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Cover Page Footnote

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Closing the Drain: Interest Groups and the Populist President

During the 2016 American presidential campaign, Republican Party candidate Donald Trump said he would “drain the swamp” if elected. “We’re going to end government corruption and we’re going to drain the swamp in Washington, D.C.,”¹ he told supporters at a rally in Colorado. When speaking about the “swamp,” Trump was partly referring to the relationships between interest groups and politicians, which he argued are detrimental to America. An interest group uses direct lobbying and campaign donations, among other tools, to advance the shared policy objectives of its membership. During the election, he warned that if the Democratic nominee, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were elected, “special interests will remain firmly in control.”² Trump had earlier made similar remarks about former Governor of Florida Jeb Bush while vying against him for the Republican nomination.³ This is not new rhetoric. Populists frequently contend that their opponents are beholden to powerful “insider” forces.

In a television interview, Trump criticized political action committees (PACs) that were sponsoring ads attacking him, saying that they controlled his rivals with their campaign contributions. He also condemned interest groups that were promoting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), arguing that TPP “is another disaster done and pushed by special interests who want to rape our country, just a continuing rape of our country.”⁴ Trump singled out the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for criticism in this case. He said that it was “totally controlled by the special interest groups.”⁵

Once in the White House, President Trump introduced few policies aimed at regulating lobbyists, those powerful representatives of special interest groups in Washington. He issued an order restricting his appointees from lobbying their agencies within five years after leaving government service. He also banned them from working with and for foreign governments for

life.⁶ While these steps were implemented, there is no record of Trump asking Congress to stop its members and staffers from seeking employment with interest groups after leaving Capitol Hill, which he promised to do on the campaign trail. Moreover, no legislation has been submitted to clarify who needs to comply with the Lobbying Disclosure Act, another commitment he made during 2016. During the election, President Trump pledged to prevent registered foreign lobbyists from raising money during campaigns, but nothing has come to fruition on this subject. In addition, the Trump administration hired approximately one hundred former lobbyists to supervise their one-time employers. As one *New York Times* reporter noted, “If draining the swamp means less lobbying, that isn’t happening. Since Election Day, the number of new lobbyist registrations is up compared with a year ago.”⁷

It is evident that President Trump has failed to fulfill or even attempted to fulfill his commitment to weaken the influence of interest groups. During the election, he was meeting with “industry leaders, including a veteran lobbyist and the chief executive of a major airline trade organization,”⁸ the hypocrisy of which frequently got lost in the circus-like news coverage the election race inspired. Furthermore, President-elect Trump received millions of dollars from corporations to fund his inaugural. “Raising nearly twice as much as Barack Obama’s 2009 record of \$53 million, Donald Trump pulled in inaugural funds from, among others, corporations and wealthy individuals.”⁹ These activities are now under judicial scrutiny in Washington DC, where prosecutors allege that the Trump International Hotel reaped huge profits from grossly inflated fees it charged the Presidential Inaugural Committee to rent event space during his swearing-in ceremony.¹⁰ According to *The Atlantic*, “There is not a campaign promise that Donald Trump has failed to honor more flagrantly than his oft repeated pledge to ‘drain the

swamp' in Washington, D.C. He has violated the letter of his promise and trampled all over its spirit.”¹¹

During his presidency, lobbyists have connected with members of Trump’s cabinet on numerous occasions. In 2017, for example, Energy Secretary Rick Perry met with one of the most important coal executives in the United States, Robert Murray. At this confab, Murray presented Secretary Perry with a memo outlining his industry’s political objectives. After reading the document, Perry replied, “I think we can help you with this.”¹² Making good on this promise, the Department of Energy later proposed regulatory changes that allowed power plants to increase coal stockpiles. In October 2017, furthermore, *The Washington Post* reported that three of Trump’s cabinet secretaries—Wilbur Ross, Alexander Acosta, and Rick Perry—attended a meeting of the National Mining Association (NMA), an organization that represents resource extraction companies.¹³

The president himself has conferred in private with interest groups at the White House. After meeting with the NRA in the wake of a school shooting, Trump “abandoned his promise to work for gun control measures opposed by the National Rifle Association, bowing to the gun group and embracing its agenda of armed teachers and incremental improvements to the background check system.”¹⁴ He has also sat down with credit union lobbyists to discuss banking regulations.¹⁵ In addition, one of the president’s fundraisers, who coordinated his activities with representatives from the United Arab Emirates, met with Trump in a bid to have Secretary of State Rex Tillerson fired for refusing to back UAE efforts to weaken Qatar.¹⁶ Energy executives have also visited the president to discuss public policy.¹⁷

Interest groups are taking additional steps to impact Trump’s decisions, such as hosting conferences at his properties, which include hotels and resorts. “While it’s impossible to draw a

direct link between where groups seeking to influence the Trump administration hold their events and what they received, one thing is certain: Never before in American history have such groups had the opportunity to hold an event at a property owned by the president, paying for event space, rooms and food with money that ultimately heads into the president's pockets."¹⁸ The NMA experimented with this lobbying tactic in 2017 when it sponsored a conference at Trump's hotel in Washington, DC.

