in the United States. They are below 50% in nearly all polls—and in continuing US national polls. But these seem fairly steady and they clearly reflect his “base,” too. While his approval ratings averaged 39% of those polled by Gallup in his first year as president of the US, they have largely been in the low 40s since then and have not changed much. Below are Donald Trump’s Presidential Job Approval Ratings over the past few years, according to Gallup, and in relation to other US presidents.

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8 The novel coronavirus and the disease it causes (now ravaging many countries including the United States) have highlighted both Trump’s base of support and his position as a very controversial president. As late as the latter part of March and early April 2020, his approval ratings were as high as they have ever been (focusing on his handling of the coronavirus spread and the mounting number of fatalities), but the ratings have turned again. As at the time of writing (April 9, 2020), a majority of those polled by CNN show 57% saying that they are dissatisfied with the way Trump is handling the spread of COVID-19.

9 The ratings averaged 39% in Trump’s first year as president, according to a Gallup Poll and a story in the online version of The Guardian of January 2018. “The previous low was held by Bill Clinton, whose first-year average stood 10 points higher than Trump’s, at 49%.” The Guardian went on to point to surveys showing that “most Americans view Trump as a divisive figure and even question his fitness for office. One relative bright spot for Trump (until the stock market dipped seriously the last week of February 2020 and again in March 2020) was his handling of the economy, though even there his ratings are not as high as might be expected given a relatively strong economy.” The piece added that “Trump’s current approval rating in Gallup’s weekly poll is comparable to his average rating, standing at just 38%, with 57% saying they disapprove. The persistence of Trump’s first-year blues is unprecedented for a president so early in his term. Americans usually give their new presidents the benefit of the doubt, but Trump’s ‘honeymoon period,’ to the extent he had one, saw his approval rating only get as high as 45%.” Trump spent more time with approval ranked under 40% than any other US president in his first year of office. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jan/16/trumps-approval-rating-at-lowest-for-any-president-in-their-first-year (accessed November 6, 2019)

10 As accessed on the Gallup.com website on November 6, 2019.
Table I: Trump's presidential job approval ratings, according to Gallup

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Approval rating</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latest job approval rating</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Oct 14-31, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term average to date</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Jan 20, 2017-present</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highest job approval rating to date</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Apr 17-30, 2019</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lowest job approval rating to date</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>four times, last on Dec 11-17, 2017</td>
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Table II: Trump's presidential job approval ratings—historical comparisons, according to Gallup

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other elected presidents in October of third year</th>
<th>Average for US presidents</th>
<th>53</th>
<th>1938-2019</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barack Obama</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>October 2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td></td>
<td>55</td>
<td>October 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>October 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George H.W. Bush</td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>October 1991</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td></td>
<td>47</td>
<td>October 1983</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jimmy Carter</td>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>October 1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Nixon</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>October 1971</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Kennedy</td>
<td></td>
<td>58</td>
<td>October 1963</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dwight Eisenhower</td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>October 1955</td>
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Donald J. Trump gives many people in the United States a very audible voice, as I noted when I first wrote about Trump in *Comparative American Studies*. Many of those who voted for him in 2016—and are likely to vote for him again in 2020—were people who felt left out of the riches and mobility they sought, wanted, and believed others were getting. Popularity matters to Trump and he is clearly aware of who constitutes his “base.” Early polls showed that many of Trump’s most passionate supporters were working-class men, but class does not seem to be high on his list of topics nor on the list of many of his supporters. Whiteness, anti-immigration (at least from places outside Europe or European settler societies), and making “America great again” matter more, at least in public discourse. Most long-time and active Republicans (including Mitt Romney, Ted Cruz, Mario Rubio, and the late John McCain) did not support him and frequently criticized him, but Trump still won the Republican nomination for president in 2016; only Romney voted to convict him in the recent Senate trial, and there is little doubt that he will win the Republican nomination again in 2020.

Many of Trump’s critics consider him racist and homophobic. I have personally heard journalists ask interviewees if they think Trump is racist. Interviewees often shy away from that accusation, but they seem comfortable saying that many of his active supporters are. The Unite the Right march in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 fuelled that fire. Even Wikipedia had an entry on this event. It read:

one car was deliberately driven into a crowd of people who had been peacefully protesting the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, killing one and injuring 28. The driver of the car, 20-year-old James Alex Fields Jr., had driven from Ohio to attend the rally. Fields previously espoused neo-Nazi and white supremacist beliefs. He was convicted in a state court of hit and run, the first-degree murder of 32-year-old Heather Heyer, and eight counts of malicious wounding, and sentenced to life in prison. On March 27, 2019, he pled guilty to 29 of 30 federal charges in exchange for the prosecutors not seeking the death penalty.

