On November 10, 2016 – two days after the election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States – Charles Stewart III (Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Lawrence D. Bobo (W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of the Social Sciences, Harvard University), and Jennifer L. Hochschild (Henry LaBarre Jayne Professor of Government and Professor of African and African American Studies, Harvard University) discussed “Populism and the Future of American Politics.” The program, which served as the Academy’s 2045th Stated Meeting, was introduced by Jonathan F. Fanton (President of the American Academy). What follows is an edited transcript of the discussion.

Donald Trump’s campaign provided very few specifics about how he proposes to address the underlying issues that made his populist appeal successful. If his policy proposals don’t show results in short order, has he unleashed a political force that even he can’t contain? In other words, could the future hold mainstream politicians who will be more Trumpian than Trump himself?

Charles Stewart III

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Sometimes when you make plans several months ahead of time, you never realize what a great opportunity you’ll have. When we decided at the end of the summer to participate in this panel and to organize it around the theme of “populism and the future of American politics,” we had already experienced a presidential nomination process in which major candidates from each party plugged into populist urgings, both from the right and the left. Indeed, even if Donald Trump had received one percentage point less of the popular vote on Tuesday in a couple states, leading to a different outcome, the arc of the general election confirms that we are in unsettled times in which populist appeals are quite powerful across the political spectrum.

We are meeting two days after the general election, with its stark outcome that will land Donald Trump in the Oval Office next January 20. Everyone in this room knows that his message was specifically directed at voters – and specifically white working class voters – in ways that appealed to anger over the long-term loss of jobs and status. The postelection analysis reveals that this appeal worked. We see it in the exit polls, and we see it in macroanalysis. For instance, in a posting today on fivethirtyeight.com, which I think is trying to redeem itself after a miserable season of primary predictions, the economist Jed Kolko reported that the vote swing from Romney in 2012 to Trump in 2016 was greatest in counties where the economy is most likely to be based on routine tasks, such as manufacturing, retail sales, and clerical work – precisely the tasks that could be eliminated easily through automation.

This election reveals a lot about the mix of globalization, stagnating work skills, racial tensions, economic inequality, and the like. What it doesn’t necessarily reveal is what the future holds, both for policy and for politics.

As for policy, Donald Trump’s campaign provided very few specifics about how he proposes to address the underlying issues that made his populist appeal successful. If his policy proposals don’t show results in short order, has he unleashed a political force that even he can’t contain? In other words, could the future hold mainstream politicians who will be more Trumpian than Trump himself?
And there is of course the question of how Democrats respond to the fact that they are losing hold on a population that used to be a core part of the party constituency. The Democratic Party has largely embraced the new economy and globalization, and those who benefit from the new economy and globalization probably outnumber those who don’t. The Democrats could wait it out. However, Donald Trump has shown that the intensity of appeals to those losing out to the new economy can beat a larger group that may be complacent.

But finally, of course, the appeal of Bernie Sanders to a significant portion of the Democratic base is also evidence that the genie is out of the bottle on the left, too. Is there a response in the Democratic Party that can appeal to disaffected voters on both sides of the political spectrum, or are we in an era in which distinct populisms will grow in response to a common set of political concerns?

There is a lot to be said on the topic of populism and the future of American politics, and I don’t want to delay too long getting to our panelists, who actually know something about this topic. When we were thinking about how to focus our remarks this evening, there was a very good chance that the result of the election could turn on questions of election law and administration, which is one of the areas I work in. Donald Trump’s repeated charges that the electoral process was “rigged” worried many of us in this field that the result itself would be contested, and that we would find ourselves today not knowing who the next president would be. For better or worse, that ended up not being the case, and all accounts suggest that Tuesday’s election was pretty typical, as far as administering elections goes. So we can focus here on the meaning of the election from a substantive perspective, although issues of the legitimacy of the electoral process still linger.

