

New Trends and Impact of American Populism

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In recent years, the rising populism in the United States has brought about new risks to the country and the world. At the same time, the American political elites and the media have concocted a new version of “China threat.” China is confronted with more challenges in its external environment. Judging from the present situation, populism and the new “China threat” have the same economic and cultural root cause since both of them are a result of the serious negative impacts of globalization on American economic and social development. They also reflect the efforts of some social groups in the US to manipulate the political agenda by resorting to the so-called “conspiracy theory” and “demonizing” other social groups. What is different is that today’s populism originates from the grassroots, but rises to the top level of state power and enters the national agenda through Donald Trump’s election to the presidency and his subsequent ruling. The “China threat” rhetoric shows that the political elites have adopted an extreme and aggravated anti-China ideology. These two trends have not yet converged, but we need to be vigilant and guard against the possibility that China will be targeted by American populism.

New Trends in American Populism

Conceptually, populism has three core elements: worshipping “the people,” opposing “the elites,” and advocating the notion that politics should be

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the expression of the people's will.¹ In practice, it is characterized by three general components: first, to mobilize the public through charismatic leadership, social movements or political party restructuring and stimulate a specific popular base; second, to combine with a specific ideology, and put forward a set of political, economic and social reform programs; third, to oppose the original ruling elites and the establishment, and seek to unite with the upper strata of society in order to establish new norms and systems. In the American political context, populism is not only a tool used by political challengers, but also a label used by the elites to denigrate grassroots politics. As President Trump entered the White House and boosted the right-wing populism in the world, populism has been frequently used by policy makers, political parties and various social movements as a tool for one particular social group to put the blame for social contradictions on another group. It manifests the following development trends.

Simultaneous rise of left-wing and right-wing populism

Historically speaking, left-wing populism has been in a weak position in American politics, while right-wing populism has been relatively active. Left-wing populism regards specific economic strata, primarily the working class as “the people,” opposing the gap between the rich and the poor and capitalism in general. It is hostile to the rich, stands for the interests of specific classes, and supports universal welfare and the nationalization of enterprises. Examples include the People's Party founded in the 1890s, the civil rights movement in the 1960s, the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 and the Bernie Sanders phenomenon in the 2016 presidential election. Right-wing populism regards specific ethnic groups (the white) as “the people,” excludes immigrants, places extreme emphasis on its own ethnic interests, upholds traditional social values, pursues economic nationalism and despises multilateralism. Examples in this regard include the

1 Jan-Werner Muller, *What is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, pp.19-20.

xenophobic movement in the late 19th century, the anti-Semitic movement by the Catholic priest Charles Coughlin in the 1930s, the anti-civil rights movement by George Wallace in the 1960s, the anti-free trade movements by Ross Perot in 1992 and Pat Buchanan in 1996, the Tea Party movement since 2010, and the Trump phenomenon.²

At present, left-wing and right-wing populism are rising at the same time, and they compete against each other with right-wing populism having the upper hand. Relying respectively on Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont and President Trump, the two forces have found new performance platforms within the two major political parties. Within the Democratic Party, the disputes between moderate liberals represented by the Clinton forces and the left-wing faction represented by Bernie Sanders have not come to an end. The rise of grassroots radicals has become a new bright spot and attracted a large number of young people. They focus on economic and class issues, oppose privileges, advocate equality and sympathize with the more vulnerable groups. Several new-generation Democrats appearing in the 2018 mid-term elections claimed democratic socialism. Just as Sanders decried capitalism as “a process by which so few have so much and so many have so little,”³ many young people believe that capitalism is the crux of national problems. Within the Republican Party, the populist sentiments of anti-establishment, anti-immigration and anti-free trade are surging. The issues concerning race, religion, ethnicity and culture attract much attention while traditional propositions about controlling government spending, reducing deficits and debt, and safeguarding the alliance system have become unpopular. Since the beginning of the Trump presidency, the Republican establishment keeps on “dropping out,” as seen in House Speaker Paul Ryan’s announcement of not running for reelection, and the resignation of Nikki Haley as US Ambassador to the United Nations. The

2 Ragini Ahuja, “The History of Populism: A Review of the Populist Explosion,” *Journal of International Affairs*, New York: Vol.70, No.2, Summer 2017, pp.179-180.

