“Touching Bottom: The Many Meanings of ‘Trump’s Base’”

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Abstract

To explain the hyper-nationalist rhetoric and illiberal policies of President Donald Trump, some intellectuals and journalists have employed the architectural metaphor of a Trump base within the electorate. Allegedly, Trump either is trying to satisfy a substantial number of non-elites in the United States (whose their deep-seeded illiberal predispositions ironically impose political choices upon him) or he is, through fiery rhetoric, manipulating their consciousness and mobilizing an authoritarian following. This paper analyzes the implicit logic and assumptions of the language of a Trump base, considers the anti-democratic message embedded within this image of the demos, describes the aspects of ritualistic political participation that the image accurately articulates, and proposes supplementing it with an additional more dynamic and contingent understanding of citizens today.

This paper explores a contemporary vogue term: “Trump’s base.” The expression deserves attention because, as we have learned from philosophers of language and students of popular culture, our vocabulary is inseparable from action. Words, used singularly and in groups, inform the projects that we launch (as well as the projects that we resist). They label and define our perceptions and expectations. They even construct our desires and channel our thus emotions. To paraphrase the political theorist Anne Norton, language is “means of movement into the eternal world.” Moreover, “[T]his process is reciprocal: the self extends its will, its thoughts, itself, into the external world, and the world enters the innermost self through the medium of language.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The vogue expression “Trump’s base” merits particular attention because of its frequent use by politicians,[[2]](#footnote-2) journalists,[[3]](#footnote-3) and scholars[[4]](#footnote-4) who oppose President Trump’s anti-immigrant and de-regulatory policies, who are troubled by his frequent racist and misogynist quips, and who see the domestic and foreign policies of his administration (from his relentless attacks on affordable health care, to his appointments to the judicial branch, to his denigration of intelligence services) as posing a danger to America’s basic political arrangements (and, thereby, a danger to the workings of American society as a whole). It is embedded in a political battle over a presidential regime and over the legitimacy of a sitting president’s authority. And, as we shall see later in this paper, it is employed in other political battles as well.

Some might argue that although the expression appears in a number of contemporary political struggles, the treatment of “Trump’s base” as a significant concept, worthy of analysis, is making a mountain out of a molehill. After all, the phrase may be nothing more than a convenient and fashionable substitute for such boring, hackneyed phrases as “Trump’s voters,” “Trump’s followers,” “Trump’s supporters,” or “Trump’s constituencies.”

But, when examined closely, “Trump’s base” is not a politically innocuous synonym. It is, in fact, a metaphorically rich word that melds together notions of policy indifference, of crudity and moral indifference, of con artistry, and of a warlike approach to politics. Moreover, it seldom is used in isolation: it often appears alongside favorable historical narratives about the contributions of capitalist expansion to the material and moral well-being of the United States. As a result, the expression has ramifications that transcend its use as galvanizing slogan in current battles over the president’s authority. The word promotes fears of significant increases in the political power of economically marginalized individuals and groups (a future eventuality often labelled “populism” by its opponents), and it reinforces an ongoing aversion among US citizens to serious discussions about the costs and long-term viability of both corporate and global capitalism. Despite its use as a battle cry to mobilize promote rebellions against a particular ruler, “Trump’s base” has conservative overtones that merit attention from those in the United States who seek greater participation of everyday citizens in governance and a more egalitarian society.

Multiple Meaning of a Short Phrase

To better see the theoretical connotations of the phrase “Trump’s base,” let us first consider its most obvious empirical reference and then add some metaphorical meanings of “base” that the expression joins.

Voters for Trump

Today, many political commentators and actors use “Trump’s base” to designate a subset of American citizens who either voted for Donald Trump during the Republican party primaries and the presidential election of November of 2016, or who attended his raucous campaign rallies.[[5]](#footnote-5) The expression’s implicit claim is that without these voters, Trump would be far weaker president and his power over other politicians in Washington would crumble. This set of anonymous voters provide a key (and possibly the key) to his surprising rise to office and his extraordinary ability to bend others to his will.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This use of “base” is not surprising. According to the second, paperback edition of *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, “base” and its near-twin term, “basis,” mean “that on which something depends.”[[7]](#footnote-7) *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms* adds that words with similar meanings include “foundation” and “ground.”[[8]](#footnote-8) For example, the “basis of an argument” could be translated as the key premises or presumptions on which the persuasiveness of a claim rests. Unlike “basis,” “base” usually denotes something tangible (“the base of a pedestal,” for example, or a “fan base”), whereas “basis” usually refers to more abstract and intangible types of dependency (say, “interacting with someone on a friendly basis,” or “a basis for an agreement”). So, in term of standard language, “Trump’s base” seems, on first glance, a sensible, run-of-the-mill term with which to label his electoral supporters.

But the meanings of words—including recently coined terms—are never simple and straightforward. Over time, as words are applied to concrete conditions, their original meanings acquire new wrinkles and implications. The term becomes richer, because of the additional connotations and layers of meaning. It also because increasingly ambiguous, because of the mixture of multiple possible significations that each user might have in mind. The seemingly straightforward and common-sense term “base,” for example, carries a lot of metaphorical baggage beyond electoral support.

