

THE TRUMP PHENOMENON

How the Politics of Populism
Won in 2016

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THE TRUMP PHENOMENON

How the Politics of Populism
Won in 2016

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*Dedicated to Congressman John Lewis — who has
proven his decency and courage throughout a life-
time and the memory of Ramon Casiano — who
never had the chance*

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1. Introduction	1
2. Democratic Culture and Civic Virtue	7
3. The Trump Voter: Labeling the Baskets	35
4. Institutional Openings to Authoritarianism	73
5. Postscript	107
 <i>References</i>	 113
 <i>Index</i>	 135

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the summer of 2016, Philippa Grand and I discussed the possibility of a short book on what we assumed would be the rise and fall of Donald Trump. The idea was to write the book in the “not-too-distant future.” On November 9 we spoke again and agreed that I would begin writing at once. I did. In between these two dates, Nick Harney invited me to speak at the University of Windsor about the Trump candidacy. Even though my talk took place less than two weeks from the election, the assumption I held in August remained, though with a certain level of anxiety that was widely shared. It is to both Philippa and Nick that I owe a huge debt of gratitude for kick starting this project.

During the election season, the transition period leading up to Trump’s inauguration on January 20, 2017, and the first 75 days of the administration I have had conversations and email exchanges with numerous people in the United States and Western Europe that have proved to be immensely helpful in coming to terms with what for us was both unexpected and unwelcome. Several people read all or some of the manuscript and offered their criticisms and insights, including Dag Blanck, Steve Dawdy, Thomas Faist, Kay Herrala, Susan Kivisto, Joel Phillips, and Östen Wahlbeck. Others have aided in less direct, but nevertheless much appreciated ways. This list includes academic colleagues, students, friends, and family members. At the risk of leaving out names, I want to

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On November 8, 2016, American voters elected Donald J. Trump to become the 45th President of the United States. He was a candidate who had been widely criticized, described as authoritarian in his leadership style and whose psychological fitness for office was frequently called into question, with mental health experts concluding that his behavior reveals what could be an undiagnosed personality disorder. American voters elected him despite Trump being viewed as an unusual candidate running a highly unconventional election campaign. They did so even though negative views of him have been as high as 70%, which suggests that some people who viewed him negatively nevertheless voted for him. They did so even though he was a central figure over several years in stoking the birther conspiracy theory that sought to delegitimize the election of the nation's first black President. They did so even though his bullying and name-calling of his Republican rivals was uncivil, revealing a lack of respect for those he competed against for the nomination. They did so even though his braggadocio is adolescent and incessant (claiming, e.g., that his "IQ is one of the highest"

and that he has the “world’s greatest memory”). They did so even though Trump demonized Mexicans as criminals, rapists, and drug dealers and suggested that the Mexican government was responsible for orchestrating their migration to the United States. They did so even though he called for a ban on all Muslims entering the country, a violation of constitutional protections of religious freedom.

They did so despite his repeated threats to send Hillary Clinton to prison, the sort of threats one expects to hear from cult-of-personality dictators, but not from a candidate vying for election in a democratic nation. They did so even though a standard part of Trump campaign rallies and in numerous tweets was to call reporters “dishonest,” “scum,” “slime,” and “liars.” They did so even though he repeated conspiracy theories and gained support from far right groups. They did so even though Trump’s frequent use of his Twitter account was often viewed as revealing a lack of self-control.

They did so despite a history of misogyny, and in bragging that was caught on a hot mike that because he was a celebrity he could sexually assault women. They did so even though he was accused of mocking a reporter with a physical handicap. They did so even though he claimed Senator John McCain was not a war hero because after his plane went down during the Vietnam War, he ended up a prisoner of war. They did so despite his verbal attacks on the Khan family after Mr. Khan had spoken at the Democratic National Convention — Muslim Americans and a Gold Star family whose middle son, a commissioned officer in the US Army, was killed in Iraq. They did so even though his saber rattling has unnerved high ranking members of the military and the intelligence community. They did so despite a history of investigations and reportage on his business career that questioned Trump’s own claims regarding his business acumen. They did so even though at the Republican Party convention, Trump’s

self-belief led him to contend that in addressing the problems confronting the nation, “I alone can fix it.” They did so even though his repetitious claim that he would make America great again was never followed up with realistic policy proposals. Rather, they appeared ready to believe that he was going to spend massively on infrastructure and on building up the military while simultaneously slashing taxes and containing the deficit. Unlike the majority of adult Americans who did not vote for Trump, those who did appeared to be willing to engage in a form of magical thinking.

