

# The Populist Style in American Politics: Presidential Campaign Discourse, 1952–1996

Bart Bonikowski and Noam Gidron, *Harvard University*

This paper examines populist claims-making in US presidential elections. We define populism as a discursive strategy that juxtaposes the virtuous populace with a corrupt elite and views the former as the sole legitimate source of political power. In contrast to past research, we argue that populism is best operationalized as an attribute of political claims rather than a stable ideological property of political actors. This analytical strategy allows us to systematically measure how the use of populism is affected by a variety of contextual factors. Our empirical case consists of 2,406 speeches given by American presidential candidates between 1952 and 1996, which we code using automated text analysis. Populism is shown to be a common feature of presidential politics among both Democrats and Republicans, but its prevalence varies with candidates' relative positions in the political field. In particular, we demonstrate that the probability of a candidate's reliance on populist claims is directly proportional to his distance from the center of power (in this case, the presidency). This suggests that populism is primarily a strategic tool of political challengers, and particularly those who have legitimate claims to outsider status. By examining temporal changes in populist claims-making on the political left and right, its variation across geographic regions and field positions, and the changing content of populist frames, our paper contributes to the debate on populism in modern democracies, while integrating field theory with the study of institutional politics.

With the recent rise of radical parties in Western Europe, research on populism has gained renewed interest among social scientists, adding to a large body of existing substantive knowledge on populism in Latin America and, to a lesser degree, in the United States. Much of this research, however, has been concerned with the demand side of populist politics, that is, the factors that generate support for parties that rely on populist claims. The major limitation of this approach is that it takes for granted the notion that some parties are populist while others are

*The authors thank Carly Knight, Eleni Arzoglou, and members of the Harvard Economic Sociology Seminar for their excellent feedback on an earlier draft of the paper. Delaram Takyar, David Campos, Charlotte Lloyd, Jake Matthews, and Michael Gribben provided valuable research assistance on this project. The research was generously supported by the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and the Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality and Social Policy at Harvard University. Direct correspondence to Bart Bonikowski, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 636 William James Hall, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA. E-mail: bonikowski@fas.harvard.edu.*

not. The treatment of populism as a stable ideological attribute of political actors misses a fundamental insight from research on culture and politics (Berezin 1997): political claims-making is a dynamic interactional process, in which meanings are shaped by the relations between actors embedded in social fields (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2010; Mische 2003; Slez and Martin 2007; Statham and Koopmans 2009).

Consistent with a dominant tradition in comparative political science, we define populism as a form of politics predicated on a moral vilification of elites and a concomitant veneration of the common people (Kriesi 2014; Laclau 1977; Mudde 2007). What distinguishes our approach, however, is that we measure populist claims-making at the level of individual political speeches. This allows us to study the temporal fluctuation in populism, its shifting prevalence on the political left and right, the changing content of the binary categories that constitute populist claims, and the contextual factors that shape politicians' incentives to employ populist rhetoric. We demonstrate the utility of this approach by analyzing 2,406 speeches of US presidential candidates from 1952 to 1996 using automated text-analysis methods.

We view US presidential politics as a particularly useful empirical case for four reasons. First, despite the country's long tradition of populist politics, from the nineteenth-century agrarian movements to the recent successes of the Tea Party, the United States rarely features in comparative research on populism (but see de la Torre 2015). We view this omission as unfortunate, because it contributes to a mistaken understanding of populism as a unique feature of particular political settings. Extending populism research to understudied cases like the United States can help scholars identify general mechanisms and construct a more powerful theory of populist politics.

Second, while the US case has been omitted from comparative research, American electoral discourse has been extensively studied by American historians, who have produced a wealth of secondary data on the content of US presidential campaigns. While such accounts rarely compare populism over time in a systematic manner that lends itself to the development of general theory, they enable us to rigorously validate the descriptive findings generated by our methodological approach. This gives us more confidence in the results of our automated text analysis than would be the case in a less extensively studied substantive domain.

Third, electoral speeches of US presidential candidates serve as highly ritualized performances that reflect the dominant tropes of the polity's moral order (Alexander 2011) and therefore offer a useful site for examining the persistence of populist politics. At the same time, our focus on US presidential campaign rhetoric is likely to generate conservative estimates of the prevalence of populism in American political discourse. Because presidential candidates are seeking to communicate with a broad cross-section of the electorate, their speeches are less likely to feature divisive moral rhetoric than those of candidates running in primaries or elections at lower levels of government. Should we find clear instances of populism in our data, this would suggest that populism may be even more widespread in other domains of American politics.

Finally, presidential speeches are among the few types of electoral discourse that have been digitally archived. As a result, we are able to examine fluctuations

in populism over the entire second half of the twentieth century. This extensive analysis allows us to observe patterns in populist rhetoric that would have been less pronounced over a shorter period of time.

In explaining the patterned variation in populist claims-making, we draw on field theory (Bourdieu 1994; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Martin 2003), which treats political behavior as a function of actors' struggles over resources within relational configurations of power. Discourse is a central element of field dynamics, because it serves as an articulation of taken-for-granted beliefs about the stakes and rules of the field, while also enabling actors to jockey for position through appeals to mobilizable publics. While field theory has been gaining considerable traction in political sociology, it has rarely been applied to the study of institutional politics, and elections in particular. Yet, electoral contests are cases of relationally oriented strategic action *par excellence*, which makes field theory a particularly opportune lens through which to understand their discursive dynamics. We bring together these two research traditions with the goal of contributing to the empirical elaboration of field theory and the reengagement of political sociology with the study of institutional politics (Manza and Brooks 1999; Steensland 2009).

To foreshadow our results, we find that populist claims-making has a unique discursive structure that can be identified using dictionary-based automated text-analysis methods. This in itself is an important innovation that highlights the utility of computational tools for the comparative and historical analysis of political discourse. Beyond that, our main contribution stems from the observation that the prevalence of populist claims in campaign discourse varies in systematic and predictable ways. This is true across political campaigns, including multiple campaigns run by the same candidate, but also within campaigns, with populism fluctuating over time and across geographic space. This variation cannot be attributed to the ideological preferences of the candidates or their parties, which are relatively stable. Instead, we show that reliance on populist claims is a function of the relational and interactional features of political discourse, including a candidate's position in the political field and the relationship between the candidate and his intended audience.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, we find that populism is predominantly used by political challengers rather than incumbents and that it is more prevalent among candidates who can credibly position themselves as political outsiders. We show that reliance on populism typically declines over the course of campaigns in response to the changing characteristics of the audience (though less so among incumbents), and that speeches given in the geographic strongholds of each party are more likely to feature populist language. These results demonstrate that populism is a significant feature of American presidential politics among both parties and, therefore, that the United States should be considered a central case in comparative research on populist politics.

## Populism as a Relational Phenomenon

In defining populism, we draw on Laclau's (1977) classic theory (as well as more recent work by Mudde [2007]), which emphasizes the formal structure of

populist claims. Within this tradition, populism is predicated on a moral opposition between the people, who are viewed as the only legitimate source of political power, and the elites, whose interests are perceived as inherently contrary to those of the populace. The specific elites targeted by populist claims can vary, from elected politicians and business leaders to intellectuals, but they are invariably portrayed as having betrayed the public trust. In the case of elected officials, a common accusation is that instead of representing the electorate, they serve special interests in order to increase their own political and economic power. Corporate elites, on the other hand, may be seen as exploiting workers and consumers in the pursuit of wealth, often through the cooptation of politicians. In addition, populist claims often emphasize the social distance between common people and the elites, with the latter portrayed as out of touch and disconnected from the everyday problems of the former. This is a particularly common charge against intellectuals and civil servants. Finally, in some variations of populist rhetoric, elites are framed as having been co-opted by disparaged out-groups, which are placed outside the symbolic boundaries of “the people” (Bail 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Given their anti-establishment orientation, populist claims often advocate far-reaching solutions for redressing the perceived power imbalance, such as the replacement of representative institutions with direct democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). In particular, intermediary institutions, such as the judicial system and parliamentary bodies, are frequent targets of populist critiques, due to their emphasis on procedural checks and balances rather than the direct translation of the majority’s will into policy outcomes (Urbainati 1998). In more mainstream political contexts, where calls for regime transformation would appear overly radical, populist appeals typically advocate the unseating of existing elites in favor of political outsiders, who are claimed to be more deeply committed to representing the people’s interests.

