



Donald Trump speaks to attendees at an Arizona for Trump rally at Desert Diamond Arena in Glendale, Arizona, on Aug. 23 during his presidential campaign. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)



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Once upon a time, Democrats were the party of populism. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in accepting his renomination for the presidency in 1936, famously [said of the wealthy and business interests](#), "Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me — and I welcome their hatred."

Now, populist ire is directed not at the moneyed interests but at the cultural and political establishment and Donald Trump has replaced FDR as populism's avatar.

Trump's win was the culmination of a variety of factors, but the most obvious cause was his ability to present himself as the anti-politician in a country that hates politicians. First, he conquered GOP politicians in the primaries, and now he has won a general election against an experienced politician for the second time.

In Europe, populist anger focuses on Brussels and its European Union bureaucrats. In America, the target is more diverse, including cultural and political elites. In both cases, resentment from working-class voters is directed at those who enforce rules and norms that run roughshod over those voter's values.

When challenged, the establishment explains that they know better. Whether discussing curricula at the local school board, or dealing with local government agents enforcing business or zoning codes when a Latina mom has a side job running a beauty salon in her home, or all of us being told our economy is the "envy of the world" when we do not feel there is much to envy when we go to the grocery store or fill up the car, each of these cases are moments when populist anger is born.

Trump is a genius at exploiting populism.

His ability to connect via television, his always confident speaking style (even when what he is saying is gibberish), his raised fist after the assassination attempt, all [evidence that genius](#).

When political uncertainty combines with a pervasive sense that one's economic status is declining, you have a recipe for an electorate that will warm to a strongman.

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On Sept. 28, Trump attended the Alabama-Georgia football game. One of the first laws of campaigns is *never* send a candidate to a sporting event: They will get booed. When he was introduced to the crowd, they [erupted in applause](#). Whatever you think of what he does with it, he has a gift for connecting with voters.

Successful campaigns are not just about the candidate. They need to identify unaffiliated or independent voters who might support them. Back in 2017, [political scientist Lee Drutman](#) looked at a robust set of data to categorize voters based not only on whether they were liberal or conservative, but whether those ideological inclinations manifested themselves in social attitudes or economic ones.

Drutman identified four quadrants of voters:

- Those who identify as liberal on both economic and cultural issues are the base of the Democratic Party.
- Those who are conservative on both sets of issues are the base of the GOP.
- Those who are conservative on economic issues but liberal on social ones — the Michael Bloombergs of the world — represent the smallest quadrant, at 3.8% of the electorate.
- Those who were more socially conservative but economically liberal constitute 28.9% of the electorate. Drutman called them the "populist quadrant." I call them "Pope Francis voters."

Why is the populist quadrant so large? Globalization has created enormous uncertainty in the politics of many nations, but when that uncertainty combines with a pervasive sense that one's economic status is declining, you have a recipe for an electorate that will warm to a strongman.

As Alec McGillis reported [in The New York Times](#), the people in those medium-sized cities that dot the Midwest know that their kids may not do as well as they did. What is more, they look out their window and see that the evaporation of opportunity has consumed their entire town. Deeply seated ideas about the American dream began

to die. Of course they warmed to someone who promises to make America great again.

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What is more, voters in this quadrant are tired of being told they are on the wrong side of history, that they are rubes, that if they can't reconcile their dismal economic prospects with evidence of rising GDP, it is their fault. When they raise the perfectly respectable concern that maybe we shouldn't be so quick to trash traditional norms regarding sexuality, they are called bigots. They wonder why anyone would accuse them of having "white privilege," when they certainly don't feel privileged.

Day in and day out, they saw that it wasn't just the U.S. Catholic bishops who labeled abortion the "preeminent priority" in the election. Democrats led with the issue, without acknowledging the moral qualms even many pro-choice people have about the issue.

All of this created the groundswell that made Trump's victory possible. A candidate who connects with people identified some of the deep grievances in the electorate.

[As I noted Wednesday](#), the church's immediate task now is to stand up in defense of migrants. Let's put our religious liberty up against Trump's scapegoating. I doubt there will be "mass deportations," just as he never really built the wall last time, but he will claim he is doing it and people will be scared. We are commanded by the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels and magisterial teaching to welcome the stranger, and we must be tireless in that effort.

There is a deeper challenge for the church, one I have mentioned before but that seems even more difficult in the wake of Tuesday's results. Trump's campaign was built on marshaling grievance and now, with his victory, the other half of the country feels aggrieved.

How can the church preach its Gospel of grace and gratitude in a culture defined by grievance?

This story appears in the [Election 2024](#) and [Trump's Second Term](#) feature series.