Why has Trump allowed interactions between his administration and interest groups to flourish after promising to stop them? To answer this question, this article examines his relationship with the coal industry. During the 2016 election, Trump frequently held rallies with coal miners around Appalachia. At these events, he praised their hard work and contributions to America, promising to save their jobs and communities. Coal bosses also appeared at these assemblies and applauded his proposals. Since Trump made the energy sector a central part of his campaign, it is useful to focus on his interactions with King Coal when trying to understand why a populist leader would foster relationships with interest groups while at the same time promising to dismantle them. In the United States, the coal industry is frequently referred to as "King Coal" to denote its immense political and economic influence. For this study, Trump's dealings with coal bosses provide valuable material for an examination of his behavior.

While presidents may want to keep lobbyists around for a variety of reasons, Trump's actions highlight a unique factor to consider. Specifically, this study contends that his populist style requires a political context where he can connect with the "common man," foster a crisis, and display nationalism. While not every interest group helps him construct the populist environment he needs, King Coal does, which helps explain why Trump has coordinated his activities with this influential organization. First, in terms of building relationships with the

“common man,” the coal industry provides the president access to miners, who symbolize the hard-working spirit of America. Spending time in mining communities helps Trump establish the belief that he is a legitimate representative of “real Americans.” Second, in the twenty-first century, coal country has faced significant problems, such as rising unemployment and drug addiction, partly due to the coal sector’s declining fortunes. Exploiting the challenges facing miners today, the president can construct a crisis narrative in order to stoke economic fear in other parts of America. Third, working with King Coal helps Trump spotlight another feature of his populist style: patriotism. The president connects his “America First” agenda with the energy industry’s fight against global environmentalism, a strategy that seeks to arouse nationalism across the United States. Promoting this populist political context is essential for Trump as he seeks to gain power.

When researching populism, authors must eventually confront the problems associated with defining such a slippery concept. According to John Judis, “When political scientists write about populism, they often begin by trying to define it, as if it were a scientific term like entropy or photosynthesis. That’s a mistake.”¹⁹ Even though populism can be “elusive and protean,” as Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner put it,²⁰ scholars have attempted to provide some clarity. Alistair Hennessy, for instance, says that populism represents the mobilization of politically unaffiliated industrial workers, at least in the case of Latin America.²¹ Richard Hofstadter also pursues an economic perspective in his definition, arguing that these types of movements are driven by the financial anxieties of “entrepreneurial radicals.”²² While the Jacksonian variety also includes economic empowerment, it adds anti-elitism and the political mobilization of the “common man.”

For other scholars, social ethics are an essential ingredient to consider. For example, Donald MacRae says populism is an ideology that worships the sacred values of rural communities.²³ In Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser's conceptualization, populism is a "thin-centered ideology" that pits the will of the "pure people" against the "corrupt elite."²⁴ Most definitions, regardless of their focal points, highlight the tensions that exist between elites and non-elites. Essentially, the "people" are always portrayed as virtuous soldiers engaged in a struggle against politicians, financiers, or "foreigners."²⁵

While these viewpoints contribute to our understanding, the present study favors the strategic perspective. This definition contends that populism is a political algorithm used by elites to gain power. This "approach emphasizes . . . the emergence of a strong and charismatic figure, who concentrates power and maintains a direct connection with the masses."²⁶ In Trump's case, his brand of populism is based on building relationships with social actors that help him win elections. While other populists might display different characteristics, Trump's politics follow a vote-maximizing logic. This definition adds a rational-choice dimension to the populist persona. As Anthony Downs states, "every government seeks to maximize political support. We further assume that the government exists in a democratic society where periodic elections are held, that its primary goal is reelection, and that election is the goal of those parties now out of power."²⁷ Trump's collaboration with King Coal follows Downs' prediction that politicians will pursue alliances that help them win office.