What is central in the above definition—though less frequently borne out in empirical research—is that populist claims are not inherently tied to progressive or conservative ideology (Kriesi 2014; Laclau 1977). Indeed, examples of populism on both sides of the political spectrum abound, from the leftist Chavismo in Venezuela to the right-wing nationalism of the French National Front. In the United States, populist rhetoric fueled the anti-Communist inquests of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, the exclusionary appeals of George Wallace, and the anti-Washington rallies of the Tea Party, but also the 1999 anti-globalization riots in Seattle and the Occupy Wall Street protests. Despite the flexibility of populist claims, case-based research typically focuses on particular ideological variants of populism in a given country or region, ignoring the full ideological range of populist claims (but see de la Torre 2015; Kazin 1995; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012). Our paper parts with this approach by inductively measuring populism among both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. We view this as an important step in understanding the general mechanisms that shape the political use of populist rhetoric.

While the classic definition of populism serves as a useful conceptual starting point, it leaves unspecified the level of analysis at which populism should be studied (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). Many of the contemporary studies of populism in Western Europe, for instance, classify specific political parties as

populist and then seek to explain their electoral performance.<sup>3</sup> This strategy has proven fruitful in understanding the rise of far-right parties in Europe; its major limitation, however, is that it assumes populism to be a stable property of political actors. An alternative—and more sociological—approach views populism not as an ideology but as a mode of political practice: “a specific set of actions that politicians and their supporters *do*—rather than as a type of movement, party, [or] regime” (Jansen 2011, 82). For our purposes, the most important feature of this practice-based approach is its focus on the discursive dimension of populist claims (cf. Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2009; Jagers and Walgrave 2007).

Treating populism as a form of claims-making allows us to shift the level of analysis from political actors to individual speech acts embedded in fields. This approach is in line with sociological work that considers relationally articulated claims as constitutive elements in the construction of social and moral boundaries (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2010; Lamont 2002; Statham and Koopmans 2009). Our emphasis on dynamic claims rather than fixed ideology makes it possible to ask not only who engages in populist discourse, but also under what circumstances populist claims are more or less likely to be employed.

## Populism and Electoral Campaign Discourse

Within a field-theoretic perspective, politics is ultimately a relational contest over control of material and symbolic resources, including the ability to define the rules of the political field itself (Bourdieu 1994). As challengers and incumbents vie for position within the field, they make discursive appeals to a variety of stakeholders in order to mobilize support for their political projects (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Discourse is thus a crucial aspect of all domains of politics, but its strategic use is the most explicit in electoral campaigns, which lay bare the otherwise opaque dynamics of field competition.

While field theory has rarely been used to study institutional politics (but see Sleaz and Martin 2007), a large volume of scholarship in political science has considered the dynamics of electoral discourse (Jacobson 2015). This literature has typically examined how the content of presidential candidates’ messaging varies based on two strategic objectives: persuasion, whereby candidates seek to change voters’ beliefs, and priming, whereby candidates seek to affect voters’ relative weighting of different issues (in practice, campaign messages typically aim at achieving both goals simultaneously [Chong and Druckman 2007, 116]). Sides (2006) argues that persuasion may be a more precarious task for candidates, because individuals tend to prefer information that confirms their pre-existing biases. Campaign rhetoric is thus first and foremost a tool candidates use to “win votes by emphasizing issues where they perceive an advantage, thereby making these issues prominent in voters’ minds” (Sides 2006, 407). The state of the economy, for instance, has often been considered an especially important factor in shaping presidential candidates’ messages. Candidates who are able to take credit for a strong economy or lay blame on opponents for poor economic conditions will emphasize economic issues, while those who are likely to be held responsible for poor economic conditions or who run against incumbents presiding over a

thriving economy will try to increase the relative salience of other issues (Vavreck 2009, 31–32).

While this work helps explain what topics candidates talk about, it tells us less about how they frame their chosen issues, a consideration that is more centrally relevant for our analysis. Here, research on emotions and morality holds more promise. Scholars have shown that emotionally charged frames, such as those promoting fear and moral judgment, have a high degree of salience and tend to be more stable over the campaign period than policy-oriented frames (Jerit 2004). Widely accessible narratives concerning moral worth, such as those about the inherent greed of bankers or the inevitable corruption of politicians, are likely to be particularly powerful, because they encourage group comparisons that increase people's sense of self-worth (Lamont 2002) and produce visceral emotional reactions that serve as powerful guides for political decision-making (Haidt 2012).

Research in political and cultural sociology suggests two important mechanisms that may affect particular candidates' incentives to employ morally charged populist discourse in specific moments. First, both the content and framing of political claims are likely to be shaped by a speaker's position in the political field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Slez and Martin 2007). The most important distinction for our purposes is between incumbents and challengers (Gamson 1975). In elections, incumbents wield the advantage of past electoral successes and demonstrable experience in positions of political power, as well as the ability to set the terms of the public debate about their accomplishments. To counteract these advantages, challengers must "articulate an alternative vision of the field and their position in it" (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 6). One way of accomplishing this is to portray the incumbent as part of a morally contemptible political establishment and to frame one's own candidacy as that of a political outsider fighting for the people's interests—that is, to rely on populist rhetoric.

Of course, the ability to effectively make anti-establishment claims depends on the credibility of the populist frame in a given context, an outcome that is itself influenced by the challenger's political background and the setting in which a speech is given. This brings us to the second insight from the study of culture and politics: that the content of political discourse depends not only on the attributes of the speaker, but also on the speaker's relationship to the audience. Whether a particular claim is viewed as credible depends on its resonance with the everyday experiences and common narratives of the target public (Snow and Benford 1988). To be effective, therefore, political appeals must take into account the potential heterogeneity of their recipients; the more diverse an audience, the more likely it is that speakers will rely on inclusive and widely accessible messaging (Mische 2003). Given that political candidates dedicate considerable resources to analyzing the preferences of potential voters, we can expect the prevalence of populism in political speeches to vary considerably across settings and over the duration of political campaigns.

What the preceding discussion makes clear is that in order to take into account the relational and field-dependent aspects of populist claims-making, it is essential to attend to contextual factors that shape the content of campaign speeches, such as their timing and location, their intended audience, the broader political



and economic conditions, and the structure of incentives in the political field. By doing so, we hope to contribute to the development of a more general theory of populist politics.

## American Populism since the 1950s

Accounts in the popular press and academic scholarship suggest that the past two decades have witnessed a general surge in populist politics in Western democracies, giving rise to “a populist zeitgeist” (Mudde 2004). While scholars of European politics have documented the rise of radical right-wing parties (Berezin 2009; Kitschelt 1995; Norris 2005), in the United States the discussion has focused primarily on social movements and intra-party politics. Populist voices within the Republican Party have received the most sustained attention, particularly following the rise of the Tea Party movement (Rosenthal and Trost 2012; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). As Kabaservice (2011) notes, however, the Tea Party is merely the latest manifestation of a long trend that has seen the gradual replacement of moderate conservatives in Congress with successive cohorts of increasingly populist Republican politicians. The roots of modern conservative populism can be traced back to what Hofstadter (1964, xxxvi) termed “the paranoid style in American politics,” a form of political language characterized by a Manichean worldview, misinformation, and “crusading mentality,” as epitomized by Senator McCarthy’s rhetoric during the 1950s and Goldwater’s presidential campaign of 1964.