3 David Catanese, “How Sanders and Warren Will Decide Which one Runs for President,” *The Atlantic*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/warren-sanders-trump-2020/568462>.

Republican top leaders and voters are generally more tolerant of Donald Trump, and “who is more pro-Trump” becomes a slogan for Republicans to gain the upper hand in mid-term elections while being “anti-Trump” carries with it the risk of ruining one’s Republican political career. This political climate has spawned violence such as the Charlottesville riots, the mail bombing attempts targeting Democratic politicians, and the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting.

Rise of populist forces from periphery to the level of state power

Mainstream politicians in the United States have never shied away from using populism as their podium. For example, Andrew Jackson was the first US president that claimed himself as an anti-establishment “common man.” Many policies in Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal originated from the propositions of the People’s Party. Ronald Reagan’s political belief that “government is not the solution to our problem but is the problem” attracted a large number of conservative “Reagan Democrats,” which became an effective weapon in his electoral victory.⁴ It can be said that in previous presidential elections, candidates from both major political parties resorted to populist discourse and strategies in order to win public opinion, but this round of surging populism, through Trump’s taking office, has reached the highest level of state power and asserted itself into the nation’s political agenda. Now populism in the US is no longer just a campaign strategy, but the practice of national policy, and operates in the framework of the government establishment and by a series of lawful principles which it represents. At the federal level, right-wing officials are still in the minority, yet they have the louder voices. In the White House, populist anti-establishment appeals have more chance to be acted on expeditiously.

Trump has two landmark policy positions, namely strengthening the immigration policy and reshaping the international trade order. Both appeal

4 Fu Suixin, “Revival of Counter-Globalization, Populist Movement and Nationalism in the United States,” *Journal of International Security Studies*, No.5,2017, p.38.



People take to the streets in cities across the United States to oppose President Donald Trump's declaration of a national emergency on the country's southern border, which would empower him to bypass the Congress and mobilize funds to construct border walls and barriers.

directly to the white working class, reflect the anti-immigration, anti-elite and anti-globalization sentiments of white racism, and provide the basis for attacks on the neo-liberal agenda implemented by previous administrations. Trump chanted "Make America Great Again," "Drain the Swamp," and "Build the Wall," linking in a simple and crude way the complicated contradictions within American society and illegal immigration, and attributing all the problems to former Washington elites, thus winning core voters' support with bold proposals that break away from political correctness. Both the belligerent public communications style and the retaliatory diplomatic approach as seen in Trump's presidency belong to an established populist routine in political mobilization. Concerning the base of populism, right-wing populists, who take white racism and economic nationalism as their ideology and claim themselves as "vulnerable groups" in society, have called for "recapturing the United States" and regarded

Trump as their companion, giving him fervent support, making him their spokesman, and utilizing him as a weapon against the establishment elites. People with important influence in White House decision-making, such as former Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, trade advisor Peter Navarro and senior political advisor Stephen Miller, are all supporters of white supremacy.

Populist appeals impacting US policy traditions

Populism exaggerates the principle of “people’s sovereignty,” rejects the idea of pluralism, highlights the personality cult of “charismatic leaders,” and regards all factors that constrain their leaders as obstacles. President Trump, who is no different from other populists in history, attacks the media as “the enemy of the people,” has a venomous relations with the intelligence community, dismissed FBI Director James Comey, and called investigations into collusion between his associates and Russian officials “witch-hunt.” He also interfered in the independence of the judiciary, pardoned the Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio who was suspected of racism, launched personal attacks on his political opponents, and looked down upon the intellectual elites. The series of words and deeds by Trump are regarded by mainstream media as subversive of democracy, and damaging to democratic principles such as the electoral system, the separation of powers, freedom of the press and the global free market.⁵

