Are Populists Truly More Concerned with Democracy?

An Analysis of the Incidence of Key Words Relating to Democracy on the Official Websites of German Political Parties

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This work attempts to answer, at least in part, the question of whether populist parties are more concerned with democracy than other political parties, based primarily on the writings of Mudde and Kaltwasser. I used a web scraper to count the occurrence of words on the official websites of three political parties in Germany, one populist and two not, and compared the incidence of key words related to democracy from a pre-determined list. I posited two hypotheses**:** first, that the AfD website will have a greater incidence of populism-related words than the CDU and the SPD websites, which supports the assertion that the AfD is a populist party; and second, that the AfD will have more overall results of democracy-related terms than the other parties, which shows a higher surface level interest in democracy, compared to the more traditional mainstream parties of the CDU and SPD. My analysis will find that, based on the significantly higher incidence of populism- and democracy-related key-words, the AfD qualifies as a populist party, and demonstrates a higher surface-level concern with democracy and democratic deficit than the CDU, which supports the characterization of populist parties as highly concerned with democratic legitimacy.

**Summary of Terms**

The initial characterization of populism as democratic extremism, and the parties of populists being more concerned with democracy than non-populist parties, requires explanation. While a more thorough discussion of populism is beyond the scope of this project, I seek to offer here at least a foundation of the term and attempts to study it over the years. Populism is a difficult phenomenon to define, as it has been co-opted, used and defined by many over the years, often for very different reasons, with some doubting the veracity or usefulness of the term entirely (see Germani, 1978, pg. 5 and Mair, 2002, pg. 6, cited in Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012, and Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008, pg. 3, for examples). However, Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser crystallize the various definitions of populism into a unified whole. Based on the observation that practically all definitions of populism include the division of society into opposing groups, an anti-elitist sentiment, and an exaltation of the common people, they define populism as “a thin-centred [sic] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people” (2012, pg. 8). This definition emphasizes the democratic legitimacy of the rulers, and that majority opinion is the basis of all legitimate governance; the ‘general will of the people’. This definition paints populism as being overtly concerned with democracy.

This work builds on and heavily borrows from previous writing I have done on populism in Europe. In previous essays I explored the topic from a qualitative, more theoretical standpoint. In the following project I sought to add a quantitative element to the study, and performed a key word analysis, counting the occurrence of words related to populism on the official websites of three political parties in Germany: the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany; AfD), the Christliche Demokratische Union (Christian Democratic Union; CDU) and the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social-Democratic Party of Germany; SPD). These three parties were chosen as they represent in Germany, respectively, the recently-founded, main populist party which was until very recently a political outsider (Dilling, 2018); and the two mainstream center-right (CDU) and center-left (SPD) parties in Germany. They therefore most clearly represented the divide between populism and mainstream politics within a single country (in this case, Germany).

**Methods and Word Choice**

The main methodology was to build a web scraper with Python and Selenium, find key words, put them in an SQLite database, and then use the Pandas and Matplotlib modules to parse and visually represent the data. The official websites were chosen primarily because all three of the political parties have websites, and all the websites convey their platform in an organized manner and place, allowing for a relative equivalence in determining what their values are. Furthermore, while one of the parties (AfD) has a publicly available full platform in .pdf format, which would have given a more complete look at the party’s values, neither of the other parties had such a thing, which means the analysis would not be equivalent. Key word analysis was chosen as the method of research primarily because defining a list of key words and then counting their occurrences is an objective measure, which cuts down on (but does not wholly prevent) bias. As a measure of some legitimacy, key word analysis has been used as a method of study in academia elsewhere, such as in the analysis by Josep Soler on the language of predatory vs. non-predatory journals (2019). This method is also referenced/used in The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology (Box-Steffensmeier, et al. 2009).

The specific key words, as well as their rough translations and definitions in English, can be found in the appendix, on page six. The key words were chosen admittedly somewhat arbitrarily; the words directly related to democracy (Demokratie, demokratisch, etc.) should be uncontroversial, but some of the words chosen to represent democracy as an ideal may not be, and this will vary from reader to reader. Some culling has been done already; words that occurred on the AfD website in significant quantities, such as ‘Volk’ and variations thereof, were excluded from the list of democracy-related words because they carry connotations of nativism and have a historical baggage which is not related to democracy per se. Instead, this word has been placed in the category of ‘words related to populism’, alongside others. It is important to note there is some overlap between the two categories of words. This is because some words are fits for both categories, so when a word occurs that is in both, it is counted in both. This author hopes that if the reader wishes to conduct an analysis with different or additional words, they feel free to do so.

**Web Scraper Results and Analysis**

Now, this analysis hinges on the AfD being a populist party, which is supported by the results of the web scraping.

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

Figure 1.0

The figure above shows the occurrence of key words related to populism between the three parties. The AfD, with seven, has the most, while the CDU has only a single occurrence, and the SPD has none at all. This stark disparity shows the AfD’s rhetoric is clearly more populist in nature. Therefore, for the purposes of the study, the AfD can be characterized as a populist party.