In contrast to the “populist zeitgeist” thesis, other research suggests that populism in presidential discourse has decreased over the years. Bimes and Mulroy (2004, 138), for instance, argue that “the rise and legitimation of a far-reaching national administrative state has led to the toning down of presidential populist rhetoric,” as even traditionally anti-statist Republican politicians have had to come to terms with “big government.” While the authors do not claim that populism has disappeared altogether from American political discourse, they do suggest that compared to previous historical eras, contemporary political leaders’ ability to credibly utilize populist appeals has diminished.

While some scholars focus on general trends in populism, others point to the ways in which populism has fluctuated across the ideological divide over time. In his influential historical study, Kazin (1995) argues that populism is intimately intertwined with the notion of American exceptionalism, the belief that the United States stands out among the nations as a beacon of freedom. Central to this conception of American identity is the notion that the people must be vigilant against the excesses of powerful elites. Kazin traces how this anti-establishment sentiment has been expressed through populist discourse on both sides of the political spectrum, from the agrarian Populist Party of the late nineteenth century, through the labor and Prohibition movements of the early twentieth century and the paranoia of Cold War conservatism, and finally, to the New Left and the New Right of the 1960s and beyond.

The idea that populist language varies across the ideological divide and over time therefore has deep roots in the literature. What is missing from this research is systematic measurement of the relative changes in populism and a clear

formulation and empirical analysis of the conditions that predispose some political actors to use specific types of populist language in particular circumstances, while making this strategy less appealing to others. Addressing these lacunae is our primary objective.

## Data and Methods

Our analyses rely on data from the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse (Annenberg School for Communication 2000), a digital compendium of verbal communication by US Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. The dataset covers 21 campaigns over 12 elections from 1952 to 1996 (speeches for the 1964 Republican Goldwater-Miller campaign were unavailable), including all speeches, television ads, and debates delivered by the candidates between September 1 and Election Day, as well as the nomination acceptance speeches delivered at the party conventions. We restrict the data to candidates' public speeches, which range in number from 39 for George H. W. Bush's 1988 campaign to 310 for John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign. The total number of speeches is 2,406.<sup>4</sup>

In order to examine how candidates' political biographies and the contexts in which the speeches were given are associated with patterns of populist claim-making, we merged the speech-level information with data on each candidate's state of origin, previous elected position, and years since first election to federal office or governorship, as well as the state where the speech was given. We also distinguish between different campaign stages using the month and week in which each speech was given.

Given the difficulty of manually coding over 2,000 lengthy texts, we employ dictionary-based analysis to automatically detect populist language in the candidates' speeches. This approach searches the documents for the occurrence of a predetermined list of terms and assigns a prevalence score for each term to each document. Though a number of alternative prevalence measures are available, in the interest of parsimony and ease of interpretation we chose to classify documents using a simple binary variable indicating the presence or absence of populist content. This allows us to compare counts and proportions of populist speeches by the variables of interest, including speakers, parties, years, and months.

We developed the dictionary of populist terms iteratively, by first reading a random subset of speeches and identifying potentially relevant terms, then running the analysis based on those terms, and finally, finding additional terms in documents identified by the algorithm as populist. The process was repeated until we could no longer find any new relevant terms.<sup>5</sup> As with any automated text-analysis method, validation is an essential step in the analysis (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). To ensure that our analysis did not include false positives, we closely read relevant excerpts of all the speeches that were classified as populist by the algorithm and manually recoded all instances of incorrect classification.<sup>6</sup> This allowed us to achieve 100 percent measurement validity (with manual coding treated as the baseline). While it is possible that our data contain some false negatives—that is, populist speeches that the algorithm



failed to identify as populist—their numbers are likely to be low, given our extensive search for relevant dictionary terms.<sup>7</sup> The content of the final dictionary is outlined in appendix A.

A few examples help illustrate our coding strategy. One variety of populist rhetoric, for instance, is based on the claim that politicians do not adequately represent the electorate. In this vein, George McGovern relied on a particularly salient trope of American politics in his 1972 contest against Richard Nixon, the cooptation of politicians by “special interests”:

We feel we have lost control of our own government, that it has become our master instead of our servant, that we are being ruled by special interests, and by politicians who don't care about us. To a tragic extent, that is exactly what has happened.

This strategy accomplishes a number of distinct objectives. First, by using the first-person plural, McGovern draws boundaries around a unified community of voters with shared interests and includes himself within its bounds. Second, he conflates the government with all elected officials and depicts them as unconcerned with the plight of common Americans (in distinctly affective terms, by using the verb “care”). Finally, he engages in a common populist strategy that depicts elected officials as having abandoned the interests of people in favor of clientelistic ties to another group that is viewed as both unpopular and powerful. In this case, the reference to special interests is vague, but in other instances, the claims are quite explicit.

Among the explicit targets of populist claims-making, economic elites are particularly common. For instance, in 1968, Hubert Humphrey linked Richard Nixon to Wall Street in the following manner:

But while Mr. Nixon has been silent, his campaign managers have been mailing secret messages to special interests, such as the stock market traders on Wall Street, assuring them that a Nixon administration will look after their special interests—forget the public interest.

Bill Clinton used a similar argument against George H. W. Bush in 1992:

If you wanted to do something to pollute the environment, you got quick access in Washington, but if your job was cleaning up the streets, all you got was a tax increase. If you really believed in working hard and you ... you were a telephone operator, there was nobody home for you at the White House. But if you were a slick Washington operator, you got whatever you wanted. I think we ought to turn all that around and go back to good old American common sense. We can do better than that.

Rather than drawing parallels to economic elites, Republicans frequently frame Democratic politicians as out-of-touch cultural elites, whose values are at odds with core American principles. For instance, in 1988, George H. W. Bush criticized Michael Dukakis in this manner:

I do not recoil in horror from the idea of a child saying a prayer in a school. I support a moment of voluntary prayer or silent prayer. I know

this is a difficult issue for some people. But the intellectuals have, in my friend Bill Bennett's phrase, "fastidious disdain" for public expressions of religious sentiment that is, to my mind, unreasonable and ungenerous. The overwhelming majority of the people feel a moment of silence or silent prayer is a legitimate right. And I agree with them.

Here again, the binary classification typical of populist rhetoric performs considerable discursive work: Bush portrays himself as a regular American who believes in God and prays regularly, while Dukakis is framed as belonging to a fringe elite that is at its core un-American. The argument is reinforced by a reference to a long and salient tradition of anti-intellectualism in American public discourse (Hofstadter 1966).

Because of their depiction of morally corrupt elites and their defense of ordinary people, all four speeches—and others like them—were coded as populist in our data. While we treat such speeches as structurally similar, our analyses also examine the differences in the substantive content of populist claims made by both parties.

## Hypotheses

Building on insights from comparative populism research, historical studies of US political discourse, and field theory, we develop hypotheses regarding variations in the use of populist rhetoric by presidential candidates across parties, field position, time, and geographic region. We discuss the reasoning behind each hypothesis and then summarize the predictions in table 1.

*Hypothesis 1.* While populist language requires a binary construction of "the people" and "the elite," the content of these categories is likely to vary with the ideology of the speaker (Kriesi 2014). Based on the historical ideological commitments of the two parties, we expect Republican populist language to target the federal government (e.g., bureaucrats, federal agencies, the courts) and Democratic populist language to primarily target economic elites. While such a finding would be intuitive, it would further validate our methodological approach and serve as evidence for the analytical separability of the structure of populist claims from their ideological content.

*Hypothesis 2.* It is our contention that the use of populist frames in campaign rhetoric is not solely the function of candidates' or parties' predictions, but also of their relational position within the political field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012). In particular, populism is likely to be a precarious rhetorical strategy for actors who are widely perceived to belong to the political elite and a potentially profitable rhetorical strategy for those with credible outsider status. This leads us to expect greater reliance on populism among representatives of the challenger party compared to representatives of the incumbent party.

