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# Trump and the Rise of the Media-Industrial Complex in American Politics

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**ABSTRACT** *While controversies and debates proliferate about Trump's Presidency, there is little analysis of the context and factors leading to his rise and politics. The liberal axiom (Trump has won, but Russia swayed the 2016 U.S. elections) often conceals from view a significant episode that involves new players and dynamics shifting the Republican Party and U.S. politics to the radical right, which ultimately contributed to Trump's election. This analysis provides an investigation into the actors and intricacies that enabled Trump's election success and shaped contemporary U.S. politics. It examines structural, cultural and personal dynamics behind Trump's victory. In particular, the study identifies the specific role played by new media platforms and industrial interests (the media-industrial complex) as a new force shaping U.S. politics.*

## Introduction

**P**olitical pundits of all stripes and many political scientists have misread the prospects for Trump's Presidency. Trump's election as the American President was seen almost as an 'impossible' venture on numerous grounds, but most notably, the Republican Party elite stood against his candidacy right from the onset and tried to block him. After all, the motto the 'party decides' is not just the title of a widely read political science book, it is an historical fact. And yet, against all odds, Donald J. Trump won the 2016 presidential race after a year and a half long, uphill battle becoming, the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. A neophyte in politics, Trump avoided mainstream ideologies or affiliations, including that of the Republican Party itself. Instead, he appealed to the economic and physical fears of the voters with his politically incorrect messages and white nationalism. Seven months into the presidency, Trump has already deeply shaken the political order and the body politic as he continues the rebellion against the national and international liberal order since the primaries. Violating the norms (and sometimes rules) of

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presidency and shaping his politics. The liberal wild card (Trump won, but Russia swayed the 2016 U.S. elections) often conceals from view a significant episode that involves new players and dynamics shifting the Republican Party and U.S. politics to the far right, which significantly contributed to Trump's election. Why did the U.S. electorate radically alter its behavior and choose a candidate outside of the established Washington elite or political-economic order? Why did the preferences of U.S. citizens differ this time? Who will govern now? Admittedly fully addressing such questions would be difficult; nonetheless, it is necessary to pin down the factors, actors and context behind Trump's success. The success is often explained away as stemming from voter bases' revenge, identity, 'white men rage,' 'authoritarian voters,' leadership-charisma and so on. Such views ignore, however, the political-economic structures and the underlying changes that have taken place in American politics. Drawing from the complexity theory and economic elite domination, this analysis investigates the intricacies that helped Trump's electoral success and shape U.S. politics. The paper examines the structural, cultural and personal dynamics behind Trump's success and politics. In particular, it identifies the roles played by the economic elites, their instruments, and the new media (the media-industrial complex), which together pull the Republican Party and American politics to the far right and, potentially, authoritarianism.

democratic government has meanwhile become the order of the day. The growing political reaction to the Trump administration and the emergent showdown between different social forces has become a worrying fiat of American politics.

While controversies and debates abound, there is little analysis of the context and factors leading to his

### The Anatomy of an Impossible Victory

What are the sources of Trump's victory? How should we understand this most unusual case? To begin with, the existence of a rich scholarly tradition studying political parties and the orientations of the politicians provides little guidance to account for spectacular deviations as evinced in the recent case of Trump presidency. For instance, the dominant theory of American politics, namely the 'party decides' theory,<sup>1</sup> does not shed much light due to its failure to explain the candidacy of Trump in the 2016 nomination battle within the Republican Party. While the allure and success of the Trump campaign has analyzed with the help of different theories of American politics such as eco-

conomic populism,<sup>2</sup> communication skills,<sup>3</sup> or authoritarian voters,<sup>4</sup> many of these theories fail to capture the complexity of the case since, in part, they rely on mono-causal frameworks. To be sure, this is an old problem as actor-based or politician-centered explanations are still influential in the literature.<sup>5</sup> A recent study eschews politician/actor-based analyses and explains Trump's presidency as emanating from the choices of 'authoritarian voters' rather than, say, the party or ideology. However, it relegates actorness from one level to another –this time to the voters– holding that the voters' authoritarianism “arises casually prior to the political attitudes and behavior that it affects.”<sup>6</sup> The study does not address the crucial question as to how authoritarianism is itself formed or shaped by factors other than voter characteristics or contemporary events.

To understand the rise of Trump and his politics, it is, therefore, necessary to go beyond focusing exclusively on personal/group traits or the ideology and instead set the Trump presidency in a wider structural context. The challenge is to understand and locate the contemporary politics behind the rise of Trump in a new and non-reductionist approach. A non-reductionist explanation of a social phenomenon is rarely mono-causal; the inquiry should therefore account for a confluence of factors. Specifically, the research becomes more compact and meaningful when it focuses on three levels that make social action possible: agency, culture and structure.<sup>7</sup> Hence the fundamental question of this analysis can be formulated as follows: what are the new political and economic dynamics in U.S. politics that have affected voters' preferences and produced this tectonic shift? In answering this question, the author seeks to present a fuller account of the confluence of factors behind the recent shifts in U.S. politics that eventually produced the Trump Presidency.

## Personal Factors

An important factor contributing to Trump's electoral success and the subsequent political rhetoric has been related to his personality. Trump's idiosyncratic ruling and communication style continues to define his Presidency. However, some of Trump's personality traits related to many earlier developments, as in the case of McGovern-Fraser commission's decision in late 1960s. The latter decision changed the Democratic Party's presidential nominating process, gave way to the rise in U.S. politics of well-educated, affluent professional classes. Barack Obama, Bill and Hillary Clinton, for example, were highly educated, coming from different generational backgrounds and higher echelons of the U.S. education and neither saw the Depression or World War II.<sup>8</sup> The shift in leadership had an unexpected but politically game-changing consequence: Party elites in the professional-managerial position (Democratic and Republican) began to dominate the political scene at the expense of



Instead of political axioms, Trump uses his body language and communication style as a political weapon.

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organized interests and the traditional party base. The new leadership showcased the idea that the resolution of political problems necessitated education. It also resulted in both the liberalization of knowledge/status and the emergence of technocratic approach to politics. Another vital outcome of the takeover of the ruling party by the well-educated and professional class was the gradual erosion of politics as negotiations between organized interests.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the new party elites held that different social identity groups and political interest groups could simply be reconciled or that disagreements could easily be resolved by recourse to expertise.<sup>10</sup> In sum, the rather naive belief that the problems and contradictions can simply be erased with the politics of compromise in turn generated disconnect between the rulers and the grassroots.

