

Peter Kivisto, *The Trump Phenomenon: How the Politics of Populism Won in 2016*

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12490>

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

Marcus Walsh-Führung, « Peter Kivisto, *The Trump Phenomenon: How the Politics of Populism Won in 2016* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2018-1, Online since 18 May 2018, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12490>

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- 1 Peter Kivisto, *The Trump Phenomenon: How the Politics of Populism Won in 2016*
- 2 United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing, 2017. Pp. 140. ISBN: 9781787143685
- 3 Marcus Walsh-Führung
- 4 In his book, Peter Kivisto presents a comprehensive empirical and theoretical account of events leading up to the election of Donald J. Trump as 45th President of the United States. As such, *The Trump Phenomenon: How the Politics of Populism Won in 2016* offers a basis for the discussion on the political status quo in the United States. The book analyzes key aspects that have impacted the current political climate and the election of a president with authoritarian tendencies. In doing so, Kivisto addresses three anti-trump narratives: psychology and temperament, business career, and political worldview while, at the same time, explaining the complexity of reasons for citizens to vote for an unconventional presidential candidate and the driving forces of right-wing populism that have manifested themselves into Trumpism.
- 5 In describing the causes of Trump's authoritarian nature, Kivisto points to Trump's narcissistic tendencies as diagnosed by reputable academics and psychiatrists. The author continues by detailing the discussion of President Trump's alleged incompetency during the election and doubts in his ability to govern. Furthermore, the author alludes to a direct connection between Donald Trump's decision-making processes as President and as business mogul which both are characterized through involvement of family relationships and a lack of transparency. Trump's practices in building his business empire represent a mirror image of his anti-big government, anti-neoliberal, and anti-immigrant world view and have led to the political practice of attacking the liberal elite and aligning himself with the political agenda of the far-right. While none of these findings are new and have been thoroughly documented by journalists, the author

creates strong connections and develops a clear story on how Donald Trump has developed as a public figure.

- 6 In a post-truth world, the right-wing of the Republican Party has been able to co-opt the political discourse in the United States, thereby, challenging the traditional narratives of American values through fear and suggested negative effects of globalization. To illustrate competing liberal and conservative narratives, the book utilizes a binary approach to categorize opposing political, social, and cultural positions through civil virtue and uncivil vices. While differing positions have always been present in society, a polarization has occurred focusing on political partisanship which challenges the understanding of the “Other.” As Kivisto and other political analysts have pointed out, Trumpism has initiated two monolithic narratives that have deviated from the historical understanding that ideological differences should enable dialogue and debate between the left and right. This dialogue is at the center of protecting democracy from illiberal temptations. However, as the discourse during the election has demonstrated the United States has departed from a universal narrative that the majority of its citizens identified with a generation ago.
- 7 The Trump narrative is a departure from the traditional discussion, led by political scientists and analysts, of the developments of democracy and historical voting patterns in the United States. As proof, Kivisto characterizes the current developments as dominated by institutional constraints and white cultural backlash. In addition, he demonstrates the changing role of the Electoral College in the modern political landscape and its effects on choosing the presidential winner. While both left- and right-wing politicians have supported the institution, there is now an alarming amount of opposition to change the electoral process. As stated in Kivisto’s book, far-right political pundits have defended the Electoral College because it provides a safeguard for white Americans in an ever-growing pluralistic society.
- 8 Kivisto demonstrates the ability of Trump to label pluralism as a direct threat to democracy while, at the same time, demonizing Hillary Clinton for her one-sided remarks against his supporters. In an effort to define the Trump supporter, the book illustrates the complexity in developing clear criteria of his constituency. The author describes in detail the variation in political backgrounds of Trump voters while showing a consistency amongst Trump voters in states’ rights issues. The author explains this discrepancy through Trump’s manipulation tactics and his strategy to scapegoat the political and intellectual elite by focusing on their self-serving interests in government. Trump has been able to exacerbate the effects of his political strategy through his access to the right-wing media. Kivisto goes into great lengths in describing how Trump uses far-right news agencies and talk show hosts (e.g. Fox News and Sean Hannity) to engage voters and to consolidate his political message while, at the same time, delegitimizing “left-wing” media organizations (e.g. CNN and MSNBC) as producing fake news and challenging their journalistic integrity.
- 9 As a result of a backlash from southern conservatives to counter New Deal programs implemented in the South, the author describes the driving force of the Trump campaign as rooted in the right-wing of the GOP which associates itself with the John Birch Society. The conservative ideology of the John Birch Society evolved in the 20th century due to efforts by the industrialists, Charles and David Koch, and President Richard Nixon’s Southern Strategy. Through their super PACs, the Kochs have been able to challenge the role of government and free speech to further their political voice. The book discusses

how the influx of money from super PACs has produced political discourse amongst the religious right to support small government and the elimination of social programs. The Southern Strategy has allowed the Republican Party to create restrictions and challenge voting rights; at the same time, the conservative wing of the party has been able to promote its own social and religious agenda. The author demonstrates how the belief system of the religious right has been mobilized by Pat Roberts and Jerry Falwell through the congregation of their mega churches and describes the linkages between the social conservative message of these religious leaders and their backing of Donald Trump. Allowing these extreme leaders to further push their agenda to the right of the political spectrum has created a conflict in the conservative party. This, in turn, has challenged the fundamental aspects of traditional conservatism and has allowed racist elements a platform in the Republican Party.

- 10 *The Trump Phenomenon: How the Politics of Populism Won in 2016* provides background information and analysis to discuss and build upon the continued cultural political polarization that challenges democratic institutions today. Despite the anti-democratic rhetoric coming from the Trump authoritarian strategy and nationalistic support, the far-right has been unable to create an organizational power within the Republican Party. Nevertheless, Trumpism with its fascist tendencies has the ability to harm society through the limiting of civil liberties for minorities. The author argues that one of the main reasons for the ability of right-wing populists to constrain civil liberties is through their gerrymandering of congressional districts which also allows the far-right to push through their pro-business conservative agenda for the corporate oligarchy.
- 11 The author provides a comprehensive survey on the social and institutional dynamics of the populist movement in the United States and the political actors that are behind it. The summary of events leading up to the election of Donald Trump is well researched and would be beneficial to readers with limited knowledge on the topic. Scholars interested in the origins of right-wing populism and reasons behind the rise of Trump will also benefit from reading *The Trump Phenomenon: How Politics of Populism Won in 2016*.