Populism, American Style

Henry Olsen

On February 19, 2009, business journalist Rick Santelli inadvertently helped launch a populist movement. Appearing on the cable network CNBC from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, Santelli spoke of rising public anger about the expensive taxpayer-funded bailouts of failed banks, bankrupt corporations, and home owners who had defaulted on their mortgages. These policies were breeding deep concern about the growth of government, Santelli argued, and people were looking for ways to express their opposition. “We’re thinking of having a Chicago Tea Party,” he said, suggesting that participants might throw stock certificates into Lake Michigan.

The tone and substance of Santelli’s complaints struck a nerve. Video of his remarks spread rapidly across the internet, and his reference to the Boston Tea Party seemed to give many the inspiration they were seeking. Just two months later, on April 15, an estimated 500,000 people marked tax day with roughly 800 “Tea Party” protests across the country. There have since been hundreds more such gatherings, including several large demonstrations in Washington and other major cities. Directed especially against the Obama administration’s economic policies and the recently enacted health-care legislation, these events represent a large (if loosely organized) grassroots protest movement. Indeed, this past April, a New York Times poll found that 18% of Americans identify themselves as Tea Party supporters.

Yet as this new populism has spread, it has also generated a great deal of worry and disdain. One might expect a negative response from observers on the left: Tea Party anger is, after all, directed at their favored policies and politicians. But the Tea Partiers have also engendered concern and scorn among many on the right and in the center. New York

Henry Olsen is a vice president at the American Enterprise Institute.
Times columnist David Brooks, for example, has defined the activists as “a large, fractious confederation of Americans who are defined by what they are against,” and who are characterized by the “zero-sum mentality that is at the heart of populism.” Washington Post columnist George Will, who opposes many of the same policies the Tea Parties reject, has his doubts, too: Populism’s “constant ingredient has been resentment,” he wrote recently. “It always wanes because it never seems serious as a solution.”

This dim view of populists has a long pedigree in political thought. Observers since Plato and Aristotle have warned that democracy’s peculiar failing is its tendency to produce demagogues: popular leaders who can excite the masses through fiery oratory, and then exploit the resulting political fervor to rise to power and destroy the state.

The American founders had the same fears, and so built our republic to contain such outbursts whenever they might arise. By and large, they have succeeded: American populism, as it has taken shape again and again throughout our history, has not yielded the demagogic figures that so worried the classical philosophers. Our exceptional nation has an exceptional political culture, and among its foremost features has always been a distinctive form of populism that, far from threatening to destroy the republic, has at crucial moments helped to balance and rejuvenate it.

This is not to say that we know for sure what our own populist moment will bring. To understand both its significance and its potential, however, we should look not at the classical portrait of populism but rather at its unique manifestation in the United States—a history that is, by turns, both consoling and cautionary.

**THE SPECTER OF DEMAGOGUES**

Our view of classical populism is shaped by both the warnings of philosophers and the experiences of some democracies, ancient and modern. In the Politics, Aristotle defines a demagogic democracy as one in which “the decrees of the assembly override the law” and a popular faction “takes the superior share in the government as a prize of victory.” The people’s leader, the demagogue, incites them to pursue such despotism through extravagant rhetoric, playing on the people’s basest desires and fears. The result is laid out ominously in Plato’s Republic: The people—“an obedient mob”—“set up one man as their special leader…and make him grow great.” The masses take the property of the wealthy to redistribute it among themselves; the people’s enemies,
meanwhile, are charged with crimes and banished from the city (or worse). The Athenian philosophers were not merely theorizing such scenarios: Their city had lived through them, during the reigns of the 5th century B.C. demagogues Alcibiades and Cleon.

Though classic populism has varied according to time and place, it has generally taken the form of a morality play in four acts. In the first act, the masses come to feel like powerless victims, left helpless against the onslaught of an oppressive “other.” In the second act, often following a crisis, that “other” is defined by a popular leader as an implacable enemy—one who has no concern for the welfare of the people, and whose actions are motivated by selfishness and greed. In the third, the leader proposes a solution: The people must use their numerical advantage to seize control of the state. In the final act, that power is used to take back from the enemy that which rightfully belongs to the people, without regard for the enemy’s consent or rights.