Trump was the person to take advantage of this political reality. For Trump and his team, the political is a constant struggle for power taking shape in a

friend-enemy relationship or as his chief advisor put it bluntly ‘politics is war.’<sup>11</sup> More correctly, it is continuation of war with other means. Furthermore, in place of Clinton’s vague ‘we,’ Trump embodied the hope for white lower and middle-classes that were losing their economic and social status and re-

alized that the Republican Party elites were doing nothing to stop it. Trump sought the support of a clearly demarcated electoral base: white America. For example, in an effort to connect the personal with the political, Trump, in the last five years, kept claiming that Obama was not born in America and implying he could neither legally become the President or represent white Americans. He discovered (probably learning through the example of Scott Walker, Governor of Wisconsin) that economic and social inequality could be interpreted differently than most politicians would assume. He also saw amidst a growing Republican Party insurgency led by the Tea Party, he could be the preferred candidate thanks to a poll dating back to 2011 (PPP) and one in another (*Wall Street Journal/NBC*) poll in April 2011 among Republican Presidential candidates just before the 2012 election. The conditions were ripe, but he gave up on it when Bin Laden was killed in a raid under Obama administration.

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### ***Trump’s Language: All Facts for the Tribe***

Another important personal trait was his communication skills. Trump’s success also lay in its ability to create a speech style where he could change the content and vary his voice-pitch according to context. Research shows that this bodes well with the audience in comparison to other Republican candidates. A recent computerized text analysis of comparative campaign speeches shows how influential his skills have been *vis-à-vis* other contenders in the primaries.<sup>12</sup> In particular, in terms of grandiosity, informality and voice pitch-analysis, Trump fared much better than his contenders did.<sup>13</sup> His informality was in part based on low-complexity content of his political speeches (particularly through his excessive *Twitter* use in what have come to be dubbed ‘Tweetstorms’). Regardless of the content of speech, the *form* of his communication relied on racist-xenophobic and sexist tropes that aimed to shock and give the impression of an informal and charismatic leader (‘abortion should be punished,’ ‘Muslims should be banned,’ ‘Mexicans are rapists,’ etc.).

The content of Trump’s communication was in part informed by alt-right ideology employing a hefty use of conspiracy theories so as to make some of the complicated political events and processes accessible or understandable for the general public. It was the Trump campaign in 2016 that helped the alt-

## Trump does not use well-known political arguments or axioms. Rather he utilizes this communication style as a political weapon to rule out 'northern liberals' and delegitimize the Washington establishment

taboos on race, culture, gender identity and claims that the U.S. government and Western civilization are under-siege. Economic crises, ongoing terrorist attacks, and the inability to prevent the overflow of extraordinary events make people more receptive to conspiracy theories as in Trump's claim that 'thousands of New Jersey Muslims celebrated the 9/11 attacks.'<sup>16</sup> The animating feature of this communication is 'the war' in which the U.S. and the world are divided into –a right versus wrong and friend versus enemy. The unifying leitmotif is white nationalism. The grammar in this communication style takes white man, as its main subject, who is struggling to regain his privileged political-social status. This is done mainly by sharpening an 'us' versus 'them' distinction through dualities including: victim-criminal (white-black, Muslim-Christian); secure inside/dangerous outside (the whole frenzy around 'building the wall' at the Mexican border). An exemplary aspect of the ideology of the alt-right can be found in a leaked seven-page document penned by one of Trump administration staffers –a former National Security Council Official, Rich Higgins– which avers that 'America is at risk and slipping away' and the current Trump government is under threat from seven groups: 'the mainstream media, the academy, the deep state, the global corporatists and bankers, the Democratic leadership, Republican leadership, and Islamists.'<sup>17</sup> Hence, a new political struggle is in the offing whereby the status, identity and interests of white America would be dominant and economic and cultural hegemony restored.

It is necessary to note that the truth or validity of the content of Trump's political speeches and pronouncements seems irrelevant to him and his audience. There is certainly a discrepancy between 'the conclusions that he wants the audience to reach versus the conclusions warranted by the evidence at hand.'<sup>18</sup> For example, he first claimed Obama wiretapped Trump Tower, but then said his claims needs to be understood within the context of his other assertions or taken figuratively. This would be so, for Trump, because 'a wiretapping is, you know today it is different than wiretapping. It is just a good *description*.'<sup>19</sup> The emergent political narrative instead functions as a kind of 'practical con-

right ideology to go mainstream.<sup>14</sup> The alt-right or 'alternative-right' is a reactionary far-right ideology as well as a countercultural and political force associated with white nationalism, white supremacy and premised on an anti-immigration discourse spread mostly online that construe America as a 'natural' land of Anglo-Saxon Protestants.<sup>15</sup> It builds on certain conspiracy theories rejecting political and social

sciousness,<sup>20</sup> standing at the boundary between the discursive/rational aspect of America (Washington elites, Democratic Party, the media, etc.) and the sub-conscious (WASP, Confederate Flag, etc.).

Overall, the words and symbols used to communicate with the audience do not necessarily serve the truth or correspond to the facts the matter. Second, it seeks to generate an alternative political and cultural counter-discursive niche (informed in part by the alt-right) against the powerful liberal political discourse. Rather than semantic juggling, Trump's communiqué seeks to disrupt the established relationship between words and signs to reposition against the Washington elite.<sup>21</sup> Third, it serves as an inoculation effect against the neoliberal *status quo* (how things work in Washington) by creating an alternative cognitive map. Fourth, it sets the parameters of 'informal political talk'<sup>22</sup> that builds upon Trump's campaign speeches and political narrative to vent 'resentment'<sup>23</sup> born out of a severe economic crisis. This 'informal political talk' is then spread thanks to alternative media platforms such as *Drudge Report*, *Breitbart*, *Blaze*, the far right radio programs and others. Hence millions of people are inoculated against the mainstream liberal discourse and its politically correct renditions. In short, Trump does not use well-known political arguments or axioms. Rather he utilizes this communication style as a political weapon to rule out 'northern liberals' and delegitimize the Washington establishment ('Obama wiretapped Trump Tower,' 'very un-American intelligence' and 'media is the enemy of the American people' and so on).