Base People

First of all, literary critics and social historians tell us that “base” has long been used as a term of derision by those who control the means of production in discussions of those they wish to control and exploit. The scholar Raymond Williams, for one, reminds us that “base” is one of a number of terms of contempt (including “mob,” “the multitude,” and “masses”) used by nervous property owners in England and its colonies when referring to members of the lower social orders (peasants, day laborers, hired hands, and so on). Since the sixteenth century, the term has continued to be used to label people of little means, of minimal formal education, and of rough manners.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This derogative use of “base” persists in the United States today. According to the 2016 *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, in America the meanings of “base” include “of low value and inferior quality,” “contemptable,” “ignoble,” “menial,” and “degrading.” Its synonyms are “low,” “vile,” “despicable,” and “wretched.”[[10]](#footnote-10) People who are called “base” allegedly lack lofty ambitions, noble values, and a sense of decorum, and have a propensity to act greedily, mean-spiritedly, and aggressively.

Because of these long-standing associations, the phrase “Trump’s base” means for many people far more than a set of voters who cast ballots for a Donald Trump or who participate at his rallies. The expression attributes below-average social status and an absence of integrity to those who support Trump. And the phrase emits an undemocratic aroma, because it conveys distrust, if not fear, of the downtrodden.[[11]](#footnote-11) The condescension is evident in the following excerpt from an essay written by *New York Times* opinion writer Timothy Egan: “Dogs, though known for their loyal, can take only so much one abusive human. Alas, the same cannot be said for the aging, white, rural and southern people who make up Trump’s base.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Because of this hybrid socio-ethical meaning, a large amount of social-science research on “Trump’s base” has been devoted to documenting the unusually low income-levels and the deficiencies in formal education of Trump supporters, as well as their below-average commitment to widely accepted values, such as frugality, humility, foresight, and forbearance.[[13]](#footnote-13) It seemed self-evident to many researchers that norms of civility are dangerously underdeveloped among those at the bottom of social order. Between 1945 and 1965, those fears motivated such scholarly notions as the “F-scale,” “authoritarian working-class,” and “right-wing populism,” which, not surprisingly, are enjoying a revival in empirical scholarship of “Trump’s base.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Fan Base

“Base” also has acquired two fairly fresh associations over the past century, presumably as a result of the growth of big business and corporate capitalism and the ongoing expansion of marketing into Americans’ personal lives. First, with the commodification of popular art (from movies to recorded music), there is the twentieth-century jargon term “fan base,” which refers to large numbers of anonymous consumers who eagerly buy and consume a celebrity’s mass-produced wares. But the consumption of popular art is not entirely un-orchestrated. Thanks to mass-marketing techniques, audiences are systematically exposed information about the artist and are organized by marketing agencies into fan clubs. They come to envy the celebrity for the affluent, carefree lifestyle that they imagine. Enthralled by the manufactured public image of unbounded power and freedom, members of the fan base increasingly wish not only to consume the celebrity’s artwork. They want to walk, dress, and otherwise resemble the artist, and, thereby, to partake vicariously in the fantasy of unlimited power.

A number discussants of “Trump’s base” seem to have the “fan base” notion in mind and insist that a sizeable number of voters blindly adore Trump. Often, users of the expression also accept the empirical validity of a quotation that the media has been attributed Trump, to the effect that if he killed a person in broad daylight, a huge number of his voters would still love him.[[15]](#footnote-15) When combined with the electoral referent of “Trump’s base,” the idea of a devoted “fan base” implies that past voters Trump are not autonomous, critical-thinking citizens, who in up-coming elections will judge President Trump according to his delivery of key campaign promises. His “base,” in other words, resembles not the vigilant “constituency” posited by nineteenth-century liberal thought, whose policy-based votes can serve as a source of democratic accountability. The base is viewed as a collection of manipulated fans who expect President Trump to perform the role of a mass-media celebrity—that is, to gratify his wishes on an enormous scale, and to act out the voters’ fantasies of self-indulgence without consequences. Once again, the notion is infused with anti-democratic suggestions; this time, about the limited rationality of people and their susceptibility to manipulation.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Customer Base

A second and overlapping use of “base” that is rooted in recent developments of Anglo-America capitalism is found in the phrase “customer base.” That term I part refers to the strategies by which a private company creates a body of loyal consumers. Allegedly, after a group of potential consumers, identified through market studies, is persuaded to purchase a good. Then, the consumers are persuaded, through the company’s marketing division, to remain true to that brand and to ignore the goods sold by rival producers.

Members of a “customer base” are not choosy, tight-fisted, independently reasoning, and well-informed browsers. Because their beliefs and desires are shaped by experts in advertising, they are not ready and able to judge facts objectively. Again, seemingly poor material for democracy.

But this leads to a surprising twist: the power relationship entailed by a “customer base” is ultimately not one-sided. The profit-seeking enterprise, once it has established the base, is subsequently constrained by the expectations cultivated within the target audience. Afraid of losing past purchasers, the company defers (sometimes indifferently, sometimes reluctantly) to the tastes now in the base. The company is trapped by its own creation, and incentives for product innovation are lost.

In light of the paradoxes inherent in the notion of a “customer base,” it follows that voters for Trump are not simply putty in his hands. True, their devotion to him is, in large part, an outcome of Trump’s formidable marketing skills, which he developed both as a television entertainer and as a real-estate magnate. He learned in his pre-political careers how to plant loyalty to his brand through over-the-top rhetorical techniques similar to those of a real-estate agent or used-car salesman. More than even typical popularly-elected politicians, he has mastered the arts of fear mongering, pie-in-the-sky promises, and the dismissal of challenging information.[[17]](#footnote-17)

However, having won the most exalted elected office in the land, he now continually needs to shore up his base through great-man theatrics, exaggerated promises, warnings about imminent dangers, and the constant manipulation of facts. If Trump does not engage in intense salesmanship, his base may shrink and his beltway power may dissipate. In fact, say some critics, “the base” is already starting to crumble, which creates angst for the President and compels him more than ever to perform as a blowhard.[[18]](#footnote-18) So, to keep his office, he must daily boast, upstage, sneer, ridicule, and in general act in a manner not befitting a president. His fiery language and so forth are not simply or primarily manifestations of a daffy personality. They are calculated acts undertaken to placate his customer base.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Military Bases