This makes the next part of the analysis more relevant. As a populist party, the AfD can be used as a representative to answer the main question, that is, whether populist parties are more concerned with democracy than other political parties. Based on the results of the web scraping below, the answer appears to be a resounding ‘yes.’

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

Figure 2.0

Words related to democracy occur on the AfD platform pages twenty-three times, versus five for the CDU. Like before, the SPD has no words related to democracy on its website. This shows that the AfD expresses concern for democracy at a higher rate in its rhetoric compared to other parties. However, there is a potential wrinkle in that assessment.

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

Figure 2.1

The above graph shows that when the democracy related words is whittled to just ‘Demokratie’ and related variants (‘demokratisches’, etc.) the difference is much smaller, at least between the AfD, with four occurrences, and the CDU, with three. While not enough to invalidate the previous results, it does weaken the argument somewhat that the AfD is significantly more concerned with democracy and democratic legitimacy. Still, the sheer number of other mentions supports the initial hypothesis.

One possible explanation for a relative, or in the case of the SPD, complete, lack of democratic language for the CDU and SPD, is that, as mainstream parties, they believe that their status as democratically legitimate is a given, so they do not spend time discussing that topic, whereas the AfD, as the literature argues, is based on a claim of a lack of mainstream democratic legitimacy and so focuses more on the issue, leading to a higher incidence of related key words. The AfD, as a relative newcomer, also has more to prove and must convince the electorate with rhetoric that it is legitimate.

**Limitations & Future Improvements**

There are admittedly limitations of this key word analysis method. Notably, key words only show what a group publicly expresses, not what its members really believe in private; it is entirely possible that a group expresses an ideal and does not follow through. Examining the difference between what a party expresses and what policies it votes for or introduces could be an interesting avenue for future research. Likewise, future research could compare the incidence of words related to democracy to the incidence of words related to nativism and other aspects of populism, to assess to what extent populists actually are concerned with democracy, relative to other interests like immigration and cultural issues.

**Conclusion**

The results of the web scraping support the hypothesis that the AfD is more overtly concerned with democracy than either of the two largest mainstream political parties, the CDU and the SPD. This result supports the broader characterization by Mudde and Kaltwasser that populist political parties are highly concerned with democracy and democratic legitimacy, at least on the surface. While this analysis is not intended to be a ‘smoking gun’ for the democratic inclinations of the AfD, let alone populism as a whole, it is the author’s hope that this project can serve as a springboard for further research on the topic.

Appendix

Populism Word List:

- Volk: people, folk

- Volke: Volk, pl

- völkisch: adjectival form of Volk

- völkische: see above

- völkisches: see above

- Elite: elite

- Eliten: elites

- Elitegruppen: elite groups

- Person: person

- Personen: persons

- souverän: sovereign

- souveränen: sovereign

- Souveränität: sovereignty

- Korruption: corruption

- korrupt: corrupt

- korrupte: corrupt

- korrupten: corrupt

- korruptes: corrupt

- bestechlich: corrupt, bribable

- bestechliche: corrupt, bribable

- bestechlichen: corrupt, bribable

- bestechliches: corrupt, bribable

Democracy Word List:

- Demokratie: democracy

- demokratisch: democratic

- demokratische: democratic

- demokratischen: democratic

- Demokratisch: democratic

- Demokratische: democratic

- Demokratischen: democratic

- Bürger: citizen

- Bürgern: citizens

- Bürgerin: citizen (female)

- Bürgerinnen: citizens (female)

- Person: person

- Personen: persons

- Volksabstimmung: popular vote

- Volksabstimmungen: popular votes

- Abstimmung: vote

- Abstimmungen: votes

- abstimmen: (verb) to vote

- souverän: sovereign

- souveränen: sovereign

- Souveränität: sovereignty

Raw Data Tables:

Populist Words AfD

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| page\_url | page\_title | word |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | Volk |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | Volk |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | Volk |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | Korruption |
| https://www.afd.de/aussenpolitik\_sicherheit/ | Außenpolitik | Sicherheit | souverän |
| https://www.afd.de/zuwanderung-asyl/ | Zuwanderung | Asyl | Person |
| https://www.afd.de/familie-bevoelkerung/ | Familie | Bevölkerung | Souveränität |

Populist Words CDU

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| page\_url | page\_title | word |
| https://www.cdu.de/themen/menschen-mit-behinderungen-inklusion | Menschen mit Behinderungen/Inklusion | Person |

Democratic Words AfD

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| page\_url | page\_title | word |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | souveränen |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | demokratischen |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | souveränen |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | Volksabstimmung |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | Volksabstimmungen |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | demokratischen |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/demokratie-in-deutschland/ | Demokratie in Deutschland | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/aussenpolitik\_sicherheit/ | Außenpolitik | Sicherheit | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/aussenpolitik\_sicherheit/ | Außenpolitik | Sicherheit | souverän |
| https://www.afd.de/innere-sicherheit/ | Innere Sicherheit | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/innere-sicherheit/ | Innere Sicherheit | