



7-2020

Reactionary Populism and the Historical Erosion of Democracy in America. An Interview with Nancy MacLean, Duke University

Nancy Maclean
Duke University

Aimee Imlay
University of Kentucky

Matthew Wentz
University of Kentucky

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.29.12>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Maclean, Nancy; Imlay, Aimee; and Wentz, Matthew (2020) "Reactionary Populism and the Historical Erosion of Democracy in America. An Interview with Nancy MacLean, Duke University," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 29 , Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.29.12>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol29/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

Reactionary Populism and the Historical Erosion of Democracy in America.

An Interview with Nancy MacLean, *Duke University*

Interviewers: Aimee Imlay and Matthew Wentz, *University of Kentucky*

Nancy MacLean is the William H. Chafe Professor of History and Public Policy at Duke University, and the award-winning author of several books, including Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan; Freedom is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace; The American Women's Movement, 1945-2000: A Brief History with Documents; and Debating the American Conservative Movement: 1945 to the Present. She also served the editor of Scalawag: A White Southerner's Journey through Segregation to Human Rights Activism.

Her scholarship has received more than a dozen major prizes and awards, and has been supported by fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Humanities Center, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowships Foundation.

Her most recent book is [Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America](#). Democracy in Chains was a finalist for the National Book Award, and the winner of the Los Angeles Times Book Award in Current Affairs, the Lannan Foundation Cultural Freedom Award, and the Lillian Smith Book Award. The Nation magazine named it the "Most Valuable Book" of the year.

In the Introduction of your book, Democracy in Chains, you write that "the single most powerful and least understood threat to democracy today" is "the attempt by the billionaire-backed radical right to undo democratic governance" (xvii). It is very clear that you mean this statement without exaggeration. Why do you think this is so little understood? Why do you think it should be our most pressing concern? Finally, how do we combat these billionaire-funded radicals who are determined to de-democratize the United States?

Nancy MacLean (NM): I think the reason that this threat is so little understood is that the architects of this project do not want it to be understood by the majority. They understand that what they are really seeking would be repellent to the majority and can only succeed by means of stealth and incremental changes of the governing rules of our society, including the legal and constitutional rules. Therefore, they are trying to achieve what they are doing kind of behind the

public's back. They, of course, have public faces. In fact, the Koch network funds over 150 organizations in the United States alone - not counting the overseas ones. And all those organizations of course have public faces, but the key elements of this project are being done in stealth by deliberate misinformation and disinformation. For example, consider climate science denial and promoting the myth of voter fraud to justify voter suppression. And we could go on about the other stealth efforts. In summary, the reason why it is so ill understood is that they do not want us to understand it. They would like to go under the radar. And in fact, Charles Koch has said that his father had an expression that the whale that surfaces is the one that gets harpooned. They would much rather operate in secret. And in fact, a new book on the Koch business empire called "[Kochland](#)" by a business reporter shows that secrecy is also built into the Koch industries business model. That addresses why it is ill-understood.

Why do you think it should be our most pressing concern?

NM: The reason it should be our most pressing concern is that the scale of money that the Koch network is investing in all these operations to render our democracy dysfunctional for the majority has absolutely no parallel in contemporary life. No parallel in history. This is so audacious and radical an effort that the social sciences do not even have a concept for what is happening. We have let inequality develop in our society to such an absurd extent that Charles Koch and his recently deceased brother, David Koch were among the two wealthiest men in the world each having a fortune of some \$50 billion. As a result, investing hundreds of millions of dollars to change our society is chump change to them. It is pocket change. Their political spending is so significant that it rivals the major political parties. At times when it is not election time, it is even more than those political parties. It is vast. And I think an alternative way to get it, why it's so important and why it should be the urgent focus, is that if we took that Koch money out of our political system and those organizations that it funds out of the public conversation, we would be having very different experience of the last 20 years and of the future. For one thing, we would be able to act on the catastrophic threat to our planet that comes from fossil fuel industries like Koch industries at this point.

The foundations that Charles Koch is associated with are the leading funders of climate science denial. By Greenpeace calculations they have provided over \$127 million to organizations engaged in climate science denial. In other words, deliberately trying to deceive the public about what the science is telling us. I cannot even find words to describe the human impact of that. And the number - the millions of people whose lives will be harmed, disrupted, and sometimes lost entirely because of that effort. For example, the UN estimates conservatively that by 2050, we will have 150 million climate migrants in the world and that is a conservative estimate. Some other estimates predict 2 billion. This is what this fossil fuel industry is doing to us and Koch industries leads the effort.

It is interesting because Koch industries is not publicly traded. So, there is no stakeholder intervention or potential for intervention because it is not publicly traded. Do you think that makes this more dangerous?