### ***A Faustian Bargain***

Emblematic of his campaign's form and content, Trump made a stump speech in February 2016 in Charleston, South Carolina, where the first shot in the nation's Civil War was fired. There he told a virulent racist story of a crushed rebellion under the command of U.S. General John Pershing, an administrator of the U.S.-occupied Philippines, who was fighting against the Muslim rebels in early 1900s. The political context at the time of the campaign speech was that Trump wanted to reiterate his support for various kinds of torture in 'combating terrorism.' He had this to say:

We had a genius his name was Pershing who lived a hundred years ago, did you hear his name? At that time there was also a terrible terrorism problem. Terrible terrorism. He was the type that stands up on his horse, [body language]. By the way, you will not find them in a lot of history books because they do not like to tell you. General Pershing was struggling with the terrorists like we do. He took fifty bullets, and he dipped them in pigs' blood. And he had his men load his rifles and he lined up the fifty people, and they shot 49 of those people. And the fiftieth person he said "You go back to your people and you tell them what happened." And for 25 years there wasn't a problem, OK? 25 years there wasn't a problem, all right? So we better start getting tough and we better start



getting vigilant and we better start using our heads or we're not gonna have a country folks, we're not gonna have a country [joyful applause].<sup>24</sup>

Trump's version of the story was clearly disconnected from its historical context and far from the reality of what happened. Peculiarly, the actual time frame in the story was also invalid. However, these issues are beside the point. For, he did not seek to win an argument around a specific historical case but rather dominate the argument as to the best possible responses to the terrorism problem. Trump's aim was to raise the appeal of an historical eventuality for a contemporary policy issue and audience. For the latter, the U.S. colonial history or the factual matrix of the story itself did not matter much either. Nor did Trump let historical facts get in the way of a good story since he was building a 'latent meaning' that would resonate with the audience. The main premise behind the 'pig-blooded bullet' story was to expand the war on terror to the cultural/religious terrain, where one particular (religious) identity could be singled out in order to demarcate and augment in-group solidarity through engaging in a clash of civilizations. The upshot was to bond with the audience by establishing an alternative universe of meaning or rather a 'practical consciousness' through story-telling. In short, Trump's campaign rhetoric was mainly 'performative,' and consequently his words could not be subject to truth claims or falsity tests.<sup>25</sup> The Clinton's campaign was based on a politically correct set of soundbites or slogans deriving from the *truth* of the matter ('constatives,' 'descriptive fallacy'<sup>26</sup>) held to be subject to audience's scrutiny of claims. During the campaign, it was precisely this point that the liberal establishment and other counter discursive interventions failed to realize.<sup>27</sup>

## Cultural Factors

Who were the Trump supporters? It is important to note that while the oft-invoked 'white working class' backed Trump in certain (swing) states such as Ohio, a significant fraction of the middle and even upper-middle classes also voted for him. The average income of a Trump voter was \$72,000 compared to Hillary Clinton's \$61,000 (American average is \$56,000). Furthermore, there is evidence that high-income, medium-education white counties shifted to Trump in 2016.<sup>28</sup> That is, Trump's supporters were more varied than often assumed. It would therefore be useful to leave aside the 'infantile' view (mostly on the left) according to which voters would vote mainly in respect to economic incentives and those that do not are simply 'dupes' or 'hood blinked' simply by the powerful.

In their stead, it is better to couch the preferences in historical context. Under the influence of cultural globalization in the 1980s, changing values and social preferences (multiculturalism, LGBT, women's rights, abortion, black and His-

panic politics and so on) has come to define the main themes of political discourse. This has helped to make the politics of identity prevail over bread and butter politics, severing social ties or empathies outside of one's own groups. Growing in economic and cultural enclaves can increase unawareness or insensitivity towards the agendas and problems of out-groups. A 'boutique' type of multiculturalism in turn leads to the failure of multiculturalism or half-hearted acceptance of other identities in society, which undermines meaningful democratic participation and fragments civic culture. In addition to social identity, class-based and placed based identities can also lead people to interpret the world in such way that the electorate vote against their own interests as, for example, evinced in the case of Scott Walker in Wisconsin's recent political history.<sup>29</sup> The mainstream political agenda rarely reflect macro structural problems and local actors instead continue to spend their energy on culture wars. Take, for example, Hillary Clinton's political campaign slogans, which revolved around identity-related grievances of minorities, women, Hispanics and others. Her main campaign slogan ('stronger together') catered mostly for the excluded or minority groups, who were chiefly unaware of each other's struggles or plight and, hence, hardly constituted an alternative political force. Consequently, the subsequent divisive politics of values left the political space wide open for Trump to enter and exploit for political gain.

**Although sometimes dubbed 'dark money' or 'income defense' by 'civil oligarchy,' the repercussions of the intervention by such groups goes beyond the economic-ideological realm. The main struggle is to shift the economic and public policy to the (radical) right**

## Structural Factors

Their singular importance notwithstanding, it is necessary to couch the personal and cultural factors in their wider structural contexts. Four important political and economic changes that shaped the contemporary U.S. politics also played a role in the rise of Trump. The first structural dynamic involved economic and socio-structural conditions rooted in local and global financial and political turmoil. Particularly since 2008, the decline of industrial forces, factory closures, job losses and the indifference of the Democratic Party to big tribulations in the 'Rust Belt' states (e.g., Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Virginia) made it easier for Trump to step in and further dismantle the blue-collar constituency from the Democratic Party. The manufacturing sector (e.g., steel, coal, textiles and furniture) automation, globalization, trade agreements (NAFTA and TPP) and importantly the pessimism of an increasing

## Rather than spreading Democratic Party's political message, this mainstream anti-Trump campaign opened up billions of dollars' worth of free advertising for Trump

ing process, opening up the way for new primaries and an affluent professional class to take charge. In particular, the proliferation of primaries affected the party decision making mechanisms, since it tipped the political balance within the party away from broad-based constituency and organized interests (e.g., labor unions) towards affluent-educated professionals. The way politics was done had changed (i.e., personal issues or concerns prevailed over class interests). The laborious and long-running pre-election marathon gradually shifted politics away from broad-based struggles and towards culture wars. So much so that for example 'new class democrats had little understanding of the fears felt by blue-collar and ethnic whites about race related issues.<sup>30</sup> Resentment of the liberal elite, place based-identities and the development of 'rural political consciousness' in particular contributed to the alienation and blame game among citizens rather than holding power to account.<sup>31</sup> It was in part these changes, which laid the groundwork for the departure of the white working class from the Democrats in the 2016 elections. White working-class votes were a key voting bloc for Trump, as 66 percent seems to have backed him.<sup>32</sup>

The third dynamic was a 2010 Supreme Court decision, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. The ruling (by 5 to 4) eliminated the existing limits on how much money can be spent by corporations or single individuals on elections campaigns. This ruling paved the way for rich mega-donors to wield and exert unseen political power in U.S. politics through funding/organizing election campaigns that allowed *unlimited* financial backing of certain politicians (mainly through Political Action Committees). This critical and controversial decision not only helped to sideline party politics, it also enabled ultra-rich actors to commit themselves to shifting politics to the far right in line with their own wishes and beliefs. Hence, the political drama and political party rhetoric were no longer dominated by the interests and expectations of the organized groups but by educated white-collar single-issue politics. In other words, the process of appointing a presidential candidate shifted away from being a war of position involving organized classes and other political elites.