Trump uses the slogan "drain the swamp" in a variety of ways. This phrase is deployed to demonstrate how he promotes government deregulation, fights political corruption, resists the "deep state," and challenges "establishment" politicians. However, this study utilizes James Strock's definition to understand what is meant by the "swamp": "Draining the swamp, or

transforming the culture in Washington, means deconstructing the Special Interest State.”²⁸ Before examining why Trump’s siphoning efforts have lagged, the next section focuses on scholarly interpretations of interest group-executive branch relations. It concludes by highlighting areas that need clarification when it comes to explaining how and why populist presidents interact with organized interests.

Interest Group Politics and the White House

Trump is not alone when it comes to criticizing interest groups. In addition to thousands of politicians, many academics have also disparaged these political actors. In *The Semisovereign People*, for instance, E.E. Schattschneider shows that the most powerful groups in Washington are funded by corporations. Countering those who heap praise on these organizations—that is, the pluralists²⁹—he contends that the “flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.”³⁰ In his study, Michael Parenti identifies how corporate lobbyists co-opt government officials in order to obtain favorable treatment.³¹ William Hudson reinforces these interpretations, saying that, “people who control large business corporations dominate our political processes and largely control the public policy outcomes.”³² In *Demosclerosis*, Jonathan Rauch supports these findings by identifying how pressure groups clog the arteries of government.³³

As they seek to explain interest group-executive branch relations, scholars usually discuss access to the White House. While it is typical to hear stories about lobbyists working with Congress, they also have a long history of contacting presidents. Only during the modern presidency, however, have these interactions intensified and become more structured. As Joseph Pika notes, Franklin Roosevelt assigned the task of organizing meetings with pressure groups to

his closest aides.³⁴ Later in the century, the White House created the Office of Public Liaison (OPL) to manage negotiations with organized interests.³⁵

In their research, Kay Schlozman and John Tierney identify different access channels used by groups seeking the president's attention, such as White House staff and presidential advisory boards.³⁶ Adding to this list, Jeffrey Berry notes that lobbyists build connections with bureaucrats in order to participate in the executive branch's policymaking process.³⁷ Neil Cole also highlights different paths that groups pursue as they attempt to build relationships with the Oval Office. For example, they exploit the organizational structures of the institutional presidency, what he calls the "formal" conduits, such as the Cabinet. Or they utilize access points that exist outside established institutions, such as family and friends of the president.³⁸ AT&T's hiring of Trump's one-time personal attorney, Michael Cohen, fits this "informal" category. According to Heath Brown, furthermore, lobbyists attempt to contact new presidents even before they take office, using presidential transitions as "their first opportunity to curry favor and seek influence with the newly elected administration."³⁹

Political scientists have also studied different factors that encourage interest group-presidency collaboration. In his study, Pika notes how the decline of political parties since the 1960s has contributed to increasing interactions between lobbyists and the Oval Office.⁴⁰ Martha Kumar and Michael Grossman support this thesis, saying that in recent years, presidents have used lobbyists to get messages to Congress and the public, rather than relying on parties.⁴¹ Moreover, scholars recognize that chief executives seek alliances with these organizations in order to gain electoral and governing benefits. For instance, presidents ask pressure groups to mobilize their members during campaigns and elections. The White House also urges groups to call or write letters to elected representatives on behalf of the president's agenda. As Thomas

Holyoke highlights, furthermore, the executive branch outsources “work to interest groups and private companies,” which acts as an incentive for lobbyists to maintain contact with the Oval Office.⁴²

When it comes to group influence, another topic of conversation, some scholars say that lobbyists control the president. According to Benjamin Ginsberg, Walter Mebane, and Martin Shefter, “Elites have been able to secure power without building a strong popular base by fashioning institutional bastions for themselves in government agencies.”⁴³ For example, liberal groups have placed lobbyists in the regulatory state to defend ideological priorities, and Republican-affiliated organizations have entrenched themselves in the national security apparatus for the same purpose. This structural feature prevents presidents from successfully implementing their agendas. With a case study of the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), Patrick Haney and Walt Vanderbush also support the notion that interest groups influence presidential decisions. During the Reagan presidency, the CANF frequently proposed items for his administration to consider, and they even implemented the White House’s policies related to Cuba.⁴⁴ In *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt identify how Jewish groups have impacted America’s national security strategies.⁴⁵ Regarding domestic policy, Simon Haeder and Susan Yackee contend that groups use the Office of Management and Budget’s regulatory review process “as a point of entry for lobbying and, under certain circumstances, are able to influence public policy outputs.”⁴⁶