NM: Yes. I write about this in the book and others who have written about the Koch industries business model have also commented on this. Charles Koch is contemptuous of publicly traded

companies because they do have transparency and therefore do not engage in the kind of very long-term strategic planning that Koch does and are subject to shareholder and other public pressures. I might add here your university has a Koch funded center on campus - the Center for Free Enterprise. And as a scholar, it is mystifying to me that university administrators would take monies from an organization like the Charles Koch Foundation knowing what they have done to our political system and particularly knowing that they have engaged in systematic misinformation about the science of climate change. I do not see how any university can host disciplines in the sciences and in good faith recruit students and faculty to the sciences when they are also taking money from the Charles Koch foundation and its associates.

What can students do about that?

NM: Well, I think all citizens can do something about this Koch network. The single most important finding of my research is that the Koch network is operating in the way that it is because they understand that they are a permanent ideological majority, that nobody wants to live in the world they are trying to create. And that is why they have used the strategies that they have. Therefore, just bringing sunshine to this by informing the greatest number of people possible about who they really are, what they are up to and how they work is a huge contribution.

Students can alert other students, alert faculty, alert community members, alert donors, alert alumni, and alert the press to the dangers of these Koch centers is important. There is a wonderful organization called [UnKoch My Campus](#). That organization was created by two students who attended universities with large Koch centers. One of them, the flagship Koch center at George Mason University that I wrote about in *Democracy in Chains*, and the other is at Florida State University. And the students witnessed firsthand, over four years, how the Koch presence on their campus undermined academic integrity and created all kinds of problems. Their reports on these centers document how universities welcome this presence at their own peril and that has been shown, case after case. Their website is full of good materials on that and reports that really show the dangers of Koch investment. I think if students took the leadership on this it could have a very big impact.

The Koch brothers publicly denounced Trump in the last election – breaking, arguably, their Republican allegiance. What does this mean for the Republican party? Do you think that this foreshadows the splintering of the right between libertarians and populists?

NM: I do not think David Koch, who is now deceased, ever said anything against Donald Trump. David met with Trump at Mar-a-Lago, but Charles Koch at one point described Donald Trump as a monster. I think that Charles Koch probably finds Donald Trump to be vulgar - someone he would never invite over for dinner. But at the same time, the Trump administration has been very useful for the Koch network. When Charles Koch boasted at a donor summit last year, he said: we have gotten more accomplished together in the last five years than I was able to accomplish in the previous fifty years. At another donor summit, he said we have accomplished more in the last year than the previous ten years.

In other words, things are going swimmingly for them in many domains in the Trump administration. Key examples of that are how the Koch network through the Federalist society

and through Donald McGahn as White House counsel were vetting all of Trump's judicial nominees. Trump appointed their judges to the bench. Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh were their choices and they invested a fortune in making sure that they were confirmed. They have also advised on the federal judiciary nominees that Trump has proposed. Trump has been able to name more federal justices to the bench than any president in living memory, thanks to Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader. Essentially taking many of those appointments away from President Obama. So, in terms of defining the operating rules of our government and society, the legal rules, they have had huge victories through the Trump administration.

The tax bill was also something their people were advising on almost daily. They boasted that they were in daily contact with White House. That tax bill is going to be devastating to most Americans over time and has already driven up the deficit considerably, which they will use then to argue for a constitutional convention. Additionally, they have gotten things that they want in domain after domain, from attacks on public education and funding for private education and for-profit colleges, from Betsy DeVos in the Department of Education, to unending all kinds of workers' rights and protections in the Labor Department under its shifting leadership over time. Certainly, they are getting the fossil fuel industries' agenda through the EPA and the Department of Energy. In domain after domain, they are getting what they want. The one exception to that is tariff policy. They have not been happy with the president's protective tariffs, but that is small potatoes compared to everything else that they have gotten.

It is interesting now that Trump is facing impeachment. I have been kind of following, trying to see what the most Koch allied members of Congress are doing regarding this and how their think tanks are commenting or not commenting on it. They all seem to be sticking by the president. I really think that future historians and journalists are going to find out that there were much closer connections between members of this administration and the Koch network than journalists had been paying attention to.

Trump is getting his policy directives from people who are interested and do have a stake in these things, and they are shaping those policies and he is putting them through. I think of him now as the Distractor in Chief. And in fact, one of his energy officials recently boasted about this in meeting with oil and gas executives, he said it is absolutely thrilling to be working for this administration. The president has a knack for turning the attention of the press and the people elsewhere while we do the work that we need to do. There are some people who portray Trump as kind of coming out of nowhere and being this bizarre exception in American politics. But really if you look historically, he is the culmination of a long process of the decay in that party.