Due to its pursuit of short-term effects and ignorance of long-term sustainability of policies, populism tends to veer toward the irrational.⁶ For example, radical Democrats advocate an increase of the federal minimum hourly wage to \$15, more than twice the current \$7.25, a proposal which is unlikely to pass. On the other hand, Trump insists on building walls along the US-Mexico border and bans trans-gender enlistment. These issues,

5 Stephen M. Walt, “Top 10 Signs of Creeping Authoritarianism Revisited,” *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/27/top-10-signs-of-creeping-authoritarianism-revisited>.

6 Francis Fukuyama, “The Populist Surge,” *The American Interest*, February 9, 2018, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/02/09/the-populist-surge>.

which no politician in the establishment is likely to touch, complicate the US economic and social transformation.

With regard to diplomacy, Trump boasts that he knows the real world better than the globalist elites, believing that America has a conflict of interests with the world and that other countries are not only of different minds but are even jeering at and taking advantage of the United States' wishful thinking. Therefore, he seeks to change the way the US interacts with the world, and wants to conduct diplomacy based on "America First," using confrontational methods to cope with threats and launching attacks on the post-war diplomatic tradition, including multilateral trade arrangements, the alliance system, and value-based diplomacy. In his eyes, the liberal world order is totally useless and should be cast aside. As a result, Trump becomes the first US president to deny the post-war international institutional system, which the US actively built up. He even sympathizes with the populist governments in Italy, Poland and Hungary, and loathes the European integration process. Although he also emphasized the unity of the West, yet from his speeches in Poland in July 2017 and in the UN General Assembly in September 2018, it can be seen that Trump regards the West as a unique cultural unit, bounded by sovereignty and integrated by certain historical traditions and beliefs, instead of a like-minded community of democratic states.

Hence, an initial "Trump Doctrine" has started to take shape with three meanings: for the United States, it has no enemy when it has no friend; regarding the relations with other countries, there is no gain unless the US has the courage to lose; for the world at large, only greater chaos will bring about greater governance. Generally, the doctrine believes that the US commands the world while other countries have little say; specifically, the Trump Doctrine is the opposite of the "Obama Doctrine."⁷ The evolving American diplomacy towards the "law of the jungle," protectionism and

7 Jeffrey Goldberg, "A Senior White House Official Defines the Trump Doctrine: 'We're America, Bitch,'" *The Atlantic*, June 11, 2018. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/06/a-senior-white-house-official-defines-the-trump-doctrine-were-america-bitch/562511>.

strong-man autocracy will only stimulate the rise of global nationalism, push the East-West joint governance in international affairs toward a “clash of civilizations,” and could make the US alliance relationships the first victim of “America First.” In fact, Washington’s allies have found it increasingly difficult to convince the Trump administration to stop upsetting the current international order and system. The United States has successively withdrew from the Paris Agreement, the Iran nuclear deal, the UN Human Rights Council and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and threatened to pull out of the Universal Postal Union. From international mail billing regulations to strategic stability, the US has undermined multilateralism and global governance, showing that Trump’s anti-establishment appeals in diplomacy are rapidly reverberating at the international level.

Strong vitality of the current round of populism

Objectively speaking, populism aims at popular values, represents grassroots aspirations and stresses equality, thus preserving a certain degree of justification.⁸ Most US politicians are proud of being “common man.” In order to win the support of the people, the two major political parties have adopted certain populist proposals, pushing for party reforms, promoting the improvement of government policies, and transforming sporadic populist ideas into certain systems and values. In this process, resentful voices from the grassroots become the driving force for reforms at the national level, while high-brow people with vested interests, without strong impetus from the whole society or a sense of crisis, find it difficult to initiate changes.