Not all scholars agree that interest groups have power over the Oval Office. Specifically, Jeffrey Berry and Kent Portney maintain that presidents can restrict lobbyists’ access to government agencies, which curbs their influence. This happened when Vice President Dan Quayle supervised the Council on Competitiveness.⁴⁷ As Holyoke argues, “the president and his

immediate staff often keep interest groups at arm's length. Instead of being able to acquire face time with senior administrative staff to press their own cases, lobbyists are largely granted access only when they are needed to build support for the president's policy agenda in Congress or with the public."⁴⁸ From another perspective, Mark Peterson discusses how President Reagan was able to weaken liberal organizations by cutting programs that benefited them.⁴⁹

While these arguments are important to consider, one issue has not received much attention in the literature: how *populist* politicians interact with organized interests. Existing studies usually focus on non-populist chief executives. Graham Wilson, however, does recognize that the "styles" of individual presidents can shape their alliances with lobbyists;⁵⁰ but his research does not delve into populism. More analysis is needed when it comes to this subject. For instance, the access channels used to contact populist presidents must be identified. Also, whether lobbyists can influence these types of leaders is a subject that demands attention.

Another vital question to consider is why a populist would want to work with interest groups. For this brand of politician, aligning with pressure groups is supposedly forbidden. These organizations represent the "enemies" of the "people." They created the "mess" that needs to be cleaned up. As the following parts of this article demonstrate, however, Trump has not followed this dictum. This is an important finding not only because it highlights an essential feature of his brand of populism, but it also adds to our knowledge of how interest groups navigate a populist environment that is founded on hostility to their existence. According to this study, lobbyists have nothing to fear from Trump as long as they help satisfy his political needs. To explore this aspect of his presidency, the next section focuses on what motivates his relationship with King Coal.

The Political Needs of a Populist President

When academics and other commentators write about President Trump, they often mention his populist tendencies.⁵¹ As J. Eric Oliver and Wendy Rahn state, “Exploiting a large ‘representation gap,’ Donald Trump has enjoyed a ripe opportunity to make a strong populist claim to the presidency. Trump capitalized on this by employing a rhetoric that is distinctive in its simplicity, anti-elitism, and high degree of collectivist language.”⁵² In *The New American Revolution*, Kayleigh McEnany writes, “As President Donald Trump continues on the journey of his first term, I know he does so with an eye for the people, not the politicians.”⁵³ On the campaign trail, candidate Trump frequently displayed his populist streak when he said that he loved the “poorly educated” and that he represented the “silent majority.”

While some question his populist credentials, especially considering his wealthy upbringing,⁵⁴ Trump has consistently promoted this image of himself. For this study, the president’s leadership style is important to contemplate as it attempts to explain his relationship with interest groups, especially the coal lobby. This research maintains that he has formed an alliance with King Coal in order to construct an environment that makes populism a viable political strategy. As a result of their interactions, he has been able to amplify three vital aspects of his preferred context. First, the president is afforded regular opportunities to associate with the “common man.” This allows him to market the notion that he is fighting for “real Americans” against the Washington establishment. Second, due to this coalition, Trump is given the opportunity to peddle a crisis narrative. Since the mining sector is experiencing declining fortunes, the president can use its troubles to build a paradigm of economic fear and then sell it to the American people. Third, aligning with King Coal provides the White House with an opening to display patriotism. Trump can frame the coal industry’s struggle against global

environmental regulations in terms of putting “America First.” The following sections detail how Trump’s alignment with the coal lobby helps construct and magnify these aspects of his favored political milieu.

The “Common Man’s” President

Fareed Zakaria says that populists “share a suspicion of and hostility towards elites, mainstream politics, and established institutions.”⁵⁵ Mudde and Kaltwasser contend that this concept is based on the idea of “a democratic way of life built through popular engagement in politics.”⁵⁶ Populism represents, moreover, a “political strategy employed by a specific type of leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers.”⁵⁷ As Jan-Werner Muller states, “Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people.”⁵⁸ Populists essentially require a direct link with the “real people.” This allows them to maintain an image of political legitimacy among their working-class supporters. For a billionaire like President Trump, significant resources must be dedicated to this type of activity.

Donald Trump consistently seeks “companionship” with “real Americans,” which is highlighted by his interactions with coal miners. Since they bolster his populist image, the president puts considerable effort into cultivating relationships with this group. During the 2016 campaign, he made trips to several states with significant coal operations, including Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia. His Twitter account featured pictures of his meetings with miners.⁵⁹ According to Trump, coal miners are the epitome of America’s “greatness.” At an election rally in West Virginia, he said its residents “make America great.”⁶⁰ During another stop, he put on a miner’s hard hat to show his harmony with them. In Pennsylvania, he held up a sign that said “Trump Digs Coal.” At an event in Abingdon, Virginia, supporters adorned with overalls typically worn by miners provided his backdrop.