Trump’s comment that there were “very fine people on ‘both sides’” left many of his critics incredulous and thinking that it was not just his supporters who were racist. This was widely debated and discussed at the time and is clearly still remembered. According to Jane Coaston, in April 2019 Trump was “still defending his infamous remarks in the wake of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017” when he told reporters, “I was talking about people that went because they felt very strongly about the monument to Robert E. Lee […] People there were protesting the taking down of the monument to Robert E. Lee. Everybody knows that.”

Trump’s reaction to the 2017 Charlottesville, Virginia, confrontation (and death) is now just part of the evidence. Notice also the current revival of his campaign rhetoric about building a tall, beautiful, and strong wall between the US and Mexico, as well as his nomination (and defense) of Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh to the US Supreme Court.

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11 I wrote an essay early in Trump’s first year as president of the US and reconsider that essay here; see Dominguez, “Reflections on Trump’s First 100 Days.”
12 See, for example, Rosa and Bonilla, “Deprovincializing Trump.”
14 Coaston, “Trump’s New Defense.” Clearly this 2019 piece in *Vox* is critical of Trump, but he retains avid supporters and relishes having them.
Most critics describe Trump as worried about the white, Christian, and heterosexual people in the US, not to mention the largely white male working-class nationalists who claim to be the proper Americans. Of course, he would not agree with this depiction, especially because his son-in-law is Jewish and his daughter converted to Judaism, but I am definitely not alone in describing him that way.

Trump is likely to dismiss more than this characterization. He clearly dislikes criticism, and withholds support for people in his government—military and diplomatic corps alike—when he feels that they are no longer loyal to him. This was especially clear during the impeachment process in the US House of Representatives and in the aftermath of his acquittal by the US Senate on February 5, 2020, when he fired decorated military advisers and acclaimed US diplomats who had testified against him.

Trump frequently lambasts the media, which he sees as liberal and against him. Yet even Fox News (which in the past has supported Trump) has come up with poll results and news stories that no longer clearly support him. There is little doubt that Trump has many supporters in the US, and I understand why critics of Trump describe them as right-wing populists. The issue, however, is what this means about the United States as a whole.

Evidence of a move to the left in the US

There is another way to view current politics in the US. Yes, there is a “base” that supports Trump and that sees Democrats as too critical of the US, but there is also a clear move to the left, and that, I argue, is at least as significant as the wave of right-wing, white nationalism to which Trump gives voice.

It is not enough to say that we have long known that the United States is full of contradictions. It is. I have written about this, but so have others, including Myles Lennon who approaches the topic quite convincingly in his 2018 HAU article entitled “Revisiting ‘the Repugnant Other’ in the Era of Trump.” But we need to account for this visible and audible move to the left as well. Trump’s vision and his supporters’ vision (or at least his perception of his supporters’ vision) is of an “America” that is solidly present and that contrary to the desire of many people cannot really accommodate a fringe. As I wrote for Comparative American Studies, “it may indeed be a blatantly delusional ‘America’ that seriously believes it is the best country in the world, despite its millions of people without healthcare or health insurance [made worse by Trump’s actions early in his presidency], decent schooling, or...

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15It is, of course, significant that he refuses to show his tax returns, although he is now nearing the end of his first term as president of the US and despite legal demands for those tax returns. It has always also been quite interesting to me that his “base” is so often enthusiastic about him, even though they apparently have little money and he is reputed to be extremely rich.

16Fox News has typically been considered the opposite of MSNBC. While the former is typically supportive of Trump and Republicans and critical of CNN, The New York Times, and anyone it considers liberal, leftist, or socialist, the latter is typically critical of Fox, Republicans, and anyone considered to be conservative, right-wing, or white nationalist.

