The Political Magic of Us vs. Them

Encouraging and exploiting division has worked for Trump, as far as his own electoral prospects are concerned. Can he keep it up?

By Thomas B. Edsall, Feb. 13, 2019, NYTimes

However often President Trump strays from his favored political strategy, he faithfully returns to it like a dog to a bone: first, polarize the American electorate along racial, cultural and economic lines, then exploit the schisms that have supplanted the class divisions that were once central to both American and European partisan politics.

On one side of the divide are those whom the political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart describe in a 2016 paper as comfortable with “an inexorable cultural escalator moving postindustrial societies steadily in a more progressive direction.” This new direction amounts to what the authors call an intergenerational shift toward post-materialist values, such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, generating rising support for left-libertarian parties such as the Greens and other progressive movements advocating environmental protection, human rights, and gender equality.

On the other side, Norris and Inglehart write, is a counterrevolution, a retro backlash, especially among the older generation, white men, and less educated sectors, who sense decline and actively reject the rising tide of progressive values, resent the displacement of familiar traditional norms, and provide a pool of supporters potentially vulnerable to populist appeals.

Economic distress, they argue, reinforces cultural alienation to produce fertile terrain for Trump. “Fears of economic insecurity, including the individual experience of the loss of secure, well-paid blue-collar jobs, and the collective experience of living in declining communities of the left-behinds” combine to make voters more susceptible to the anti-establishment appeals of authoritarian-populist actors, offering simple slogans blaming “Them” for stripping prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from “Us.”

The collision of these forces has produced the emergence of an American authoritarianism. In their book, “Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism,” which comes out later this week, Norris and Inglehart write that Trump has assumed leadership of this authoritarian movement, defined as a cluster of values prioritizing collective security for the group at the expense of liberal autonomy for the individual. Authoritarian values prioritize three core components: 1) the importance of security against risks of instability and disorder (foreigners stealing our jobs, immigrants attacking our women, terrorists threatening our safety); 2) the value of group conformity to preserve conventional traditions and to guard our way of life (defending “Us” against threats to “European values”); and 3) the need for loyal obedience toward strong leaders who protect the group and its customs (“I alone can fix it,” “Believe me, “Are you on my team?”).
The United States and many European countries, at various points in the last decade, have reached a critical juncture, Norris and Inglehart write: “The interwar generation, non-college graduates, the working class, white Europeans, the more religious, men and residents of rural communities” have come to feel “estranged from the silent revolution in social and moral values, left behind by cultural tides that they deeply reject.” These men and women, “until recently the politically and socially dominant group in Western cultures,” reached a tipping point at which their hegemonic status, power and privilege is fading. Their values make them potential supporters for parties and leaders promising to restore national sovereignty (Make America Great Again), restrict immigration and multicultural diversity (Build a Wall) and defend traditional religious and conventional moral values.

The debate over whether the rise of right-wing populism is driven by cultural anxiety, racism, ethnocentricity or economic deprivation may “be somewhat artificial,” Norris and Inglehart contend because interactive processes may possibly link these factors, if structural changes in the work force and social trends in globalized markets heighten economic insecurity, and if this, in turn, stimulates a negative backlash among traditionalists toward cultural shifts. It may not be an either/or question, but one of relative emphasis with interactive effects.

In this country, the nominally class-based politics of the New Deal fractured when working class non-college whites felt abandoned by a Democratic Party that shed its pre-civil rights, segregationist southern wing and that by the 1970s had adopted a culturally and racially liberal agenda. Over the past five decades, these white voters have formed the core of the populist right. Conversely, minorities, many of whom face the same economic hardships as working class whites, if not worse, are firmly aligned with the party of social and cultural liberalism and racial equality, the Democratic Party.

“The new cultural cleavage dividing Populists and Cosmopolitan Liberals,” Norris and Inglehart write, is “orthogonal (statistically independent) to the classic economic class cleavage” — in other words, the new division cuts across and splits the old economic class solidarity.

Data from a preliminary American National Election Studies survey — provided to me by Matthew DeBell, a scholar at Stanford’s Institute for Research in the Social Sciences — revealed the strength of this new cleavage. The survey asked 2,500 men and women to rank their feelings toward Trump on a “feeling thermometer” scale of zero, “very cold or unfavorable,” to 100, “very warm or favorable.”

