Main points today

1. What is populism in the political arena?
2. Populism as a threat to constitutional government
3. Two examples of populists in politics (one successful and one not)
4. Contemporary constitutional government in the United States
5. Populism’s challenges to CG today
1. What is populism in the political arena?
What is “populism”?

• A style of political communication focused on “the people”
• A political movement invoking the interests of ordinary people, whether all “the people,” or some subset of them
• A movement in which a charismatic political leader claims to represent and aims to rule in the interest of “the people”
• Has great potential for divisiveness based on whether “the people” are “all the people” versus some subset defined by culture, blood ties, race, ethnicity, economic class, victimhood
Historic traits of populism

• Populism, rooted in the citizenry or people, tends to associate with democracy (rule by the people)
• Populism is not an ideology, but a style of doing politics, so historical examples arise on both the left and the right. Examples:

Right: Adolph Hitler of Germany (mid 20th c)

Left: Hugo Chavez of Venezuela (early 21st c)
2. Populism as a threat to constitutional government
Toward understanding populism’s danger – a classic critique of democracy

As far back as his *Politics* (4th c BCE), Aristotle recognized the vulnerability of constitutional government (CG), a regulated system of self-rule by members of a community:

- **CG is the best political system,** combining broad citizen participation and strong institutions and rules
- It also tends to **maximize the common good**
- **CG prevents majority tyranny** in a system based on majority rule
  - that is, CG represents interests of many but also holds the majority and minorities in check so they don’t abuse one another
Aristotle’s “however” about constitutional government

• CG is vulnerable to demagogues, political manipulators
• Demagogues flatter and stir up “the people” against alleged “enemies” to accumulate power
• In the name of the people, demagogues undermine political institutions and rules
• Demagoguery can thus break down and sweep away constitutional government and the common good
• Aristotle’s demagogues are, in effect, populist politicians

• Thus a demagogic leader’s “populist” political style (my term, not Aristotle’s) can lead toward tyranny
3.
Two examples of populists in politics (one successful and one not)
Historical example 1 – Ancient Rome

- A republic for five centuries, Rome’s political system provided for CG -- government by citizen assemblies which made laws and appointed executives (magistrates)
- An appointed Senate advised magistrates
- However, in 49 BCE, Julius Caesar (great general) overthrew the head magistrate Pompey and was named Dictator of Rome
Rome (cont.)

• In the Senate, Julius Caesar’s allies the *populares* faction claimed to represent the interest of the Roman people

• In the name of the *populares* J. Caesar bypassed the Senate and legislated by popular referendum or decree
  • (J. Caesar assassinated on 15 March 44 BCE)

• By 27 BCE J. Caesar’s successor Augustus became Emperor, superseding republican institutions (CG)

• Within a few decades Rome had experienced both Caligula and Nero as emperors
Historical Example 2 - Late 19th C. US

• In decades after Civil War, Midwestern and southern farmers & rural poor suffered from economic disadvantages and hardship
• They experienced high bank borrowing costs, predatory railroads and shipping costs, and exploitation by commodity brokers
• Poor people lost farms and experienced hunger
• A farmers’ movement seeking redress arose in the Midwest and Texas; it formed Grange movements for mutual self help and political clout
• Granges later evolved into the People’s Party (1890s)
US People’s Party (cont.)

• People’s Party challenged midwest Rs and Ds for control of state governments in 1880s

• In 1896 the People’s Party (and the Dems) nominated Democrat William Jennings Bryan for president on a monetary reform platform

• Populism failed to win power, and was gradually absorbed by Democrats
Other influential US populists

**Left**

- Sen. Huey Long (1930s)
  - Share the Wealth movement
- Occupy Movement (2011-12)
- Sen. Bernie Sanders movement & campaign (2016)

**Right**

- Rep. Thom. E. Watson (1900-'22)
  - anti-Cath., anti-Semitic, anti-immigr. movement
- Tea Party (2009- )
- Donald Trump movement & campaign (2016-?)
4.
Contemporary constitutional government in the United States
Key features of U.S. political system

- A nation populated over time by immigrants
- **Factional diversity** (religious, ethnic, racial, economic, regional) with crosscutting interests
- **Complex constitutional government** provides
  - popular sovereignty and shared sovereignty with states (Constitution)
  - **limited government** (Bill of Rights)
  - division of powers (Constitution)
  - checks and balances (Constitution)
  - civilian control of armed forces (Constitution)
Key features of US system (cont.)