I’m going to engage this topic as someone who’s trying to finish a book on the question of postracialism in America, and I’m going to pivot off that possibility in considering the question of postracialism in America, and its nearly three-hundred-year history. Yet the current moment does feel like a time of deeply acute polarization and, unexpectedly, almost indigestible racialized divisions, political identity divisions, and ideological divisions. As we near the end of a second term for a popular African American president, having just elected as our next president a man who many believe ran an openly bigoted campaign, we’re confronted with a deep, puzzling question: how on earth did we get here?

The short answer is threefold: first, we’ve just experienced an electoral contest in which a billionaire Republican was able to more effectively cast himself as a champion of the lower, working, and middle classes than his Democratic rival; this was in part made possible, second, by the power of race and racial prejudice in our national politics and political discourse, and, frankly, third, by a sort of paralysis that comes about by the powers of the economic elite and fear of direct appeals to minority voters.

I want to begin by recalling for all of you the old term Reagan Democrats, and I want to read you a paragraph from the definitive book on the subject, Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics by journalists Thomas and Mary Edsall. They were trying to understand why Republicans kept winning the White House, and, based on research by pollster Stanley Greenberg, they offered the following diagnosis:

These white Democratic defectors express a profound distaste for blacks, a sentiment that pervades almost everything they think about government and politics. Blacks constitute the explanation for their vulnerability and for almost everything that has gone wrong in their lives; not being black is what constitutes being middle class; not living with blacks is what makes a neighborhood a decent place to live. The special status of blacks is perceived by almost all of these individuals as a serious obstacle to their personal advancement. Indeed, discrimination against whites has become a well-assimilated and ready explanation for their status, vulnerability, and failures.

We might now just replace that word “blacks,” or add to it “Mexican immigrants,” and we’ve updated that analysis.
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have written, “It was the most postracial of times, it was the least postracial of times.” I believe that only when we get beyond the fallacy of colorblindness and the distorting narrative of postracialism that we can hope to rise to a point of honest, clear-eyed engagement with how and why politics, prejudice, and polarization so often roil our democratic and collective lives.

In the brief time I have here, I want to draw attention to three points of contradiction: one, stemming from the tensions involving the conflict of simultaneous growth of income inequality and of ethnocracial diversity of the population; two, the tensions that arise from both deepening partisanship, on the one hand, and what has become the routine racialization of our politics, on the other; and three, this paralysis around the power of the economic elite, versus fear of appeals to black and minority voters. I’ll come back to that at the end.

For most of the period from 1945 to 1973, as our economy grew, incomes grew for everyone, and the income gap between the most affluent and the least affluent in the United States actually shrank. A quite different story has characterized the post-1973 period, particularly the post-1980 era. Since the Great Recession, a disproportionate share of income and wealth has gone upward to the already most well-off segments of the population. A recent report from the Institute for Policy Studies emphasized that income disparities have become so pronounced that Brookings Institution senior fellow William Frey have shown that 64 percent of the U.S. population could be classified as white in 2010. Between 2010 and 2050, that percentage is expected to steadily decline, with the United States probably becoming a majority-minority population by 2040. In fact, we hit one important benchmark five years ago, when the majority of new births in this country were children of color. Experimental research shows that when presented with evidence of these demographic trends, many white Americans tend to express a sense of threat from minorities and a greater emotional animosity toward them. They also begin to think, even more than they may have already, in zero-sum terms about opportunities and resources. Moreover, there’s some experimental work showing that drawing attention to these demographic terms has direct political effects. Psychologists Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richardson found that experimentally manipulating awareness of this racial population shift increases white identification with conservative political ideologies and the Republican Party.

Enter Donald Trump. It should surprise no one that this nexus of conditions—sharply rising inequality and an increasingly acute sense of economic vulnerability for lower- and middle-income Americans, in the context of rapid population change as we transition from a solid majority white population to a nation without a clear ethnocracial dominant group—opens the door to a powerfully resonant blend of antiminority populism. But what role has partisanship played in the routine mobilization of race in our body politic?