The results illustrate that the population is even more divided between those who love and those who hate Trump than we might think. Sixty-one percent had either extremely hostile or very positive feelings toward the president.

Alan Abramowitz, a political scientist at Emory University, analyzed the responses to the survey. He wrote me that nearly two out of five of those surveyed, 38 percent, put Trump in the coldest range, 5 degrees or lower. 23 percent, put him in the warmest range, 95 degrees or higher. If the definition of extreme is expanded to encompass those who rank Trump from 0 to 10 and from 90 to 100, the total grows to 72 percent — 44 percent at 10 degrees or lower, 28 percent 90 degrees or higher.
Abramowitz noted that “Trump is the most polarizing president in the history of ANES polling and Gallup polling.” Not only is Trump the most polarizing president, he has monopolized public attention and managed to make himself the object of both loathing and adoration. “The 2020 elections will certainly be all about Trump, assuming he is on the ballot and to a considerable extent even if he is not,” Gary Jacobson, a political scientist at the University of California-San Diego, wrote me in an email. “The 2018 election was all about Trump even though he was not on the ballot.”

Stanley Feldman, a political scientist at Stony Brook University, elaborated on Trump’s self-generated centrality in an email: “While Democrats and Republicans were already quite polarized before Trump ran for the presidency, I don’t think there is any question that he has contributed to further polarization. It is increasingly difficult to find people who don’t feel strongly about him.”

Trump, Feldman noted, “taps into some fundamental issues in contemporary American politics—race/ethnicity, social issues, nationalism—and his rhetoric—clearly designed to appeal to his base—turns off many of those who are not with him on those issues. When you do little or nothing to broaden your support beyond your core voters you will generate extreme affective reactions.”

Feldman posed the question: “Will this make the 2020 election largely about Trump? To a great extent yes, though the answer to that will depend in part on who the Democratic candidate is. As we saw in 2016, negative reactions to Hillary Clinton contributed to the outcome of that election.”

Feldman’s point about Clinton leads to the next question. As the Democratic selection of a nominee begins in earnest, one issue threatens the cohesion of the center-left coalition: whether the party should support expansive liberal initiatives like Medicare for All, a sharp hike in tax rates on the rich and a Green New Deal or whether it should stake out the center.

Columnists who lean toward the center themselves have been particularly sharp in their criticism of the leftward movement of the party.

“Democrats Are Boosting Trump’s Re-election Prospects,” read the headline of a National Journal article last week by Josh Kraushaar: “Their top 2020 presidential hopefuls are embracing socialist-minded economic policy, from a Green New Deal to single-payer health insurance. It’s playing right into the president’s hands.”

Gerald Seib, a columnist at The Wall Street Journal, wrote earlier this week that “Democrats have arrived at a moment of great opportunity, but also of great peril.” Increasingly, he argued, the party has become, “identified with policy proposals that are easy for Republicans to caricature as left-wing extremism. It is a fair bet that a majority of congressional Democrats don’t support either a 70 percent top tax rate or an across-the-board wealth tax on the richest Americans.”
In addition, Seib noted, “the party is beginning to experience the consequences of a zero-tolerance attitude on perceived misbehavior.” According to Seib, “Democrats face this question: Could they manage to scare off that center just as it has become so available?” The risk, Seib wrote, “is that centrist voters will think they see that an angry left wing taking charge. Democrats could appear to be succumbing to the national mood of anger, when the better image might be of hope.”

In his State of the Union address on Feb. 5, Trump laid the groundwork for an assault on Democrats, declaring:

“Here, in the United States, we are alarmed by new calls to adopt socialism in our country. America was founded on liberty and independence — not government coercion, domination, and control. We are born free, and we will stay free. Tonight, we renew our resolve that America will never be a socialist country.”

I asked Brian Schaffner, a political scientist at Tufts who is one of the directors of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, whether Democratic primary voters are pushing presidential candidates to take stands on issues further to the left than the general electorate would accept. Contrary to the view of many political analysts, Schaffner countered with data suggesting that this is not the case.