A final metaphorical application of “base” that seems relevant for illuminating the meaning of “Trump’s base” derives from modern warfare, which relies on standing armies, mechanized and digitalized weapons, and logistical planning. In today’s world of mass armies, automatic weapons, and expensive machinery, a “military base” is location for weapon storage and troop training. The purpose of the base is constant preparedness for deployment and battle, not for reconciliation and the negotiation of peace. Those who work and live on the base are taught to view political opponents as morally unprincipled foes, never to be distrusted. Outsiders are to be subjected to surveillance and—if deemed security risks and traitors to the commander-in-chief—disarmed, routed, or otherwise subdued by hook or crook.

According to many of those who write and speak about “Trump’s base,” a large segment of his voters approaches domestic politics as a form of warfare. Those with policy outlooks and opinions that deviate from those of President Trump are to be treated as enemies of the state. Critics, doubters, and dissenters are not viewed as partners in a national project—partners with whom one finds common ground, compromises, and cuts deals.

Wanting to defeat those who are different, members of “Trump’s base” purportedly are comfortable with the extinguishing of hard-won legal rights of non-European Americans, women, non-heterosexuals, and immigrants from non-Christian countries. Members of “the base” also are not averse to kicking Democratic and Republican critics of the President by any means possible, including lies and slander, threats to campaign donors, and endorsements intra-party opponents of the critics. At rallies, “the base” will scream with approval whenever Trump describes fantasies of locking up rival elected politicians; will join him in jeering about the alleged shortcomings of socially marginalized populations; and will delight during his ridicule of the news media. They inject a belligerent, combative, and intolerant spirit into America’s normally peaceful, moderate and non-polarized body politic.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Perhaps most troubling (say those who worry about “Trump’s base”), a large number of voters for President Trump believe that it is legitimate for the president to curtail freedoms of the press; to bypass legal due process; and to repeal constitutional checks and balances that limit the scope of presidential power. In effect, “the base” provides electoral support for—and gives a fig lead of democratic legitimacy to—a political strong man refuses to brook differences of opinion, who willfully tramples on freedoms of expression, and who cunningly undermines judicial review and legislative autonomy. Like the National Socialist Party in Germany during the 1930s, “Trump’s base” is a seed-plant for fascism.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Applied Political Meanings

Because of its multiple metaphorical allusions, the short expression “Trump’s base” is not politically neutral. It not only carries information about the electorate, but functions as a codeword for a complex political development. A first approximation of the full meaning of the expression is something like this:

Trump’s base (n): a sizeable portion of the American electorate—mainly from poorly educated backgrounds and from low-income households—that not only cast its ballots for President Trump in 2016, but that admires his boorish ways; that is hostile to conventional ethical norms of generosity and self-restraint; that views politics as a battlefield on which defeat and eliminate a variety of social enemies; and that rewards and is cultivated by a politician who is well-trained in the art of salesmanship. Because “Trump’s base” favors combative politics, lacks clearly articulated policy demands, and fanatically follows President Trump, it is theoretically and practically incompatible with the proper workings of a modern liberal democracy. It could transform the country into an authoritarian political order.

Combining a wide range of sociological, moral, causal, and prophetic claims, the term is pregnant with predictions and is emotionally resonant.

But, as students of narrative remind us, words are not used in linguistic vacuums. Their meanings are shaped by their interaction with surrounding terms and, in particular, by the stories in which they appear.[[22]](#footnote-22) Consequently, the meaning of the expression “Trump’s base” constantly changes according to the narrative about America with which it is paired. Consider, for instance, the following three ways “Trump’s base” has been bent and modified by members of different wings of America’s two major parties.

Liberal Centrists’ Wariness of “Trump’s Base”

Today, many established leaders of the Democratic Party today see themselves as “moderates” who distance themselves from formal ideologies and utopian dreams and who, instead, practice the politics of inclusiveness, consensus building, and compromise. In terms of social-policy preferences, they also can be labelled “liberal centrists” who seek to advance opportunities for individuals’ upward-mobility without favoring any particular class, race, or religious tradition. They want to create an America in which talent and achievement determine social status and material well-being; where rewards are distributed according to individual merit, not sex, race, or other inherited attributes.[[23]](#footnote-23)

According to liberal centrists, immediately after World War II the Democratic party went too far in helping the poor people who are criminals, slackers, or in some other way undeserving. Finding the party’s previous pro-union, New Deal, and Great Society programs of state intervention in and regulation of private market transactions old fashion, economically unnecessary, overly doctrinaire, and generally ineffective, these self-styled moderates have called for balance on questions of economic redistribution. The liberal centrists, therefore, have called for an end of deference to the policy agendas of organized labor, an end to the financing of expensive programs of social services and public goods through taxation, and an end to attempts to jump start the economy via Keynesian prime-pumping techniques, such as deficit spending. Instead, they favor a more business-friendly type of politics, in which the state creates conditions within which large, growing businesses can prosper; and these in turn will provide good jobs and good wages to the populous.