At present, with the restructuring of constituencies, both political parties have turned to extremes in order to cater to voters while the number of centrists and pragmatists is decreasing. The core ideology and beliefs of the Republican Party have changed, while the Democratic Party is facing

8 Jiang Dehai, “How to Understand Western Populism,” *Tongzhou Gongjin*, No.10, 2018, p.33.

a split between moderates and radicals. Information technology and new media platforms have further expanded the audience for populist ideas, which facilitates the rise of populism. For example, continuous fierce clashes between right-wing media, such as Fox News, Drudge Report and Breitbart News, and the mainstream media have shaken the tradition of moderate criticism which for a long time had characterized American society. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a growing left-wing populist force since 2016 committed to achieving a “humanitarian social order based on public control over resources and production, economic planning, equitable distribution, feminism, racial equality and non-oppressive relations,”⁹ breaks the taboo of socialist discourse. The redistribution of power initiated by populism is far from complete.

It should also be noted as Trump pursues populism with irrationality and fanaticism, his policies might bring about undesirable consequences and ultimately put him in a dilemma. What is not clear now is whether Trump’s collision with the government apparatus will evolve into the victory of extremists and their domination, or will accelerate the absorption and integration of their ideology into the establishment which will mitigate a collision between the two. It is not clear either whether the pressures Washington faces in its domestic reforms will be reduced as the populist rhetoric diverts blame for problems at home to other countries, as seen in trade protectionism, or Trump’s diplomacy will eventually suffer a failure in the world and bring disaster to himself. Anyway, one thing is for sure, as Dr. Henry Kissinger said, that the United States has always regarded the so-called “improvement of the condition of all mankind” as a strategic goal, and “if we abandon this important idealism, the United States will betray itself.”¹⁰ This may be the boundary for Trump’s “America First” concept and the populist anti-establishment appeal.

9 Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “How the Democratic Socialists of America Learned to Love Cynthia Nixon and Electoral Politics,” *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-democratic-socialists-of-america-learned-to-love-cynthia-nixon-and-electoral-politics>.

10 Henry Kissinger, *The World Order*, translated by Hu Liping, et al., CITIC Press Group, August 2015, p.430.

Roots of Current Populism

Populism has a long tradition in American politics and is rooted in protracted political or economic crisis in society. In the conflict between traditional values and modern life, populism becomes prominent as a traditional political and cultural element to attack and thus restrain the status quo, thus creating tensions with elite politics.¹¹ At present, the root cause of American populism lies in the deteriorating inequality caused by the economic distribution system, the weakening superior position of white Americans caused by changes in demographic structure, the deepening clashes between nationalism of the white blue-collar class and globalism of the political elites, and the dissatisfaction of the “vulnerable groups” in society with the Obama administration.

Financial crisis opening the door to populism

The financial crisis not only dealt a heavy blow to the American economy, but also inflicted severe damage to people’s confidence in their economic prospects and weakened the legitimacy of policy-makers and financial elites who enjoy power and wealth. On one hand, the excessively liberal capitalist economic model has come to a dead end, leading to unprecedented criticism of capitalism from the left-wing; on the other hand, the Wall Street, once benefitting from the bailout and recovering itself, has resumed its old practices and parceled out large dividends to shareholders. Quite a number of people feel that they have been abandoned by the transnational world economy, betrayed by politicians and bankers in the establishment camp, and exploited by the pressures on resources and employment due to a massive immigration influx. As a result, there have been surging localism and anti-elite sentiments, which has greatly impacted globalization. A group of “losers” in the spread of globalization and the

11 Zi Zhongyun, *The United States in the 20th Century*, revised edition, Commercial Press, June 2018, p.36.

working class, especially white blue-collar workers, become active advocates of populism. Among them, right-wing populists are the main force in the US anti-globalization movement.