If we were to go back to the presidential contest of 1956 or 1960, you would find that the major party platforms of the Republican and Democratic Parties contained largely similar language about issues of civil rights and race. Indeed, both parties, at that time,
actively competed for the black vote, to a degree. So there is no necessary connection between partisanship and issues of race. Beginning with the 1964 election, however, the two major parties began to sharply diverge on issues of civil rights and race. Ultimately, the Democratic Party clearly became the party of the effective governmental enforcement of full citizenship for African Americans. With that came a sea change in partisan alignments. The South went from being solidly Democrat-controlled to largely Republican-controlled. Black loyalty to the party of Lincoln, once something you could take for granted, started to weaken during the Franklin Roosevelt and New Deal era, accelerated under President Kennedy, and vanished and can to constrain the influence of Democratic voters, who increasingly are minorities. Not only is race thus increasingly aligned with voting by party identification, but political scientists and political psychologists have shown us that attitudes that we would characterize as racial resentments play an increasingly strong role in defining the meaning of those party attachments. The end result is what legal scholar Ian Haney López has termed “dog-whistle politics.” Given improved racial attitudes and the successes of the civil rights era, however, openly bigoted appeals are fraught with the risk of backfiring, at least if directed at African Americans (the same can’t yet be said of Mexicans, as we’ve just seen). But carefully crafted slo-

Race has always been an ingredient of American national politics. Its salience, explicitness, and centrality vary from one election cycle to the next, but it’s never been an irrelevance. We’ve got to forget this postracial fantasy.

was replaced by a near-complete capture—and I do mean that word capture—by the Democratic Party in subsequent years.

An unfortunate effect of these developments is that both major parties, to a degree, depend on racial division for their electoral success. On the one hand, then, in a context in which Republicans are content to completely cede the black vote, Democrats only need to do so much to expect black loyalty. After all, where are black voters going to go? So even under Obama, nothing you could construe as a truly strong minority or black agenda is articulated within the confines of major party politics. On the other hand, especially as the population changes, the Republican Party worries more and more about mobilizing its base, and doing what it

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Sanders did. Clinton’s campaign was clearly afraid to say, “I’m going to represent you guys against these economic elites.” That economic message just wasn’t there, especially at the end, when her whole campaign was directed against Trump, and not for the rest of you.

The alternative is to say she failed to double down on the Obama coalition, recognizing that Obama got reelected in 2012 by hyper-black turnout, more than replacing the two million white votes he lost with two million—plus African American voters. And here’s the thing that hasn’t gotten much coverage to this point: in the upper Midwest states that Clinton lost—and I’m going to include Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania—the entire margin of Trump’s victory in each of those states can be accounted for by her lower black percentage vote, and lower black turnout, compared with Obama. I want you to think about that. As it turns out, despite what you might have read in the National Review, if Obama had gotten just his 2012 numbers, and Trump had exactly his 2016 numbers, Obama would have been elected to a third term.

It is not my intention to sound an unremittingly pessimistic note. If there are takeaways here, they are perhaps threefold. First, the current moment is best read as complex. Changes in our institutions and norms, and in the outlooks and attitudes of the mass of Americans, have been significant, and are not easily overridden or reversed. There are clearly contending political alliances out there. There’s no single, overarching axis of intolerance. If anything, a two-term Obama presidency signals something important about the majoritarian character of the mass public at this point, underlying racial inequality and division notwithstanding, and the real ultimate closeness in the overall vote—and, in fact, Hillary won the overall vote. Second, the success of the Trump candidacy should worry us all the same, because it didn’t implode. In this context of economic anxiety, rising inequality, populism and the future of American politics.

We inhabit a troubling moment of alignment of race, and racial-policy-related commitments, with basic party identities. This is not a healthy circumstance for our democracy.
As one of my students pointed out, in the end this is a partisan story. Some prominent Republicans said, “Never Trump,” and many Republicans may still have concerns about our next president. . . . Nonetheless, on balance: Republicans voted for Trump, and Democrats voted for Clinton.