17My point here is that these contradictions do not explain this move to the left now. As I wrote in 2017, the United States (1) is a country that officially granted universal suffrage within its Constitution, but that actively discriminated against more than half of the country’s population at the time, and de facto still does; (2) it is a country that proclaims freedom of religion but has many people who want to restrict that freedom severely; (3) it is a country whose Constitution gave citizens the right to bear arms, but it is also a country with a very high rate of gun violence and very vocal opposition to the ownership and use of guns; (4) it is a country officially, rhetorically, and ideologically committed to the idea of the rule of law, but it is a country with a long history of torture, military and intelligence intervention, and very unequal enforcement of the law within its own borders; (5) it is a country that largely conceives of itself as a land of immigrants but has for years been very selective about the geographic and class origins of its vetted immigrants; and (6) it is a country that has long presented itself to its youths and to the world as an offshoot of Europe and an improvement over Europe, even though over a third of its population did not cross the Atlantic Ocean willingly or at all when entering the United States. (Dominguez, “Reflections on Trump’s First 100 Days,” 14–15).
But it is not the only vision of the United States that now exists, and the many supporters of that alternative vision are also not a fringe element in the contemporary US.

Let me quote from a June 2019 story in Newsweek about a new Fox News poll that showed Trump lagging behind Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, and three other Democrats in the 2020 Presidential race:

A new poll from President Donald Trump’s favourite TV network did not bode well for the commander-in-chief’s goal of being elected for a second term. According to Fox News, the president is currently lagging behind as many as five of the Democratic candidates for the 2020 presidential election [when there were still that many in the race for the Democratic Party nomination for president].

The latest poll, conducted between June 9 and June 12 [2019], found Democratic frontrunners — former Vice President Joe Biden and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders — each garnering 49 percent of the vote in a hypothetical head-to-head against the president. Biden fared slightly better against Trump, beating the incumbent by ten percentage points, while Sanders had a slightly smaller gap of nine points over the president. The remaining three Democrats who could possibly unseat Trump were Senators Elizabeth Warren and Kamala Harris [who have since dropped out of the race], and Pete Buttigieg, mayor of South Bend, Indiana [who has also since dropped out of the race]. Warren, who was the first of the Democratic hopefuls to publicly call for Trump to be impeached holds the slight edge in this trio, beating the president by 43 percent to 41 percent.

. . . The Fox News poll results were not terribly dissimilar from a Quinnipiac University poll released last week that showed Trump lagging behind six Democratic contenders [again, when there were many Democratic Party contenders].

In polls spanning September 2019 until early October 2019, Biden led Trump with an average of 6.9 points, Sanders was up 5.3 points, and Warren was up on average 5.2, according to RealClearPolitics.\(^9\) It is important to note that these polls include data collected before as well as after the impeachment inquiry began on September 24, 2019. And it appeared at the time that Warren was making gains since the Democratic debates began in late June 2019. Alexander Burns wrote for the New York Times in an article titled “Why Populist Democrats Have Gained the Upper Hand in the 2020 Race” on October 11, 2019: \(^{21}\)

Several slow-building trends have converged to upend the race over the last few weeks: Senator Elizabeth Warren’s steady ascent in the polls [at the time] has accelerated. Both she and Senator Bernie Sanders, a fellow progressive, have

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{19}\) Moran, “Fox News Poll Shows Trump Lagging.”

\(^{20}\) RealClearPolitics aggregates polling data from national polls and generates averages.

\(^{21}\) I recognize that this NYT writer uses the phrase “populist Democrats,” and that this goes against my analysis, but I think he is wrong to assume that the move to the left is the result of a left-wing populism.
raised immense sums of money from small donors online, dominating the Democratic field and each collecting about $10 million more than Mr. Biden in the last quarter. And Mr. Biden’s numbers have gradually slipped in a way that has alarmed his supporters.

In an article dated November 5, 2019, and published online, Jacob Pramuk gathered more recent data from RealClearPolitics and made the following chart showing 5 Democratic presidential candidates supposedly beating Trump in 2020 in head-to-head battles. Of course, polling results in what the politicians call “battleground” states (rather than in national polls) still indicate strong support for Trump and this may be enough to get him re-elected in 2020, not by the majority of the country’s popular vote but by the US’s peculiar electoral college system.

Table III: Trump behind in national 2020 polls, according to Pramuk and RealClearPolitics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Democratic Candidate</th>
<th>Biden</th>
<th>Sanders</th>
<th>Warren</th>
<th>Harris</th>
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Some people may want to see all this as evidence of a left-wing populism, but there is a simpler explanation we should consider. There is a rise of a new left in the US, one that has not been seen in the United States in decades but that may actually be spurred to action by having Donald Trump as president.