This basic outline has been followed by regimes throughout history—from the demagogueries of the ancient Greek democrats, to the modern forms of communism, fascism, and socialism. The enemy can be economic (like capitalists or aristocrats), racial (as the Jews were for the Nazis), religious (as with sects in Lebanon or Iraq), or foreign (think Hugo Chávez’s denunciations of America). The circumstances of each case differ greatly, of course, but the pattern remains the same: The “victim” seeks to vanquish the “victor,” to take what is rightfully his, and to do unto the other what has allegedly been done unto him. When the drama is finally over, the rule of the people has given way to the rule of a despot.

Such a pattern was among the evils James Madison sought to contain through the Constitution. His great fear, as he put it in Federalist No. 49, was that “the passions, . . . not the reason, of the public would sit in judgment.” If this were permitted, Madison wrote in Federalist No. 10, “the influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame”; the American republic, he believed, should be designed to keep such conflagrations in check.

Madison assumed that Americans would be tempted to demand classical populism; the challenge was to reduce the ability of the government to supply it. In this sense, his creation has clearly worked: America has never had a classically populist regime. More interesting, however, is the fact that—contrary to Madison’s assumption—the demand for such
populism has always been fairly low in America. As it turns out, Americans have tended not to launch large-scale quasi-democratic movements in the classical-populist mold. And when such movements have arisen, they have generally not done well at election time—and so have never come close to enacting their agendas.

The relative absence of these movements has always puzzled European and Marxist social scientists, who have struggled to explain why America—in this respect virtually unique in the Western world—never formed a significant socialist or communist party. After all, economic mobility isn’t that different in the United States than in Europe. Inequality is worse. Why, then, haven’t Americans clamored to overthrow the powerful? What is the matter with Kansas?

The answer is to be found in the American soul, shaped as it has surely been by Madison’s system. Americans are a self-governing people through and through, and American populism reflects the American passion for self-determination. That passion certainly leads some Americans to respond powerfully against overbearing elites, and so causes some populist movements to form. But it has also often allowed these responses to be channeled in constructive directions—keeping our politics in balance, and over time giving rise to enduring political coalitions.

In looking at some key populist episodes in our history, then, one finds a pattern that should ease the worries of those now concerned about a politics of resentment. It is also a pattern that offers some crucial guidance for the instigators and cheerleaders of today’s populist movement.

American populism shares with its classical cousin the use of heated rhetoric against an unjust “other,” and the idea that popular control of the state is essential to the restoration of justice. But it breaks from the classical model in three significant respects.

First, successful populist movements tend to characterize the American people not as helpless victims, but as honest folk dispossessed of their right to achieve prosperity and happiness through self-improvement and hard work. As such, American populists seek not a charismatic leader who will bring them order and justice, but rather a re-opening of the avenues to self-advancement and self-reliance.

Second, the “other” in American populism tends not to be vilified as an implacable enemy without rights. Instead, he is an adversary: one who
might be corrupt or acting unjustly at the moment, but still a fellow citizen who retains his basic American goodness, is capable of redemption, and is secure in his rights. Despite some reckless accusations to the contrary, today’s populist movement seems no different on this front.

Third and most important, effective American populists generally do not seek to take the enemy’s property to redistribute it to the people. Instead, they argue that if the government is once again made responsive to the electorate — by placing the populists in power — the people will again be able to help themselves. Sooner or later, the populists usually develop a policy agenda — and it is typically a case for using government to advance self-reliance or enable prosperity and growth.

These distinctive elements of American populism recur throughout our political history. There are, of course, exceptions; but the movements that have led to lasting political coalitions are generally the ones that have followed this pattern.

Indeed, America’s first enduring political coalition was built on the back of a populist movement: a revolt by farmers against what they perceived as an elitist political leadership devoted to urban trading and banking interests. Many rural farmers in the republic’s early years were upset by such acts of the new federal government as the tax on whiskey (which precipitated the Whiskey Rebellion of the 1790s); the creation of the First Bank of the United States, which made loans for the benefit of commercial interests; and new taxes levied to finance the Quasi-War with France in de facto support of America’s trading partner and former colonial overlord, Great Britain. When the Federalists passed the Sedition Act in 1798 (which criminalized criticism of the government), and started arresting opposition newspaper publishers, many Americans saw that the very future of their self-governing democracy was at stake.