### ***The Media-Industrial Complex***

The fourth and arguably most potent factor behind Trump's success was the complex interaction between the effects of media and economic elites on U.S.

number of workers seem to have played an important role in Trump's rise.

Secondly, the end of the 1960s saw a revolutionary change in U.S. politics following the McGovern-Fraser commission's decision that altered Democrats' presidential nominat-

politics, what is here called the media-industrial complex. When U.S. President Eisenhower first used the term military-industrial complex in his farewell speech in 1961, he wanted to raise the alarm about the dangerously close association between military industries and members of Congress whose districts depended on these industries.

The term ‘media-industrial complex’ has analytical and normative implications. Analytically the term seeks to explore the inner workings of an emergent media-politics-money nexus. It also seeks to draw attention to some regressive ramifications for democratic politics. Although the relevance of ‘media’ and ‘industry’ is evidently clear, the term ‘complex’ needs some explaining. While the military-industrial complex lays emphasis primarily on the influence of a set of actors and straightforward connection between them, the emphasis in the media-industrial complex is on the *complex*. Unlike the military-industrial complex’s assumed-linear relationship and its politics, here the media-industrial complex springs from complexity theory to point to disproportionalities between actor and action, between cause and effect, between emergent structures and their unpredictable effects.<sup>33</sup> The present study also draws from theories of ‘economic elite domination’ and ‘biased pluralism’ to explain who influences U.S. public policy.<sup>34</sup> The upshot is to highlight the surprising power and success of a handful of self-organizing networks (here, certain economic elites) in producing enormous national and global political effects (Trump’s Presidency).

Who are these new economic elites? The growing emphasis by Washington’s liberal establishment on Russia’s efforts to sway 2016 elections often conceal from view another significant episode that involves new players and dynamics that continue to shift the Republican Party and U.S. politics to the right. These new players have had a considerable impact on U.S. politics and Trump’s political success. Drawing from extended party networks theory,<sup>35</sup> one can say that these new players are part of the Republican Party complex but independent of it, acting more like close-knit networks, systematic-organized groups ascending in U.S. politics in recent years with hugely attractive and massive financial resources at the service of would-be politicians.<sup>36</sup> Although sometimes dubbed ‘dark money’<sup>37</sup> or ‘income defense’ by ‘civil oligarchy,’<sup>38</sup> the repercussions of the intervention by such groups goes beyond the economic-ideological realm. The main struggle is to shift the economic and public policy to the (radical) right. The repertoire of such actors and dynamics has historically been quite wide; including influencing public policy, agenda-setting, opinion-shaping apparatus, financing *and* shaping political campaigns.<sup>39</sup> The activities of the aforementioned new actors include analyzing voting behavior, identifying patterns, voter interviews, flyers, digital and social media campaigns, cinematic documentation or traditional TV commercials. Well-known in the Republican Party universe, these new players are amongst the wealthiest donors, such as Ricketts, Mercer, Singer and Koch.

This analysis highlights two big actors: Robert and Rebekah Mercer and Charles and David Koch. As explored below in more detail, these two actors are involved in pulling U.S. politics to the right by funding and catering for the far right. These two ultra-rich, billionaire families use various platforms and mechanisms very effectively to achieve two main targets. First, they advance a radical political agenda with a view to undermine the previous (Democratic Party shaped) policies in such wide-ranging issues as tax reform, climate change, abortion rights, immigration and health reform. Second, they play vital roles in winning critical seats for the Republican Party in both chambers of the U.S. Congress. Not surprisingly, the Republican Party has held majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives since 2010. To be sure, the changing nature of U.S. politics does not just depend on financial or legal contexts. These new wealthy actors have their own political attitudes, plans and tools. It is therefore necessary to understand the context and mechanics, which this analysis refers to as the media-industrial complex.

### ***The Media Impact***

Although the scholarship on press-state relations or more broadly on media-politics nexus has evolved in many ways, assessing the impact of the media on public and policy makers remains on the frontlines of academic research.<sup>40</sup> Critical approaches explain how vested interests of the state and private sector (the market) play dominant roles in manufacturing consent. The mass media and news production become an influential/powerful ideological instrument of the dominant classes and are casted as a sociopolitical force.<sup>41</sup> However, the technological developments, including the internet and social media, have changed the way we think of the media's impact as well as speed and access to information.<sup>42</sup> To begin with, the Trump campaign ran on an extraordinary style in terms of its political message, campaign rallies and 'hybrid media strategy.' To many it was "the most unorthodox campaign in political history."<sup>43</sup> Unlike the Clinton campaign's formalism, strategy and high professionalism, the Trump campaign benefitted from being amateurish *and* authentic. As for the latter, for example, recent research found that his use of social media platforms gave him an edge and contributed to his astonishing success due to the use of 'authenticity markers' in communication such as exclamation marks, all-caps, name-calling and even insults indicated his 'sincerity, spontaneity and engagement.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in contrast to the Democratic Party's innovative use of digital media with a high number of staffers,<sup>45</sup> the Trump campaign was amateurish. Being amateurish, in turn, branded Trump as authentic and strengthened his image as doing a reliable instead of paid job, because 'politicians who come across as too professional might therefore seem calculated and cynical, while the amateur has the benefit of perhaps seeming clumsy and imperfect, but yet authentic.'<sup>46</sup>

Trump's success also has to do with the nature of the media influence. Despite the fact that all the mainstream platforms such as *CNN* and *New York*

*Times* stood against Trump and supported Clinton, his presidency could not be stopped. There are many sources, which made Trump's success more plausible: the use of both mainstream and alternative media outlets through what some scholars call 'hybrid media strategy.'<sup>47</sup> It is possible to think of Trump-media relations in two ways. The first is the indirect benefit the mainstream media platforms provided for Trump's campaign. That is, nearly all the liberal mainstream media organizations put anti-Trump discourse at the center of their coverage, giving him free media space and helping him. Rather than spreading Democratic Party's political message, this mainstream anti-Trump campaign opened up billions of dollars' worth of free advertising for Trump. Indeed, Trump enjoyed a \$2 billion worth political ad according to a study by MediaQuant.<sup>48</sup> This gave him a clear edge over his rivals given the distribution of campaign budgets (Bush \$90 million, Clinton \$30 million, Trump \$10 million).