Emerson Polling reported on its mid-October 2019 website:

Pramuk “Here’s How Biden, Sanders . . . Are Faring.”
In the first caucus state of the 2020 presidential election, the Democrat Primary field has shifted since the last Emerson poll in March [2019]. Former V.P. Joe Biden is now tied with Sen. Elizabeth Warren for the lead 23% each, followed by Mayor Pete Buttigieg at 16%, and Sen. Bernie Sanders dropping to fourth at 13%.

Of course, the 2020 Iowa caucus results ended up with Buttigieg winning more delegates than any other Democratic candidate in the race and Sanders winning the popular vote.

It remains fascinating, however, especially given Sanders’ advanced age (77), not to mention his recent heart attack, to see the continued enthusiastic support he has received from younger voters in the US. In recent polls (in October 2019) we see a large disparity between younger and older potential voters polled in their views of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Emerson Polling also reported in mid-October 2019 that “21% of those under 50 support Warren followed by Sanders at 18%. Biden continues to lead with those over 50 – receiving 33% support from this cohort, followed by Warren at 24%.” So, we see that Warren and Sanders, perhaps ironically, still led the youngest group of voters even over younger [and now withdrawn] presidential candidates like Kamala Harris and Pete Buttigieg.

In June 2019 Emerson Polling reported:

Income level is a driving factor in voter preference among the top candidates. Among those making less than $50,000 a year, Biden, Sanders and Warren are all at 20%. Among those making more than $50,000 a year, Sanders is at 8%, Warren is at 24% and Biden is at 25%.

In June, Emerson Polling also wrote:

Overall, voters have not acclimated to a candidate who describes themselves as a Democratic Socialist—with 43% saying they would not vote for a candidate with this label, 30% of voters indicating they would vote for a Democratic Socialist, and 27% unsure. Among Democratic primary voters, 56% said they would consider voting for a Democratic Socialist, 15% said they would not, and 29% are unsure. “The problem for Sanders and others who describe themselves as Democratic Socialists is that Independents are opposed, 42% to 26%, and that might be a problem for a Democratic nominee to overcome in a general election,” said Kimball, Director of the Emerson Poll.

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23In April 2015 Sanders announced his campaign for the 2016 Democratic nomination for President of the United States. Although he won 23 primaries and caucuses and around 43% of pledged delegates, he did not win the nomination of the US Democratic Party, but he became Hillary Clinton’s biggest rival. He did concede the nomination and endorsed Clinton against Donald Trump, yet he never stopped urging his supporters to continue the “political revolution” that he believed his 2016 campaign had begun. Although now 3 years older, he announced a second presidential campaign in February 2019. Both of his presidential campaigns have garnered fervent supporters. Also central to his campaigns has been his refusal to accept large donations from corporations, the financial industry, or any associated Super PAC.

24The national Emerson College poll was conducted from June 21–24, 2019 under the supervision of Professor Spencer Kimball. The sample consisted of registered voters, n=1,096, with a Credibility Interval (CI) similar to a poll’s margin of error (MOE) of +/- 2.9 percentage points. The data were weighted by age, gender, region, income, and education based on 2016 turnout modeling. It is important to remember that subsets based on gender, age, party breakdown, ethnicity and region carry with them higher margins of error, as the sample size is reduced. Data were collected using both an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system of landlines only (n=697), and an online panel provided by Amazon Turk (n=399).
Clearly there is still strong enthusiasm for Bernie Sanders (who won some Democratic Party primaries in the first quarter of 2020 and until his withdrawal on April 8, 2020, was one of the two front-runners for the Democratic Party nomination for president of the United States). That Sanders called himself a Democratic Socialist is revealing, since this kind of language has not been used by national politicians since the 1930s. That Warren has publicly said she is not a socialist, indeed that she believes in capitalism, may well have cost her votes in the 2020 primaries. Socialism was clearly squashed by the Cold War, and in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union when many Americans thought that capitalism had won and that Communism (even socialism) had lost. But Sanders apparently garnered enthusiastic supporters up to, and since, his withdrawal from the race for the presidency by laying claim to socialist bona fides. According to the Editorial Board of the Wall Street Journal on October 15, 2019:

Bernie Sanders wants voters to know that he—not Elizabeth Warren—is the bona fide socialist running for President in 2020. “There are differences between Elizabeth and myself,” Mr. Sanders said Sunday on ABC. “Elizabeth I think, as you know, has said that she is a capitalist through her bones. I’m not.” As he falls in the polls, Mr. Sanders has to do something to reignite that 2016 fire. But the Vermont Senator’s problem is that Ms. Warren has co-opted more or less all of his important policy proposals.