Jennifer L. Hochschild

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As Charles mentioned, we had been toying with this topic for some time, and I had prepared two or three different versions of this talk. The one that I was developing systematically over the last week or two began with the challenge of—once Clinton wins the election—reincorporating those forty or fifty million Trump supporters, those voters we might think of as a populist population, and gaining their support for the new Democratic agenda, or at least their acceptance of the legitimacy of the new administration. I dropped that speech, for obvious reasons. Instead, like many of you, I’ve spent the last couple of days trying to figure out what just happened. And that’s what I’d like to do tonight: aided by a little bit of data, let’s see if we can trace where this thing came from. Why did Trump win the election, but more broadly, what are the contours and elements of right-wing populism?

The first thing to look at is the turnout. As Larry just explained, turnout was down in 2016, and not just among black voters, according to the incomplete results that we now have available. We had an enormously engaged population in terms of interest and visibility, but for a bunch of reasons we could spend a long time studying, turnout overall was down a percentage point or two from 2012—again, if current calculations hold up once all votes are counted. As Larry has also just told us, if turnout among parts of the population had been one or two percentage points higher in just a few states, the outcome would have looked different.

Setting aside overall turnout and focusing instead on vote shares among the candidates, the short version of the story is that in almost all population groups, the 2016 Democratic candidate, which is to say Clinton, won a slightly smaller share than did Obama in 2012. Consider that Trump had an enormous advantage over Clinton among whites with no college degree. Clinton received a much higher share of the black, Latino, and Asian American votes, but for all three groups, it was a slightly smaller share than Obama received in 2012. So her majority from these groups just wasn’t great enough to win the states she needed. This is a major pattern in the data.

Finally, looking at the overall vote; as one of my students pointed out, in the end this is a partisan story. Some prominent Republicans said, “Never Trump,” and many Republicans may still have concerns about our next president. So we may see a lot more controversy in Congress than one would expect, given that the same party will control the executive and a majority in both houses. Nonetheless, on balance: Republicans voted for Trump, and Democrats voted for Clinton. (Independents did vote more for Trump than they did for Clinton, which was not the case in 2012.) So we have a big partisan story, along with a complicated demographic story.

Moving more deeply into the election results than voting percentages alone permit, I want briefly to talk through a series of potential explanations for the growth of U.S. populism, before spending a little time on how they combine. Note that here I am offering only suggestions of the kind of evidence you’d need for a serious, full-fledged debate, but it’s a start.

Let’s look first at the change in wealth distribution in the United States since 1984 for various segments of the population. From 1984 to 2005, the bottom quarter of the population, in terms of wealth holding, basically held their own, although they didn’t gain any wealth either. Following the 2007 crash, the bottom quartile lost an enormous amount of its wealth, and it hasn’t recovered any ground since 2013, the last year
for which we have data. The median wealth holder followed a similar script, with a slight rise of wealth up through the early 2000s, and considerable decline since 2007. The 75th percentile lost wealth in the Great Recession, but still ended up marginally better off in 2013 than in 1984. The 90th percentile also lost a little in 2007, but this did not offset their massive gains in wealth since 1984. Most dramatically, the 95th percentile has increased their share of wealth by about 90 percent since 1984, despite the 2007–2008 crash. So the median wealth-holders and the least wealthy Americans have lost the most since 1984, and especially since 2007, while the best-off have gained. (You could tell the same story about income, but wealth, in the long run, is a more important measure.)

There’s clearly a class story here. A nontrivial fraction of the population, roughly half, are a lot worse off than their families had been four, five, or six years ago – and no better off than their parents had been – and there’s no reason for them to think that they or their children are going to be any better off moving forward. That is frightening and infuriating.

Of course, there’s also a race, ethnicity, and immigration story that must be parsed to understand the rise in right-wing American populism. These stories aren’t identical, but they’re all entwined in the Trump campaign and in this election in complicated ways. In the most comprehensive exit poll from the 2016 election, with about twenty-five thousand respondents in hundreds of precincts, for example, 70 percent of the surveyed population agreed that “Illegal immigrants working in the United States should be offered legal status,” as opposed to “should be deported.” If you believe these data, then, American voters are not flat-out xenophobic. Nonetheless, one-third of those who favor offering legal status to the undocumented still voted for Trump. Of the 30 percent of the population who endorse deportation, of course, a majority voted for Trump.