**The political strategy of Bannon-Mercer collaboration was that of 'revolution.' As Bannon made clear, the Mercers laid the groundwork for the Trump revolution**

The use of alternative (far right) media support was another important component. Unremittingly politically incorrect, campaign messages were delivered to the public by popular local alternative media outlets, including a network of talk radio shows. Pointing to the importance of such alternative channels of communication, Sam Nunberg, a member of Trump's election campaign said "I listened to thousands of hours of talk radio, and he (Trump) was getting reports from me."<sup>49</sup> The incessant Clinton-bashing and anti-Washington content of such popular and local-media media sources made Trump's job much easier. Before the election, the radical right-wing internet news reporting by the likes of *The Drudge Report*, *Infowars*, *The Blaze* and *Breitbart* proved much more influential in agenda setting and opinion molding than some traditional outlets. Much to the consternation of the mainstream media, which suffers from shrinking staff and readership due to underfunding and paywalls, these alternative media outlets enjoyed unfettered readership in part by airing anti-elitist messages and anger at the establishment.<sup>50</sup> Such alternative local media sources become more vocal not only because of their challenge but also because they serve as news sources for the mainstream media and news producers.<sup>51</sup> For example, *The Drudge Report*, the media platform that kept on the agenda Clinton's illness during the campaign, was second to *MSN.com*, receiving 1.47 million visitors in July. It was through this kind of alternative media coverage that Hillary Clinton's 'weakness' became campaign material for Trump's team.

Another important source of media influence has been online propaganda. Conspiracy theories constitute an important streak of the latter. Online chan-

**Bannon-Mercer cooperation entertain a radically new perspective to media-politics which is not dominated by “punditry or opinion locked in an echo chamber” but with an Internet-based information-data processing approach whereby digital social media platforms function as the main line of attack**

nels put to use various conspiracy theories (e.g., ‘Clinton was a secret Muslim agent linked to the terrorist organizations through her close aide (Huma Abedin’) on alternative media sources which later move to the mainstream media and social media (44 percent of the U.S. citizens get their share of news from *Facebook*<sup>52</sup>). For instance, anti-Clinton news spread on *Facebook* and were read 213 million times. Consequently, the rise of U.S. right-wing radicalism owes more to these alternative websites than to Russia. While 200 Russian web pages

can reach out to 15 million Americans,<sup>53</sup> only *Breitbart* averages 14 million monthly visitors. It is difficult to comprehend the impact of these alternative radical online media such as *Breitbart* without understanding their backers.

### ***The Mercers***

Robert Mercer started as a highly intelligent and successful computer engineer at IBM in 1972 and conducted ground breaking research in language processing that can recognize speech. He later became a CEO of hedge fund Renaissance Technologies, known for its innovative use of algorithms in its deals on the financial markets. Today, Mercer is one of the biggest stakeholders of *Breitbart*, an online media platform for the alt-right, whose executive chairman was Steve Bannon.<sup>54</sup> *Breitbart* is the flagship of the Mercer-Bannon partnership that helped Trump win the White House through its ‘attack-and-destroy’ journalism. It has been fighting social liberals or ‘cultural Marxists’ for about a decade and has gone on to become the most watched political news source on *Facebook* and *Twitter* with 2 billion annual clicks. Robert Mercer’s political activism was more significant than his donations which stood at \$75 million lagging behind the Koch Brothers’ massive \$800 million. However, there were other more precious ideological and political instruments the Mercers provided for the Trump team (including such peerless instruments as *Breitbart* and Cambridge Analytica) helping to change the course of the elections. Conceiving Mercer’s struggle only in economic terms would, therefore, be erroneous. A more holistic view necessitates seeing the controversy as an ideological war as well.

Mercers’ political ideology is transmitted mostly through the resolute and ambitious team of his daughter, Rebekah Mercer. Rebekah Mercer put her entire political team at the service of Trump after briefly supporting Ted Cruz’s campaign. Her team reshaped the campaign rhetoric and strategies that in turn



Robert Mercer, one of the richest men in the U.S., and his daughter Rebekah put their entire political team, including Steve Bannon, at the service of Trump to win the election.

Getty Images Turkey / SYLVAIN GABOURY / PATRICK MCMULLAN

helped Trump win the 2016 election. The team included Steven K. Bannon, Michael Anton and Kelly Anne Conway who were committed to ‘wipe out’ the Washington establishment (or the ‘Washington Generals’ in Anton’s lexicon), *including* the Republican political elites. It was this very team that took over Trump’s campaign from August 2016 on and went on to fill the West Wing after the election.

Here, it is Steve Bannon who stands out. Bannon is a nationalist firebrand, who was Trump’s campaign manager and now his chief strategist. Sometimes dubbed as ‘America’s most dangerous political operative,’ Bannon is a Harvard graduate and ex-Goldman-Sachs banker, who was born into an Irish Catholic working class family, an outsider to the left and the right.<sup>55</sup> Ideologically, he is a culture warrior, the voice of alt-right movement and ‘white America.’ Most significantly, Bannon has been ‘*de-facto* political adviser’ to the Mercer family since 2012, urging the family to invest in *Breitbart* and make use of data-analysis for political purposes.<sup>56</sup>

The political strategy of Bannon-Mercer collaboration was that of ‘revolution.’ As Bannon made clear, the Mercers laid the groundwork for the Trump revolution. Irrefutably, when you look at donors during the past four years, they have had the single biggest impact of anybody, including the Kochs.<sup>57</sup> As for the instruments of said ‘revolution,’ *Breitbart* stands out. *Breitbart* is an online conservative news site that aims to reshape political coverage of Washington.



It served as part of a wider project to mold public opinion in line with the narrative and ideology of the alt-right movement. Bannon established 'Breitbart London' in London in 2014 just prior to UK's upcoming critical elections and his targets for the future included France and Germany, which, to him, constituted 'the next stops.' He claimed that 'we look at London and Texas as two fronts in our current cultural and political war.'<sup>58</sup> *Breitbart's* ambitions include carrying its project of 'culture war' on a global scale.

