

No, Sanders and Trump aren’t Two Sides of the Same Populist Coin.

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Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are both often referred to as “populists,” and that similarity is sometimes invoked to help explain why so many of Sanders’s 2016 primary voters supported Trump in the general election. However, this broad similarity obscures an important difference: the targets of Trump’s and Sanders’s populisms are dramatically different, making Trump’s populism much more dangerous.

In the abstract, the [definition](#) of a “populist” is relatively simple: a politician who positions themselves against the real or perceived “elites” or “establishment” on behalf of the “common person.” In general, populists’ attacks on the “elite” or the “establishment” consist of calls to fundamentally transform established institutions.

To measure populism by a politician’s opposition to institutions, we also need an adequate definition of “institution.” In political science, an [institution](#) is any entity that influences individuals’ behavior. Examples of institutions range from informal norms governing interpersonal etiquette to the Supreme Court. The news media is an institution because it influences people to think and act in certain ways. Elections are an institution because they determine the people on whom we confer the legitimacy of government power. My focus will be on the largest institutions in American business and politics, such as courts, the federal bureaucracy, the media, elections, large corporations, and financial institutions.

Those definitions are straightforward enough, but in practice, a populist can be tricky to identify. After all, anyone running in favor of change can, in a sense, be defined as populist because they advocate modifying existing power structures. For example, Barack Obama—in his 2008 presidential campaign announcement—[said](#), “I know I haven’t spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I’ve been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change.”

So, was Obama a populist? Well, no. Examining Obama’s record in office, he didn’t advocate much institutional overhaul. His policies made changes to the American healthcare and financial systems, but he didn’t seek to fundamentally transform them or destroy them entirely. As such, he is more aptly understood as a reformer than a populist, with the distinction being that populists seek to transform established institutions while reformers seek to curb their perceived excesses.

It’s worth remembering that populism—which can have a negative association with figures like Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez and Hungary’s Viktor Orbán—could be a smear that powerful people use to delegitimize activists. In the long view of modern history, some institutions, such as slavery and Jim Crow, needed to be obliterated.

Populism also isn’t just doing what’s popular. Democratic strategist David Shor recently [began advocating](#) that “Democrats should do a lot of polling to figure out which of their views are popular and which are not popular, and then they should talk about the popular stuff and shut up about the unpopular stuff.” This strategy, which Shor calls “popularism,” isn’t defined by the anti-system appeals of populism, so the two must be viewed separately from each other.

By contrast, I think it is appropriate to use the term “populist” when dramatically transforming institutions on behalf of the common man becomes either a focus of a campaign or when in office, a focus of policy. For both Trump and Sanders, institutional attacks were a campaign mainstay, and during Trump’s 2017-21 tenure in office, they defined his administration.

So, what makes Sanders a populist? He began his 2016 campaign by [arguing that](#) “[the American people] want a fundamental change so that government works for ordinary Americans

and not just billionaires.” To that end, Sanders supported breaking up large banks, a complete overhaul of the US healthcare system, and dramatic changes to corporate structures. With those three policy aims, he was advocating major overhauls or the downright abolition of some of the most powerful institutions in the country: banks, pharmaceutical companies, health insurance companies, and successful, profitable corporations.

It’s no wonder that he said his campaign was fighting for a “revolution.”

But it’s important to note that Sanders’s populist villains were private sector institutions, especially economic ones. Where he called for changes to the political system—such as campaign finance reforms like ending Citizens United—he was proposing to change the relationship between the political system and those large economic institutions. This focus on the private sector stands in stark contrast to Trumpian populism.

During his first campaign for president, Trump’s attacks on economically powerful institutions—like [banks and hedge funds](#)—sounded quite similar to Sanders’. However, as his campaign evolved, the institutional targets of Trump’s ire shifted. He increasingly attacked the media—labeling them the “enemy of the people”—, and once he took office, he began attacking politically independent bureaucrats—labeling them the “deep state.”

Most concerning of all, he routinely attacked elections themselves. When he finished second in the Iowa caucuses, he called them “[stolen](#).” During a presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, he declined to commit to accepting the results of the general election, and even though he won the electoral college, he falsely claimed voter fraud cost him a plurality in the popular vote. And, of course, he failed to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election, the [most secure election in American history](#), and his denial led to a deadly coup attempt at the US Capitol on January 6.

In short, Trump directed his ire at democratic institutions: elections, the media, independent bureaucrats. Let me be clear: we can have reasonable, good-faith debates about how independent and trustworthy those institutions are, but Trump didn’t engage with those concerns in a thoughtful, nuanced way, and he didn’t offer institutional solutions to his grievances. In fact, Trump’s lack of interest in specifics reveals a fundamental truth: he was more interested in attacking institutional power for the sake of his own interests. His attacks on institutions, rather than being rooted in concern about the long-term viability of democracy, were primarily tools for delegitimizing his enemies.

In my view, it’s a mistake to view politics on a left-right axis, on a 2D grid, or even on a 10D grid. There are hundreds of dimensions of which voters’ views can vary, and the salience of those views can fluctuate over time. Politics, when conceptualized in this more multidimensional way, can be more difficult to predict, but it can help explain how a voter might support a socialist like Bernie Sanders and a right-winger like Donald Trump in the same year.

So which dimensions explain the fact that [roughly 12 percent](#) of Sanders’s primary voters backed Trump? One factor might’ve been voters’ dislike of Hillary Clinton specifically, as seen in her generally high unfavorable ratings, but I would say that political disposition is the most likely culprit. It’s not hard to understand how voters who are generally skeptical of power—cultural, political, or economic—could see an appeal in two candidates who might seem far apart on a traditional left-right axis. In other words, their mistrust of institutions drove their voting behavior more than any liberal or conservative identification.

So, what should we make of this analysis? Lots of Americans seem deeply frustrated with power structures as they’re currently constituted. And lots of them seem willing to blow them up and embrace populism in some form or another. But Trump should remind us of the perils of that

impulse. His routine attacks on bedrock institutions of American democracy have left vital democratic institutions significantly weakened.

Of course, Sanders’s economic populism can threaten civic society as well. After all, an impoverished populace is poorly positioned to create a robust democracy, but Trump’s populism attacks institutions—like an independent press—that are vital to American civic society while Sanders’s populism attacks institutions, like private health insurance and Super PACs, that many other countries live successfully without. Ultimately, for American democracy to survive, we have to distinguish between these types of populism by seriously examining what institutions they seek to challenge.