Some of them held signs saying “Friends of Coal.” As Clifford Krauss and Michael Corkery state, “Donald J. Trump made coal a centerpiece of his campaign, holding rousing rallies with miners in hard hats, who he said had been neglected under eight years of the Obama administration.”⁶¹

Throughout the election, many miners believed the billionaire candidate was their industry’s savior. Declan Walsh reported that, “For these men, this season’s presidential campaign boils down to a single choice. ‘I’m for Trump,’ said Dwayne Riston, 27, his face smeared in dust. ‘Way I see it, if he wins, we might at least stand a chance of surviving.’”⁶² These coal miners also felt that Americans were looking at them like they were dumb hillbillies. Trump offered a different vibe, which was transmitted when he said that, “miners should ‘get ready, because you are going to be working your asses off!’”⁶³ As one voter stated after attending a Trump event, “‘He’s the one that cares about us. He’s the only one out of everybody—Democrat or Republican—that really cares about us.’”⁶⁴

Once in the White House, President Trump made certain to showcase his new allies. When he signed a bill permitting coal waste to be dumped into streams, miners surrounded him. He also invited them to attend another event where he announced an executive order removing Obama-era regulations governing the energy sector. Singling out these workers for attention, he said,

“I want to acknowledge the truly amazing people behind me on this stage: our incredible coal miners. We love our coal miners. Great people. Over the past two years, I’ve spent time with the miners all over America. They told me about the struggles they’ve endured. I actually, in one case, I went to a group of miners in West Virginia—you remember, Shelley—and I said, how about this: Why don’t we get together, we’ll go to another place, and you’ll get another job; you won’t mine anymore. Do you like that idea? They said, no, we don’t like that idea—we love to mine, that’s what we want to do. I said, if that’s what you want to do, that’s what you’re going to do.”⁶⁵

These social interactions with blue-collar workers paid off during the 2016 election. Many coal miners, in addition to other working-class voters, showed their appreciation by casting ballots for Trump, helping him win West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Even today, when much of the nation has soured on his presidency, Trump's approval rating is over 50 percent in West Virginia and Kentucky.⁶⁶ Many working-class Americans feel a connection with him. His cultivation of friendship with coal miners has helped cement this aspect of his populist persona. With the assistance of the coal sector, Trump has successfully constructed one aspect of the political environment that populists need: a connection with the "common man."

Crisis and Fear

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Kline writes about Latin American generals who manipulated emergency situations to gain power in the 1970s.⁶⁷ Military leaders are not alone when it comes to using this tactic. Populists also display this behavior by "reintroducing conflict into politics and fostering the mobilization of excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo."⁶⁸ Moreover, "Drawing upon anti-intellectualism and a sense of urgency, often largely created by the populists themselves, he will argue that the situation ('crisis') requires 'bold action' and 'common sense solutions.'⁶⁹ For Trump, stoking anxiety was central to his 2016 campaign. As Elaine May states, his "message resonated with millions of mostly white Americans whose fears have generated anger and resentment against strangers, minorities, and outsiders who, they wrongly assumed, threatened their security."⁷⁰

To create an atmosphere of uncertainty, populists deploy crisis narratives. This helps them shape and direct the public's trepidations in order to gain influence. For Trump, his speaking style adds to the power of his fear mongering. According to Arlie Hochschild, the president has a rhetorical rhythm that deeply affects his core supporters. She writes, his

“speeches—evoking dominance, bravado, clarity, national pride, and personal uplift—inspire an emotional transformation.”⁷¹ After observing one of his campaign rallies, she detected that many of his voters appeared to be in a “state of rapture.”⁷² When speaking to those who believe they are “strangers in their own land,” Trump has the ability to make them feel important and empowered.

To construct the second leg of his preferred political environment—crisis—Trump has relied on rhetoric crafted by the coal industry. He has mainly channeled the energy sector’s frustrations with President Obama’s environmental policies, such as the Clean Power Plan. This proposal, which was never enacted due to court challenges, encouraged power plants to use natural gas instead of coal. Another source of consternation for the industry was Obama’s order prohibiting the dumping of mining waste into streams, in addition to his support for the Paris Climate Agreement. For coal executives, these policies were perceived to be an existential threat. As a result, they asked judges to strike down the president’s regulations and petitioned members of Congress to protect their extraction activities.