Of course, 2020 has proven Sanders to be stronger than Warren in the primaries, though not as strong as Biden who is now the presumptive nominee of the US Democratic Party. Through early March 2020, it was Sanders who was described as a front-runner, and not Warren (who did so poorly on “Super Tuesday“ that she even came in third in her home state of Massachusetts and dropped out just a few days later). Trump’s fans (i.e. the vast majority of those who give him a positive approval rating) have clearly met their match in the number of Americans who support candidates far on the left by US standards, whether the candidate galvanizing them is Sanders (or even Warren). The question is whether the move to the right that people talk about represents a change in the US, or something else altogether. I understand that “populism” is an important part of the rhetoric in South Africa, parts of Europe, and parts of Latin America today, and that it is used widely to describe and critique aspects of what is going on in many countries. I think it can clearly be applied to Trump’s “base” of support, but I think that focusing on that dimension occludes this very noteworthy development of support for leftist policy and ideals in the US, one that may have surprised Sanders in 2016 but no longer surprises him in 2020.

**Conclusion**

Trump has indeed made it possible for that section of the US public that is enthusiastic about him to say and do racist things, anti-elite things, and things that most people in the academy consider right-wing things. But these people have long been in the US, so is this not a matter of their becoming more audible and visible than before? I argue so in this article.

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Elizabeth Warren did well in the debates, but not in the actual primaries where she “underperformed.”
The data suggest that Trump allows a largely silenced group of people to feel represented in Washington, DC, but not that he “created” his political supporters. This is important because it argues against there simply being a move to the right in the United States. The data presented here also show that a large number of registered voters in the United States feel comfortable with national candidates for the US presidency who call themselves socialist. Notice that recent polls show that over half of Democrats (and about a third of all potential voters) now say they would consider voting for a Democratic Socialist. That Sanders did so well in a number of Democratic Party primaries and caucuses is significant. It means that very many Democratic Party voters are energized by Sanders, including (or despite) his self-appellation as a Democratic socialist. Of course, there are still Democratic leaders who fear that a socialist cannot win in the general election in November 2020, and there is the revealing fact that Trump openly asked South Carolina Republicans to vote for Sanders in the South Carolina open primary on February 29, 2020, because he thinks a socialist could not beat him. But my argument is that the US is facing a left-wing move now just as much as a right-wing move, and I do not want this tendency eclipsed by attention to Trump and his “base.”

One could, of course, then argue that this is evidence of a left-wing populism in the United States and that we are now facing two oppositional populist moves. However, I think that is a mistake. Many of those supporting Sanders and Warren are students in colleges and universities, people suspicious of corporations and rampant neoliberal capitalism, people who believe in climate change, and people not convinced that the way forward is putting the US first in all economic and political matters. So, they are not really anti-elitist. Arguments that make anti-elitism central to “populism” would not adequately explain this support for Sanders or Warren as left-wing populisms. Sanders and many of his supporters, instead, say that they are leading or participating in a movement. Sanders talks about wanting a revolution, including insisting on rights being granted to people in many Western European countries that the US considers its allies. In many ways, he does sound like a socialist, but it would be a clear mistake to assume that all socialism is populist.

Sanders supporters are obviously strongly opposed to Trump and that is what unites them. In fact, Trump supporters would probably consider Sanders’ and Warren’s supporters elites and not just anti-American. What is also interesting is that many people excited about Sanders and Warren are certainly not socialists as people in the 1930s were. They are not primarily supporting labor unions (which now represent a very small fraction of the US labor market) or primarily concerned about labor (though they are often concerned with inequalities of various sorts), and they are not looking at current socialist or Communist regimes outside the US as models. One could call them the “new left” (or, better yet, the early twenty-first-century left); one could say that they are making the US Democratic Party move to the left in its official statements, positions, and policies, as Sanders certainly hopes and states; one could even say that Trump has amplified their voices, too, since they are at least in part motivated by challenging him and his supporters. But I argue here that they are not populist in any real sense of the world.

