

Reactionary Victories: What the Russian Communist Party and the MAGA Movement Have in Common

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In 1995, just four years after communism's collapse in Russia, the Russian Communist Party (CPRF) became the majority in the national legislature. Fast forward to 2016, an American businessman—and vocal critic of communism—with no prior political experience secured the U.S. presidency. What could connect these two seemingly unrelated victories? Taking in existing reactionary theory, this paper examines the electoral victories of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) in the 1995 Russian Legislature and Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. These two cases comparatively prove how successful reactionary political resurgences consistently originate from a prominent public view of institutional corruption.

Political attitude is the umbrella term for various views about political change, concerning the “correct” methods and speed with which to enact political changes.²⁴ There is a spectrum of attitudes people can possess, such as radical, liberal, conservative, or reactionary, that have different extremities, with radicals and reactionaries being the most radical points on the spectrum of political attitudes. Reactionaries hold the belief that the current order is incompetent and should be replaced through the restoration of an existing past regime, or an imagined past ideal fabricated to support the movement. Like radicals, reactionary attitudes are also more susceptible to using violence to change the status quo as deep-rooted.²⁵ According to a study by Harvard psychologists, this can be attributed to the lack of cognitive inflexibility—a difficulty adapting to new or changing intellectual demands or circumstances—exhibited by those with more extremist political attitudes.²⁶ Oddly Reinforcing this kind of change, the same cognitive inflexibility also predicts a greater willingness to endorse violence in support of a political belief or group.

²⁴ O'Neil, P. H., Fields, K. J., & Share, D. (2024). *Cases and Concepts in Comparative Politics* (3rd ed.). W.W. Norton & Company.

²⁵ Christopher Sebastian Parker, & Lavine, H. (2024). Status threat: The core of reactionary politics. *Political Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12983>

²⁶ Zmigrod, L., & Goldenberg, A. (2021). Cognition and Emotion in Extreme Political Action: Individual Differences and Dynamic Interactions. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 30(3), 218–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721421993820>

To contextualize post-USSR era governance, in 1993, Russia was declared a democratic federation with a republican government. Russia's government is centralized with a president and a prime minister. They have a bicameral legislature called the Federal Assembly, with the lower house being the State Duma and the upper house being the Federation Council. Each house has its respective jurisdiction, but the State Duma holds real legislative power, as it can override any decisions made by the Federation Council.²⁷

In 1995, the second legislative election since the 1991 breakup of the U.S.S.R. was held. The Soviet successor, Russia's Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), won and gained its peak power in the Duma, securing the party's political reign.²⁸ Ideologically, the CPRF embraced communism and rejected capitalism and Western globalization. They called for a return to Stalinist ideals, which appealed to voters who had not benefited from the experiment of a market economy and were discontented with the crime, corruption, and feeling of "disorder" in post-Soviet society. The citizenry was greatly unsettled with high inflation as well as the Chechnya War (1994-1996), where the Russian government committed many war crimes against the Chechnyan people. Compounding on this military failure, the shock therapy intended to impose economic liberalization in Russia led to economic collapse rather than a successfully transformed market.²⁹ This reform period, dubbed *perestroika*, quickly transformed most of the Russian state-owned enterprises into joint-stock agencies. This sudden shift led to a significant drop in their GDP and high inflation. Additionally, many of the those that bought into the newly private companies were Russian oligarchs, who could also influence the media and government. They were tied to the other dominant party facing the CPRF (among the 43 participating parties), "Our Home Russia" party, was seen as elite and tied to money from big corporations. Disgruntled by the turbulence of market economic reforms and suspected corruption, angry voters were attracted to the idea of returning to the orthodox communism that was in place just years ago. In the election, there was significant voter turnout, despite the cynical Russian society

²⁷ Wikipedia Contributors. (2019, August 1). *Federal Assembly (Russia)*. Wikipedia; Wikimedia Foundation. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Assembly_\(Russia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Assembly_(Russia))

²⁸ Wikipedia Contributors. (2023, December 8). *Russian legislative elections*. Wikipedia; Wikimedia Foundation. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_legislative_elections

²⁹ Turner, J. (2022, March 24). Where did Russia's post-communism economic reforms go wrong? - Economics Observatory. Economics Observatory. <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/where-did-russias-post-communism-economic-reforms-go-wrong>

at the time, and the CPRF won 22% of the vote, gaining 58 seats in the Duma.³⁰ This is especially significant considering the high turnout and recency of communist dismantlement, displaying how intensely the Russian people yearned for the previous regime.