*Hypothesis 3.* Building on the previous hypothesis, we distinguish between different degrees of outsider status by coding candidates'

**Table 1. Hypotheses**

Hypothesis	Unit of analysis
<i>Hypothesis 1 (content of populist claims).</i> Democrats rely primarily on economic populism and Republicans rely primarily on anti-statist populism.	Party
<i>Hypothesis 2 (field position: incumbency).</i> Representatives of the incumbent party rely on populism less than representatives of the challenger party.	Campaign
<i>Hypothesis 3 (field position: prior office).</i> Previous political position determines credibility of populist claims, with members of the administration least likely to rely on populism, followed by members of Congress, governors, and those who never held office.	Campaign
<i>Hypothesis 4 (field position: political career).</i> The longer a candidate's political career, the lesser his reliance on populist rhetoric.	Campaign
<i>Hypothesis 5 (intended audience: campaign phase).</i> On average, campaigns become less populist as they approach Election Day.	Campaign, time to election
<i>Hypothesis 6 (intended audience: campaign phase and field position).</i> Challengers become less populist over time and incumbents become more populist, leading to gradual convergence.	Campaign, time to election
<i>Hypothesis 7 (intended audience: geographic region).</i> Candidates employ populist language in accordance with local political conditions, with Republicans focusing on the South and Democrats focusing on the Midwest and Northeast.	Party, geographic region

political positions prior to their presidential campaigns. We expect reliance on populism to increase proportionally with perceived distance from the federal political elite, ranging from members of the previous administration (presidents or vice presidents) and members of Congress to governors and those who held no previous elected office. Outsiders should be more likely to make populist claims for two reasons: first, they need to offer a strong alternative narrative to that offered by the establishment candidate, and second, their anti-establishment claims have a greater chance of being viewed as credible by the electorate.

*Hypothesis 4.* An additional dimension of outsider status may be reflected in the candidate's professional résumé. A candidate may have held no official position prior to the election campaign, but may still have been a public figure for many years. The longer the political career of a candidate, the less credible the candidate's populist challenges may appear to the electorate. We operationalize variation in the length of political careers as the number of years since the candidate was first elected to federal office or governorship.

*Hypothesis 5.* Reliance on populism may vary not only across campaigns, but also over the duration of any single campaign. This is likely to be a function of the changing audience for campaign messaging, with early stages of a campaign targeting the candidate's political base and later

stages focusing on the general electorate. Given that party bases tend to be more ideologically extreme than the median voter, we should observe a decrease in populism as campaigns approach Election Day.

*Hypothesis 6.* The attenuation effect posited in Hypothesis 5 is likely to vary with the candidates' relative positions in the political field. In particular, challengers, whom we expect to be more populist in general, should scale back their populist rhetoric over time to appeal to the general electorate. In contrast, incumbents who are likely to be less populist than challengers in the first place, may be gradually pushed to respond in kind to the populist claims of their opponents. If so, we should observe countervailing trends for challengers and incumbents, which should produce a gradual convergence in their respective reliance on populism in the final weeks of the election.

*Hypothesis 7.* If all politics is local, populist politics should be no exception. Interacting with different constituencies across geographical regions, candidates should be expected to tailor their rhetoric to the audience they address. In particular, Republican candidates should rely more strongly on populist rhetoric when campaigning in the Southern states, because the South has played a fundamental role in shaping the political repertoires of the contemporary Republican Party (Lowndes 2008). Expectations regarding regional variations among Democrats are less straightforward. The Northeast is often characterized as especially socially liberal, while the Midwest has a long tradition of labor union mobilization and agrarian populist ideology; consequently, these regions may be more receptive to Democratic populist rhetoric.

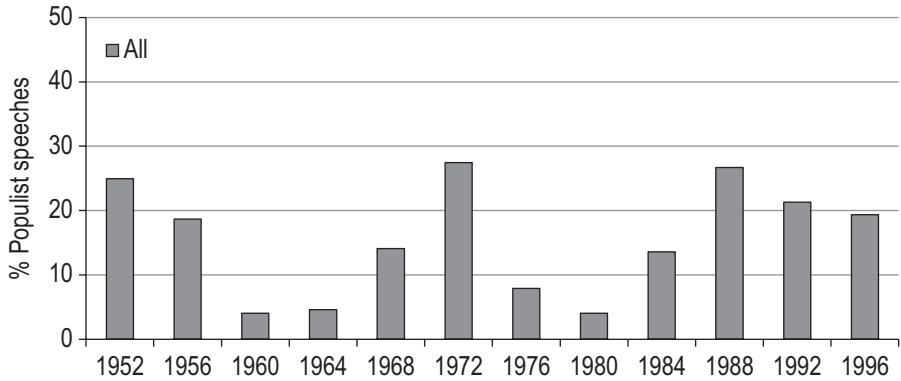
We summarize the hypotheses in table 1. The second column of the table lists the appropriate unit of analysis for each hypothesis test.

## Results

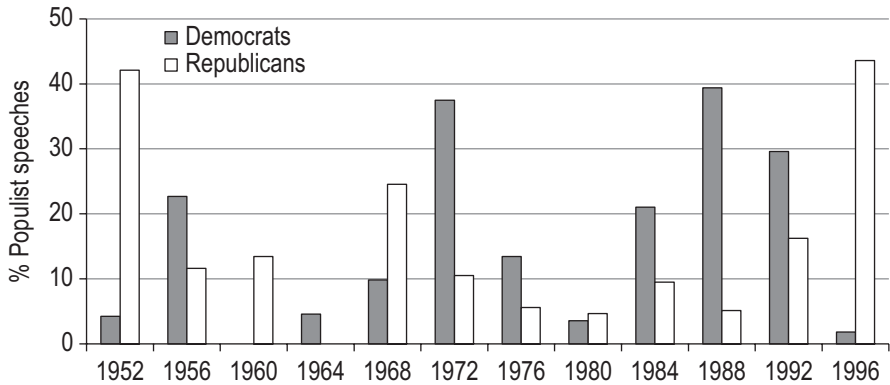
Before testing the hypotheses, we begin with an overview of the distribution of populist claims over the 12 elections covered by our data, as illustrated in figure 1. The overall trend is trimodal, with peaks in the early 1950s, the early 1970s, and the late 1980s through the 1990s. In contrast, the early 1960s and late 1970s through the early 1980s appear to mark low points in the use of populist rhetoric in US presidential elections. Though the past three decades may indeed be characterized by a "populist zeitgeist," populism is certainly not a new feature of electoral discourse. In total, 15.2 percent of presidential candidates' speeches contain populist language, with a minimum of 4.1 percent in 1960 and 1980 and a maximum of 27.5 percent in 1972.

The results are broken down by party in figure 2. The mean percentage of populist speeches for Democrats is 11.1, while for Republicans it is 20.4. The 1952 Eisenhower campaign, the 1996 Dole campaign, and the 1968 Nixon campaign represent peaks in Republican populism, at 42.1, 43.6, and 24.6 percent, respectively, while the largest peaks for the Democrats correspond to the

**Figure 1. Prevalence of populist speeches, 1952–1996**



**Figure 2. Prevalence of populist speeches by party, 1952–1996**



1988 Dukakis campaign (39.4 percent), the 1972 McGovern campaign (37.5 percent), and the 1992 Clinton campaign (29.6).

These descriptive results demonstrate the utility of our conceptualization of populism as an attribute of claims and not political actors. Seven of the candidates covered by our data competed in multiple elections, either in successive attempts at the presidency or as incumbents running for reelection; they include Eisenhower (1952, 1956), Stevenson (1952, 1956), Nixon (1960, 1968, 1972), Carter (1976, 1980), Reagan (1980, 1984), Bush (1988, 1992), and Clinton (1992, 1996). In all of these cases, the prevalence of populism in the candidate's speeches varies from campaign to campaign, with the largest differences observed for Eisenhower (30.5 percentage points), Clinton (27.7 points), and Nixon (14 points). Given this variation, it is clear that populism is best thought of not as a core ideological commitment of a given candidate or party, but as a framing strategy, the use of which is shaped by the structure of political constraints and opportunities prevailing at the time of each campaign.