How was a person so many people, in public life and privately, had concluded was unfit for the office elected to lead the largest and most powerful democracy in the world? And what does it mean for that democracy? Does it mean that little will change as *Washington Post* columnist Kathleen Parker implied shortly before Election Day in a column bearing the headline, “Calm Down. We’ll Be Fine No Matter Who Wins.” Or does turning over the reins of power to such a person constitute a genuine test of the robustness of American democracy, or even more bleakly, an existential threat? Laying my cards on the table, I would gladly present Ms. Parker with the Dr. Pangloss Award for 2016, while concurring with conservative columnist, Michael Gerson, when he wrote in the *Washington Post* two weeks before the election that, “It is the first time in my political lifetime that I have seen fragility at the heart of American democracy.”

This book is an effort to offer an account of Trump’s political rise and ultimate electoral victory, and in doing so it seeks to identify some of the implications of what it might portend for the future. It will discuss events leading up to the election and beyond as the Trump operatives geared up to take over the reins of government on January 20, 2017, but it stops with the swearing in. What happens once this administration begins to govern is a topic for another day. The book

at hand proceeds by first exploring who Donald Trump is, the goal of which is to sketch out three analytically distinct but nevertheless intertwined anti-Trump narratives that have emerged and acquired sufficient robustness to have a continued impact on public opinion. It includes a narrative about his psychology or temperament, one concerning his long career in business, and the third addressing his political worldview. Trump's life has been both vividly on display in the public eye as he has enthusiastically sought attention throughout his business career, but aspects of his world — particularly regarding his business holdings — are far from transparent.

Next the book looks at who supported him, seeking to discern who they were and to understand why they voted for this celebrity businessman. This gets into more complex territory, and one can assume that political analysts — journalists, social scientists, and political operatives — will be working over voting data for some time to come. Nonetheless, we do know quite a lot about his supporters and do not need to wait for the future for some basic answers. In addition, there is a large body of scholarship that has offered varied accounts of voters who have in other places and times opted for authoritarian candidates running as populists. I will frame this analysis of Trump voters considering that body of work.

Third, I look at those forces that enabled, or made possible his, in many respects, unlikely success. While not the only forces, the three most significant are the media, the Christian Right, and the Republican Party. The book concludes with an analysis of Trumpism as a manifestation of right-wing populism and will use insights from scholars who are involved in producing comparative analyses of this movement in Europe and North America at a historical moment where it has become a phenomenon of major political significance on both sides of the Atlantic.

I make no effort to present anything remotely resembling the last word on the topic. I see it rather as a preliminary reconnaissance, and am fully aware that there is already underway a veritable cottage industry of critiques of the Trump phenomenon and the fruits of such labors will begin to appear soon. My hope is simply that this slim volume will contribute to that needed conversation. More than that, this is a moment when such dialogue must be a prelude to actions devoted to defending democracy. But such actions will take place in an uncomfortable time and space. Indeed, on the last day of 2016, Donald Trump tweeted the following message: “Happy New Year to all, including my many enemies and those who have fought me and lost so badly they just don’t know what to do. Love!” A colleague forwarded this message to me with the subject heading: “A crazy Trump tweet that sums up the next four years?”

The uncomfortable time and space I refer to was recently diagnosed by sociologist Neil Gross as an indication that a large swathe of the American citizenry is experiencing collective trauma, a term he sees deriving from the seminal theorizing of the early French sociologist Émile Durkheim. He contended over a century ago that when the bases of social solidarity are undermined by challenges to customary shared beliefs and practices rooted in norms, values, and ritual behaviors, people can collectively suffer from what Durkheim called anomie, but which might more familiarly be described as a feeling of alienation or disorientation. This is the feeling currently experienced by many anti-Trump Americans, according to Gross, and the reason goes well beyond the fact that the polls predicted a Clinton victory. He writes:

*For progressives, moderates, and “Never Trump”
Republicans, the political order they long took for
granted — defined by polarization, yes, but also by*

a commitment to basic principles of democracy and decency — is suddenly gone. In recent decades, Democrats and Republicans rarely agreed on substance, but all candidates for major office were expected to adhere to fundamental ethical norms, like “don’t threaten to jail your opponent” and “don’t celebrate sexual assault.”

Mr. Trump’s victory signals that that world, with the assurances it offered that there were some lines those seeking power wouldn’t cross (or the American electorate won’t let them cross), is no longer. (Gross, 2016, p. 3)

In short, for a large swath of the American population there is an uncomfortable sense that serious damage has been done to the body politic and to the well-being of civil society. The following three chapters, which can be read as an effort to offer an account of how this damage was inflicted, will reveal that there is no simple or quick fix. The root of the problem transcends Trump, who should be seen as a consequence rather than as a cause of a systemic failure to inoculate the democratic process from the clarion call of authoritarianism.