To determine which fiscal, labor, financial, and infrastructural conditions best help today’s entrepreneurs, liberal centrists have called from open and intimate friendships with leaders of large corporations. Moderates, to the consternation of organized labor, have agreed with big businesses’ arguments that it is wise to increase access to foreign markets. They also have reached the conclusion that public goods, such as water and health care, should be managed through private companies and market mechanisms. When the state must regulate market relations, it should do so with a very light touch, and mainly for the purpose of helping hitherto excluded populations, such as women and African Americans, have equal access to market opportunities.[[24]](#footnote-24)

According to the liberal centrists, the existence of “Trump’s base” is deeply troubling for many reasons. Members of “the base” have blindly supported Trump, even though his policies do not in fact help them deal with their dire economic circumstances. Under his prompting and not-so-subtle egging, “the base” has denounced the rights and entitlements of women, non-European immigrants, and racial minorities. Through street mobilizations, which provide cover for members of hate organizations, “Trump’s base” has injected an extraordinary amount of fear and intimidation into American politics. And its voting behavior has enabled a disorganized, impulsive, and ill-informed president, who did not win a majority of all votes cast in the 2016 election, to cast aspersions on other hard-working politicians and to use the presidential pulpit to undermine the legitimacy of the judicial branch and to roll back civil rights. In all these ways, “the base” has undermined an otherwise well-working political-economic order that allegedly for decades has promoted widespread affluence within the country and that has steadily allowed previously excluded social groups to share in the nation’s bounty.

In short, “Trump’s base” comprises “deplorable” voters (to quote Hilary Clinton) who are morally obtuse, economically ignorant, and politically destructive. However, there is reason to be hopeful, claim the liberal centrists. Thanks to the benefits of capitalism’s globalization, the social conditions that gave birth to this electoral phenomenon are disappearing.

According to liberal centrists, since the end of the Cold War, the national economy of the United States has enjoyed steady and rapid economic growth. The increased output of goods and services has led to higher standards of living for middle-income individuals, more interesting jobs, and the slow but sure disappearance of pockets of poverty. To allow modern big businesses to prosper, the government has supported the public education and job training of countless Americans. Granted, the post-War boom has suffered a couple of hic-ups, including the recession of 2008. But the normal pattern of growth is not about to end, thanks in large part to the government’s unfailing commitment to free trade. As the country’s private producers continue to trade with and pour investments into other regions of the world, both big and small US companies will prosper. They will sell their wares and services to growing markets. They will purchase raw and semi-finished materials cheaply. And to man the increasingly digital and automated businesses in the United States, they will seek, employ, and generously reward well-educated mental laborers (or what used to be called “white collar workers”).

Because of macro-historical trends, it is twilight for authoritarian-populist forces like “Trump’s base.” The newly unemployed older poor, who had labored in non-competitive rust-belt industries and who remain, brooding, in small-town settings, will inevitably die and will be replaced by younger millennials, who have been trained for jobs in high-tech industries. The slow-but-steady generational shift means that the days of the Trump Base are numbered. The moral spirit of the country will shift from a preoccupation with material well-being to an interest in non-material matters, such as environmental sustainability, the liberalization of marriage, and the promotion of gender diversity and equality.

In the meantime, the important thing, argue the liberal centrists, is not to let the existence of “Trump’s Base” frighten political leaders into launching radical political projects to redistribute wealth, regulate profit-making businesses, raise taxes, or launch expensive new welfare programs. Herculean efforts to remake currently expanding economy will destabilize a demonstrably successful system. The inevitable failure of such radical initiatives to reshape the economy will surely fuel an authoritarian backlash. The pressing task is more preservationist: (1) to maintain the current course of promoting the globalization of market relations and (2) to continue help economically marginalized populations, such as men, women, and trans of color, acquire stable jobs, purchase necessary goods (housing and food, for instance), and have equal access to widely enjoyed social services and amenities, such as education, public restrooms, and clean water.

Moral Conservatives’ Consternation about “Trump’s Base”

Even though liberal centrists passionately denounce “Trump’s base,” the are in their economic thinking conservative. They warn against altering what they perceive the nation’s currently upward economic drift. Other politicians who criticize Trump, however, think change is in order; and some of the heralds for change, ironically enough, have spoken through the Republican party.

Since the end of the Second World War, a self-declared conservative tradition has developed in the United States that combines a deep admiration for the affluence generated by a free-market economy with a fierce defense of moral self-discipline. According to moral conservatives, such as former Senators Barry Goldwater and Jeff Flake, public intellectuals William F. Buckley Irving Kristol, and *New York Time*s columnist David Brooks, the principles and norms of puritanism, such as frugality, sobriety, hard work, enterprise, and initiative, have a symbiotic relationship with laissez-faire economics.

Whereas the liberal centrists see the appearance of “Trump’s base” as a momentary and unfortunate blimp on an otherwise blissful path of American capitalist development on a global scale, the self-proclaimed moral conservatives see “Trump’s base as the byproduct of a long-standing decline in American morality. Allegedly, this decline was visible long before Donald Trump ever ran for office. He simply used his showmanship skills and con artistry to capture the attention of confused citizens.

Like the liberal centrists, the moral conservatives believe that global capitalism is a desirable next stage in the evolution of America’s economic order. Untapped markets in foreign countries are opportunities for entrepreneurs to invent, service, and sale their wares. Meanwhile, costs of production drop due to easier access to semi-finished goods and raw materials that can be produced more cheaply elsewhere. Both consumers and entrepreneurs enjoy a bountifulness of cheap goods and interesting jobs that autarchy alone could not generate.

For moral conservatives, what made America great in the distant past was the relative emptiness of the continent and the opportunity to labor on one’s own property. A variety of middle-classes values—self-discipline, moderation, prudence, and tenacity—emerged along the frontier from the running of a small farm, a small workshop, or a small store. The practice of managing one’s property and deciding daily what to do fostered proud, independent self-reliant personalities (what Flake in a recent book, critiquing Donald Trump, calls “men of the West”[[25]](#footnote-25)).

