



Andrew Yang: The Techno-Populist Candidate

No 2020 presidential candidate presents the pure Technocrat plus pure Populist platform better than Andrew Yang. He is notably different than the extreme socialist or leftist candidates and should be recognized as a Techno-populist. □ TN Editor

Andrew Yang is a peculiar candidate for the presidency; not only has he no previous political experience, but he has also placed great emphasis on issues that have been on the fringes of mainstream media political discourse usually examined by academics or YouTube personalities. It is a credit to him that topics like automation, the meaning and value of work, the concentration of elite talent in to narrow career paths, and of course, UBI, have had a chance to be touched upon during this campaign cycle.

Nonetheless, the most provocative aspect of the Yang campaign, and of the man himself, is the unusual tension between a technocratic emphasis on expertise and efficiency, and the populist rhetoric he uses to

denounce remote elite enclaves, and to call for a revolution that, in the words of Bismarck, we undertake rather than undergo. Yang views himself—or at least projects himself as—the people’s technocrat. An expert that the average Joe can trust.

Yang as Technocrat

Technocracy is government by experts. The term is Greek in origin, fusing *tekhnē* (describing art or skill) and *kratos*, meaning power or rule. But the literal meaning of this word is not its salient contemporary sense. Modern Technocracy (and by extension technocrats) usually endorse government by a specific kind of expert, using a particular sort of method. The technocrat is usually (though not always) versed to some degree in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and social science domains, and tends to want governments to draw upon scientific methods and findings, argue from data and cutting edge studies, and value efficiency and systematic rigor. Social problems, to the technocrat, are thought to come more from incompetence, waste, or negligence than from ideology or malice. As Zbigniew Brzezinski eloquently put it in [*Between Two Ages: America’s Role in the Technetronic Era*](#), “Social problems are seen less as the consequence of deliberate evil and more as the unintended byproducts of both complexity and ignorance; solutions are not sought in emotional simplifications but in the use of man’s accumulated social and scientific knowledge.”

To summarize, the technocrat is someone who assumes that:

1. Government and policy would be better off if they were presided over and/or dictated by technical experts.
2. The problems of politics are primarily problems of efficiency and administrative dysfunction.
3. The application of the results and methods of the sciences and/or other technical fields is the best way to solve our political problems.
4. There should be a resource of unassailable facts that politicians use as the basis of argument which lies outside of the realm of opinion.

One of the most striking aspects of Yang's latest book, [*The War on Normal People*](#), is just how many tech leaders, start-up gurus, entrepreneurs, and hedge fund managers this man is in contact with. Countless pages offer anecdotes of Yang jetting to dinners with this Silicon Valley leader in San Francisco or that technical expert in the Northeast. Yang, by the very company he keeps, signals that he is a member of this technocratic class.

More substantially, the thesis of Yang's book is both diagnostic and prescriptive. He argues that many of the current jobs that serve as the backbone of our economy will either be rendered obsolete by accelerating automation, or will be done by a small group of technical experts leaving many jobless and languishing in economic despair. According to Yang, the available data show this process is already well underway and will continue to worsen in the coming years. Yang calls this development the Great Displacement. And the unavoidable reality of automation, he says, will force the government to implement new economic and social policies in response. Universal Basic Income—what Yang calls the “freedom dividend” of \$1000 a month—is Yang's preferred means of dealing with this looming crisis.

Whether or not one agrees with this view, it is clearly suggestive of Yang's technocratic sensibilities. He supports his claims and ideas with data from the U.S. Bureau that show low labor force participation, the recent elimination of manufacturing jobs, and an increasing discrepancy between productivity and compensation. His claim that elite talent is clustering into a few geographic regions and disciplines rests on data from the career offices at those very elite institutions.

For Yang, data are the primary resource with which he frames his picture of what is going wrong in our nation. A reliance on data to understand problems and formulate policy responses is characteristic of the technocrat. Yang wants to give every adult in the United States \$1000 a month (adjustable for inflation) which will cost about \$1.3 trillion by Yang's own estimate. He stresses that his plan will be more efficient than the current system of government assistance programs because:

- One program will be able to accomplish the work of 126.
- Direct monetary compensation has been shown, in some studies at least, to have more positive outcomes than mediated forms of charity or relief.
- The cost of the program can be offset by a so-called VAT tax which will increase the cost of some consumer goods, and UBI will result in job growth.

Yang wants to show that his signature program will clean up administrative waste, increase efficiency, and that it is vouched for by experts. In terms of Yang's rhetoric, the following passage in particular encapsulates his technocratic sensibilities:

We have an indebted state rife with infighting, dysfunction, and outdated ideas and bureaucracies from bygone eras, along with a populace that cannot agree on basic facts like vote totals or climate change. Our politicians offer half-hearted solutions that will at best nibble at the edges of the problem. The budget for research and development in the Department of Labor is only \$4 million. We have a 1960s-era government that has few solutions to the problems of 2018. This must change if our way of life is to continue. We need a revitalized, dynamic government to rise to the challenge posed by the largest economic transformation in the history of mankind. The above may sound like science fiction to you. But you're reading this with a supercomputer in your pocket (or reading it on the supercomputer itself) and Donald Trump was elected president.

Yang focuses on the outdated and inefficient state of our modern government and the technocratic solution of cutting edge methods to modern problems, and he is vexed by the inability of people to agree on basic facts—particularly scientific ones—that ought to carry far more weight than mere opinions. For this reason, technocrats like Yang tend to favor a quasi-evangelistic outreach to the public concerning scientific education. And finally, there is the concluding reference to the benefits of technology and to its inevitable future advances.

Technocracy, being more of a method of governing than a value system or worldview, is often used by a dominant ideology to make its

ideological agenda more efficient. So in China, which has until recently been [governed as a technocracy](#) made up almost exclusively of engineers, the technocrats support communism, but in America it is often used to make neoliberal policy more effective. This being the case, the elites are never really afraid of a technocrat: They understand that the method can be used to serve almost any master. Technocracy also has the benefit, at least in the States, of flattering the ego of the middle classes. Supporting a technocrat can signal seriousness and intelligence on the part of the informed voter who cares about “serious policy issues and scientific data.” Thus technocracy, in itself, is never really a challenge to the status quo. But this description does not, by itself, fully describe Yang or his campaign.

Yang the Populist

Populism is a complex and contested term. Some commentators have understood it to mean the integration and mobilization of the people into the political process. This understanding encompasses most movement-based progressive politicians. For the purpose of this essay, however, populism will be understood as the inverse of established liberal democratic institutions. In a political environment where the general will of the people (popular sovereignty) is seen as the driving force in civic life, an institutional establishment that purports to represent the people’s interests will do so imperfectly—often looking to serve the interests of the institutions themselves and the people within them as opposed to the general public for whom said institutions were built. This division between the general will of the people, and the institutions established on their behalf, allows a politics of populism to arise.

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