

NATIONAL REVIEW

Trump and Sanders: True Populists?

Judging by their current positions and their records, neither Trump nor Sanders is much of a populist.

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There's been a lot of talk about populism in this year's presidential campaign. In particular, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are, we are told, populist candidates. But what exactly does populist mean in this context, with these candidates?

To some, populism means trusting the people. But does either Trump or Sanders really trust people to make decisions in their own lives? From the type of health insurance you have to the types of products you buy, both Sanders and Trump believe that government should make decisions for you. They may pay a lot of lip service to the common sense of common people, but when it comes right down to it, both candidates apparently think people are too stupid to make their own choices.

Maybe, then, being a populist means siding with average people against powerful special interests? That would make sense. But when Trump champions bailouts of the big banks, or abuses eminent domain to try to seize property from an elderly widow in order to expand one of his casinos, that's not exactly being the champion of the common man. After all, isn't Vera Coking exactly the sort of person a true populist should be siding with?

Even Trump's protectionist trade policies are simply choosing winners and losers from among big corporations. And his rabid defense of ethanol mandates puts him clearly on the side of special interests. Archer Daniels Midland is hardly the common man.

Meanwhile, Sanders walks in lockstep with powerful special interests like the public-employee unions. Asked to choose, for example, between the children of average Americans and the teachers unions, Bernie unhesitatingly chooses the unions. Nor should we forget that the government that Sanders wants to empower is perhaps the biggest special interest of all.

So if neither Trump nor Sanders really trusts or defends the people, what is it that makes them populists? To some extent, it is simply telling people what they want to hear. They are finding a mob, jumping in front of it, and calling that leadership.

William Jennings Bryan, the quintessential populist icon, once explained his support for the free-silver movement by saying, "The people of Nebraska are for free silver, so I am for free silver. I will look up the arguments later."

But there is a reason why the Founding Fathers rejected such rank majoritarianism, and why they founded this country as a republic and not a pure democracy. They understood that our rights are not dependent on transient political majorities but are inherent in all men, bestowed by nature and nature's God, as the Declaration puts it. Neither Trump nor Sanders seems to understand this.

Perhaps that is why neither Trump nor Sanders refers often to the Constitution or to constitutionalism. They reject the Founders' vision of a government of limited, carefully enumerated powers. Instead, both candidates seek to mobilize political passions in search of enemies — the banks, “the establishment,” foreigners, or the “billionaire class” — in order to impose their vision of society on others. Their goal is not to leave us alone to run our own lives, but rather to run our lives for us.

This is a belief, not in the individual wisdom, initiative, and responsibility of common people, but in big government. It says that people cannot take care of themselves but must be cared for by someone much smarter than they are — someone like Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump.

This is faux populism. It is not a belief in “the people,” but a message of contempt for them.

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