Coal operators also added a crisis narrative to support their struggle, one that employed the “war on coal” slogan. Former CEO of Massey Energy Don Blankenship has been credited with popularizing this phrase. Adam Raymond notes that he “was instrumental in crafting the bogus idea that President Obama was waging a ‘war on coal.’”⁷³ The Friends of Coal, an organization created by the West Virginia Coal Association, adopted this slogan and used it in ads attacking the president’s policies. Robert Murray has also repeated this propaganda on numerous occasions. Luke Popovich, who once worked for the NMA, took the hyperbole to a new level when he compared Obama’s regulations to the four horsemen of the apocalypse.⁷⁴

The coal industry contrived additional language to describe Obama's energy reforms. Bill Raney, head of the West Virginia Coal Association, said in 2013 that the "administration will impose bureaucratic mandates with no regard for the people and communities of West Virginia that depend on coal and the inexpensive energy it creates for their very existence and survival." "Make no mistake," he continued, "this administration's new climate initiative will negatively impact West Virginia coal jobs, result in higher electric bills for consumers and businesses and lead to America's economic disarmament via U.S. manufacturing jobs relocating to other nations."⁷⁵ In a *Charleston Gazette-Mail* editorial, Raney framed the president's actions this way: "Since taking office in January 2009, the Obama administration has relentlessly pursued its anti-coal, anti-business agenda, strangling the American economy with radical policies and rules. Even in the best of economic times, these policies would hamstring American business. Combined with the current worldwide economic challenges, the EPA's war against business threatens millions of jobs and the very foundation of our economy."⁷⁶ Moreover, in reference to Obama's stream rule, the NMA said it was "a win for bureaucracy and extreme environmental groups and a loss for everyday Americans."⁷⁷

To help feed insecurity in America, Trump borrowed this rhetoric almost verbatim. Essentially, the coal industry handed the president a prefabricated set of arguments, including catchphrases and statistics. Trump's Twitter account has evidence of this appropriation. As part of a message he posted in 2014, Trump argued that, "Obama's war on coal is killing American jobs, making us more energy dependent on our enemies & creating a great business disadvantage."⁷⁸ Another tweet during that year's midterm election said West Virginians needed to elect someone who would end the "war on coal."⁷⁹ On the campaign trail in 2016, candidate

Trump continued to use this type of language, stating in Pittsburgh that, “we will end the war on coal and the war on miners.”⁸⁰

Trump has employed other crisis rhetoric, which also matches King Coal’s, to describe the effects of Obama’s policies on miners. At the signing ceremony mentioned in the previous section, he noted that his predecessor tried to destroy coal communities. “The miners told me about the attacks on their jobs and their livelihoods. They told me about the efforts to shut down their mines, their communities, and their very way of life.”⁸¹ He also said during the 2016 campaign that if Hillary Clinton were to win, coal mining would be abolished.

Using an off-the-rack crisis narrative made Trump’s political life easier. To begin, it has saved him time and money, especially since coal executives did all the test marketing for the “war on coal” slogan before he adopted it. Moreover, this phrase was useful in getting voters to the polls. As Steve Bannon (the former head of Breitbart News and White House senior advisor during the first months of Trump’s presidency) once noted, “Fear is a good thing. Fear is going to lead you to take action.”⁸² Raising anxiety levels among coal miners and working-class Americans certainly helped Trump win their votes, with 71 percent of white men and 61 percent of white women with no college degree casting ballots for him.⁸³ From a governing perspective, there are advantages to promoting fear in society, too. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt argue that during an emergency, “Citizens become more likely to tolerate, and even endorse, authoritarian measures when they fear for their security.”⁸⁴ If populists can create a sense of uncertainty and unease among the population, it is easier for them to achieve their political objectives. Trump has most certainly used this tactic to his advantage during his presidency.

This study recognizes that coal communities are suffering. An Appalachian Regional Commission report shows that coal production declined by 45 percent between 2005 and 2015.

For those same years, there was a 27 percent drop in coal employment, mainly in Central Appalachia. Poverty rates have also increased as good-paying occupations have failed to materialize to replace vanishing coal jobs.⁸⁵ In addition, the opioid crisis has led to rising mortality rates across the region. Therefore, coal miners are correct when portraying their situation in dire terms. What this research focuses on, however, is the manner in which Trump has used their strife to construct his preferred political environment, one where fear is ever-present. Harmonizing his rhetoric with the coal lobby's narratives has buttressed the president as he seeks to convince the rest of the nation that they, too, should be afraid.