To place the aggregate results in historical context and evaluate their face validity, we consider six campaigns that stood out as especially populist in our

data: Eisenhower in 1952, Nixon in 1968, McGovern in 1972, Dukakis in 1988, Clinton in 1992, and Dole in 1996.

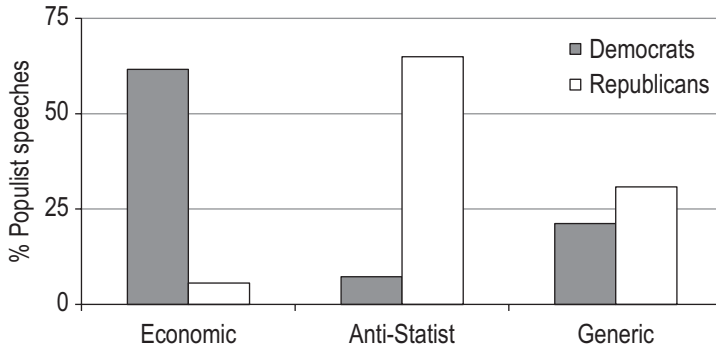
In 1952, Eisenhower had held no political position prior to the campaign, making him well positioned to rely extensively on populist rhetoric. Eisenhower made an explicit decision to focus his speeches on a critique of the Truman administration's policy on three issues: Korea, Communism, and corruption (known as the K1C2 formula) (Small 2003). This rhetorical strategy lent itself to populist framing, because the common target for all three issues was the existing political establishment in Washington—the same elites who allegedly ineptly handled the Korea conflict, enriched themselves at the cost of the electorate through corrupt practices, and were suspected of Communist sympathies.

The following decade featured low to moderate levels of populism until the 1968 election, when Nixon's "silent majority" campaign produced a major increase in populism. Although the populist language of this election is probably best captured by the infamously inflammatory third-party candidate, George Wallace (whose speeches are absent from our data), Nixon's second presidential campaign sought to capture the same anti-liberal sentiment in subtler ways. As noted by Lowndes (2008, 130), "Nixon identified an enemy within. The antiwar movement was, he implied, more dangerous than the external enemy itself." He opposed the ostensible liberal rabble-rousers with a "silent majority" of peaceful Americans, a vague category with exclusionary class and racial undertones. Given that these moral appeals were based on a binary opposition between those who were committed to true American values and those who sought to disrupt the American way of life, it is not surprising that we find high levels of populism in this campaign. Furthermore, at that point Nixon had been out of office for eight years, which bolstered the credibility of his self-presentation as an outsider and defender of average Americans against the ostensible threat of radical liberalism.

In the 1972 election that followed, the decline in Nixon's reliance on populist language is consistent with the shifts in the political field. By then, Nixon was unquestionably at the core of the political establishment and the position of the political outsider was assumed by George McGovern, widely described as a "prairie populist" for his strong commitment to social justice and resolute critique of the corrupting effects of power (Stimson 1975). McGovern's campaign sought to tap into left-liberal disaffection with mainstream Washington politics by evoking "the poignant strains of an idealism betrayed, of American values reasserted to oppose rulers who had lost touch with the needs and desires of 'ordinary people' ... to preserve the interracial, cross-class electoral base that had elected every democratic president since FDR" (Kazin 1995, 215). Even though McGovern had a long record of public service as a Congressman and senator, he was able to make credible claims to outsider status as a challenger to an incumbent president.

The late 1980s and early 1990s feature large spikes in Democratic populism, with both Mondale and Dukakis (a past vice president and a governor, respectively) as outsiders seeking to—unsuccessfully—challenge the popularity of Reagan and Bush with anti-elite appeals to the middle-class.<sup>8</sup> Dukakis in particular repeatedly sought to frame Bush as an ally of the rich, who ignored the plight



**Figure 3. Type of populism by party**

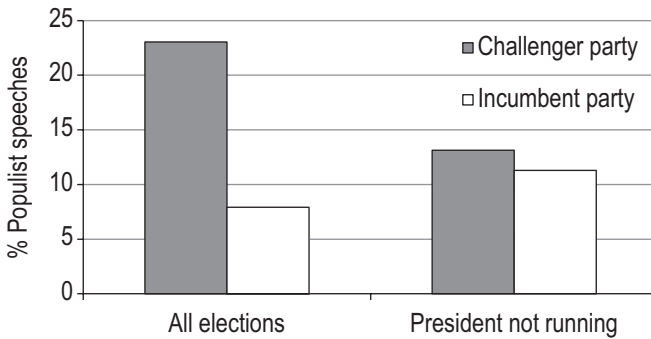
of everyday Americans. What Dukakis failed to do in 1988, Clinton achieved forcefully in 1992, relying frequently on appeals to the popular will and on critiques of elite economic power (Kazin 1995; Thomas and Baas 2009). Indeed, Clinton's 1992 campaign, symbolized by the slogan "Putting People First," is especially notable among Democratic presidential candidates for its populist messaging (Schneider 1994). Clinton's position as a Washington outsider—boosted by his gubernatorial credentials—was especially pronounced in light of the unusual three-term control of the presidency by the Republicans.

Finally, despite its consistency with the historical record, the extremely high level of Republican populism in the 1996 election may appear surprising in light of our hypotheses, given Bob Dole's lengthy career as a Congressman and senator. Prior to 1996, Dole had been widely perceived as an establishment politician *par excellence*, but in running against Clinton (and earlier in the primary, against Buchanan), he chose to rebrand himself as an ordinary American and a defender of Main Street interests (Grabe and Bucy 2011; Weakliem 2001). Dole's speeches featured the recurring slogan "it's your money," combined with claims that the federal government was overly greedy and irresponsible with taxpayer dollars. Dole's decision to employ populist claims turned out to be a strategic mistake: his arguments did not resonate with voters, as demonstrated by his resounding loss to Clinton (by 220 votes in the electoral college and 8.5 percentage points of the popular vote). Because of Dole's clear outlier status, we chose to omit his campaign from all the multivariate analyses.<sup>9</sup>

While the above discussion demonstrates that both parties frequently rely on populist rhetoric, the content of populist claims is likely to vary with party ideology, as argued in Hypothesis 1. To test this prediction, we grouped the dictionary terms into three thematic categories: economic (e.g., Wall Street, wealthy few, big corporations), anti-statist (e.g., bureaucrats, big government, Washington elites), and generic (e.g., loophole, crooked, power grab), with the generic category consisting of terms that could be used to critique any elite group. We tabulated the use of the three types of populism across the parties. The results are presented in figure 3.

As expected, Democrats rely primarily on economic populism that targets business elites, while Republicans engage in anti-statist populism that critiques

**Figure 4. Populism by incumbency status of candidate's party**



federal political elites. Both parties use generic populist terms to a similar degree. While this contrast is consistent with the policy orientations of both parties, what is remarkable is the starkness of the party differences. Republicans rely on economic populism in only 5.6 percent of their populist speeches, while Democrats critique the government in only 7.3 percent of their populist speeches. In addition to confirming our hypothesis, these results demonstrate the validity of our empirical approach and its ability to capture distinct types of populist language by party ideology.

The next set of hypotheses deals with candidates' relative positions in the political field. As with all forms of framing, populist claims-making is likely to be effective only when it is perceived to be credible by its intended audience. Because the resonance of anti-elite claims in presidential campaigns depends on the candidates' ability to present himself as an outsider, the speaker's political past and distance from the center of the political field are likely to play a crucial role in the process.

Hypothesis 2 focuses on the status of the candidate's party as occupying either an incumbent or a challenger position. The results are presented in figure 4. **Consistent with our expectations, representatives of an incumbent party are far less likely to rely on populist claims than those belonging to a challenger party.** Indeed, this relationship holds in 10 out of the 11 elections for which we have data on both candidates (the 1960 Kennedy campaign is the only exception). When a party has been in power for four or more years, its candidate's claims to outsider status are likely to lack credibility and will therefore be avoided. As shown in the right panel of the figure, however, when the incumbent party's candidate is not a sitting president, this relationship is weaker. Interestingly, in the latter scenario, the challenger party is also less likely to rely on populist claims, presumably because it stands to benefit less from anti-elite attacks on the previous administration.