Other data show the same pattern: relatively high support for Trump even among those who reject his expressed views on Muslims, Mexicans, or President Obama, along with very strong support among those who share those views. Thus right-wing populism has not only a strong class story, but also a race, ethnicity, and immigration component.

There’s a third possible explanation of right-wing populism: a focus on gender. We heard many challenges from Trump and his supporters about Hillary Clinton’s looks, stamina, and capacity to be commander-in-chief. And you have all seen the bumper sticker, “Trump That Bitch,” and the like. But rather than focus on Hillary, I thought it would be more interesting to look at the broader question in the exit poll: “Does Trump’s treatment of women bother you?” Seventy percent of American voters said yes, it bothers them; but of that group, 30 percent still voted for Trump. The remaining 30 percent of the whole were not bothered by Trump’s behavior toward women, and unsurprisingly, the vast majority of them voted for Trump. This expressed unconcern about – or hostility to – gender equality is reinforced by Trump’s strength among women voters, especially white women and even well-educated white women. That’s remarkable.

Another possibility: is populism about distrust of government? A host of survey questions might inform us: “Is the country on the right track or the wrong track?” “Do you trust the elites?” “Do you believe that public officials act in the interests of people like you?” “Do you think public officials understand the problems of people like you?” But more simply, let’s look once again at the 2016 exit poll: “What are your feelings about the federal government?” Here respondents had four choices: “enthusiastic,” “satisfied,” “dissatisfied,” or “angry.” Only 6 percent of respondents said they were enthusiastic, and another 24 percent were satisfied. That means that three in ten voters were on the positive end of this spectrum – not a lot. Of this group, 20 percent voted for Trump.

The “dissatisfied” group, almost half, split evenly between Trump and Clinton. But a quarter of the population described themselves as “angry” – a strong word in a public opinion survey – and three-fourths of them voted for Trump.

We also have to look at context. One version of the story is that virtually every city voted for Clinton, and every noncity voted for Trump. That may not be exact, but it’s a good starting point. This is a very old trope, the urban-rural, urban-suburban, big town–small town division. It goes back to Thomas Jefferson, it goes back to the Bible, it goes back to, I’ve been told, Gilgamesh, and it’s more powerful now than ever in U.S. elections.
One way of understanding right-wing populism is, roughly speaking, that racism, sexism, xenophobia, and religious prejudice are embedded in the nature of class antagonisms: they are constitutive of contemporary populism in the United States and elsewhere.

But other contexts are equally important. Let’s look at counties that went for Trump in the primaries of Super Tuesday. What we see in the data is that the higher the death rate among middle-aged whites in a county, the greater the share of votes that Trump got, compared with other Republicans. Increasingly, the high and perhaps rising death rate for adult whites is a consequence of alcohol use, obesity, opioids, suicide, and a variety of diseases that correlate with people living pretty terrible lives; people living in such communities are disproportionately Trump supporters.

The New York Times offered more context for the primaries by examining census data for characteristics of people residing in counties that supported Trump on Super Tuesday. High percentages of whites with less than a high school education; of people who identify their ancestry on the census as “American”; of mobile homes in the county; of “old economy” jobs, including manufacturing and retail jobs that are, as Charles mentioned, relatively easily automated or offshore; of voters who had supported George Wallace; of evangelical Christians and of native-born Americans—all had strongly positive correlations with support for Trump. Labor force participation rates went the opposite way: the higher the share of the population in that county who participate in the labor force, the less support Trump received.

With this sort of evidence, we can start to form a picture of counties with a high proportion of Trump supporters: the counties are rural or at least not urban, economically depressed, and disproportionately comprised of residents who seem psychologically and interpersonally depressed as well.

At this point, I want to stop examining the data and reflect for a minute on how to make sense of what we’re seeing. Anybody who’s taken a history course knows something about the phenomenon of leftist populism. We typically think of William Jennings Bryan, though the 1890s Populist movement is a little complicated, given that “left” and “right” today don’t quite mean what they did a century ago. Still, roughly speaking, we would identify the Populist movement of the American Midwest as a phenomenon of the left, much of which got incorporated into Progressive era and New Deal laws and policies. Huey Long was a kind of left populist; perhaps you could call Andrew Jackson a leftist populist, though only with regard to white Americans; there is a radical leftist populism in Greece today. We might include Bernie Sanders in this group, although it’s a little hard to figure out exactly how to characterize him.