Appealing to these worries in the election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison patched together Southerners and rural voters in the Mid-Atlantic states in an effort to defeat the reigning Federalists, headed by John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. While Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Hamilton are today held in high esteem as intellectuals — and perhaps as America’s most contemplative politicians — one would never know it from the rhetoric they employed in their efforts to win power. The Jeffersonians accused their Federalist opponents of being monarchists bent on overthrowing republican government and replacing it with a regime based on the British model (and run in the interests of the rich).
Jefferson called his opponents “Anglomen and monocrats.” The Federalists in turn described Republicans as a wild and angry mob, akin to the French revolutionaries, who would murder their opponents and burn churches.

Amid the passion and the anger, Jefferson and Madison’s Republican Party—the forerunner of today’s Democrats—won the day; the coalition they built then proceeded to win every national election until 1824. The Republicans also provided the first example of a uniquely American populist movement. They cast the American people as honest, hardworking, and determined to reclaim America from the elitists trying to rob them of their liberties; the people’s adversaries, meanwhile, were identified as aristocratically inclined public officials (especially Adams and Hamilton) whose support came from the powerful and wealthy New England merchant class. Justice and republican government, the narrative went, would be restored only when the people seized the government in their own name by winning elections. As Jefferson put it in a March 1799 letter to Thomas Lomax, “The spirit of 1776 is not dead. It has only been slumbering.” Once the people “recover from the temporary frenzy into which they [have] been decoyed,” Jefferson wrote the following year, they will “rally round the constitution, &….rescue it from the destruction with which it had been threatened.”

But even in the populists’ harsh depictions, the Federalist adversary never rose to the level of an enemy. Unlike American Tories who supported Britain during the Revolution—and who saw their property seized and were driven to emigrate to the West Indies or Canada by the thousands—Federalists were treated like fellow Americans who, with some persuasion, might return to republican principles. “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists,” President Jefferson intoned in his first inaugural address—hardly a recitation of the classical-populist creed.

Just as important, the Republican notion of justice was based on an appeal to self-determination and self-reliance. Jefferson did not seek to take the property of the Federalists and distribute it to farmers and mechanics; rather, he sought to repeal policies that he believed prevented people from making their own way in life. The hated whiskey tax, for example, was repealed by the Republican Congress, as were many of the other taxes Adams had imposed—but no punitive economic or political measures were imposed on the defeated. The element of retributory vengeance, so crucial to old-fashioned populism, was entirely absent from Republican doctrine (and governing practice).
Much the same was true of the next great populist episode in our history: the rise of Jacksonian democracy. The elections of 1828 and 1832 saw the ruling Republicans break into two factions: The minority faction—headed by incumbent president John Quincy Adams—became the National Republicans (and then the Whigs); it drew its support from the mercantile regions of the country, mainly New England and the large cities of the South. Members of the majority faction, meanwhile, renamed themselves the Democrats under the leadership of Andrew Jackson. This new group re-established the character and core of the Jeffersonian coalition, extending it to the new states of the South and Midwest.

Of the public figures who emerged in America’s early decades, Jackson is often considered the closest to a classical populist. He certainly made a great deal of his humble frontier roots, engaged in heated rhetoric, and drew class distinctions. Upon his election as president in 1828, Jackson threw open the doors of the White House—welcoming thousands of supporters, regardless of social class, to an unrefined and boisterous inaugural celebration filled with muddy boots and heavy drinking. In 1832, he campaigned against the Second Bank of the United States—a forerunner of the Federal Reserve—arguing that it was a scheme of the elite and the rich to despoil the people. In a message explaining his veto of a measure that would have re-chartered the bank, Jackson noted that giving the bank an effective “monopoly of the foreign and domestic exchange” would cause its stock price to rise by 30% or more. The people holding this stock, and others who would benefit from the bank’s continued existence, were foreigners and “a few hundred of our own citizens, chiefly of the richest class.” This and other measures being proposed in Washington—such as using federal money to support road and canal construction that would have benefited industrialists—showed, in Jackson’s view, that “many of our rich men have not been content with equal protection and equal benefits, but have besought us to make them richer by act of Congress.” Jackson’s campaign motto that re-election year was hardly subtle: “Let the People Rule.”