The failure of recovery from the financial crisis has been manifest in two ways. First, there has developed a greater concentration of wealth. Distortions in the income distribution system have led to a shrinking middle class. The proportion of middle-income people in the total population has continued to decline, and by 2015 it had fallen below 50%. The income earned by middle-income families accounted for 61% of the country's total in 1971, and in 2014 the figure dropped to 43%. In recent years, the income of the top 1% of the highest earners increased from 20.27% of the country's total in 2013 to 23.8% in 2016, while the income of the bottom 90% of those who earn the least decreased from 52.73% to 49.69% of the country's total.¹² The gap between the rich and the poor has widened instead of narrowed. Second, the tradeoff between power and money has become serious. Before the 1970s, 3-4% of congressmen, after departing from office, became lobbyists. Now, 42% of House representatives and 50% of senators become lobbyists after leaving office. According to statistics, in the Obama administration, more than 100 government officials came from lobbying groups of the same profession, and the same number of officials went to interest-related lobbying groups after leaving office.¹³ The mainstream political system is becoming increasingly indifferent to the demands of the poor, and common people are excluded from the public policy discourse.

In this context, people are generally doubtful about the long-term prospects of economic growth. They are worried that the future generation will be worse-off and that the American Dream will become bleak. According to statistics, the less-educated white working class has become the

12 Pew Research Center, "The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground," December 9, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/the-american-middle-class-is-losing-ground>.

13 Timothy Carney, "Eight Years Later: Obama's Broken Promise on the Revolving Door," *Washington Examiner*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/eight-years-later-obamas-broken-promise-on-the-revolving-door>.

most pessimistic group. Only 44% of them expect their children to have a better material life than themselves, while more than half of the black, Latinos and college-educated white people have the same expectation.¹⁴ Because of the irreversible polarization of income distribution, the weakening of social mobility and the monopoly on capital, the root causes of populism remain intact, and will even become stronger in the event of an economic recession or a similar plight.

Changes in demographic structure aggravating identity crisis

The two large-scale immigration inflows in the history of the United States both came from Europe and subsided due to the Civil War in the mid-19th century and the economic recession and harsh immigration laws in the 1920s respectively. At that time, a longer interval provided immigrants with more time to integrate themselves into the local community. However, today's immigration tide is an unprecedented phenomenon. It started in the 1960s and 1970s, and has continued to the present day. The places of origin of the immigrants become more diverse and dispersed, with those with Latino, Asian and Muslim origins increasing significantly. After setting their foot on American land, they tend to live together and have few intermarriages with the mainstream society. Their assimilation is consequently slower than the two previous influxes.

With the aging of the white population and their low fertility rate, it will lose its traditional dominant position as the main ethnic group, which means the advantage of continuously attracting immigrants becomes a disadvantage for the white population. According to statistics, by 2045, white people will account for 49.7% of the total population in the US and become the minority. Considering the big contribution to the growth of Asian and Latino population by young immigrants, by the year 2020, white people will have become a minority in the millennium generation under the age of 18. Among voters from 18 to 29 years of age, the white will lose their

14 J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, translated by Liu Xiaotong, et al., Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House, April 2017.

majority position in 2027.¹⁵

Corresponding to the changes in ethnic structure, various cultural and religious forces based on ethnicity have exerted influence on the United States' cultural identity in a comprehensive way and thus provided more space for new thinking. Globalization, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism have all impacted Americans' awareness, and various forces pose challenges to the core of American culture. Evangelical Christianity, as the leading religious force, has suffered setbacks, and the tradition of white superiority has shown signs of faltering. This brings about a crisis for Americans, especially for the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs), who fear that the mainstream white culture will lose its glorious dominance in history. The greatest advantage of the Republican Party at present is that it awakens white people's anxiety about the demographic structure and mainstream culture of American society, and firmly attracts elderly, blue-collar, rural, and less-educated white people. The rise of the Tea Party and the alt-right movement represents the resistance and return of traditional force of whites at ideological, cultural and political levels.

Deepening rift between “people” and “elites”

As Samuel Huntington stated in his *Who are we? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, there is a gap between the white-elite-controlled government institutions and policies on one side and the interests of non-elite whites, what populists call the “people,” on the other.¹⁶ For example, the political elites, with the Democratic Party at its core, focuses on promoting the identity and socio-economic status of minorities, while ignoring the identity and socio-economic status of low- and middle-level white people. Many low- and middle-class whites consider themselves victims of this “reverse discrimination” and feel that the “political

15 William H. Frey, “The U.S. Will Become ‘Minority White’ in 2045, Census Projects,” The Brookings Institution, March 14, 2018, <http://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-project>.