- **Slow pace of change** allowed by institutions restrains passions and allows adaptation
- **Political culture** (shared expectations) provides legitimacy
  - Public agreement or consent to the system, support for the rules, and tolerance for others’ views
  - Norms within gov’t about rule of law, separation of powers, etc.
- **Breakdowns in legitimacy have produced violence** – eg., Shays’ Rebellion, Civil War
- Recent changes in technology via **mass media and social media add energy to political discussion and accelerate culture change**
5. Populism’s current challenges for US constitutional government
Our populist moment

- Citizens United unleashed massive unregulated funds
- Serious weakness of both major parties
- Democrats
  - Sanders challenge
- Republicans
  - Tea Party/Freedom Caucus
  - Trump as outsider
- Trump wins and governs in populist style
The risks of populist politicians

- The **populist style** of appealing to the interests of “the people” can be innocuous, but
- It can also be very divisive when

1. It attacks constitutional norms and institutions
2. It disrupts government’s functions and efficacy
3. It divides the populace and promotes conflict
4. It reduces the democratic, constitutional government’s legitimacy (its popular consent and support)
Trump’s populism

• What follow are some things that I observe candidate and president Trump doing that illustrate his populist style
• Not exhaustive or definitive, nor focused on a broader evaluation of his presidency
• Likely to be a source of disagreement among some of us
• Offered for your reflection
1. Undermines constitutional norms and institutions

- **The Arpaio pardon** undermines law enforcement cooperation with courts and citizens’ constitutional rights & protections (e.g., rule of law)
- **Calling media “enemies of the people”** delegitimizes them to public, reduces confidence in information
- **Attempted Muslim ban** appears to violate 1st and 14th Amendments
- **Denigration of Judge Curiel and of various courts and rulings** undermine separation of powers
- **Encouraging police abuse of detainees** and recommending torture endorse violating 8th Amendment and undermine rule of law
2. Disrupts government’s functions and efficacy

- **Comey firing** delays/disrupts administration of justice [probably has backfired]
- **Firing and failure to appoint new federal district attorneys** disrupts law enforcement
- **Failure to fill hundreds of positions** in State and other departments weakens institutions’ performance in many arenas
- Administration’s **proposed budget cuts would undermine government efficacy** (aimed 2/3 at programs for poverty reduction, housing, health research and education and disaster relief)
3. Promotes division and conflict

- **“Birtherism”** discredited Pres. Obama’s citizenship with strong racial implications
- **“Build the wall!”** anti-immigration campaign platform and immigration enforcement strategy seed/feed inter-ethnic conflict
- Comments on “crime wave” in “inner cities” contains fear mongering and thinly veiled denigration of racial minorities
- Retweets of alt-right memes and claim of “good people” among white supremacists at Charlottesville encourages racist groups, may promote more violence
4. Reduces government’s legitimacy

- DJT’s slogan: “Make America Great Again” denigrates US’s achievements and status
- Embracing dictators and human rights violators (al-Sisi, Duterte, Putin) visibly diminishes US commitment to democracy
- Refusal to accept own election result if a loss and later claims of massive voter fraud (no evidence) and commission discredit US election system
- Denigration of multiple targets w/in federal government (Congress, Federal Reserve, court and “deep state”) undermine public confidence in system
Conclusions: Implications

- Populist style can **mobilize conflict** -- already visible in rallying existing groups on right and left
- **Can promote hostile or violent confrontations** – already happened in Charlottesville, Berkeley
- **Can demonize those who disagree** with leader and policies and thus **shrink the public space** and narrow political options to support/oppose the leader – not yet?
- **Can erode conventions and key democratic norms within and outside government** (civilian control of military, support for rule of law) – already happening?
- **Most dangerous**: Can establish and **promote groups and movements supportive of the leader** – so far not much sign of centralized effort to do this
• “The success of American democracy comes from a pervasive belief in the rule of law and that all are equal before it. But the rule of law is fragile and dependent on faith. Once people lose faith in it, the door to anarchy opens.” Michael Fuchs, US News and World Report (Aug 2017)

• “(T)he problem is not just that Trump is ignorant of the Constitution; it’s that he doesn’t care. His political philosophy, to the extent that he has one, is the demagoguery that the Founders designed the Constitution to protect us against.” Corey Brettschneider, Politico (Aug 2016)
Thank you!
Back to populism: definitions

• A belief in the rights, virtues or wisdom of the common people
• A political movement claiming to represent the interests of the common people
• Political movement able to mobilize political support on a broad scale
• A political movement claiming to represent “all the people” or majority, or “the real people,” especially against entrenched elites
Risks of populist politicians – actions betray political base

• More examples:
  • “Draining the swamp” of corruption by placing Wall Street figures in control of economic policy and cutting regulations that protect consumers
  • Proposes to “raise workers’ wages” by cutting taxes on corporations
  • Proposes budget cuts aimed 2/3 at programs for poverty reduction, housing, health research and education