Yet Jackson’s tactics offer another example of a fundamentally constructive American populism. He accused his adversaries of oppressing the poor for the sake of the rich—but he did not seek to take away their rights or their property. He eliminated the Second Bank and opposed federally financed internal improvements, but his aim was to end the purported depredation of the people by the wealthy, not to enrich his
own supporters. In Jackson’s morality play, he restored the American heritage to a dispossessed, but fundamentally self-reliant, people—not by taking from the rich, but by ennobling the ordinary.

Jackson was an American populist, but not a demagogue. And his rise to power, like Jefferson’s, ushered in an enduring coalition—one with a concrete agenda intended to counteract the power of established economic interests, and so to enable greater upward mobility and self-reliance.

**A House Divided**

Because he led the Union through the Civil War, saved the American experiment, and ended slavery, Abraham Lincoln is generally thought of today as a unifying statesman—not a populist. (Indeed, he staunchly opposed the populist “Know Nothing” movement that sought to curb immigration in his day.) But Lincoln’s career nonetheless illustrates the character and strengths of some peculiarly American-populist ideas—ideas that he absorbed during his 20 years’ war with the Democratic populists who dominated Illinois politics, and which he later applied as a candidate and as president.

Lincoln ran his 1858 and 1860 campaigns using well-honed populist techniques. He championed the free white people of the North—honest citizens seeking to reclaim America and preserve its ideals for future generations. The people’s adversaries, meanwhile, were identified as Southern slaveholders and their Northern co-conspirators. (Lincoln even alleged that his great rival, Stephen Douglas, was engaged in a blatant conspiracy with Supreme Court chief justice Roger Taney, President James Buchanan, and former president Franklin Pierce to bring slavery to the North and to revoke each state’s power to abolish the practice in its jurisdiction.) In Lincoln’s campaign narrative, justice could be achieved only by removing these adversaries from power; failure to do so would place the American republic in jeopardy.

Classical populism would have rounded out this litany by offering some obvious remedies—chief among them the repossession of the Southern elites’ property, and the curtailment of their rights. This, indeed, was the platform of the abolitionists, and many (including William Lloyd Garrison) denounced Lincoln for his failure to adopt it.

But Lincoln rejected the classical-populist temptation, and held to a different course—one that enabled his Republican Party to sweep to victory a mere six years after its founding. Lincoln argued that as wrong as
slavery was, Southerners should not be deprived of their human property without compensation. While abolitionists argued that the Constitution was a pact with the devil because it implicitly tolerated slavery, Lincoln argued that respect for the Constitution was essential to American liberty. His approach, therefore, was to limit the spread of slavery — not to launch an extraconstitutional crusade to abolish slavery everywhere in an attempt to assuage Northerners’ sense of justice.

Beyond the slavery question, Lincoln’s Republicans also advanced economic policies designed to let the average American better himself. The first GOP Congress created land-grant colleges in the states to research agricultural productivity, passed a Homestead Act that gave federal land to settlers who improved it, and provided public assistance for building a transcontinental railroad. Each program enlarged the reach of the federal government, but each was designed to give the individual the means — access to knowledge, land, and transportation — by which to advance himself.

Lincoln showed that the threads of American populism could be woven into a different political coat than those worn by Jefferson and Jackson, but that these populist threads were nonetheless the key to political success in our democracy. And the coalition Lincoln built would dominate American politics for the next 30 years, until an economic depression — combined with widespread immigration and industrialization in the early 1890s — left the public again ill at ease. These changes eventually gave rise to the American political movements that have come closest to real classical populism: the People’s Party, and the William Jennings Bryan Democrats.