It may be fair to claim that Warren and Sanders and their supporters espouse a few political positions that resemble those of the late nineteenth-century populist party in the US—for instance, seeking to regulate the power and influence of large corporations and the wealthiest private citizens. Yet the differences are stark too, and especially in the

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16Shorto, “Bernie Sanders’s Forty-Year-Old Idea.”
demographic make-up of these supporters and the appeal of their leaders. We may never know whether a Sanders candidacy would have gained widespread support among farmers, for instance, but it is clear that many of his supporters are educated elites and live in cities and on the coasts. Many Trump supporters are elites, too, to be sure (as are Republican Party supporters more generally), and it is sometimes suggested that any claims to populism on the right are a farce intended to stoke false consciousness and dupe the masses. That is not the main point of this article, but I do want to suggest that what we are seeing on the right and on the left are not in any sense symmetrical or mirror images—not the two balanced wings of a bird.

Populism can, of course, exist on the left just as much as on the right, as some colleagues have contended. But my argument is that in this case it is just on the right and not the left, and that to argue that populism explains both moves is misleading because it risks amplifying the loud rhetoric on the right and ignoring this loud (and certainly not fringe) group on the left. To do so risks oversimplifying US politics when the real issue is that the United States is deeply divided politically and ideologically, and some of it wants a revolution, not just reform. The fact of Sanders’ growing popularity among ordinary people in many states, as well as among elites, suggests an actual move leftwards, whereas the support for Trump has mostly just stirred the seething racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and homophobia always lying in wait in the United States. It is interesting to note what Bernie Sanders said on April 8, 2020, in his statement when bowing out of the 2020 US presidential race: “Together we have transformed American consciousness as to what kind of nation we can become, and have taken this country a major step forward in the never-ending struggle for economic justice, social justice, racial justice, and environmental justice.”

It is not that the discourse on populism is unhelpful here. It is certainly useful to think along these terms both with respect to the United States and with respect to other countries in the world. But must populism as a term developed and much discussed in some countries and regions necessarily be the best way to explain contemporary politics elsewhere? It is interesting that it applies in part to the US, but it is equally interesting that the rise of a right-wing populism in the US has largely been fuelling a new and much more audible and visible left. And it is equally interesting that supporters of this new twenty-first-century left call themselves “progressives” and see themselves as ardently part of a “movement.” People may think that these terms are acceptable in the US and that socialism and left-wing populism are not, and they are insightful to a degree. Yet it is also important that we are talking now about millions of people—many of them young people—who enthusiastically endorsed the candidacy of a self-described Democratic Socialist and whom Joe Biden is now trying to court.

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28 A New York Times article authored by Giovanni Russonello, dated April 9, 2020 and sent to me online that same day, said the following:

The challenge now for Joe Biden is clear: Yes, he’ll need to win the support of moderates and swing voters in key battleground states to beat President Trump in November. But he will also need to earn the trust of liberal voters and those feeling left behind by a political establishment that Sanders has loudly criticized — and that Biden proudly embodies. Biden, the former vice president, must work to energize young people and progressive voters who largely rejected his center-left candidacy during the Democratic primary race. He and Sanders spoke by phone on Wednesday, and the Biden campaign is planning to release digital content arguing that he has moved in Sanders’s direction in policy areas like health care.
References


RealClearPolitics. Polls.


Which populism, whose populism?

*This piece is a further reflection on, and update of, “Whose Populism: Trump Supporters versus a New Left”. It was finalized toward the end of May 2020.

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At the time of writing on 23 May 2020, we have been under stay-at-home orders for weeks, even though most US state governments have started to loosen those orders. Each day brings news and developments that may appear to be just about the novel coronavirus, but it has become clear in the last few weeks that these reports or occurrences are as much concerned with the presidential elections in November of this year as with the pandemic.

By now, Joe Biden has become the presumptive candidate for president of the USA on the Democratic Party ticket. Both left-wing Bernie Sanders and left-leaning Elizabeth Warren have dropped out of the race and endorsed Joe Biden, but it is not clear whether their supporters would vote for Joe Biden in November—and not just because of the recent allegation of sexual harassment by Tara Reade. Many supporters of Sanders and Warren are simply unexcited about Biden himself. On the other hand, like their preferred candidates, they are so opposed to Trump that they may cast a vote for Biden as an anti-Trump statement.