What the Koch network has done kind of brilliantly, and they boast about it, is basically change incentives and punishments to bend the Republican party to the biggest donors' purposes. Through their capacity to raise huge amounts of money to invest in candidates who will toe the line or to primary any who do not toe the line, they get their way. The Trump base attacks anybody who does not toe the line. And again, you see that most dramatically in the case of policies related to the fossil fuel - protecting the fossil fuel industry. In *Democracy in Chains*, I write that in the 1990s, there was no difference between the two major parties in their recognition of global warming, climate change as human caused, and the threat that needed action. Of course,

they differed on how to address it, but both parties recognized it as a threat that needed action. This dates to George Herbert Walker Bush in the early 1990s. Yet, by 2014, only 8 of 278 Republicans in Congress would admit that climate change was happening and caused by human activity. It was Vice President Mike Pence who circulated that climate pledge.

I think people need to understand that traditional notions of Democrats and Republicans or liberals and conservatives just do not apply anymore in understanding this situation. There are many Republican voters who want to make sure we have clean air and water and want to make sure we act on all the extreme weather. They are getting directly affected, especially in rural areas and coastal areas. But their party is not listening to them. It is listening to these powerful donors.

Some scholars have argued that the rise of populism (this is assuming that Trump can be categorized, of course as a populist) has included the erosion of democratic institutions by weaponizing them with ideologues. Brett Kavanaugh and the other the federal judges that Trump has appointed are all libertarian-leaning. How do you think that this affects the erosion of our democratic institutions?

NM: As a historian, I cannot talk about populism without modifier. There is reactionary populism, for example, I wrote about that in my first book, on the Ku Klux Klan. There's progressive populism: the kind that we saw in the People's Party during the 1890s and that you see in the Bernie Sanders campaign. Elizabeth Warren and many progressive populist organizations are doing great work around the country. I think that at some level, some amount of populism is part of the air we breathe in modern democratic societies because people who are campaigning for office are trying to get things done and have to appeal to masses of people. And anger is a powerful motivator, so they will couch what they are doing in terms that arouse people's anger against elites of some kind.

But what is distinctive in the kind of populism that we are seeing from figures like Donald Trump and Bolsonaro in Brazil, is these reactionary populists or right-wing populists, do not give a damn about the people. They are using the anger of the people over decades of neoliberal austerity and failed promises, but they are harnessing and weaponizing that anger in order to move an agenda that is about corporate supremacy. It is a disgusting sleight of hand. I was just reading this book by Michael Lewis called *The Fifth Risk* and it highlights what the Trump administration has done in federal departments and agencies. Lewis discusses the Department of Agriculture, writing that Trump is a president who won the rural vote, particularly the white rural vote; thus, those white, rural Evangelical voters are his strongest base of support. Lewis argues that surely Trump would care about the Department of Agriculture given his base is rural. However, Lewis documents that the Trump administration did not attend the briefings by the Department of Agriculture to orient the new administration. They appointed Trump loyalists who do not care about the rural people. And if you look past the rhetoric and instead at the policies, you see the policies are serving corporate elites. And similar to what I learned from my research on Ku Klux Klan and lynchings in early 20th century America and then on this Koch led project in our time - it is an old trick to use populist language to achieve elitist ends. And considering the kind of populism that is coming from the political right now, it is attacks on elites who are perceived to be too liberal. Elites who are obeying the law with regard to refugees,

upholding the dignity and rights of African Americans and Latinos and others subject to racism. It is a cheap trick. That is how I think about it.

This is an issue on theories of populism. Thus, do you see any connections between your historical work in the rise of right-wing populism in the US and Trump as the culmination of a plan?

NM: We've seen a kind of long-term deterioration in the Republican party. Many political scientists, historians and journalists have written about that, but there was a kind of crossing of the Rubicon in 1964 by making Barry Goldwater their presidential candidate, which was the outcome of deep organizing from college Republicans and other adult figures on the political right. But Barry Goldwater was really the first neoliberal candidate, free market fundamentalist, not on his foreign policy, where he was cold war Hawk, but domestically. He talked about privatizing Social Security. He was against labor unions. He wanted to prioritize the Tennessee Valley Authority. An agenda against minimum wage, maximum hours, all these different things. To get him to be the candidate the folks who were doing this (and this included William Rusher, who was editor of the *National Review*), they were very explicit in their meetings. And I've seen the documents from the meetings stating that they wanted to shift the Republican party from the Northeast, where its leaders then were based, to the, they actually said the States of the former Confederacy, to plant the Republican flag squarely in Dixie. And the idea was to appeal to white voters who were hostile to workers' rights from the CIO and the New Deal and especially to the Civil Rights Movement. So, when Barry Goldwater ran in 1964, he basically only won in the States of the Deep South that were most hostile to civil rights and his own state of Arizona. That was the beginning of a process that then went on through the Nixon administration. People talk about the Southern strategy. Ronald Reagan held his first post-convention rally after he became the 1980 nominee in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where civil three civil rights activists had been murdered. That was a deliberate attempt on the part of his campaign to reach what they called the Wallace-inclined voters. This is clearly pandering to racism and stoking hostility using a kind of reactionary populism to agitate white voters to hate the federal government.