Another influential instrument of the media-industrial complex was Cambridge Analytica (CA), a data analytics company in which Mercer was believed to have a \$10 million stake and Bannon a seat on the board. CA aims to shape information traffic, most notably in elections, boasting that it has 'up to 5,000 data points on over 230 million American voters' through which they build 'custom target audience, then use this crucial information to engage, persuade, and motivate them to act.'<sup>59</sup> According to experts, the influence of CA comes from its ability 'to follow people around the web and then, via *Facebook*, target them with ads.'<sup>60</sup> Its real political purchase lies in its artificial intelligence capacities to track and detect all the usual and extraordinary emotional ups and downs of the people followed through their *Facebook* profiles or various social media accounts. One key objective in this type of psychological investigation is to generate political and economic campaign messages and slogans that are highly tailored to specific individuals. CA's predecessor, British communications strategist SCL, advised governments, particularly in their war on terror, in part by way of influence/change in mass behavior and beliefs.<sup>61</sup> According to Andy Wigmore, a close associate of the Trump team, the likes of CA proved vital in the Brexit referendum by convincing British public for the exit from the EU.<sup>62</sup> The profiles of the electorate ('bio-social' profiles) are derived from their physical, mental and social characteristics to predict and shape their emotional reactions. There was, hence, an extremely apt use of artificial intelligence at the service of Bannon-Mercer-Trump team, continuously learning and adapting to new conditions.

Trump's political message was therefore hardly accidental or an improvised, random blunder – a widely held belief on the left and the right. On the contrary, according to Wigmore, using artificial intelligence techniques enabled a 'word room,' which measured the target audience's reaction to words used by Trump in order to find out a set of key words reflecting the anxiety and fear of the public mood in relation to topical issues such as immigration.<sup>63</sup> These key words were then selected and adjusted to shore up the political narrative. At stake, however, was not just mechanical word programming but rather a sophisticated, techno-propaganda machine that had social media platforms instantly detecting people's emotional reactions to the political narratives just formed. Overall, CA was part of a growing trend that capitalizes on using personal data for political gains. The use of personal data for political campaigns

by perusing social media platforms to turn them into a form of political advertisement, also known as 'dark ads,' influenced the U.S. election and has now started to affect general elections in Europe.<sup>64</sup>

Another prong in the media-industrial complex was the Government Accountability Institute (GAI), co-founded by Bannon and funded by the Mercers with Rebekah Mercer as chairwoman. GAI aims "to investigate and expose...governmental corruption or malfeasance"<sup>65</sup> with a thorough effort to build fact-based indictments against targeted politicians. To reach out to a wider readership in the 2016 election process, GAI serviced its investigations to the mainstream media (in such popular programs as CBS' 60 Minutes, ABC News, Newsweek and so on). Notably, amongst its employees are talented data scientists who are tasked with gathering information by searching the 'dark-web' about the targeted people and institutions with the help of \$1.3 billion-worth 'supercomputers.' The flagship product of GAI was its president's book *Clinton Cash: The Untold Story of How Foreign Governments and Businesses made Bill and Hillary Rich*, a *New York Times* bestseller that hit the headlines of main mainstream liberal newspapers. It is worth noting this sophisticated propaganda machine made Trump's presidential bid much easier during the election process, in part because the book and other related GAI inputs helped shape the public perception about Clinton and Democrats. In Bannon's own expression, 'weaponizing' journalism and political narratives, all the previously available messages can be sidelined. In their stead, a refined counter-narrative, a techno-political weapon *par excellence* was formed with the help of modelling, algorithms and computer science. For the Bannon-Mercer teams, it has become possible to anticipate and mold public opinion, voter preferences/behavior by meticulously tracking the Twittersphere, Facebook or other social media platforms and processing information for political gain. Understanding and molding the psychology of masses on an individual base (an area of research notoriously difficult in social sciences) has finally arrived.

The Mercers' relentless efforts to sway the elections came to fruition with Trump's electoral victory and the subsequent domination of the West Wing. In this new digital war, voting is taken as a 'weapon' for manipulating cognitive-psychological set-up of ordinary people for controlling the mindset and preferences. It is a war based in part on the alternative news media premised mainly on the discourses of fear (refugees, immigration, terrorism and so on). Responding

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to such fears with carefully crafted political messages renders the audience docile and hostile to critical thinking. At stake is not simply political activism aimed at individuals; but rather the strategic goal of goading targeted societies toward the desired political outcomes. According to a survey conducted in pre-Brexit UK, a third of *Twitter* interactions were found to spread anti-EU ideas and sentiments by 'human-looking

bots.' It is also reported that in the U.S. elections, one in 5 bots of Russian origin worked for Trump. These bots are virtual thought-molding apparatuses manipulating debate on highly topical issues such as terrorism or immigration with trending-topics in Twittersphere or 'dark-ads' on *Facebook*.

Overall, the Mercer-Bannon partnership in politics is not one of a kind. For example, one notable precedent on conservative media-politics nexus is the late Roger Ailes, a long-time editor of Rupert Murdoch's *Fox News* channel. Amongst Roger Ailes's long list of successful past operations are swaying the presidential races of Nixon, Reagan and Bush in addition to raising *Fox News* share of viewers much above its counterparts like *CNN* and *MSNBC* in 10 years. Ailes' approach was to blur the lines between entertainment and news to entice the viewers with the 'attack-and-destroy' journalism.<sup>66</sup> Despite similarities with mainstream, conservative political universe and the editorial media, the Bannon-Mercer cooperation entertain a radically new perspective to media-politics which is not dominated by "punditry or opinion locked in an echo chamber"<sup>67</sup> but with an Internet-based information-data processing approach whereby digital social media platforms function as the main line of attack.

### ***The Koch Network***

Another constituent of the media-industrial complex is the network associated with the Koch Brothers. The Republican Party has long benefitted from a coterie of powerful grassroots and constituency organizing network enabled by the Koch brothers, who channeled financial resources to help elect preferred candidates in the elections. This network aims to move politics to the far right and has succeeded at a remarkable rate thanks in part to two billionaire-brothers Charles and David Koch. The Koch Brothers are the 4<sup>th</sup> richest family in the U.S. and Koch Industries generated \$115 billion in revenue, operating in petrochemicals and finance sectors with 70,000 employees. Through their vast army of activists and organized groups, they reportedly spent \$400 million in the 2012 elections and about \$800 million in 2016. Their main goal has been helping to elect Republicans to the House of Representatives, the Senate and



David Koch and his brother, members of the 4<sup>th</sup> richest family in the U.S. spent about \$800 million in the 2016 elections helping to elect the Republican candidates so as to shape public policy.