Decades later, a vastly ideologically different reactionary resurgence occurred in the United States. In 2016, Donald Trump, an American businessman and television star, unexpectedly took the U.S. presidential election by storm. Trump stood for an ideology of reactionary, traditionally conservative, and nationalist political thought.³¹ His motto, “Make America Great Again,” is inherently reactionary, as it calls for a restoration of past American society/ideals deemed “great”. Republican President Ronald Reagan first used the phrase “Let’s Make America Great Again” as one of several slogans for his 1980 presidential campaign.³² Reagan was also an American reactionary success, calling to shrink “Big Government” and reverse the socially liberal progress of the 60s and 70s.³³ Many people may interpret the slogan in different ways: some may see it as bringing back these Reagan-era ideals, others may reminisce about the age of 1950s American affluence.

With the context of Trump’s platform, the slogan references his assertion that immigration and multiculturalism have deteriorated the past narrative of American exceptionalism. His suspicions around immigrants were reflected in his platform, which pushed to greatly reduce immigration and implement economically protectionist policies. This was founded on the belief that an influx of immigration increased job competition and strained social services. The MAGA movement sought a return to a time predating this increase by heavily restricting immigration. Furthermore, Trumpism is determined to return to a pre-globalization past, to address what he sees as pressing contemporary issues. Trump’s platform pushed “America-first” initiatives: a switch to producing things in the U.S. and tariffs on goods from other countries. For example, in a speech on jobs, Trump said, “skilled craftsmen and tradespeople and factory workers [who] have seen the jobs they loved shipped thousands of

³⁰ CSCE. (1996, January 3). Report on the Russian Duma Elections of December 1995 – CSCE. Csce.gov. <https://www.csce.gov/publications/report-russian-duma-elections-december-1995/>

³¹ *Conservatism - The United States*. (n.d.). Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/conservatism/The-United-States>

³² Volle, A. (2023, July 21). *MAGA movement | Meaning, Beliefs, Origins, Donald Trump, & Facts*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <http://www.britannica.com/topic/MAGA-movement>

³³ Troy, G. (2025). *The Age of Reagan | Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*. Gilderlehrman.org. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/age-reagan>

miles away. Many Pennsylvania towns, once thriving and humming, are now in a state of despair.³⁴ He references the decline of American manufacturing in the contemporary era, leading to the outsourcing of skilled workers. Restoring an industrial base through tariffs and other protectionist policies is integral to Trump's reactionary ideas. He also operated his campaign based on a populist antagonization of the D.C establishment, which he isolated himself from as someone with no previous experience in politics.³⁵ His inexperience appealed to voters when juxtaposed against Hillary Clinton, who was a contentious symbol of the very institution Trump rallied against. As a democrat politician with a career-long experience as First Lady, New York senator, and Secretary of State, Americans saw her as a political insider, whereas Trump was perceived as an outsider who would bring about populist policy change.³⁶ This is also a reaction to a previous norm in which most former U.S. presidents had backgrounds in public service, law, or the military. At the time of the election, Trump possessed none of these.

In contrast, the CPRF and Donald Trump are vastly different ideologically. Broadly, the CPRF is positioned on the far left of the political spectrum, with its ideology being rooted in Marxism-Leninism. The populist, nationalist MAGA movement is closely aligned with right-wing political ideology. In terms of economic policy, the CPRF advocated for communism and agricultural collectivism, whereas Trump, a millionaire himself, pushed for a free market and regressive tax reforms. Additionally, neither party pushed similar social reforms in their political platforms. The CPRF was centered around moving away from Western ideals, whereas the MAGA movement can be seen to embrace certain Western values such as individualism, market economy, and Western hegemony. Additionally, the CPRF also advocated for social welfare, and Trump was for shrinking welfare programs in order to reduce the federal deficit.

On the other hand, there are numerous similarities. Both parties or candidates rise to power results from a period of government distrust and a strong view of corruption from the

³⁴POLITICO. (2016, June 28). *Full transcript: Donald Trump's jobs plan speech*. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/full-transcript-trump-job-plan-speech-224891>

³⁵Kinderman, D. (2023). Donald Trump, **anti-establishment populism and the revolving door between business and politics in the United States**. *Zeitschrift Für Unternehmensgeschichte*, 68(2), 289–314. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zug-2023-0015>

³⁶ NW, 1615 L. S., Suite 800 Washington, & Inquiries, D. 20036USA202-419-4300 | M.-8.-8. | F.-4.-4. | M. (2016, September 21). *In Their Own Words: Why Voters Support – and Have Concerns About – Clinton and Trump*. Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/09/21/in-their-own-words-why-voters-support-and-have-concerns-about-clinton-and-trump/>

people. public recognized the entrenchment of Russian elites in power and struggled with the imposed economic conditions, leading to dissatisfaction with the new liberal government, prompting a push to return to communist values. The significant troubles of transitioning to a different economy and foreign policy conditions led to the CPRF surgency in the Duma. Conversely, on paper, many Americans were not dissatisfied with the previous administration. A study in December 2016 conducted by Pew Research Center found that “45% [of Americans] expect Obama to be remembered as an above average or outstanding president.”³⁷ There was also no outstanding economic turmoil at the time of the U.S. election. Inflation rates were normal, and the GDP was experiencing steady growth. However, because many Americans viewed Hillary Clinton as corrupt and a symbol of D.C. establishment, this led to a contempt for the Democratic party that had been leading the U.S. for almost a decade.³⁸ Moreover, Trump’s populism allowed voters to see him as separate from the Republican establishment as well. Additionally, since Vietnam and the Iraq war, American distrust in the government has trended upwards.³⁹ These factors allowed Trump to have an unexpected advantage of his identity as someone with no political experience, which he used to advance his populist message. This mirrors the distrust in the Russian government following the Chernenko War. Citizens’ public support of the war had severely waned by 1995, and furthermore, they did not have complete trust in the newborn, post-USSR government.

Alternate theories suggest that reactionary movements come about due to a general sense of status threat—when a majority group is threatened by social progress.⁴⁰ This can be observed in Trump’s case, where his message won big with the majority white population in the U.S. Analysis of the 2016 electorate by the Pew Research Center found that 54% of white voters voted for Trump, and 62% of the white male voters did as well.⁴¹ According to the status threat explanation, this dominant demographic felt vulnerable in the face of recent socially progressive

³⁷ Jones, B. (2018, August 9). An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate->

³⁸ Bryant, N. (2016, November 9). Hillary Clinton and the US election: What went wrong for her? *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37922959>

³⁹ Zeitz, J. (2018, January 30). How Americans lost faith in government. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/01/30/how-americans-lost-faith-in-government/>

⁴⁰ Christopher Sebastian Parker, & Lavine, H. (2024). Status threat: The core of reactionary politics. *Political Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12983>

⁴¹ Jones, B. (2018, August 9). *An examination of the 2016 electorate, based on validated voters*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2018/08/09/an-examination-of-the-2016-electorate-based-on-validated-voters/>

policies or actions that emerged in the 2010s, such as the legalization of gay marriage through *Obergefell v. Hodges* and the first wave of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2013.⁴² However, this aligns less in the case of the 1995 Russian elections, where there is no clear majority status threat spoken to during the election. This era was more so responding to the economic insecurity caused by a chaotic market transition rather than recent progressive social change. Some political scientists also suggest reactionary attitudes originate from simple nostalgia. This could ring true in both investigated cases, but it seems to be more of a blanket observation of reactionary politics rather than an explanation of its causes.

Despite these explanations, there is a bottom line to each reactionary surge: both originate from citizen disenfranchisement. In the democratic elections studied in this paper, public dissent with the government is at the heart of the reactionary movements. Although there was a lack of economic turmoil in the 2016 U.S. election when compared to the 1995 CPRF, it is evident that both saw the current government administrations as corrupt and sought a previous return to power. When studying reactionary attitudes, the answer to origination is in the state's political atmosphere, not any political position.⁴³ When existing regimes are perceived as corrupt or decaying, the people are more susceptible to reactionary nostalgia, especially if drastic changes have occurred in the existing regime, like in the case of the CPRF.⁴⁴ This is demonstrated in the 2016 U.S. election as well, with Trump's narrative being that immigrants are changing the country for the worse, many began to wish for a time that this change was not occurring (although this period would predate the establishment of the U.S.). Despite differences in political environment and composition, each of the two states had corruption and distrust as the primary motivators for reactionary ideologies, illustrating their importance in analyzing reactionary movements. Based on this analysis, rather than nostalgia or political affiliation, the alienation experienced by citizens is the primary motivator for a reactionary movement.

⁴²Pruitt, S. (2019, December 9). *14 Major Events of the 2010s* | HISTORY. HISTORY. <https://www.history.com/articles/2010s-decade-major-events>

⁴³ Bruggeman, J. (2024, May 2). *The Politics of Nostalgia*. Fusion Magazine. <https://www.fusionaier.org/post/the-politics-of-nostalgia>

⁴⁴ Elgenius, G., & Rydgren, J. (2022). Nationalism and the Politics of Nostalgia. *Sociological Forum*, 37(S1), 1230–1243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12836>