

Warren and Trump Speeches Lay Out Competing Visions of Populism

In New York, Senator Elizabeth Warren described a government compromised by the influence of the wealthy. President Trump, in New Mexico, denounced a “failed liberal establishment.”

By Alexander Burns, 9/17/19, *The New York Times*



Senator Elizabeth Warren at a rally in New York on Monday. “Corruption has put our planet at risk, corruption has broken our economy and corruption is breaking our democracy,” she said.

Senator Elizabeth Warren stood beneath a marble arch in New York City, telling a crowd of thousands that she would lead a movement to purge the government of corruption. Not far from the site of a historic industrial disaster, Ms. Warren described Washington as utterly compromised by the influence of corporations and the extremely wealthy, and laid out a detailed plan for cleansing it.

“Corruption has put our planet at risk, corruption has broken our economy and corruption is breaking our democracy,” Ms. Warren said Monday evening. “I know what’s broken, I’ve got a plan to fix it and that’s why I’m running for president of the United States.”

Only a few hours later, on a stage outside Albuquerque, President Trump took aim at a different phenomenon that he also described as corruption. Before his own roaring crowd, Mr. Trump cast himself as a bulwark against the power not of corporations but of a “failed liberal establishment” that he described as attacking the country’s sovereignty and cultural heritage.

“We’re battling against the corrupt establishment of the past,” Mr. Trump said, warning in grim language: “They want to erase American history, crush religious liberty, indoctrinate our students with left-wing ideology.”

The two back-to-back addresses laid out the competing versions of populism that could come to define the presidential campaign. From the right, there is the strain Mr. Trump brought to maturity in 2016, combining the longstanding grievances of the white working class with a newer, darker angst about immigration and cultural change. And on the left, there is a vastly different populist wave still gaining strength, defined in economic terms by Ms. Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts, and Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

The messages underlined the possibility that the 2020 election could be the first in a generation to be fought without an ally of either party's centrist establishment on the ballot....



President Trump at a campaign rally near Albuquerque on Monday. He cast himself as a bulwark against a “failed liberal establishment.” Credit Erin Schaff/The New York Times

(Warren's) version of populism, which Mr. Sanders pioneered but did not bring to fruition when he challenged Hillary Clinton in 2016, is about attacking concentrated wealth and economic power and breaking its influence over government....

They are both trailing behind Joseph R. Biden Jr., the former vice president, in the Democratic race; Mr. Biden has run on a far more conventional message of making gradual policy improvements from the center-left, and he has expressed reservations about the rhetoric of his more liberal rivals about corporations and billionaires...

These divergent strains of populism are far from new in American politics: for much of the country's modern history, mass social movements channeling grievances with government or big business have competed with other forces directing outrage at racial and cultural minorities, immigrants and foreign countries.

“What we've seen is that Trump actually maintains strength on this issue — that, frankly, voters don't know who to trust on the issue of corruption and cleaning up Washington,” Ms. Muller (End Citizens United) said in an interview...

Ms. Warren proposed a battery of new reforms in her remarks in New York City's Washington Square Park, near the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire that she cited as an example of the oppression of the working class. And she highlighted an array of other reforms she has previously outlined, including a ban on lobbying by foreign governments and new ethics regulations on presidents and judges. She presented herself not just as an opponent of Mr. Trump, whom she called "corruption in the flesh," but of the Washington system writ large.

"Too many politicians in both parties have convinced themselves that playing the money-for-influence game is the only way to get things done," Ms. Warren said, vowing to do things differently: "No more business as usual. Let's attack the corruption head-on."

Mr. Trump's version of populism is starkly different and, to most voters, already well known. While he has periodically taken rhetorical aim at certain big corporations, like pharmaceutical companies, he has largely abandoned early efforts to make good on his drain-the-swamp rhetoric from the 2016 campaign, and he has faced a barrage of ethical questions about the intermingling of his hotel and real estate business with the work of the government. He has invited business executives and lobbyists into his administration and a number of cabinet departments and agencies have drawn close scrutiny for potential conflicts of interest, including the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of the Interior.

But Mr. Trump has still positioned himself for re-election as an anti-establishment brawler, in the same mode that helped him pull away blue-collar whites from Mrs. Clinton three years ago. He has continued to combine blue-collar concerns about issues like foreign trade with culturally conservative priorities like gun rights and immigration restriction.(and)...contempt for cultural elites.



Supporters at Mr. Trump's campaign rally near Albuquerque. Credit Erin Schaff/The New York Times

...Democrats, he (Trump) said, would enact immigration policies that would imperil their jobs and “turn every city in America into a sanctuary for criminal aliens.”

And in a state where oil and gas production is a major source of employment, Mr. Trump claimed Democrats would impose environmental policies that would empower “foreign producers” and sap profitable industries.

“Under the Green New Deal, that all goes away,” Mr. Trump said, caricaturing Democrats as seeking to eliminate cars and airplanes. “They’ll call us the hermit nation — we’ll never leave our house.”

If Mr. Trump castigated Democrats and liberals as a collective group, he offered no particular critique of Ms. Warren or Mr. Sanders, or the distinctive policies they have put forward, with the exception of their shared endorsement of a “Medicare for all”-style health care system. His lone reference to Ms. Warren was a jab at her contested claims of Native American ancestry, a mocking personal attack that Mr. Trump said was “coming back.”

Ms. Warren, for her part, only mentioned Mr. Trump in a relatively brief passage of her speech, saying that he pits people against each other on the basis of their identity so that they won’t “notice that he and his buddies are stealing more and more of our country’s wealth.”