A CROsS OF GOLD

The People’s Party, often referred to simply as “the Populists,” marked a break from the American model of populism — though, ultimately, an unsuccessful one. Emerging from the West and the South in the late 1880s in response to falling agricultural prices and the pressures of industrialization, the Populists claimed to represent a particular class of victim: the small farmer whose economic difficulties were purportedly caused by a conspiracy of big-business owners and Eastern bankers. Like their American-populist forerunners, the People’s Party argued that the government had to be wrested from the control of these moneyed elites. Their grievances and preferred remedies were elaborately stated in
the preamble to their 1892 platform: “The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind…. From the same prolific womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes, tramps and millionaires…. We seek to restore the government of the Republic to the hands of the ‘plain people.’”

Where the People’s Party departed from past movements, however, was in advocating the most nakedly redistributionist philosophy yet seen in America. The Populists called for free coinage of silver to produce inflation, which would severely reduce the value of the elites’ savings and investments. They demanded a graduated income tax and government ownership of the railroads, telephones, and telegraphs—the equivalent of demanding government ownership of airlines, television, and the internet today. Their version of the populist morality play called not for restoring a traditional sense of American justice, or for re-opening the paths to self-improvement, but for taking from the undeserving rich in order to give to helpless, more deserving victims.

The Populists’ early forays into electoral politics did meet with some success. Their candidate for president in 1892, James Weaver, carried four states—Kansas, Colorado, Nevada, and Idaho—and ran well in many others. In that same decade, Populists also forged alliances in the South with Republicans and African-Americans, winning the governorship of North Carolina and coming close in other states.

Seeing both a threat and an opportunity, the Democratic Party responded in the form of a 36-year-old congressman from Nebraska named William Jennings Bryan. Like Barack Obama and Sarah Palin, Bryan catapulted to national prominence off of one outstanding speech before his party’s national convention. Unlike Obama and Palin—who stressed themes of, respectively, unity (one America, red and blue) and ordinariness (the hockey mom from Wasilla)—Bryan spoke about class warfare. Decrying bankers and industrialists, Bryan embraced free silver, an income tax, and government relief for farmers. Placing himself at the vanguard of the “struggling masses” battling against “the idle holders of idle capital”—and claiming to represent the “avenging wrath of an indignant people” engaged in a “crusade” against advocates of the gold standard—Bryan concluded his fiery oration with the famous edict, “you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”

Some Democrats who supported the gold standard were so alarmed by Bryan that they rejected their party’s nominee in favor of their own
candidate, John Palmer. Bankers and industrialists, too, were (obviously) frightened by Bryan’s rhetoric, and fought back with all their might. Indeed, Bryan’s Republican opponent, William McKinley, raked in record-setting campaign contributions. And McKinley, for his part, campaigned on the theme that Bryan was a madman, a religious fanatic, and determined to wreck the economy. Tariffs and the gold standard had produced the industrialization that was spreading wealth to millions and providing working men with a “full dinner pail,” he argued. In response to populist calls for redistribution and appeals to victimhood, McKinley offered self-reliance and economic dynamism.

McKinley won the election, setting the foundation for a generation of Republican Party dominance. Classical populism, it seems, did not play well in America, even among voters pressed by hard times. And while McKinley’s successes in the industrial states were only logical, far more revealing was what happened in America’s burgeoning cities and resource-rich hills, home to the very laborers and miners Bryan claimed to represent. The mining counties of northern Wisconsin and Michigan, and the anthracite coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania, had all voted for Democrat Grover Cleveland in 1892, but went for McKinley in 1896. The great interior cities of Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Milwaukee followed suit. Even New York City, a Democratic bastion since the 1850s, voted for McKinley. Bryan’s classical-populist emphasis on retributory vengeance frightened the largely immigrant industrial working class, while McKinley’s classic American emphasis on helping people help themselves resonated with their own hopes and dreams. There was not to be another major populist episode in American politics until the Great Depression. And even in the midst of that enormous crisis, it was a distinctly American populism — not the vengeful demagogy of the People’s Party — that carried the day.