16 Samuel Huntington, *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, translated by Cheng Kexiong, Xinhua Publishing House, March 2017, p.6.

correctness” movement restricts their freedom of speech. White supremacists regard Trump as “the last hope to revive white superiority and hierarchy” and believe that to “make America great again” means to make America “white” again.¹⁷

The American public is not as keen as the political elites for extensive US involvement in the world economy. What the public is concerned about is social order, national security, domestic economy and sovereignty, while the elites have their first priority in support for international trade and population mobility, strengthening of the international system and deepening of America’s involvement in foreign affairs. There are significant differences in opinion between the elites and the public on immigration, trade and employment. As shown in an opinion poll conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in 2015, within the Republican Party, 55% of the public and 16% of leaders believed that immigrants and refugees posed a serious threat to the United States; 61% of the public and 20% of leaders set the control and reduction of illegal immigration as an important goal of US foreign policy. On the other hand, while only 27% of the Republican public wish to accept Syrian refugees, there are 71% of Republican leaders who are willing to do so; 62% of the public regard globalization as something good, while a much higher 98% of leaders are in favor of globalization; 76% of the public want the government to give priority to job protection, while only 37% of leaders agree to do so.¹⁸ It can be seen that the public attaches great importance to the value of borders and nationalism, while the elites put transnational identity and globalism above national identity.

Because the elites alienate themselves from the public, the public is deeply disappointed with the government and their trust in the government

17 Charles Blow, “The White Rebellion,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/opinion/the-white-rebellion.html>.

18 Dina Smeltz, Craig Kafura, Joshua Busby, Gregory Holyk, Jonathan Montan, and Jordan Tama, “United in Goals, Divided on Means: Opinions Leaders Chicago Council Survey Results 2014,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, June 2, 2015, <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/united-goals-divided-means-opinion-leaders-chicago-council-survey-results-2014>.

has continued to decline. Since 2010, less than 20% of the American people have considered the Congress competent.¹⁹ Voters are very worried that the government becomes a camp of bigwigs rather than a representative of their interests. They launched a series of protests and demonstrations opposing the monopoly of capital interests and decrying the political donations which have manipulated the government. After all, they are dissatisfied with the elites and their policies which have been detrimental to people's interests in the distribution of wealth. When Trump vows to "drain the swamp in Washington," he targets the "corrupted, arrogant, self-promoting" elites in government, business and media. In his view, these people are more experienced in dealing with foreign elites, but they have alienated the common people in their own countries and fattened themselves at the expense of ordinary people's interests.

"Vulnerable groups" in society standing up to Obama policies

Barack Obama's ethnic background as well as his policies on health care and immigration during his eight years' presidency facilitated the rapid rise of populism. Based on electoral considerations, Obama and the Democratic Party shifted their policy focus to the poorest people and illegal immigrant families. The implementation of the health care reform has benefited tens of millions of poor people who did not have any health insurance before, but the cost is mainly borne by the wealthy and middle class. Although the wealthy and the upper middle class have complaints, they are able to withstand higher premiums. Yet the lower middle class are more sensitive and vulnerable to cost changes, and they think that their interests are seriously hurt. Before leaving office, Obama vigorously promoted an amnesty and legal citizenship for over 10 million illegal immigrants. Although unsuccessful, it aroused great alarm and anxiety among opponents. They believe that the implementation of this proposal would further change the structure of the electorate and the political ecology in

19 "Congress Job Rating," Polling Report, <http://www.pollingreport.com/CongJob.htm>.

the United States and endanger the social and political advantages enjoyed by the white people. In order to improve the rights and living conditions of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) groups, Obama promulgated hundreds of executive orders and institutional reforms, which violated the traditional values of WASPs and intensified the impression by the “vulnerable groups” that the government serves only the elites.