So, this has been in play for a very long time and Donald Trump is the kind of strange fruit of all of that, in that he has taken this to such an extreme. In terms of his candidacy though, his populist stance was very helpful for him in distinguishing himself from the rest of the Republican field. It is hard to remember today, but all the other Republican front runners, including many that folks thought would be the nominee, like Jeb Bush or Marco Rubio, they had taken that kind of Koch pledge. They were carrying out that agenda. They were talking about cuts to Social Security and Medicare. They were against workers' rights. They were attacking public education. They denied climate change, etc. Donald Trump was the only person who had not taken the kind of Koch pledge and he called them puppets. And that really stuck with voters as they could see that something was happening to their party and he did not require them to take that nasty Koch medicine. He said he was going to give everybody healthcare better than Obamacare. No cuts in social security and Medicare. Of course, he said all the ugly things that he had said from the beginning about Mexican citizens and Mexicans in the United States. And he denied President Obama had been born in this country.

For a Republican voter, who would not vote for a Democrat, who wanted to be loyal to the party, but who did not want that Koch medicine, Donald Trump looked like the guy. I think he used populist appeals very effectively to distinguish himself from the rest of the Republican field, which had bowed to the donors, that rich radical-right Donor class. The other thing I think that a lot of people on the left do not understand is that when the radical right talks about the swamp, they mean something different from the rest of us. You or me or people who are writing for our national newspapers, they assume the swamp is K street, right? The corporate lobbyists. But for Trump and for James Buchanan and Charles Koch and the others, the swamp is not really that swamp. For them, the swamp is teachers, public school teachers who are pushing for more money for public education. The swamp is Planned Parenthood, which is an effective lobbyist for public health measures that benefit low-income people. The American Association of Retired People (AARP) is a big target for them. So, they think all these citizen-led organizations, labor unions of any description, particularly public sector unions, they think all of these organizations based on collective power among the citizenry are the swamp. These groups can move policy and get tax transfers for particular purposes. We have two understandings of the swamp that are completely at odds.

From another angle, the Trump administration needs to be seen as a culmination of things long underway on the libertarian right. That is, they have been attacking the administrative state for a long time. The federal agencies, they would call them bureaucracies, they would say that these bureaucrats are essentially independently enforcing their will and it is a gross misrepresentation of how politics in a modern society operates. For every federal agency that is doing work, it is licensed to do that work by majoritarian representation. For example, Congress passes a Clean Air Act, the legislation creating the Environmental Protection Agency, but House and Senate members know that they do not understand the science of that, so they create the goals for the agency and then delegate the scientists in the agency to figure out how to accomplish those goals on the part of the public. The right tries to de-legitimize regulation by saying this is this kind of unchained administrative state with these rogue bureaucrats running roughshod. But, but the whole point of what they are doing is trying to get it so we will no longer use government to restrain corporations from harming the public or harming competition. So they created this whole language of the deep state that now, has been taken in whole new directions, but the vocabulary was created by the kinds of people that I write about in *Democracy in Chains* and that operate through these Koch organizations.

And a lot of what they spin out along these lines is created by their academic grantees, their faculty grantees who work in these centers. And many of the people at these centers have nothing to do with academia. Yet they spin out all these policy studies that make the case for deregulation, attack the administrative state, etc. At the Scalia School of Law at George Mason, there was a project on the administrative state run by Neomi Rao, who is now a federal judge, thanks to Donald Trump, is in Brett Kavanaugh's old seat. One of the Koch center donors stated that they were going to bring her back to GMU with this multimillion-dollar center after she takes down the administrative state.

Koch has been personally very strategic has been investing in changing the courts since the 1970s, by investing in law and economics programs, in something called the Institute for

Justice. He also boasted that he provided seed money for the Federalist society. He understands that legal and constitutional rules can be used to constrain what the people in government can do. And it is interesting that after all these years of the right attacking what they called the activist judiciary, now that the power has swung the Cato Institute publishes a book called the *Case for an Activist Judiciary*.