AFP PHOTO /  
NICHOLAS KAMM

gubernatorial candidates so as to shape public policy in U.S. politics and prod it rightward. With their constituency mobilizing network, the Koch network played a pivotal role in the past seven years in helping the Republican party dominate both chambers of U.S. Congress. As one Koch-affiliated editor recently put it: “It took nearly a decade, but the Tea Party fervor and the army of conservative activists gave Republicans the House (2010), the Senate (2014), and the presidency (2016).”<sup>68</sup>

It is difficult to conceptualize the Koch Brothers’ political activism. Neither a social movement nor a third party, they defy easy compartmentalization. For example, they declined to support Trump or Clinton, as they refused to make a choice between the two.<sup>69</sup> As a philosophy of science wonk, Charles Koch was against Trump because he finds him ‘antithetical’ to the ‘guiding principles’ of the country; he claimed it would be ‘a monstrosity’ to raise tariffs to the levels Trump suggested.<sup>70</sup> What we know is that the Koch affiliated networks waged an ‘all-out war’ against Obama’s political agenda particularly since the 2012 elections. They have countered and sometimes upended the Democratic Party’s policy agendas. Their main purpose is to establish the hegemony of ultra-free-market capitalism by fighting government regulations in all the economic activities. Their activism mostly revolves around measures as the tax reform that benefit big corporations, reducing public spending, and breaking the influence of trade unions or their bargaining power. It was their father, Fred Koch, who first ignited the anti-establishment struggle with the

hate of communism in the 1970s. The struggle has now been transformed into a nation-wide bid for political hegemony conveniently helped by a club of ultra-rich entrepreneurs, who have been raising the stakes since 2003, exclusively gathering to collect funds for political activism every two years. These rich players have to give at least \$100,000 to attend a meeting. Groups including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce or the Christian Right are members of this broad initiative working together to raise donations to support races in favor of select candidates. To be sure, giving donations is not the only tool to sway elections or shape policy. The Koch network's varied political activism includes identifying voter profiles and analyzing voter behavior to promote their own select politicians and advance their interests and agenda.

It would be erroneous, however, to suggest that these efforts are only to promote the Koch family's self-interests or to support the political campaigns of the Republican candidates. The crux of this strange party-like coalition is to advance an alternative political and economic policy agenda. Due to its huge political influence, this peculiar political formation-sometimes referred to as 'Koch-Octopus' seems to have achieved its goal of conquering the Republican party from within.<sup>71</sup> This achievement is due to a long-term strategy based on an intense political interaction at social, economic and political levels. Thanks to its active organizational skills and success at electing its preferred candidates, the Koch network now form the habitus of the Republican Party and are a vast political force to reckon with no matter who runs the White House. Their difference is that they provide both 'legitimacy and ideological ammunition' to 'bring conservative agenda from the margins to the mainstream.'<sup>72</sup> It has been this economic and political activism by the Koch network, which paved the way for Trump's electoral victory and shaped U.S. politics much after the elections.

It should be also noted that there is a chasm between Trump and the Koch brothers. The Koch brothers did not support Trump in the elections (their preferred candidate was Marco Rubio) and Trump also wrestled with their sponsored-candidates. Cleavages and a growing distance notwithstanding, it is necessary to focus on the outcome of their relationship, the Trump Presidency. Trump's victory could hardly be possible without the Koch brothers' decade long grassroots efforts, institutional groundwork (CATO, LIBRE and especially AFP) and organized party activists. The Koch network opened an ideological-political space for the dissemination of Trump's controversial radical message. In particular, Americans for Prosperity (AFP) worked hard in the election period to mold public opinion. The AFP has 700 salaried employees, 300,000 volunteer activists, and an enormous budget of \$150 million. Together, they have mobilized voters in 35 states and helped elect Republican representatives, senators and governors, who depend on this vast network for reelection. It is through these activities that U.S. politics has tilted towards libertarian, ultra-free market and far right agendas that the Koch brothers were lionizing for years. To grasp

their influence, it suffices to remember how the swing states of Florida, North Carolina and Wisconsin witnessed the immense activism of Koch-connected organization, who worked to convince the undecided voters in favor of the Republican candidates. For example, the AFP is believed to have made 1 million phone calls in North Carolina, 120 thousand face-to-face interviews, while in Florida it knocked on a million voters' doors. In Democratic Party strongholds of Wisconsin and Michigan, where trade unions are particularly strong, the Koch-linked groups managed to break the mold and influence of these trade unions. It is necessary to note that Trump had no campaign experience and won in small margins in these states, where the Koch-connected groups made a difference.<sup>73</sup>

**In other words, the new political game does not just derive from leadership, institutional capacities or ideological state apparatuses. Rather, they spring from a complex web of economic and political relations, many of which are grounded in recent socio-economic transformations and turmoil**

The Koch network's efforts to reshape U.S. politics and prod it rightwards have been unpopular with the Republican Party base.<sup>74</sup> Trump, who seemed aware of this type of reaction from the party base, developed a campaign rhetoric that at times contradicted with certain Koch network policy proposals.<sup>75</sup> One such case went on after the election. The latent antagonism cracked open in a spectacular form in the recent showdown between the Koch network and Mercer-Bannon dominated Trump administration over the efforts to repeal and replace Obamacare. The Koch network did not support the initiative because Obamacare was not fully repealed and kept intact regulations that would send insurance costs spiking and federal subsidies rebranded as tax,<sup>76</sup> two hotspots for the economic elites. As such, the Koch network supported the opposition of the 28 Republican members of the far right Freedom Caucus to repeal and replace Obamacare. Having failed to garner the necessary 216 votes, a humiliating prospect for the newly elected President, the bill had to be withdrawn despite a Republican majority in the Congress. Many members of the House Representatives came under thinly veiled threats from the radical right groups such as Club for Growth, the Heritage Foundation and the Americans for Prosperity, which hinted that they would lose their jobs a year later.

