‘Southern USA Governors and the Performance of Populism’

Q&A, 3 March 2021

Please find below a number of other questions that we were unable to answer during the live webinar, but which the panellists (GAF: Gary Alan Fine; WT: Weston Twardowski) have kindly since considered.

Could you say more about how populist rhetoric worked and has a "long tail" over time? I'm wondering particularly about VISUAL symbolism was invoked in the 1920s and may have set precedents.

WT: I think one of the key elements that held true across these three politicians was their desire to be seen–especially by people who were (or at least felt) overlooked by politicians. You see all three traveling constantly in counties which were often written off by other politicians. They would give up to 8 speeches a day in 3 or more separate counties. While they occasionally put together large stages with lots of bunting, most often there was very little set constructed for them. People came to see them. The visual elements that were common were pulled from the audience (Bilbo encouraging his supporters to dress up their cars and bring them to town, Talmadge’s most ardent followers coming in “uniform”). What appears visually is often derived from the audience, both creating a homespun-quality that undergirded the idea of these men as “of the people” but also helped rally attendees and organizers feel as though they were communally participating: working together to elect the leader. If we look at Donald Trump as a contemporary example, elements of this idea remain very true in how the bulk of what we see at a Trump rally are the costumes, signs, and paraphernalia his supports bring to the event.

Do you think that when the audience is aware of populist performance techniques, they think more critically about the message being spread?

GAF: While reflexive awareness may have some effect, in the heat of collective effervescence, audience members are often swept away in the emotion of the event. While a crowd does not become irrational (“mad”), some forms of deliberative consideration are lessened. People wish to be “where the action is.” Too much thought dilutes the action.

WT: I would agree with Gary that populism doesn’t tend to live in the realm of policy wonkery. Bernie Sanders relies on populist performance techniques for his rallies–Elizabeth Warren (who is not identical ideologically but closely allied) does not. Being aware of the techniques a populist performer is utilizing would likely help audience members understand and perhaps recognize what is happening, but part of the success of the rally is its communal nature. It’s harder to critique the event when one is part of the collective audience, rather than an individual viewer.

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Do you think that modern-day white supremacists use the same type of theatricality/performance techniques as 1920s Klan or are their methods different? Is there anything we can learn from the past to combat this type of rhetoric?

GAF: White supremacy in 2021 is quite distinct from White supremacy in 1921 in its discourse. With the exception of those on the far borders of political discourse, most current politicians who endorse policies that have differential effects on Whites and Blacks today claim a mantle of "race blindness." The explicit racial rhetoric of a century ago ended in the 1960s for the most part as those who had once been segregationists avoided explicit anti-Black animus and embraced policies that on their surface were race blind (borrowing the rhetorical trope of Rev. King of judging character, not skin), but with effects that marginalized and disadvantaged Black citizens. While there are still large gatherings (Trump, Sanders rallies), these gatherings often make a show of inclusivity as was true at the Republican National Convention in 2020.

I was interested to hear about the insults thrown at rivals by these men, and their shifts between high and low registers – do you think politicians now are more or less civil to their rivals?

GAF: Even though current political discourse can be rough (socialist, fascist), the kinds of personal attacks that were used by the politicians that we studied would be considered out of line today. Part of this is the spread of higher education over the past century. We hear insults today and we may be distressed, but they pale in comparison to some that were used earlier. But, always, politics ain't beanbag. It remains a contact sport.

WT: Extended periods of civility in politics are rare. These politicians were nationally recognized for their crudeness (and reviled by many if not most other political leaders for it). In many ways Donald Trump represents a resurgence of this low-brow combat style. During the 2016 Republican Primary, major national politicians remarking on the size of each other's genitalia was considered shocking– today it seems almost quaint given the barrage of insults and expletives which are now commonplace. While racist and sexist language still generally needs to be coded (with perhaps the thinnest of veils) in a way it wasn't in the first half of the 20th Century, I do think we've seen politicians learn the value of lowness as a tactic in their political arsenal. I'm not sure I've seen a recent politician with the style of these earlier figures though in terms of seamlessly transitioning between poetic, lofty language and down-in-the-dirt insult hurling–yet.

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