Moreover, the isolation of the homesteads and community outposts in North America nudged settlers into a particular set of social mores. Because no landed aristocracy or caste of governing families exists, the owners of small land-holdings, to survive in a harsh and unpredictable environment, spontaneously shared materials, exchanged favors, and attended meetings devoted to public matters. At these meetings, norms of reciprocity and mutual consent evolved between the proud individuals. Interestingly, claim moral conservatives, the lessons in sociability that the wilderness indirectly taught coincided with the moral precepts of Christianity. This confluence of the frontier’s demands and the settlers’ literary habits yielded a unique and healthy type of social and political existence.

However, that is not the end of the story, say the moral conservatives. Since the mid-twentieth century, career politicians in the United States, largely for reasons of private ambition, have pursued policies that made residents ever more dependent on the state. These policies, from farm subsidies to food stamps, have rewarded duplicity, lethargy, and indolence. The overly generous New Deal policies constituted a big step in the wrong direction, argue the moral conservatives. After World War II, that step was repeated by a variety of presidents from both parties: from Johnson’s Great Society initiatives, through George W. Bush’s “no child left behind” and Medicare D politics, to Barack Obama’s Affordable Care Act. As a result, growing numbers of citizens have become greedy, deferential, hungry for handouts, and search for political patrons. At the same time, a growing number of free-spending national legislators, seeking donors and grateful voters, have cast aside traditional moral principles and sought pork-barrel legislation that impedes healthy market dynamics and has created an unsupportable national debt. Crony capitalism and kleptocracy have come to define what was once a healthy universe of self-reliant and self-disciplined individuals.

The election of President Donald Trump, say the moral conservatives, is the logical outcome of the recent cascade of governmental patronage and aid. More than other candidates, he told groups of nervous citizens, uneasy about the constant market changes, technological innovations that, job obsolesce that capitalism necessarily entails, that if elected, he would ensure that their jobs would never disappear and that they would prosper dramatically and perpetually. In addition, he fed their envy and greed by insisting that unworthy inhabitants in the country had unfairly jumped ahead in the gravy line. After elected to office he continued making unfulfillable promises and accusations about criminals and cheaters that fuel righteous anger.

Although Trump’s demagogic tactics have exceeded Washington’s norm, it is not unprecedented (say moral conservatives). For decades, both Republican and Democratic leaders in Congress have acted similarly. Recall, for instance Newt Gingrich’s endless obstructionist activities during Bill Clinton’s presidency, or those Democratic liberals who purposefully torpedoed the George W. Bush presidency. Even misinforming the public and “fake news” are hardly new.[[26]](#footnote-26) Comity, honesty, and self-restraint have disappeared from political leadership, thanks to the ruthless winner-take-all reasoning at the highest levels of the government. Old-fashion Puritanism been replaced both by a willingness to dehumanize rivals in public—a mean-spirited habit that voters easily learn to imitate—and by a short-sighted, spendthrift policies, which will fuel impatience, greed, and envy in the electorate.

The long-term solution (say moral conservatives) is a sort of trickle-down strategy of ethical uplift. Of course, prospects for this do not look, at least at first. Social and political trends (including the steady expansion of social entitlements) are causing more and more voters to behave like “Trump’s base.” More voters than ever have become selfish and avaricious, and eagerly follow candidates who offer unrealizable promises of government economic support. Most professional politicians, because of the trends in the electorate and the cost of campaigning, have become salesmen to voters and servants of business interests, rather than principled leaders who address difficult questions about the painful tradeoffs and consequences of social policy.

Nonetheless, what can be done is for those few remaining morally upright politicians in America to behave nobly, bravely, and according to principles of self-reliance. The upright few can, like Old Testament prophet speak truth to power—that is, discuss candidly the harmful costs of America’s kleptocracy to both voters and fellow politicians. They can, both on the floor of Congress and in chats with neighbors, candidly and repeatedly point out the short-term and longer-term dangers of succumbing to the temptations of free hand-outs and living beyond one’s means. And they can urge voters and politicians to re-commit themselves to older, traditional middle-class norms and decline pork-barrel deals and favors to well-endowed lobbyists. History, the moral conservatives report, has shown the power of prophets to move multitudes. Similar examples of personal integrity can inspire citizens in the United States to rededicate themselves to old-fashion values and to reject corrupt ways of life.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Soft Socialists’ Dreams of Future Conversion of “Trump’s Base”

A final set of partisan politicians to be examined in this paper is the “soft socialists” (or what detractors of the group sometimes call “the extreme Left of the Democratic party” and what defenders sometimes call “the Democratic Socialists”).[[28]](#footnote-28) These are long-standing participants in the Democratic party, such as Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who disagree with both the laissez-faire outlook of the moral conservatives and with the business-friendly strategy of the liberal centrists.[[29]](#footnote-29) “Soft socialists” call instead for a “fair” form capitalism, in which (1) private entrepreneurship co-exists with strict regulations to protect non-business owners from unsavory actions by owners, (2) a minimal amount of material goods and services (paid through higher taxation on the wealthy) is given to each and every inhabitant of the country, which will not only insure their subsistence but will allow them to have equal opportunities to secure gainful work and be compensated according to their contributions at the workplace, and (3) the rights of unions are strengthened, so that employees can negotiate with employers as equals.