Franklin Roosevelt certainly spoke in populist tones, casting the American people as vulnerable to “unscrupulous money changers” and his opponents as distant elites whose “industrial dictatorship” had ushered in an “economic tyranny” that meant “men could no longer follow the pursuit of happiness.” But Roosevelt’s “second American Revolution,” as legal scholar Cass Sunstein has described it, would not consist fundamentally of taking from the rich to give to the poor. That approach was advocated at the time by more classical populists, like Louisiana governor Huey Long, who explicitly called for the nation
to “share the wealth.” Instead, the New Deal was meant to rebuild, in Roosevelt’s words, “an American way of life”—giving each person “equal opportunity in the marketplace,” just as the first American Revolution “guaranteed equal opportunity in the polling place.” In Roosevelt’s view, his “generation of Americans ha[d] a rendezvous with destiny,” a calling to establish an economic system that “helps men to help themselves.”

Of course, F.D.R.’s programs vastly expanded the power of the government, but they did so mostly in ways that preserved a great deal of economic freedom. The Social Security Act provided government assistance that would save the widowed, the unemployed, and the aged from material poverty, but (at least as originally conceived) did not create a massive welfare state. The Wagner Act guaranteed the right of labor unions to organize and to bargain, but without making government the final arbiter of wages. The Federal Housing Administration helped to revive the housing market after the Depression and to finance America’s rapid suburbanization after the war. And the G.I. Bill gave soldiers from working-class families the financial support they needed to attend college—starting a rapid rise in educational attainment that not only answered many Americans’ yearning for self-advancement, but also helped fuel the nation’s post-war boom. In short, Roosevelt’s American-populist rhetoric and policies did legitimize a vast expansion of government in the name of serving “the people”—but, critically, did so in ways that preserved essential American freedoms.

CONSERVATIVE POPULISM

In the wake of the Depression, the New Deal, and the enduring political coalition established by Franklin Roosevelt, American conservatives were left reeling for decades. Conservative intellectuals seemed to alternate between the despair of Albert Jay Nock and the doll houses of Southern agrarianism and Ayn Rand libertarianism. Conservative politicians like Robert Taft proved unable to build a national majority, as even the Republican Party seemed to turn to more liberal standard-bearers like Earl Warren and Nelson Rockefeller. With the launch of National Review in 1955, William F. Buckley, Jr., sought to fuse conservative intellectual tendencies into an alloy stronger than each component; this intellectual conservatism was, however, to remain disconnected from mainstream politics until the mid-1960s.
In the ’60s, many Americans grew uneasy with the course the country seemed to be taking, both politically and socially. The America of farms and small towns was giving way to a nation of suburbs; the growth of large corporations, the rise of television, and the sharp increase in internal mobility were eroding the cohesiveness of local communities. Accompanying these changes was the growth of the national government, which had continued apace even under Republican president Dwight Eisenhower. Despite increasing affluence and relative peace abroad, an ever-larger number of Americans felt their country was becoming unrecognizable—and they wanted to take it back.

So it was that intellectual conservatism and popular anxiety joined forces in Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign to create a crude populism of the right. But despite what would appear to have been a favorable political climate, this amalgam proved dismally unpopular. While the rhetoric of Goldwater’s campaign was generally fairly measured, that of his backers was too often not. Much like the Populist farmers in the late 1890s, Goldwater’s supporters felt themselves to be oppressed. Many railed against elites, sometimes crossing the line from battling an adversary to assaulting an enemy; they argued, for instance, that there was a conscious conspiracy between business, government, and intellectuals to end American freedom and to yield to communist ambitions at home and abroad. Perhaps the most extreme example was the founder of the John Birch Society, Robert Welch, who claimed that an international cabal bent on undermining U.S. sovereignty and power had its tentacles deep in the American government—on the right and left alike—and that even “Dwight Eisenhower [had been] a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy.”

Ronald Reagan, then an increasingly political Hollywood actor, entered the fray near the end of the campaign with a nationally televised speech on Goldwater’s behalf. Casting the election as a choice between “up or down—up to man’s age-old dream, the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order—or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism,” Reagan accused incumbent president Lyndon Johnson of spreading socialism. Johnson’s administration, Reagan said, was seeking to “trade our freedom for the soup kitchen of the welfare state” and engaging in “appeasement” with our enemies. Noting that he was a former Democrat, Reagan closed with a conscious invocation of Franklin Roosevelt: “You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We
will preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on Earth, or we will sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness.” The movie star’s message roused the faithful, but fell flat among the voting masses.