But setting aside complexities of the left, the point is that what we’re seeing with Trump, like what we saw with George Wallace or Father Coughlin, is a right-wing or reactionary populism. It is not unique to the United States, of course—consider Brexit, France’s Marine Le Pen, The Netherlands’ Geert Wilders; and many others. Here is my final point; we need to think hard about how to characterize the different varieties of populism.

One way of understanding right-wing populism is, roughly speaking, that racism, sexism, xenophobia, religious prejudice (and prejudice against sexuality and gender identity, although those were less salient in this campaign) are embedded in the nature of class antagonisms: they are constitutive of contemporary populism in the United States and elsewhere. Hostility to government, fears about the future, discouragement about the economic and employment prospects for myself and my family are causally linked to racism, sexism, and xenophobia. The logic here is: “Immigrants are taking our jobs, blacks are getting too much government money, and women are abandoning their traditional roles in society and the family—all of which is harming my family’s and my community’s situation.” Simply: “My family is suffering because those Others have allied with government elites.”

There’s a second way of thinking about populism—and this is the slightly more benign version of Trumpian populism, if there is such a thing. In this version, racial, gendered, and xenophobic views are not causally linked to class-based populism, but rather are additive. You could remove the dislike of the Other, for example, without eliminating the core populist story of context and economic change. In simple terms, this would be: “My family is doing badly because of those government elites, and I don’t want a woman or black or Muslim president.”

In a third form of populism, race, gender, and xenophobia aren’t a central part of the story. Populist fury is driven by class anxieties and antagonisms: “government elites, or Wall Street bankers, or pointy-headed academics are causing my family and my community to suffer and lose our economic security and mobility.”

Finally, a fourth form of populism is more deeply leftist, in the sense of seeking to
unite rejection of racial, gender, religious, legal, and class injustice. The early stage of the 1890s Populist movement, for example, witnessed a racially egalitarian movement as part of the rejection of the gold standard and capitalist exploitation (though that stage died pretty quickly). Bernie Sanders was trying to create this form of left populism. In his politics, the blame for all kinds of inequality rests with elites, with the government, with an economic enemy not defined by race, gender, sexuality, country of origin, and so on. Put most simply: “My family and my community are doing badly because of powerful elites, and so are the families and communities of other Americans of different races/religions/legal statuses. We are all victims of the same injustice.”

In short, a crucial political question is how we understand the relationship between vilification of Others, or the Other, and mistrust of people who hold illegitimate political and economic power. There’s a very strong argument about necessary and causal links between populism and racism, at least in the United States – but history, political activism, and moral reasoning all suggest that some populist impulses can be accidentally supremacist, or not at all. The trajectory of the links that Trump on the one hand, and Sanders on the other, sought to forge in 2016 will ramify through American politics for at least the next decade.

I’d like to end on a less discouraging note. Is right-wing populism likely to remain dominant? Some of you may have seen the outcome of the election had only eighteen-to-twenty-five-year-olds voted: it shows an almost uniformly blue land mass, with 504 electoral votes for Clinton, 23 for Trump. Now most members of that age group don’t vote, and there are problems with this analysis, so this may not be an accurate portrayal of the youngest cohort of voters. And we don’t know whether today’s youth will retain their political liberalism as they age and become taxpayers, or if they will become disillusioned, racist or xenophobic, economically discouraged and infuriated, or any one of the many things that eighteen-year-olds mostly aren’t but sixty-year-olds often are. Still, this fivethirtyeight map does suggest the possibility of a genuine generational cohort change in which, sooner or later, people who grew up after 9/11, after the rise in immigration, and after the 2008 crash will be running our country. Perhaps if we can just hang on for another twenty-five or thirty years, it’s going to get better. Thank you.

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