In addition, the soft socialists do not adopt the rosy view of economic history that liberal centrists embrace nor the nostalgic view of unregulated market that moral conservatives hold. According to soft socialists, since the collapse of communism in 1989, real incomes have declined from many Americans; the gap between the rich and the poor have increased; and the wealthiest sectors of the country have seen their holdings increase many times over. Nor does the future look promising. According to soft socialists, globalization as currently practiced as too unregulated with regard to labor, consumer, and environmental protections. The terms of trade need to be more responsive to the needs of people beyond business owners, say the soft socialists. Right now, global trade agreements produce considerably more harm (in the form income inequality, business closings, and consumer risks) than good.[[30]](#footnote-30)

The soft socialists, because of their view of America’s post-Cold War economy as on the skids, do not see the poorly educated and low-income voters for Trump as largely the inevitable and temporary collateral damage from the otherwise beneficial globalization of the American economy. In the opinion of soft socialists, many of the rust-belt communities and laid-off manual workers are victims of state and federal government’s allocation of limited tax dollars to convince private corporations to relocate operations to new digs; of inadequate public services (schools, potable water, medical services, public transportation, and affordable housing), and of profit-maximizing decisions by private companies that put investors’ dividends ahead of workers’ and their local communities’ needs.

Liberal centrists (say soft socialists) are so focused on the blessings of international trade and investing that they cannot see the obvious human costs and sufferings that flow from the unregulated and unrestrained growth of global capitalism. Trump, however, did tell audiences in the Midwest that their hard times were undeserved and should be addressed by the federal government. Hence, Trump did surprisingly well not only in small-town backwaters of America that are naturally old-fashion. He drew surprisingly numbers of voters in larger manufacturing cities in the Midwest, such as Cincinnati, Detroit, Flint, and Youngstown, that until 2016 had been Democratic strongholds for a half century.

According to soft socialists, left-behind workers did not vote for Trump (and, in some cases, simply stay home rather than cast a ballot) because they were spell-bound by his audacious behavior, by his unrealistic promises, or by his scapegoating of immigrants and non-European Americans. They were, on election day, comparative shoppers. Clinton had decided not to discuss working-class struggles on the campaign trail, quite possibly because of her upbeat liberal centrist outlook. Trump alone talked openly to voters about the pain for being left behind. So, a large number of voters in regions of the country either flipped parties on the election day, or they stayed home.[[31]](#footnote-31) To paraphrase the late political scientist V.O. Key, Jr., the voters were responding to the only choices that the major parties placed before them, and “if the people can choose only from among rascals, they are certain to choose a rascal.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Lacking support from residents of economically depressed regions, Clinton to many pundits’ surprised, lost a number of traditionally Blue states (perhaps most noticeably, Pennsylvania and Michigan). Her poor performance in those key states ultimately cost her victory in the electoral college. As a result, Trump came to power and, following his business instincts, pursued pro-business and non-regulatory policies that did not address the concerns of the poorly educated and low-income residents of Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and elsewhere.

From the perspective of the soft socialists, cracks in “Trump’s base” are already expanding. Many previous supporters from economically distressed regions of the country deserted the candidates he endorsed during the 2018 congressional elections.[[33]](#footnote-33) Previous Trump voters will continue to switch, but only if the alternatives that the Democratic party offers are better. Therefore, say the soft socialists, it is crucial to find a Democratic candidate for the presidency who will criticize liberal-centrist orthodoxy and who will call for a different type of capitalist order, in which have nots have enough resources and rights to enjoy equal opportunities to compete for well-paying jobs and in which all inhabitants of the country can exist on a dignified level.

The moving of the economy in less overtly pro-business, a more generous welfare, and an openly pro-union directions will face resistance not only from Republicans but from moderate Democrats. The type of economic platforms that would interest members of “Trump’s base” therefore requires a new power structure. There must be a patient reformation and extensive reconstruction of the existing political system: from new rules that prohibit the corporate funding of candidates to an end to partisan gerrymandering.

Soft socialists concede that given the scale of the proposed economic and political changes that they are contemplating can reasonably be labelled “revolutionary” and will be, in effect, a fresh New Deal. Republicans of all stripes call the soft socialist plans for regulating and supplementing the rights of business irresponsible and impractical. Liberal centrists within the Democratic party, including former President Obama, agree that the soft socialist agenda is “revolutionary” in a disruptive and negative sense. They therefore constantly ridicule the strategy and urge the party to remain on a cautious, pro-business road to presidential power.

What’s Next?

When one takes note of possible metaphorical allusions, the term “Trump’s base” becomes rich with meaning. The term conveys much more than the obvious fact that a significant number of voters in 2018 cast their ballots for Donald Trump. There are implications about the rationality, moral values, and social status of those voters; about the firmness of their devotion to Trump; about Trump’s ability to enthrall citizens from certain social backgrounds; and about his ability to use these citizens to bully rivals and minorities and to undermine the constitution.

Moreover, the term has been used in different ways by party politicians today, who inflect the term in light of their broader vision of the country’s history—especially its history with capitalism. Because they see present-day capitalism differently, politicians who oppose Trump disagree on what should be done, which undoubtedly will lead to inter- and intra-party conflict as the 2020 election nears. Liberal centrists, viewing US capitalism as booming thanks to the globalization of consumer, labor, and financial markets, see “Trump’s base” as troubling and as an unfortunate consequence of globalization. But they also foresee its disappearance as new generations of digital workers replace aging workers who labored in obsolete factories, mills, and mines. The base is destined to disappear.