Goldwater’s crushing defeat seemed to all but the most die-hard conservatives to be the death knell of this nascent movement. Viewed against the backdrop of American political history, it is not hard to see why Goldwater lost: The tone and ideas of some of his extreme backers were viewed as odd and frightening by most voters, and the candidate’s inability (or unwillingness) to disavow their words allowed Johnson to paint Goldwater himself as odd and frightening. Instead of seeking to help honest folk restore the rights denied them by an adversary, too often Goldwater came across as wanting to lead victims in a violent battle against an implacable enemy.

The campaign suffered from another, fatal flaw. To succeed at the voting booth, American-populist movements have generally needed to present a positive alternative — to make an affirmative case for how their victory would set things right, and show how their particular policies would let the individual help himself. Goldwater’s backers assumed that the people would simply understand that a return to classic constitutional government would achieve their desired ends. But after 30 years under the New Deal, the constitutional connection was no longer intuitive. Americans had been convinced that the New Deal’s balance of government intervention and private enterprise was the best way, in Roosevelt’s words, to “follow the pursuit of happiness.”

Conservatives therefore faced a new challenge: how to plant the tree of liberty in the garden of Roosevelt. It was a challenge that would occupy Ronald Reagan for the next 16 years — first as governor of California, and then as a candidate for president. Ultimately, Reagan came up with an answer very much in the American-populist tradition: championing the cause of honest, simple people who felt powerless in American politics, and attracting them with the promise of self-reliance and upward mobility. Echoing Roosevelt’s appeal to the “forgotten man,” Reagan said conservatives “represent the forgotten American — that simple soul who goes to work, bucks for a raise . . . and knows there just ‘ain’t no such thing as a free lunch.’”

But Reagan made a point of avoiding personal or conspiratorial insinuations; he also presented his policies as gradual and safe
reforms. Conservatives had lost, he said, because liberals had painted them as advocating “radical departure from the status quo.” Instead, Reagan believed, conservatives should adopt “the soft sell to prove our radicalism was an optical illusion.” This meant convincing those who had supported the New Deal that their own creation was the cause of their dissatisfaction.

The desire to avoid being tarred as an extremist did not mean, however, that Reagan would avoid blunt language. Throughout his career, he minced no words when describing the threats to freedom and prosperity posed by unlimited, centralized government. He clearly defined his adversary: big government run by faceless bureaucrats who cared more for their schemes than the people’s welfare. Nor could the man who called the Soviet Union “the evil empire” and defined the ending of the Cold War as “we win, they lose” be said to have dissembled on foreign policy. But when it came to his domestic opponents, Reagan avoided the classical-populist trap of vilifying his political adversaries as outright enemies.

Reagan’s approach also departed from Goldwater’s in his frequent praise for individual accomplishment. He constantly drove home the idea that the individual could better himself with only minimal government support (“the safety net”). As president, Reagan began the tradition of placing “average Americans” in the gallery at State of the Union addresses; he held up these ordinary people—most of whom had performed extraordinary actions—as living examples of the idea that the “forgotten American” was capable of great things. Throughout his political career, Reagan constantly drew the connection between individual action and economic growth—and between limited government and human self-improvement—through example, imagery, and explanation. It was in no small part responsible for his political success.

Some Republican triumphs of the post-Reagan era—especially the 1994 takeover of Congress, which built on the anxieties revealed by the strength of Ross Perot’s populist presidential campaign two years earlier—employed many of the same elements. Conservatives railed against liberal elites, offered reforms of a welfare system that had been crushing individual initiative, and sought to set private enterprise free. George W. Bush’s two successful presidential campaigns were waged in less populist times, and therefore in a less populist spirit—but they, too, incorporated some of these populist themes.
The populist spirit is back with a vengeance today. An economic crisis provoked partly by bankers who showed little regard for the people’s money, a response from Washington that lost sight of the proper limits of American government, and looming debt and fiscal crises have produced a deep unease that has yielded, among other things, the much-discussed Tea Party movement.

We do not yet know whether that movement will join the ranks of successful populist uprisings that appealed to American values and so led to enduring political coalitions, or whether it will come to be listed among failed populist efforts that couldn’t translate public disquiet into electoral success. But the history of American populism can at least give us a sense of this movement’s direction, and should help today’s populists figure out their next steps.

