**Abstract**

Populism and Economic Development in the United States: Contradictions and Possibilities

Joseph J. Molnar and Yeshu Sapkota

Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama USA [molnajj@auburn.edu](mailto:molnajj@auburn.edu)

The U.S. populist tradition championed small farmers and wage-earners who thought “the money power” — banks and industrial corporations — had seized control of both America’s economy and its government.  The most basic populist assertion is that the conflict between elite and people supersedes all other conflicts.  Yet banks and corporations are the source of many jobs in America. These actors can have a transformative effect on a rural community with the opening of facility hiring 1,000 workers or the closure of another and the loss of significant payroll where there are few alternatives. Thus they are both sources of hope and targets of resentment. This paper examines perspectives on economic development held by rural leaders and residents by using Trump voting as an indicator of populist sentiment in a dataset of U.S. counties. We explore the contours and connections between rural dependence on elite capital for investment and resentment of the consequential subservience and uncertainty associated with dependence on larger systems.