Yet the pandemic makes it hard to predict what will happen over the next few months. Most of us in the US academy have been teaching online since the middle of March, and we are the fortunate ones. So far we have retained our jobs. Millions of people in the US have not; despite enormous economic stimulus packages passed by the US Congress and signed by Trump in the last few weeks.¹ The media reported a few days ago that the level of unemployment in the US has not been this high since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Of course, that level—reported on 8 May, 2020, as 14.7%—is not uncommon in many other countries, which had recorded similar (or worse) statistics long before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. However, this situation is quite unusual in the US. Polls show that Trump’s approval rating was in the low 40s until it rose recently with many states of the US “opening up the economy.”²

As many people outside the US know, this country has registered the largest number of reported deaths from the novel coronavirus in the world and the largest number of people who have contracted the disease (again in the world). The recorded cases are increasing steadily elsewhere, especially in Brazil, but the figures for the US are still staggering, with 96,007 deaths as of today (23 May, 2020)³ and predictions suggesting that the toll will reach 100,000 deaths by 1 June, 2020. As is also well known, both within and outside the US, the African-American and Latino/a populations are disproportionately represented among those who have died.⁴ This applies to New York City,⁵ New Orleans,⁶ and Detroit,⁷ where the proportion of racialized minorities is high. In many such cities, the difference in death rates

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¹ See the Washington Post article of May 8, 2020: https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/08/april-2020-jobs-report/
⁷ https://census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/detroitcitymichigan_US/PST045219
between white citizens and racial (African-American) or ethnic (Hispanic and Latino/a) minorities is statistically significant.

Nonetheless, many governors of US states have gone ahead in recent days (most notably in May 2020) and lifted some restrictions that had been in force during March or April regarding activities such as going to beaches or parks, getting haircuts, and even eating at outside tables in restaurants. What the impact of these interventions will be is hard to gauge. Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York has recently acknowledged the prevailing risks and taken several measures to address them further. The Governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer, is a Euro-American woman, while Detroit (which is located in her state) has a substantial African-American population. Governor Whitmer has already recognized the tragedy of the differential effects of COVID-19 on African-Americans in that city.

Trump has seemed quite worried about the November presidential election, not so much in response to the number of deaths attributed to the coronavirus pandemic, but more because of the loss of jobs, the resulting impact of unemployment on the US economy, and the consolidated impact of such negative developments on his electoral base. There is no evidence suggesting that he has actively promoted the (sometimes violent) protests by people who want their state governors to lift their stay-at-home orders and to allow a return to work and leisure activities. Events at the State Capitol in Michigan may serve as a vivid example. Videos and photographs of protests include many people not wearing masks or maintaining any recognized level of social distancing, protective behaviors promoted by Trump (at least verbally) and his White House Task Force. At the same time, going out for a haircut has virtually become a symbol of the impulse to protest. Will all of this lead to more deaths? Many people believe so, including Trump himself, who has said that Americans should expect more deaths from the coronavirus—and not just a few more, but about twice as many by early August 2020 as we have seen until now. But how will these factors be translated into support for the right or support for the left in the November elections? The outcome may depend on how the left responds to Biden.

Biden has not yet indicated whom he will choose as his Vice-Presidential nominee. He has stated publicly that he will choose a woman for that position, so Bernie Sanders is out of the running, but Elizabeth Warren is not. The standard political lore in the US has for years proposed that a presidential nominee should not pick a vice-presidential candidate who would outshine them, but that, too, may be different (even extraordinary) this year. Of the women mentioned by the media as candidates Biden is considering for the VP role (Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, and Stacey Abrams), only Stacey Abrams and possibly Amy Klobuchar seem likely to fit the bill this year. Biden might indeed choose Abrams, in part because she is African-American; he has been advised by some to take such racial considerations into account. He might also opt for Amy Klobuchar, both because she is more centrist than Warren or Harris (and visibly shares his values and positions), and because she is from the Midwestern sector of the US, balancing the fact that he comes from the East

9 https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/03/michigan-gretchen-whitmer-lockdown-protest-racism
10 Ibid.
12 See this article from the CDC (the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention): https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/forecasting-us.html
13 See the May 7, 2020 CNN article: https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/07/politics/biden-vp-vice-president-kamala-harris-amy-klobuchar/index.html
Coast, a regional factor that many presidential candidates have taken into account at least in recent years.

Yet Elizabeth Warren now seems to be the top choice of many polled, and I believe this has to do with the need to appeal to (or even appease) the electorate on the open left, as represented in the Democratic Party’s presidential campaign over the past few months by Sanders and Warren. In fact, the CBS News Poll that CNN reported on 7 May, 2020 confirmed that more than 70% of Democrats in their poll said that Biden should consider Warren to be his VP. And when asked who, specifically, they would like Biden to choose, Warren again led the way with 36% followed by California Sen. Kamala Harris at 19%, former Georgia state Rep. Stacey Abrams at 14% and Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar at 13%. (No other possible VP candidate got more than 4% in the poll.)