Those who believe that the aggressive, angry pitch of the Tea Partiers’ rhetoric will automatically alienate independent voters should think again. As we have seen, successful populist movements define adversaries in stark and often abrasive terms. Skilled political leaders in a democracy — figures like Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Reagan — know what pundits and academics often overlook: that they must move the heart before they can persuade the mind. In our modern mass democracy especially, this often requires a simple narrative: an easily identifiable “good” hero, a “bad” villain, and an unambiguous moral arc — one that shows how society can be redeemed from its current, fallen state, and how average Americans can flourish under the reformed regime. Such an appeal obviously requires sharp rhetoric and clear divisions.

Critics of the Tea Partiers and other conservative populists are right, however, in their concerns that aggressive rhetoric can go too far. William Jennings Bryan lost because he painted a portrait of his time that voters didn’t recognize, and because he made a majority afraid. Some libertarian populists, with their rejection of every facet of the modern welfare state, are likely to do the same — because even this center-right nation does not want to see the welfare state dismantled. And just as some of Barry Goldwater’s supporters tainted his campaign with their accusations of communist conspiracies reaching even to the presidency, the conspiracy theorists who insist that President Obama was not born in America risk damaging conservative populism today.
When Goldwater told the Republican convention of 1964 that “extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, [and] moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue,” he signaled to all that the extremists were welcome in his cause. But in his effort to make no enemies on the right, Goldwater ensured that he would make few friends in the center. Buckley knew better, and made sure that his developing conservative movement would not emerge stillborn because of its association with the fringes. He backed many populist conservative causes, but made clear in *National Review* that neither Ayn Rand radicals nor conspiracy theorists would find a home in conservatism. Those who seek to define modern conservative populism must do likewise with today’s extreme elements.

What is clear about our populist moment is that neither cerebral gentility nor unbridled passion alone can successfully channel today’s public sentiments into a meaningful political coalition. Neither can an agenda of pure opposition. Polls do show that overwhelming majorities of Americans now think the country is going in the wrong direction, are unhappy with Congress and its leaders, and want to elect new representatives; when Tea Partiers echo this discontent, they offer hope to millions of voters who want their worries taken seriously. But today’s populists should not imagine that an echo is all these voters want.

The fact is that the Tea Partiers themselves are disproportionately conservative Republicans. And while the troubles of the moment give those on the right a chance to be heard by other Americans, conservatives must think carefully about what they want to say once they have these voters’ ears. Polls clearly show that while most independent voters who are open to the Tea Party’s tone and concerns are unhappy with government, and think our political leaders have the wrong priorities, they do not want to tear down the welfare state or dramatically roll back the federal government. They want alternatives to President Obama’s approach. The challenge for conservatives, then, is to propose alternatives that offer a real change of direction without seeming too radical.

The history of American populism suggests that the key to meeting this challenge is to offer clear, positive proposals that can be easily identified as efforts to help people help themselves. Failing to grasp this insight is what sank Bryan and Goldwater; understanding how to express it in word and deed is what made Reagan and his coalition.

Those who hope to lead today’s conservative populism toward a new governing coalition must therefore take care to spend as much time
building up as they do tearing down. Defining the adversary and his failings is essential; appealing to the anxiety of those who feel powerless against what is emerging from Washington is crucial; emotional rhetoric with an obvious moral arc is a must. But today’s populists must also point people toward a positive vision—one that clearly shows how retaking government will allow them to improve their own lives. Failure to do this will force Americans in the political middle to decide between those who oppose and those who create. And our innate American optimism will lead us to support those who create every time.

Today’s conservative populists therefore face a choice. They can learn from America’s populist past, and turn an intense but transient public sentiment into an enduring political force. Or they can yield to the twin temptations of intellectualism and exuberance and miss an opportunity. Given the lasting consequences of past populist movements, both failed and successful, it hardly seems an exaggeration to say that which option today’s populists choose will help determine the future contours of the conservative coalition, and of America’s political landscape. For this reason alone, they are a force to take seriously—this fall, and in the years ahead.