Nationalism

The promotion of nationalism is another characteristic of populism. When the populist Hugo Chavez was in power, he consistently railed against the United States for interfering in Venezuela's political process. He felt like a victim of American "imperialism." In the case of Brexit, populists like Nigel Farage argued that the European Union (EU) eroded Britain's sovereignty and its national identity. For these types of leaders, they also link a sense of nationalism with a hatred of elites. "Populists . . . often argue that the elite is not just ignoring the interests of the people; rather, they are even working against the interests of the country."⁸⁶ "In the United States, a country in which some citizens are fascinated with conspiracy theories, many right-wing populists are convinced that elites . . . are working to establish a 'new world government,' which would put the United States under UN control."⁸⁷

According to Jarrel de Matas, "Trump embodies an extreme liberal nationalist type; one who feels it necessary to reclaim something that is apparently lost. His rhetoric is symptomatic of a return to the appeal of nationalism."⁸⁸ In his book *Crippled America*, Trump displays this aspect of his leadership style. He writes, "I know how lucky I am. The day I was born I had

already won the greatest lottery on Earth. I was born in the United States of America.”⁸⁹ To show his patriotism, Trump once installed an extremely large American flag at his Mar-a-Lago residence. When people appear to be “unpatriotic,” furthermore, he criticizes them. In the case of NFL players who refuse to stand for the national anthem, he demands that they be fired. He uses these situations to create a sense of crisis regarding African American patriotism to maintain anger among his white supporters. In addition, he has promoted the idea of having an annual military parade to help instill Americans with a sense of pride in their country.

When it comes to foreign affairs, the president has many targets while showcasing his nationalism. For example, Trump says globalization caused jobs losses in America’s manufacturing sector. Also, he claims that countries around the world are taking advantage of the US by dumping their products into our markets. To confront these practices, he removed the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and initiated a renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). He also placed tariffs on numerous consumer goods imported from China, Mexico, Canada, and the EU.

Working with the coal lobby helps Trump put nationalism in the spotlight. The Paris Agreement, or Paris Climate Accord, is an example of how the president coordinates with the mining sector to construct a nationalistic narrative. The Paris Accord, negotiated by President Obama, seeks to limit global temperature changes. When Trump signed an order removing the US from the pact, he said that, “I can put no other consideration before the wellbeing of American citizens. The Paris Climate Accord is simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit of other countries, leaving American workers—who I love—and taxpayers to absorb the cost in terms of lost jobs, lower wages, shuttered factories, and vastly diminished economic production.”⁹⁰ “I

was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris,” he told those gathered at the ceremony.⁹¹ Trump argued, furthermore, that the deal would disadvantage the US while allowing countries like China and India to continue polluting. He outlined the effects this agreement would have on coal mining when justifying his decision, contending that foreign countries would be able to dig more coal than the United States under the pact, which would result in job losses in our mining industry. Moreover, he said, “The Paris Agreement handicaps the United States economy in order to win praise from the very foreign capitals and global activists that have long sought to gain wealth at our country’s expense. They don’t put America first. I do, and I always will.”⁹²

When it comes to coal executives, they are in sync with the president. They also want to put “America first,” and the Paris Climate Accord is a good example of their alignment with the White House. Specifically, most of the coal operators in the United States view this agreement as a threat to their profits. Even though a few members of the National Mining Association sought a compromise that would have allowed the US to remain in the pact, Murray Energy and nineteen others voted at an NMA gathering to encourage Trump to leave it.⁹³ The West Virginia Coal Association called the accord “just another nail in the coffin” of the power industry.⁹⁴

Some in the coal sector have framed their objections to the plan in nationalistic terms. Popovich said, for instance, that the agreement would allow other countries to cheat and the US would be “the only ‘good kid in the class.’”⁹⁵ When the Kentucky Coal Association’s Tyler White thanked Trump for his decision, he stated that this move put “America first” and would help the country achieve “energy dominance.”⁹⁶ Once referred to as “energy independence,” White’s statement used Trump’s preferred phrase: “energy dominance.” For the president, America needs to liberate itself from foreign energy suppliers that might be able to hold the US

“hostage.” He has identified OPEC as a global organization that harms America’s sovereignty. Extracting more coal is part of his plan to make the US energy dominant and less dependent on foreigners, which explains why King Coal is on board with the president’s policies.

Trump and several coal bosses also agree when it comes to global warming. Many within the coal industry, such as Murray Energy and Peabody Energy, have denied that climate change is real, and President Trump has echoed this sentiment numerous times. Trump even adds a nationalistic angle when discussing this topic. He argues that foreign governments, especially China, have created a global warming “hoax” in order to weaken the United States. The Chinese, he claims, want US manufacturing to be less competitive in order to make their own products more attractive on the international market.