Since Trump launched his campaign, he has worked out such topics as “economic depression” and “the death of the establishment,” and pushed the blue-collars’ protracted resentment towards the Washington political circle to a new height. Claiming that “I am your voice ... I alone can fix it,” he successfully turned considerable low-income and less-educated blue-collar whites into his bedrock supporters by playing the cards of populism, xenophobia and apprehensiveness. Exit polls for the 2016 presidential election showed that 66% of Trump supporters and 22% of Hillary Clinton supporters believed that the election was “the last chance to stop the decline of the United States.”²⁰ Since Trump took office, his high-profile anti-immigration stand has been well received among the white people, and his tax reform and employment laws have been interpreted as the victory of the American people, as workers earn more wages and private businesses gain greater incentives. He also abolished the multi-culture-oriented university admission policy favored in the Obama years, no longer considering ethnic factors and thus weakening the “affirmative action” policy. To a certain extent, Trump’s populism serves as a rebound from and counter-attack on Obama’s policies.

Potential Impact of American Populism on China-US Relations

As mentioned above, populism is not necessarily something aimed at China. At present, the anti-China ideology mainly comes from within the political

20 Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, and Robert P. Jones, “Nearly One in Five Female Clinton Voters Say Husband or Partner Didn’t Vote,” PRRI / The Atlantic Post-election Survey, December 1, 2016, <http://www.prrri.org/research/prri-atlantic-poll-post-election-white-working-class/>.

establishment, and has not yet merged with populism in the society. However, the new “China threat” rhetoric has increasingly become the common language of American elites and populists such as Steve Bannon and Peter Navarro, which drives Washington’s China policy in a tougher direction.

Populism and the China-bashing trend

The current tension between China and the United States is mainly influenced by the relative growth and decline in the two countries’ power, their mutual understanding and the international political developments. It is a reflection of Washington’s strategic misjudgment of China. Populism is not only a global phenomenon, but also a traditional cultural force which came to the fore in the process of dramatic domestic political and economic transformation in the US. The chronic confrontation between left-wing and right-wing populists have torn apart American society and caused problems for a stable development of China-US relations. As far as the causes are concerned, populism and anti-China prejudices grow side by side, and they are closely related to the impacts of adjustments in globalization and international division of labor on the United States’ domestic political alignment. On one hand, the American blue-collar working class does not benefit from globalization and trade liberalization, and the government is unwilling or unable to reform income distribution policies. People feel squeezed by immigrants and betrayed by the elites. On the other hand, Trump criticizes China for stealing American jobs and “taking advantage of the US,” and some people are unhappy with China’s policy of economic globalization and the pressures of resource competition brought by Chinese Americans, believing that China is the cause of American problems. It is expected that when the US economic situation deteriorates further or the number of immigrants remains at the current level, populism will continue its strong momentum, and opposition against China will be stronger. China-US bilateral relations will resonate with the “clash of civilizations” triggered by populism.

Consistent logic in populism and China-bashing rhetoric

Both populism and anti-China prejudice are protectionist in nature. Populism promotes anti-intellectualism, and relies on intuition and moral judgment. With the prevalent “conspiracy theory,” the populists are accustomed to demonizing and opposing other social groups with their exclusivist language, so as to arouse emotional resonance from the public. Right-wing populists also target immigrants and ethnic minorities and advocate the implementation of nativist and nationalist policies, discriminating against both Chinese immigrants and overseas Chinese students. In comparison, the new round of “China threat” toys with “identity politics,” inflames the antithesis between “us” and “them,” and blames China for problems facing the US. The Trump administration formulates the whole-of-government policy toward China and resists China’s influence in trade, investment, security, and cultural and people-to-people exchanges, while catering to and stirring up people’s dissatisfaction and concerns about China. Trump’s exaggerated remarks also boost the negative perception of China in American society.