The bivariate analysis provides preliminary support for Hypothesis 1, but it is possible that the results are driven partly by the distribution of speeches across candidates. To eliminate this possibility, we reran the incumbency analysis using a logistic regression predicting the probability that a speech is populist. The model corrected the standard errors for the clustering of speeches within campaigns (that is, within candidate-years) and included a control for speech length,

because speeches with more words may be more likely to contain populist language. The results, presented in table 2, model 1, provide further evidence for Hypothesis 1: the odds ratio of an incumbent's speech being populist, compared to a challenger's, is 0.279 and the coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the association ceases to be significant in model 2, which is limited to elections following the incumbency of a two-term president. Speech length is a significant predictor of populism in both models.

Hypothesis 3 extends the field-position argument beyond the criterion of incumbency, under the assumption that candidates with different political career backgrounds will systematically vary in their ability to present themselves as credible outsiders to the electorate. As expected, the bivariate results, presented in figure 5, suggest a positive linear trend in the use of populism as the candidate's distance from the center of the political field increases. Members of the previous administration (i.e., presidents or vice presidents) are least likely to make populist claims, followed by members of Congress, governors, and finally, those who held no previous political office.<sup>11</sup> The odds ratios in the multivariate results presented in table 2, model 3, are consistent in magnitude with this ordering, but the only statistically significant differences are those between administration candidates on the one hand and governors and those with no immediately prior political position on the other; the remaining group comparisons fail to reach statistical significance.

Evidence of outsider status is not limited to one's political position prior to the election, but also includes the duration of one's entire political career. Again, long-standing membership in the political elite should make it more difficult for candidates to make anti-elite claims in their campaigns. The relationship between career length and populism is negative, as predicted, with a Pearson's correlation coefficient of  $-0.12$  (see figure 6). Short careers, however, do not necessarily produce high levels of populism. This is reasonable, given that the motivating mechanism for the hypothesis was the constraint on populism presented by lengthy careers; shorter careers are free of this constraint, but this alone does not generate the incentive for candidates to use populist language (as in the case of Stevenson's 1952 campaign).

Interestingly, figure 6 also features a single outlier in the upper-right region of the scatterplot: the 1996 campaign of Bob Dole, whose career at the time spanned 35 years. When Dole is excluded from the data, the correlation reaches  $-0.33$ , providing further evidence for Hypothesis 6. The multivariate results in table 2, model 4, also support this finding, with each additional year in politics reducing the probability of using populist rhetoric by a factor of 0.952; this result is significant at the 0.1 level.<sup>12</sup>

We now move on to our predictions concerning the temporal and geographic pattern in populist claims-making. Hypothesis 5 proposed a linear decrease, on average, in the use of populist rhetoric over the course of presidential campaigns, as candidates gradually shift from appeals to the party base to appeals to the general electorate. This is indeed what we find in figure 7, which presents the relative prevalence of populism over the three months covered by the data in each campaign. In September, populism features in 16.8 percent of speeches, compared to 14.5 percent in October and 12.1 percent in November. This amounts to a 28

Table 2. Logistic Regressions Predicting Probability of Speeches with Populist Content

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	Full sample	Pres. not running	Full sample	Full sample	Full sample	Incumbent party	Challenger party	Full sample	Full sample	Democrats	Republicans
Incumbent party	0.279* (-2.57)	0.693 (-0.36)						0.291** (-3.05)			
Field: Admin.			REF						REF		
			REF						REF		
Field: Congress			1.202 (0.15)						1.730 (0.45)		
Field: Governor			2.387† (1.64)						3.219* (1.85)		
Field: None			5.026*** (3.66)						3.694*** (3.51)		
Career length				0.952† (-1.31)				0.972† (-1.38)	0.988 (-0.54)		
Campaign duration					0.947† -1.60	1.064 (0.72)	0.939* -2.00	0.979 (-0.58)	0.968 (-0.92)		
Speech: Northeast									0.900 (-0.35)	0.750† (-1.54)	
Speech: Midwest									0.525* (-1.78)	REF REF	
Speech: South									0.626† -1.54	1.122 (0.38)	



Figure 5. Populism by candidate's previous political position

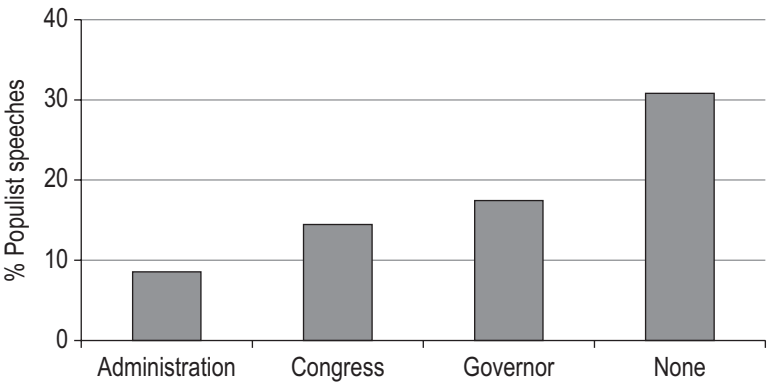
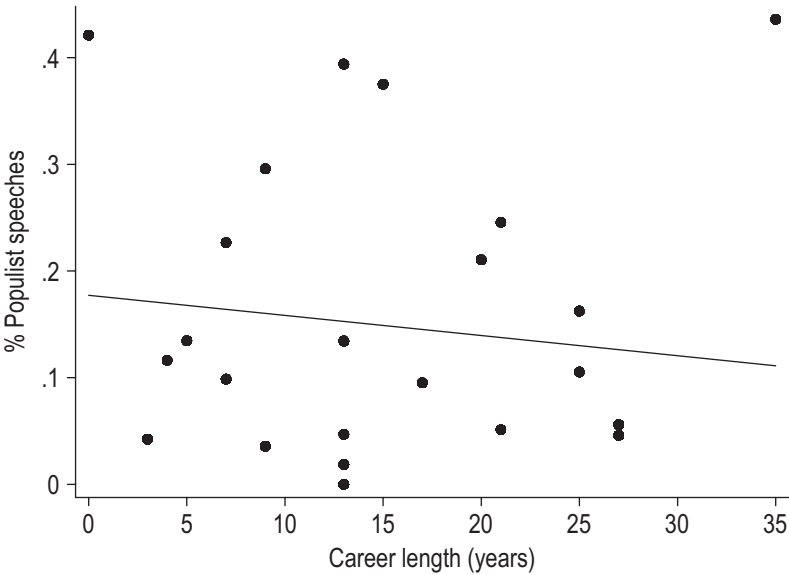


Figure 6. Relationship between political career length and use of populism

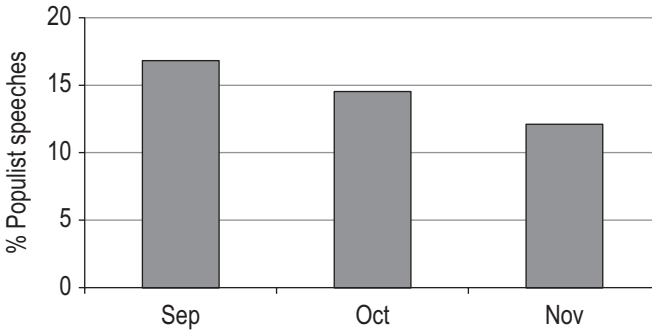


fewer week left until Election Day). Model 5 includes the entire sample (with the exception of Dole), while model 6 is limited to incumbent campaigns and model 7 is limited to challenger campaigns. The odds ratios in models 5 and 7 are both less than 1 and statistically significant, further demonstrating that populism, on average and among challengers, decreases over the course of campaigns. While the odds ratio in model 6 is greater than one, suggesting an increase among incumbents consistent with the bivariate results, the coefficient does not reach statistical significance. We interpret this as tentative evidence for a gradual convergence in populism between challengers and incumbents.<sup>13</sup>