Trump’s displays of nationalism have served him well among his supporters. Many blue-collar workers who have been displaced by job losses in recent decades point the finger at globalization. For them, it is time to put America first instead of sending US jobs to other countries. Aligning with the coal industry against the forces of cosmopolitanism has helped Trump convince many voters that he is a true patriot. This constitutes a third feature of the political environment that he relies on to build power.

Assessing and Influencing a Populist President

According to the needs-based model of interest group-presidency collaboration, which dovetails with the framework used in this study, lobbyists need presidents and presidents need lobbyists. A quid pro quo mentality motivates their interactions. For example, to run their departments successfully, Cabinet secretaries require information, which they often times obtain from lobbyists. In return for providing data and research, interest groups get assistance with understanding and implementing agency regulations. While this is a useful model to study, one

presidential prerequisite is missing when it comes to explaining why populist leaders want to work with pressure groups. Since populism emerges during unique periods in history, usually those experiencing social and economic upheaval, populist politicians need to sustain those conditions that enabled their rise to power, hoping this will help them remain politically relevant. To accomplish this feat, they require the assistance of different actors in the political system. Trump has used Cabinet officials, White House staff, and others to construct the necessary context required for his populist politics. Moreover, as this research shows, he has synchronized his actions with interest groups in order to build and maintain his favored environment. Therefore, the socially constructed political setting is a necessity that should be added to the list of presidential needs when examining interest group-presidency relations, at least when talking about populist presidents.

Populist and non-populist presidents share a common set of aspirations: they want to win office and govern successfully. Both types of politicians reach out to interest groups to satisfy these needs. Populist leaders—at least in the case of Trump—use pressure groups to help build a specific context that enables them to achieve electoral and governing victories. For Trump, he requires contact with the “common man,” opportunities to foster a crisis, and chances to display nationalism. King Coal assists in the construction of this environment, which is why he has not “drained the swamp.” While non-populists most certainly encounter the “common man,” foster crises, and show nationalism from time to time, they do not require these ingredients in order to win office or to govern effectively. For Trump and populists like him, these elements are vital.

A populist leader will not necessarily avoid an organization that is unable to assist in the construction of his or her political stage. In the case of Trump, he has established ties with a

wide variety of interest groups, including those that are not in the business of creating crisis events, displaying nationalism, or providing opportunities to connect with the “common man.”

A significant part of this research has focused on the indirect nature of Trump’s alliance with the coal lobby, such as the coordination of his rhetoric with King Coal’s. It has not explored what some consider to be the “traditional” interest group-executive branch relationship, that is, direct lobbying. Trump does have this type of interaction with coal operators. In the first year of his presidency, their lobbyists navigated different access channels to contact the president. For example, industry executives utilized formal conduits to gain entry into the White House’s decision-making process, attending meetings with Trump’s Cabinet secretaries. They also talked privately with the president himself. The coal lobby, moreover, met with Trump’s first Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) director, Scott Pruitt, to discuss the Paris Climate Accord. Moreover, the president’s current EPA head, Andrew Wheeler, is a former coal lobbyist himself, which places the industry in a favorable position when it comes to accessing the administration.

Coal operators have also influenced the president’s policy decisions, another aspect of the “traditional” interest group-presidency relationship. The removal of America from the Paris Accord, the dismantling of the Clean Power Plan, and the repeal of Obama’s stream rule were all implemented by the president after lobbying by coal executives. Furthermore, the industry was given a boost when the president opened public lands to mining. Currently, the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) is moving to relax rules that restrict the amount of dust miners are exposed to on the job, which coal operators favor. During his time at the EPA, Pruitt sought to alter regulations associated with the storage of coal ash, another policy promoted by King Coal.

Contrary to what might have been expected, especially considering Trump's "drain-the-swamp" rhetoric, pressure groups have not been checked by his administration. Lobbyists have not been kept out of the White House, and they have received much of what they wanted legislatively, at least in the case of King Coal. As long as they help construct and maintain Trump's preferred populist context, organized interests have nothing to fear from his presidency.

Based on the model presented in this study, political observers should expect fresh "swamp" activity if Trump wins the 2020 presidential election. Coal executives, in addition to other lobbyists connected with the president, can anticipate additional policy victories if he returns to the White House. As for the coal miners themselves, they can look forward to Trump's visits to their communities as he seeks to construct props for his populist political drama. For the general public, it should brace itself for nationalistic diatribes against "foreigners" and "disloyal" Americans who dare challenge his vision for the country. We should also watch for the next "crisis" that Trump attempts to exploit to further his far-right agenda.

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