Moral conservatives believe that modern economics has little to do with the existence of “the base.” Its existence reflects the moral corruption of America’s ruling class. That corruption has led to crony capitalism and kleptocracy, in which Washington’s elite give favors to voters and donors and do not hesitate to lie, grandstand, and scapegoat. Phenomena like “Trump’s base” will disappear only if the morally righteous convince the spoiled and greedy in America to change their selfish ways. Then a purged free-market economy will appear—a system of production and consumption that encourages and rewards self-discipline, hard-work, ingenuity, neighborliness, and other middle-class values and principles.

The soft socialists within the Democratic party thinks that “Trump’s base” is composed of voters who can be swayed on grounds of economic self-interest to leave Trump (should he run for a second term). The voters are justifiably worried about their worsening economic prospects. They will gladly leave Trump, but only if a compelling vision of large-scale economic and political change is put forth by his opponents. Otherwise, the frustrations and suffering that modern corporate and global capitalism create will lead voters either to stay home or to follow demagogues who, like Trump, acknowledge the unfairness and brutality of the economic system (even if they fail to solve the problem).

The longevity of the expression “Trump’s base” will depend in part on its application by party leaders, and in party on voters’ responses to various applications. It is possible that political actors, from everyday voters to party leaders, will soon discard the term. After all, a number scholars who talk about Trump’s political rise and prospects for future electoral success eschew references to a “Trump base.” Cas Mudde, for example, has interpreted Trump’s electoral fortunes without highlighting the idea of a set of personally loyal and easily manipulated voters. Instead, Mudde enumerates specific constituencies (tax payers, Evangelicals, business owners, farmers, pro-life advocates, and so on) whose substantive demands Trump has addressed in diverse ways. According to Mudde, how Trump continues to construct a coalition of heterogenous interests will determine his chances for re-election and also will inform his conduct in office. Mudde opines that the Democratic party will be ill served by a strategy that simply denounces misdeeds by Trump and his “base” and that does not attempt to engage in the satisfying of traditional interest-group demands and in classical coalition building.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The longevity of the phrase “Trump’s base” also will be affected by how the low-income and working-class referents of the term respond to various partisan usages. The derogatory uses by liberal centrists, for example, might induce Democratic candidates to ignore certain populations of voters and certain regions of the country. This, in turn, could encourage those who are overlooked to organize themselves in new ways and to blaze unexpected political paths. A new term might be needed to describe the post-“Trump’s base” phenomenon.

The many overlapping meanings of “Trump’s base” and the term’s pairings with different economic narratives have made the phrase a remarkably dynamic and versatile political resource. The expression is not endowed with a single, unchanging, universal meaning, which citizens mechanically echo in conversations with each other. Like “masculinity,” “human rights,” “due process,” and “democracy,” “Trump’s base” is a term whose meaning changes as individuals and groups apply the word to embrace and resist different political projects. And because different sides in today’s electoral battle and policy fights use the phrase in different ways, its meanings will continue to evolve.