The subsequent agreement on the reform bill in a new form sanctioned by the said groups makes it clear how powerful the Koch network has grown, able to force its way despite the Mercers affiliated Bannon's initial dismissive threats<sup>77</sup> and ensuing exchange with some members of the Freedom Caucus. The extremely tense exchange is worth mentioning here: while Bannon said "[g]uys,

## The partisan polarization and the continuing move of the Republican Party politicians toward the far right to the detriment of the general public persists as a worrying fiat of U.S. politics

revealed that Trump could hardly take for granted the support from the Republican Party itself for his policy agendas: they have to be endorsed by the Koch network. It should be also noted that despite the showdown the two stalwart conservative wings of far right eventually agreed upon repealing and replacing the Obamacare. This was due in part to the efforts by the people like Mike Pence, a Koch favorite in the administration, to make amends.

Overall point here is that both the Koch network and the Mercer-Bannon might need each other as in a marriage of convenience. The Koch Brothers have made significant inroads into and contributions to the new Trump administration. They seem to know well how the Mercer-Bannon alliance lacks institutional experience and wherewithal to run the country. Trump soon turned to the Kochs for help. Trump-Bannon also needed their networks to fill tens of thousands federal government jobs still vacant.<sup>79</sup> They need help in planning policy issues and agendas as well. To fix the problem, Trump has so far responded by ‘immediately outsourcing much of this work to experienced GOP officials, including key players in his emergent White House and in Congress’ who have been close to the Koch network, which ‘offers ideas and people to help Koch affiliated politicians shape the Trump administration and agendas.’<sup>80</sup> Among the names associated with the Koch network (in particular with its flagship institution AFP) are Vice President Mike Pence, White House Chief of Staff General Secretary Reince Priebus, the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Mike Pompeo and Speaker of the House of Representatives Paul Ryan.<sup>81</sup>

Consequently, in order to understand Trump’s electoral success, trials and tribulations of the chaotic months of his early Presidency it is necessary to grasp the political and economic activism of the Mercers and the Koch network. In other words, while the Mercer-Bannon provide Trump with ideology and political strategy, the Koch network deliver the much-needed structural (economic-legal) support. This is not to say the two will always bury the hatchet. The contrast between the Koch network’s structural approach to politics and the short-term, media-oriented data driven propaganda strategy approach of the Mercers is striking.<sup>82</sup> While the Koch Brothers’ got into a 30-year struggle

look. This is not a discussion. This is not a debate. You have no choice but to vote for this bill,” a member of the Freedom Caucus replied: “[y]ou know, the last time someone ordered me to something, I was 18 years old. And it was my daddy. And I didn’t listen to him, either.”<sup>78</sup> Hence, the Koch network dealt a major blow to the Trump-Bannon run administration. Their move re-

to have an enduring political clout; the Mercers only recently upped the ante in their political bid, mostly reflected in the success of Trump Presidency's. Hence, notwithstanding such a common cause, there is also a proclivity towards conflict between these two prominent economic elites starting from the so-called transition period. It is important to remember that the Koch brothers did not support Trump in the elections, while the Mercer family supported Trump with many tools including \$13.5 million in donations.

## Conclusion

This study has provided an analysis of a confluence of contexts and actors that made possible Trump's electoral victory and continue to shape U.S. politics. It has examined structural, cultural and personal dynamics behind Trump's victory and politics. In particular, it has identified the specific role played by new media platforms and economic entrepreneurs, referred here as the media-industrial complex. The latter is a key structure that animates particularly two sets of actors from the economic elite: Robert Mercer and the Koch Brothers. In the main, these two actors help to pull public policy agendas to the right and reshape U.S. politics to the detriment of the wider public. The two libertarian, pro-ultra-free market actors have had the ambition and wherewithal to increasingly shift U.S. politics to the radical right using innovative instruments. As argued in the study, these instruments were put to use with the aim of molding public opinion and, ultimately, shifting policy agendas.

What is the bottom-line in all these novel political actors, processes and mechanisms? What do they signify for the future of democracy? To be sure, they work to imperil democratic polity and society. From Cleon of Athens to McCarthy of Wisconsin, the world experienced many times before how democracy might fall defenseless against demagoguery. What is new this time though is that the novel, digital-technological instruments as well as organized army of activists facilitate an unprecedented circulation and consumption of radical ideologies and political message, which can wreck informed debate. To emphasize the departure of meaning and loss of contemplation, Walter Benjamin once compared the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The same goes for the editorial media *Twitter*/social media comparison.

In contemporary politics, virulent racism, chauvinism, demagoguery or the façade of populism cannot be just a feature of ideology or personal/group traits. They are also the effects of technological-economic interventions in politics. In other words, the new political game does not just derive from leadership, institutional capacities or ideological state apparatuses. Rather, they spring from a complex web of economic and political relations, many of which are grounded in recent socio-economic transformations and turmoil. This definition of pol-



itics begins revealing its most likely outcome: a new political subject who is content living in a world of ‘alternative facts’ or conspiracy theories (of the alt-right) and under the hegemony of certain economic elites. The effects on people become particularly visible and vocal in different forms of racism due in part to many alternative digital social media platforms as well as traditional editorial media including radical right-wing radio talk shows.

In this milieu, voting remains the most powerful way to combat the stormy waves of the persistent neoliberal economic crises. As politics turns into war, economic elites take voting as a weapon. Modern demagogues such as Bannon, an otherwise industrious student of the basic needs and fears of this new political subject, knows only too well that the dull liberal political repertoire is of no use in this struggle. As voters in advanced electoral democracies become increasingly visceral, democracies turn into a theater of culture wars rather than a platform for solutions to such grave problems as economic social inequality. It is vital to note that most of the early policy changes or reform proposals are unpopular with the Democratic *and* Republican Party bases<sup>83</sup> as evinced in the Mercer-Koch backed early attempts to repeal and replace Obamacare (that garnered only 17 percent approval according to the Quinnipiac University Poll in June 2017) or the recent proposed tax cuts for the rich. Consequently, the partisan polarization and the continuing move of the Republican Party politicians toward the far right to the detriment of the general public persists as a worrying fiat of U.S. politics.

In all, as has been highlighted, it is not the collective will of average citizens (‘median-voter’) or organized interest groups or *vita activa* but a handful of economic elites that increasingly shape U.S. politics and help to make ‘authoritarian voters.’ Forming hegemony in U.S. government, therefore, includes not just an ideology (racism/rage/frenzy) or party, but certain actors with vested interests and certain mechanisms associated with the media-industrial complex. The ruling economic elites are in power not necessarily because they amass trust, but because they advance instruments to harvest fear so as to shape public policy. ■

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