Populism and China-bashing can both be utilized by elite politics

Populism is an effective way for political mobilization, and it looks like it will have its way in that the law refrains from punishing the many. The Trump administration has never sought to dispel populist sentiments; instead, it is using them and playing up a new “China threat” to push forward its own political agenda. On one hand, the elites foment the “conspiracy theory,” exaggerate the “China threat,” produce anti-China propaganda and promote anti-China views on various platforms, as shown in Steve Bannon’s speech on China in Tokyo in November 2017 and his interview with Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* in September 2018. On the other hand, the elites, facing the pressure of governing, use the “China threat” to their advantage by shifting the blame for domestic problems on China. China-bashing has thus become a convenient political tool. For example, with the deepening of investigations of his collusion with Russian officials and the approaching of mid-term elections, President Trump and Vice

President Pence wantonly accused China of meddling in US mid-term elections, which seemed to divert the pressures from domestic politics.

Populism not yet playing a leading role in China-bashing

As mentioned above, at a time when traditional white predominance is undermined by aggravating economic inequality and demographic structural changes, the important root cause of rising populism lies in the deepening political rift between lower- and middle-class whites and the elites and in the unprecedented strong frustration felt by white blue-collar workers. The American public believes that the elite-dominated discourse and policies cannot represent the interests of the “people,” and the sentiment has also been manifested in some China-related issues. For example, although the elites actively advocate the new “China threat,” the negative perception of China among the American people is actually decreasing, while the public’s favorable opinion of China is on the rise. According to Gallup and CNN polls, the percentage of people who believe that China is a “very serious threat” to the United States dropped from 28% in 2016 to 22% in 2017. From 2015 to 2017, the poll on favorability toward China showed that the proportion of people with “very positive” perception of China increased from 8% to 10%; the proportion of people with “generally positive” perception rose from 36% to 40%; the group of “generally negative” perception increased by only one percentage, from 34% to 35%; and the group of “very negative” perception dropped from 16% to 13%.²¹ Although the American people regard China as one major diplomatic challenge, they still support China-US engagement and cooperation and oppose confrontation in handling the bilateral relations. Among pro-Trump Republicans, 43% are worried that the China-US trade frictions would hurt the US economy; among those Republicans not supportive of Trump, 76% have the same worries; and among Democrats, the figure is as high as 84%.²²

21 “China,” *Polling Report*, <http://www.pollingreport.com/china.htm>.

22 Karl Friedhoff, and Craig Kafura, “China Not Yet Seen as a Threat by the American Public,” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October, 2018, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/china-not-yet-seen-threat-american-public>.

Conclusion

As the world's leading power, the United States' philosophy and its utilization of strength have great bearing on the rest of the world.²³ The simultaneous rise of populism and the new "China threat" have sounded alarm bells to China. It heralds profound adjustments in Washington's foreign strategy and its China policy, with a tougher stance toward China becoming a "new normal" of the Trump administration to integrate its domestic policies and diplomacy. Judging from this, it can be said that the Washington political circle will continue to maintain pressure on China and demonstrate a hardline position in order to cater to its conservative voters. At the social level, the strong populist central region of the US has suffered much from the trade frictions with China, where the populist sentiments against China are likely to rise. For China, the priority in its handling of relations with the US should be to guard against and prevent the convergence of populism and the new "China threat." With the intensified competition between the two countries, China should advocate rational exchanges, strengthen win-win factors in economic and trade ties, and make the bilateral relations beneficial to both countries and peoples. It should also be noted that although the Western public opinion generally has some agreement on China-bashing, there are sharp contradictions in their views on populism. Trump's populism is not targeted at China alone; instead, he has also supported right-wing forces in Europe to confront traditional European elites, which has impacted political stability in many countries and led to a difficult adjustment of the Atlantic alliance. China can still refrain from directly standing up against Trump's attacks, act in accordance with the evolving situation, and expand consensus and interests with more countries in the world on globalization and free trade, to reduce tensions and create a positive atmosphere for its own development. 🇨🇳

23 Zi Zhongyun, *The United States in the 20th Century*, p.27.