We know that Bernie Sanders struggled over endorsing Biden (or at least the media reported that he struggled) in recognition of the many people who had donated to his campaign, the strength of their support for him, and the strength of general support for Sanders among the US electorate. The question now is whether Sanders’ and Warren’s supporters will vote for Biden as a way of voting against Trump. It is simply not clear what they will do, especially if Biden does not choose Warren for his vice-presidential nominee. The “new 21st-century left” clearly has considerable influence, and this has very little to do with the tragic pandemic in the midst of which we now find ourselves.

It is also not clear what may happen at the Democratic Party convention, nor even whether there will be a face-to-face convention over the next few months. Social distancing may just not be possible, masks will not protect people adequately, and a safe, effective, and available vaccine seems to be months, if not years, away. If party conventions do not happen, because all political parties now seem to have presumptive nominees, and it is not safe to have so many people travelling or being in close proximity to one another, nothing about the November election will be “normal” (or at least as it has been for decades). However, one thing remains true: the US is very divided and probably at least as divided as before this pandemic (and now possibly more intensely so). The “new 21st-century left” will not go away. It is, in fact, intensifying its antipathy toward Trump and his base, while Trump’s base is growing more unabashed by the minute. Such activity is reflected, once again, in the armed protests at the Michigan State Capitol. There is much concern about the climate of protest, both on the left and on the right. CNN adopts one perspective (and is seen as representing “the left”), while Fox News takes a different stance (which is construed as supporting “the right”).

Unsurprisingly, an additional candidate for president emerged between late April and early May—a former Republican from Michigan, now seeking to run as the candidate for the Libertarian Party: Justin Amash. Why do I even know about this? It is because US media lambasted by Trump have reported it. Independents and small party candidates—such as Libertarian Party candidates, Green Party candidates, and Ross Perot—have run for President over the past few decades, and never really come close to winning, so Amash seems not to stand a chance. However, in 2020 it is proving difficult to predict anything.

The real issue is really what the “new 21st-century left” is going to do. That Warren would even consider the role of VP is very telling. Months ago I would have expressed strong

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14 Ibid.
doubt, but in mid-May 2020, and with the coronavirus pandemic highlighting the very big differences between right and left in the US, I am no longer sure.

Why might the electoral contest in the United States matter to Africa? It is significant not merely because of the downgrading of South Africa’s economy to sub-investment grade or “junk status” on 25 March, the first evening of the lockdown. The timing of this announcement could scarcely have been worse, carrying as it did severe repercussions for local bonds and the value of the rand. The elections are also important because of differences in foreign policy between the candidates for president of the USA.

Donald Trump wants to “make America great again” and this often means withdrawing from treaties or agreements settled by his predecessors, especially, but not exclusively, Barack Obama. We see this trend in Trump’s recent comments about the inadequacies of the WHO and his not-so-recent statements and actions regarding the Paris agreement on climate change. This focus on advancing the US also means negotiating hard with countries whose economies are large, and on which the US is in many ways dependent. Trump’s long-standing battle on trade with the People’s Republic of China is an example. However, the key question is whether he may in principle be uninterested in Africa, even South Africa, because it does not play a significant role in the US economy. The situation might even be worse, because Trump clearly thinks that African countries are a drain on US government resources, and he anticipates that their needs will continue.

Biden is different. Not only was he Vice-President of the US under President Obama (who believed in international action and collaboration), but he is not inclined to drop many of these existing agreements and he does not share Trump’s views regarding the rest of the world—including Africa—and the role of the US in it. He does not belong to what I have called the “new 21st-century left” in the US (best represented by Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren), but he is, in many ways, like most Democrats seriously concerned with the legacies of slavery, including continuing racism toward people not descending fully from Europeans. This means that he would not endorse white nationalists, not even in the way Trump did after the fierce violence accompanying the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which left one counter-protestor dead and others injured. Nor would Biden have much patience with such comments as “there were fine people on both sides.”

I believe further that he would have a significantly different attitude (from Trump) towards the entire African continent. Perhaps that is wishful thinking on my part, and perhaps in the end Biden is also just an American politician who is unaware of the many ways in which the USA at present acts as an imperial power. This remains an open question, though. I hope I am correct in my assessment of a Biden presidency, especially if he chooses Warren as his running mate or is at least seriously listening to the more “progressive” wing of the Democratic Party, as well represented by both Sanders and Warren.

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