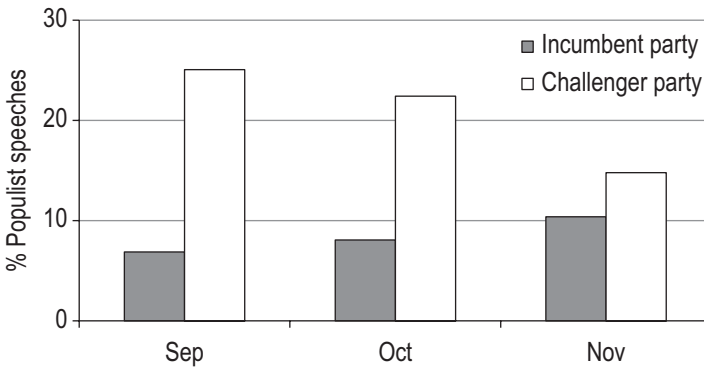
The last hypothesis considers the role of the geographic location in which a speech is given on the likelihood that it will contain populist rhetoric. The



**Figure 7. Populism by campaign month**



**Figure 8. Populism by campaign month and incumbency status of candidate's party**

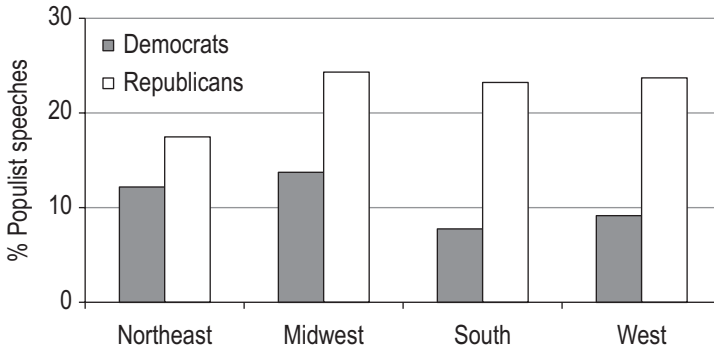


assumption here is that the same candidate is likely to rely on populism to a different degree across multiple campaign stops, depending on the perceived resonance of populist rhetoric with the local audience. Figure 9 presents the results by region, using the fourfold classification of states employed by the US Census. The evidence for Hypothesis 7 is mixed. While regional differences in populism are present, there is less variation among Republicans than Democrats.

Democrats rely most on populism in their political strongholds, which have traditionally been home to large blocs of highly educated urbanites and organized labor: the Northeast and the Midwest. Democratic reliance on populism is less pronounced in the South and the West (the latter includes both the Mountain West and the Pacific West). In contrast, Republicans employ populist rhetoric in all regions other than the Northeast, where their base of support has historically been the weakest. Both of these findings are in line with the multivariate results presented in table 2, models 10 and 11. Though mixed, the results demonstrate the broader point that populist claims-making is a relational phenomenon, which is shaped not only by the preferences or party membership of the candidate, but also by his or her relationship with a particular audience.

Finally, we consider the two full multivariate models in table 2, which weigh the relative importance of all the independent variables we have discussed. To avoid

Figure 9. Populism by region and party



multicollinearity problems, incumbent status and previous political position are entered into two separate regressions, models 8 and 9, respectively. We also include a dummy variable for party membership. The direction of all the coefficients in the two models is consistent with our previous findings, and their magnitude is largely unchanged compared to the reduced models (lack of previous political experience is the only exception—its odds ratio decreases from 5.026 in model 4 to 3.694 in model 9). The coefficients for campaign duration, however, cease to be statistically significant, while career length is significant only in model 8. The former result is unsurprising, given the contrasting odds ratios for incumbents and challengers in models 6 and 7. The change in the significance of career length in model 9 is also understandable, given that career length is associated with political position (a career length of 0 necessarily implies a lack of prior political position, and governors in our data have relatively short careers because our measure does not include their prior state-level experience). Interestingly, party membership is significant in both models, suggesting that Republicans rely on populism more than Democrats when the other variables are held constant.

## Discussion

Our paper has shown that populism is an important feature of presidential politics in the United States, with both parties frequently framing their claims using moral categories that glorify the common people and vilify elites. We have identified fluctuations in populism over time and demonstrated their association with relational predictors, such as the candidates' position in the political field and the composition of the intended audience, while describing differences in the content of populism by party. Most importantly, we have argued that reliance on populism is a strategic decision shaped by political opportunity structures, especially the degree to which populist claims made by incumbents and challengers are likely to be perceived as resonant and credible by the electorate.

Our findings have five major implications for research on populism, as well as the study of political discourse and framing more generally. First, by measuring populism as an attribute of political claims rather than political actors, it is

possible to identify and explain variation in populist rhetoric across political candidates, parties, geographical regions, and over time. This is not merely an analytical but also a theoretical point: we have demonstrated that the use of populism often varies across multiple campaigns run by the same politician. This suggests that treating certain politicians as populist and others as non-populist ignores the contextual factors that lead the same actors to choose populist framing in one context but not another. Incorporating this insight into research on the radical right (and party politics more generally) in Europe could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the incentives that have contributed to the recent rise of populist claims-making.

Second, our research has shown that neither the left nor the right holds the monopoly on populism. While this is perhaps unsurprising in the United States (Kazin 1995), it runs counter to the tendency in comparative populism research to focus on one side of the political spectrum, such as the right in Europe and the left in Latin America. By analytically separating populist claims from the ideological content with which they are associated, it is possible to identify mechanisms that cause fluctuations in populist claims-making. This, in turn, should facilitate the development of a more general theory of populist politics. While some of these mechanisms may be specific to particular countries, others are likely to be found in diverse political contexts, further reinforcing the need for systematic comparative research on the topic.

Third, we have sought to incorporate insights from cultural and political sociology into the study of populist politics by focusing on the relational and moral aspects of political discourse (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Steensland 2008). Our results have demonstrated that candidates' reliance on populism is not determined solely by their individual characteristics, but also by their position in the political field and their relationship to their intended audience. This is a result of political incentives, such as challengers' necessity to offer an alternative narrative to the success stories presented by incumbents, and of concerns over the perceived legitimacy of populist claims, which are affected by the speaker's current and past political experience. From this perspective, populism is not a stable ideology but a dynamic interactional accomplishment, whose success is driven by the relations among political actors and the feedback they receive from the electorate as much as by an actor's own fundamental political beliefs. This implies that scholars of populism should move beyond analyses of party manifestos and instead study populism as a form of political discourse that unfolds over time in concrete social contexts.

Fourth, we have sought to demonstrate the utility of automatic text-analysis methods for studying framing practices in large corpora of political documents. Though not without its limitations, this approach allowed us to observe variation across thousands of political speeches without relying exclusively on the labor-intensive process of manual coding. We hope that other cultural and political sociologists will turn to similar analytical strategies in an effort to produce and test more generalizable theories of political discourse.

Finally, our paper has sought to incorporate the relational logic of field theory into research on political discourse and framing. The notion that the structure of political claims is shaped by the interaction between the speaker and the audience

is certainly not new (Mische 2003; Snow and Benford 1988), but the mechanisms that shape such interactions had not been brought together into a coherent macro-level theory of political competition. Field theory offers a solution to this problem by emphasizing the particular challenges facing actors who occupy distinct positions in political space.

Our conclusions concerning populism as a strategy of political challengers and outsiders can be easily applied to other types of political discourse aimed at mobilizing public support for particular political projects. Moral language that activates symbolic boundaries between groups is particularly likely to benefit challengers competing against successful incumbents, because it allows them to shift the debate away from policy frames and toward persuasion based on emotional appeal. We observe this in our case, but the patterns should be even more heightened during primary elections, when candidates are appealing directly to their base.