1. Anne Norton, *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As will be pointed out later in this paper, while most politicians who refer to “Trump’s base” are highly critical of the Trump presidency, not all are “Left-leaning” (in the sense of holding egalitarian visions of distribution and re-distributive justice); and not all are former supporters of presidential candidate Hilary Clinton or current members of the Democratic party. Prominent Republic politicians and conservative thinkers who use the notion of “Trump’s base” include Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, former White House Counsel John Dean, and former Arizona Senator Jeff Flake. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Notable examples include Eliana Johnson and Burgess Everett of *Politico*, Judy Woodruff of the *PBS NewsHour*, Philip Bump and Jennifer Rubin of *The Washington Post*, David A. Graham of *The Atlantic*, free-lance essayist and periodic contributor to *The Nation* and *Politico* Sean McElwee, and *NPR* reporter Domencio Montanaro. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, the writings of the University of Maryland’s Shibley Telhami, of Harvard University’s Pippa Norris, and of the University of Michigan’s Ronald Inglehart. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for example, John Dean “Trump’s Base,” *Justia*, January 19 and February 16, 2018; Sean McElwee, “Who Is Trump’s Base?,” *Data For Progress*, No. 17, March 27, 2019; Charles E. Cook, Jr., “Sizing Up Trump’s Base,” *The Cook Political Report*, December 14, 2018; Philip Bump, “How Our Image of Trump’s Base Defies—and Live Up to—Assumptions,” *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A second and far-less common reference of “Trump’s base” is to mass-media entertainers and talking heads, such as Steve Bannon, Ann Coulter, and Sean Hannity, whose political pronouncements allegedly sway a large numbers of viewers, listeners, and tabloid readers (including Trump himself). This usage of the phrase was especially common in reports by the mainstream US news media during the during the government shutdown of December 2018. Otherwise, “Trump’s base” is normally used in reference to a sizeable set of voters who cast their ballots for Trump during the 2016 primaries and presidential election. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Pocket Fowler’s Modern English Usage, Second Edition* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008), 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1992), 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, Revised Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 192-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *seventh edition* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 2016), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, Bobby Azarian, “An Analysis of Trump Supporters Has Identified Five Key Traits,” *Psychology Today*, April 11, 2019; Derek Thompson, “Who Are Donald Trump’s Supporters, Really?,” *The Atlantic*, March 2016; Dina Smeltz, “How Does Trump’s Base Differ from Other Republicans? Let Me Count the Ways,” *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, October 2, 2018; Timothy Egan, “Good News: Democracy Has a Pulse,” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Timothy Egan, “The Secret to Cracking Trump’s Base,” *The New York Times*, September 14, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Typical is Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019). For thoughts on the recent wave of studies, especially by political scientists, about authoritarian appetites in working-class populations, see the column “Is There Such a Thing as an Authoritarian Voter?” by the historian Molly Worthen in *The New York Times*, December 16, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For intellectual histories of social scientists’ fear of working-cl*ass* authoritarianism and populism, see Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1967); Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); and Alan Brinkley, “Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform* Reconsidered” in *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 132-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jeremy Diamond, “Trump: I Could ‘Shoot Somebody and I wouldn’t Lose Voters,” *CNN Politics* (January 24, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example, Egan, “Good News.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As David Frum puts it, Trump “is a great storyteller. He has substantially shaped his supporters’ worldview, while successfully isolating them from damaging new.” Frum, “Building an Autocracy: Will American democracy survive Trump? And will the midterms matter?,” *The Atlantic*, October 2018, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Domenico Montanaro, “Poll: Trump Approval Down, Slips With Base,” *NPR*, March 27, 2019; Jennifer Rubin, “Trump’s Base Is Wising Up,” *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For a scholarly analysis of how Trump simultaneously creates and then must respond to a base, which has demands and expectations separate from his immediate agenda, see Julie Novkov’s study of Trump and the violence at the August 2017 “United the Right” rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina. Novkov, “How Do We Solve a Problem Like the Donald? The Democratic Challenge of Trump Supporters and the Politics of Presidential Removal,” *New Political Science*, 2018 40(30): 439-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Novkov, “How Do We Solve a Problem Like the Donald?”; Thompson, “Who Are Donald Trump’s Supporters, Really?” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Julian Zelizer, “Trump’s Base,” *CNN*, April 30, 2018; Yoni Appelbaum, “Losing the Democratic Habit,” and Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, “The Treat of Tribalism,” in *The Atlantic*, October 2018, 74-77, 78-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See, for example, Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Personages within the Democratic party who could be labelled “moderates” and “liberal centrists” include Joe Biden, Bill Clinton, Hilary Clinton, Rahm Emanuel, Al Gore, John Kerry, Barack Obama, and Nancy Pelosi. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For more extensive and detailed account of the rise of liberal centrists within the Democratic party, especially since the formation in 1985 of “the Democratic Leadership Council” (which the more Left-leaning Jesse Jackson once scornfully called “the Democrats for the Leisure Class”), see Eric Alterman and Kevin Mattson, *The Cause: The Fight for American Liberalism from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 360-460. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Jeff Flake, *Conscience of a Conservative: A Rejection of Destructive Politics and a Return to Principle* (New York: Random House, 2017), 27, 45. Flake’s book is the most concise and passionate discussion of the moral conservative position vis-à-vis Trump that I have come across. A less autobiographic and less homespun version of the moral-conservative position can be found in David Frum’s *Trumpocracy: The Corruption of the American Republic* (New York, Harper, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Flake further claims that today “’Fake news’ is a problem that knows no party. Bad information is and has been propagated by all sides…” *Conscience of a Conservative*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. This prescription of behaving like John the Baptist and or the prophet Jeremiah and thus purging American politics of greed, selfishness, and intolerance has a very long history in the United States. See, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. I have used the term “soft socialism” for several reasons. The provocative Marxist term “utopian socialist” is unsatisfactory because it suggests both impracticality and pie-in-the-sky thinking for this type of opponent of unregulated capitalism. The once-fashionable social-democratic phrase “evolutionary socialism” is also unsatisfactory because it suggests a teleological view of history and implies that socialists can simply standby and passively watch the inevitable transformations of a free-market economies into post-market orders. “Fabian” socialism” seems misleading because of the British Fabians’ emphasis on municipal-level collectivization and their ambivalence toward autonomous union power. “Soft socialism” also seems a preferable choice because it conveys that activists like Saunders and Warren do celebrate markets for certain purposes (and in fact think globalization, when properly carried out, is desirable). Finally, “soft socialism” makes it easier to convey Sanders’ and Warren’s pro-union approach to labor power (syndicalism, in other words) in contrast to having the state represent the interests of workers (a feature of corporatist political arrangements). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The following short summary of the soft-socialist outlook is drawn from Sanders’ famous filibuster speech against President Obama’s extension of the Bush administration’s corporate tax cuts and from his recent collection of essays on politics during the age of President Trump. Bernie Sanders, *The Speech: On Corporate Greed and the Decline of Our Middle Class* (New York: Bold Type Book, 2015); *Where We Go from Here* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018). For an interesting discussion of the evolution of Warren’s critique of free-market economics, see Alex Thompson, “Liz Was a Diehard Conservative,” *POLITICO Magazine*, April 13, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The conclusion that globalization is a decidedly mixed blessing (because its costs fall disproportionately on poorer Americans) has been advanced by a growing number of scholars who are not usually associated with socialism or radical political thought. See, for example, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties: *The Silent Revolution* in Reverse,” *Perspectives on Politics*, June 2017 15(2): 443-454. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For a convenient summary and comparison of the electoral strategies of Clinton and Trump in economically distressed regions of the Midwest and of the shortcomings of Clinton’s campaign in comparison to the successes of previous Democratic party candidates, see Arthur Paulson, *Donald Trump and the Prospect for American Democracy: An Unprecedented President in an Age of Polarization* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018), 91-101, 138. To quote Paulson (138), Trump “made issues of deindustrialization part of his campaign to a degree that Clinton did not, and as a result carried Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin, which delivered the election.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. V.O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting 1936-1960* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This development was noted in the mainstream press. See, for example, Rubin, “Trump’s Base Is Wising Up,” *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2019; and “Trump’s Base Shows Signs of Eroding ahead of Reelection Bid,” *The Hill*, March 27, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Cas Mudde, “Why Is Trump Still So Popular? He Gives His Base What They Want,” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)