“I actually don’t think Democratic primary voters are substantially more liberal than Democrats more broadly,” he wrote, adding that many of the party’s new policy initiatives are, in fact, “favored by a majority of those who voted in 2016.”

He cited the following results from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study survey.

- Who favored granting legal status to immigrants? Democratic primary voters: 79 percent support; Democrats in general: 77 percent support; all voters: 55 percent support.
- Who would require minimum amounts of renewable energy? Democratic primary voters: 85 percent support; Democrats in general: 80 percent support; all voters: 61 percent support.
- Ban assault rifles? Democratic primary voters: 91 percent support; Democrats in general: 84 percent support; all voters: 64 percent.
- Eliminate mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent offenders? Democratic primary voters: 84 percent support; Democrats in general: 78 percent support; all voters: 67 percent.
- How about raising the minimum wage to $12 per hour? Democratic primary voters: 92 percent support; Democrats in general: 90 percent support; all voters: 65 percent.

Along similar lines, four political scientists, John Sides and Christopher Warshaw of George Washington University, and Lynn Vavreck and Chris Tausanovitch of UCLA, write in a March 2018 paper, “On the Representativeness of Primary Electorates” that “primary voters are frequently characterized as an ideologically extreme subset of their party, and thus partially responsible for increasing party polarization in government.” On the contrary, they find “that primary voters are similar to rank and file voters in their party” and thus “the composition of
primary electorates does not exert a polarizing effect above what might arise from voters in the party as a whole.”

Jacobson of UCSD strongly agreed, arguing that Democrats’ intense dislike of Trump will make them willing to forgive a candidate who fails to adopt all their favored policies if the candidate looks like a winner:

Most Democrats will have as their prime goal — far more important than positions taken by the candidates — making sure Trump does not have a second term. The national election survey cited above reveals the depth of the electorate’s divisions on a range of issues in the Trump era.

On what may prove to the crucial subject of debate over the next two — impeachment — the public is split. The survey found that a 42.1 plurality favors impeachment, including 24.9 percent who favor it strongly. A slightly smaller 38 percent oppose impeachment, including 30 percent who oppose it strongly. 19.9 percent did not take a stand.

Americans are evenly divided in their assessment of Trump’s repeated denials that neither he nor his campaign ever coordinated with Russia to defeat Hillary Clinton. According to the survey, 49.9 percent agreed with the statement “Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign probably coordinated with the Russians,” while 50.1 percent said the campaign “probably did not coordinate.”

One of Trump’s signature claims during the 2016 campaign was the promise that he would “drain the swamp” of corruption in the nation’s capital. That promise, according the public, is not holding up well. The survey asked “Has corruption in government increased, decreased, or stayed the same since Donald Trump became president?” The result? More than half, 54 percent, said corruption has increased under Trump, including 26.6 percent who said it has increased “a great deal.” 28 percent said the level of corruption remains unchanged, and 18.4 percent said corruption had decreased. 3.1 percent said corruption had decreased “a great deal.”

Trump has railed against the Mueller investigation since it began, calling it an “illegal Joseph McCarthy style Witch Hunt.” Asked about the Mueller investigation, 45.1 of those surveyed said they approved, 16.6 points more than the 28.5 percent who said they disapproved, 19.7 percent “extremely strongly.” 28.4 percent had no opinion.

Trump has pushed the authoritarian envelope further than any president (or major party presidential candidate) in recent memory.

Let’s turn back to Gary Jacobson. “As long as Trump is on the scene, the nation is bound to remain deeply divided,” Jacobson writes in “Extreme Referendum: Donald Trump and the 2018 Midterm Elections,” which will appear in a forthcoming issue of Political Science Quarterly:

To the extent that he reshapes the Republican Party in his white nationalist image, these divisions will deepen further and every election, like the 2018 midterms, will be fought with both sides convinced that nothing less than the future of American democracy is at stake.
Norris and Inglehart suggest that the dependence of the populist right on older voters may lead to its steady decline as those voters die off, but they are not confident that this will happen. “It remains to be seen how resilient liberal democracy will be in Western societies, or whether it will be damaged irreparably by authoritarian populist forces” they write at the conclusion of their book. “The problem is not just Trump, nor is it just America. It reflects pervasive economic and cultural changes, for which there are no easy answers.”