Populism, of course, is not the only form of discourse that is predicated on moral distinctions; the salience of group boundaries is also heightened by various forms of nationalism, nativism, and chauvinism, as well as essentialist religious discourse. In fact, it is possible that these alternative moral framings reinforce one another by heightening a general tendency toward categorical thinking among target audiences. In addition to explaining candidates' strategic use of these discursive forms, future research could examine, using observational but also experimental data, the impact of such rhetoric on voters' electoral choices.

While powerful, moral language carries the risk of being perceived as inauthentic and hypocritical, because it requires the speaker to occupy a credible position of moral authority. In an environment of increased informational transparency, candidates are more likely than ever to be held accountable for their discursive choices, even as their audiences become increasingly heterogeneous. Consequently, moral appeals—populist and otherwise—can carry large costs for political actors. The degree to which such discourse pays off in terms of fundraising and electoral success is also a matter for further empirical inquiry.

In light of our substantive findings, future studies of populism would do well to take seriously the full range of variation in populist politics and to engage in systematic comparisons of the phenomenon across polities. By so doing, scholars can move past the conflation of populism with particular political ideologies and specific geographic cases, which have limited the theoretical scope of work on this topic. We view the elaboration of an inclusive empirical approach and greater engagement with field theory as important first steps in the development of a more general understanding of populist claims-making in established democracies.

## Notes

1. We use male pronouns when referring to the historically specific patterns in our data, because no female presidential candidate from either party had won the presidential primary between 1952 and 1996.
2. For instance, in the US case, Southern conservatives have used populist rhetoric to draw a connection between Northern liberal elites and the urban poor, positioning these two groups against whites in the South (Lowndes 2008, 158).

3. For a more extensive discussion of the multiple conceptual approaches in populism research, see [Gidron and Bonikowski \(2013\)](#) and [Moffitt and Tormey \(2014\)](#). For a review of work that treats populism as a form of discourse, see [Poblete \(2015\)](#).
4. Presidential candidates often reuse portions of their stump speeches in order to stay on message and to preclude the need for producing hundreds of distinct speeches. If the extent to which candidates rely on stump speeches has changed over time in response to a changing media landscape, our over-time comparisons could be biased. To verify whether this was the case, we ran a matching algorithm that examined the within-campaign variation in speech content (using the average of normalized Levenshtein edit distances between all pairs of speeches within each campaign [[Navarro 2001](#)]). Interestingly, there was very little variation between campaigns and no secular trend over time in the use of the stump speech: most campaigns relied on repeated language sparingly, producing average Levenshtein distances between 0.73 (for Nixon in 1960) and 0.79 (for Eisenhower in 1956), which suggests that between 73 and 79 percent of the content of any speech dyad would have to be altered for the two speeches to become identical. We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for identifying this potential problem.
5. In total, we hand-coded excerpts from 890 speeches. These included 599 speeches identified as populist by our algorithm, 186 speeches flagged by previous iterations of the dictionary using terms that had relatively low accuracy, and 105 speeches that were included in the validation of an alternative method we had considered earlier in the study. Given this extensive hand-coding process, it is reasonable to ask what value is added by the use of automated text analysis. First, this approach allowed us to code only the subset of data identified as relevant by the algorithm, rather than the entire corpus, saving us considerable time (we read only 40.1 percent of the corpus). Second, the algorithm identified specific passages that contained the dictionary terms, which made it possible for us to read the relevant excerpts rather than entire speeches. This further increased the efficiency of the coding process.
6. We developed precise coding rules based on an initial close reading of a random subset of speeches. We classified a speech as populist if it included a morally disparaging reference to any elite group (judgments concerning individuals or policies were not sufficient) and an unfavorable comparison (either implicit or explicit) of that group to everyday people. To ensure that our coding was systematic, we carried out an inter-coder reliability analysis of a random 10 percent sample of speeches drawn from those initially identified as populist by the algorithm. This produced a coefficient of agreement of 0.85 and a Cohen's kappa of 0.70 ([Cohen 1960](#)), which well exceeds the threshold for "substantial" reliability ([Landis and Koch 1977](#)).
7. As a further test of this assumption, we conducted our multivariate analyses on only those speeches that were hand-coded. The direction, and in most cases the magnitude, of the coefficients remained the same. As would be expected with a 60 percent reduction in sample size, however, some of the coefficients ceased to be significant. Nonetheless, the persistence of the substantive patterns observed in the full-sample analysis reassures us that our findings are not biased by unobserved false negatives.
8. Though Reagan is often thought of as a populist for his embrace of pro-market imagery that juxtaposed an overbearing state with the virtues of hardworking, middle-class American taxpayers, his campaign rhetoric was rarely framed in a morally confrontational manner that explicitly targeted elite groups. Thus, while certainly anti-statist, few of his speeches met the conditions for populism as we define it in this paper.
9. Most of the analyses were unaffected by the exclusion of Dole's speeches; we point out any substantively meaningful differences in our subsequent discussion of the individual hypothesis tests.

10. All the regression results use one-tailed significance tests, because our hypotheses are unambiguously directional. We exclude the 1996 Dole campaign from the multivariate analyses due to its outlier status.
11. We are referring here to political positions in the years immediately preceding a given election. For instance, prior to the 1968 election, Nixon did not hold political office, even though he served as vice president from 1952 to 1960.
12. Not surprisingly, given Dole's lengthy career at the time of his presidential run, the inclusion of his speeches in the multivariate analysis makes the negative association between career length and populist claims-making non-significant (though the coefficients retain their direction).
13. When Bob Dole's speeches are included in the analysis, the campaign duration coefficients lose their significance, because Dole did not appear to waver from his populist framing as the election approached.

## About the Authors

Bart Bonikowski is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Harvard University. Relying on surveys and textual data, his research applies insights from cultural sociology to the study of politics. His most recent work examined the impact of cross-national networks on attitude diffusion and the sources and consequences of within-country variation in popular understandings of the nation-state. His current projects focus on populist claims-making in Europe and the United States and the cognitive and affective dimensions of nationalism.

Noam Gidron is a doctoral candidate in government at Harvard University. His research interests include political sociology, comparative political economy, party politics, and public opinion.

## Appendix A. Dictionary Terms

The following terms were used to identify populism in presidential candidates' speeches. The terms were stemmed in order to capture all relevant inflected and derived words, as is commonly done in automated text analyses. In a few cases where stemming would have produced problematic results, only the unstemmed term was used. For instance, "bureaucrats" would have been stemmed as "bureaucrat," which would have erroneously captured the non-populist term "bureaucratic."

The dictionary was developed over a course of multiple iterations, during which new terms were added and validated. Terms that yielded excessively large numbers of false positives (such as "American people," "rich," and "lobbyist") were removed from subsequent versions of the dictionary. The final dictionary included all of the terms listed below, resulting in an overall measurement validity of 52.59 percent. Typically, the next step would involve the elimination of all remaining underperforming terms to further increase validity (for instance, the removal of the italicized terms below, all of which had false positive rates greater than 50 percent, would have increased the overall validity of the dictionary to 77.74 percent). Given, however, that we were using a relatively small corpus, we were able to manually code all 599 speeches identified as populist by the full



dictionary, which allowed us to achieve a validity rate of 100 percent (assuming the perfect accuracy of manual coding).

### **Unigrams**

Bureaucrat, *loophole*, millionaire, baron, venal, crooked, unresponsive, *uncaring*, arrogant

### **Bigrams**

Special interest, *big government*, *Wall Street*, *Main Street*, big corporations, ordinary taxpayer, *your money*, wealthy few, professional politician, big interest, *old guard*, big money, Washington elite, rich friend, power monger, power grabbing, *power hungry*, easy street, privileged few, forgotten Americans, *too big*, long nose

### **Trigrams**

Top 1 percent, average American taxpayer

### **Four-grams +**

Government is too big, government that forgets the people

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