What makes it so difficult to enact and sustain comprehensive social welfare policy that would aid the disadvantaged in the United States? Addressing the relationship between populism and social welfare, this book argues that two competing camps of populists divide American politics. Regressive populists motivated by racial resentment frequently clash with progressive populists, who embrace an expansion of social welfare benefits for the less affluent, regardless of race or ethnicity. Engstrom and Huckfeldt uncover the political forces driving this divided populism, its roots in the aftermath of the civil rights revolution of the mid-twentieth century, and its implications for modern American politics and social welfare policy. Relying on a detailed analysis of party coalitions in the US Congress and the electorate since the New Deal, the authors focus on the intersection between race, class, and oligarchy.

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Race, Class, and Social Welfare

American Populism Since the New Deal

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Many Americans experienced a rude shock on the evening of November 8, 2016, when they learned that Donald Trump would become the next president of the United States. Similarly, it had been surprising for many Americans, Republicans and Democrats alike, when Donald Trump fashioned a successful populist campaign that accumulated a string of victories in Republican primaries and ultimately secured the party’s nomination at the 2016 Republican National Convention. This book argues that we should not have been caught off guard. Indeed, populist appeals are deeply embedded in the history of the Republic, and a wide variety of successful populist appeals have played influential roles in the history of its politics.

Some of these populist programs and appeals, such as Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, have been progressive efforts aimed at improving the political and economic fortunes of everyday Americans. Other reactionary populist appeals, most famously in the American South but elsewhere as well, have successfully employed political messages anchored in animosity based on race and class.

Most recently, we can see the consequences of reactionary, upside-down populist appeals with respect to social welfare policy in American politics. That is, those who need social welfare legislation the most – the economically disadvantaged – are often least likely to support it. This has clearly been the case in the vitriolic debate over the Affordable Care Act (ACA), but the problem certainly predates the difficult history of the ACA. Indeed, opposition to the expansion of the social welfare state is frequently pronounced among lower-income white voters – many of whom would be ultimate beneficiaries. We argue that the solution to this
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puzzle lies deeply ingrained within the conjoint dynamics of race and class in American life and hence in American politics.

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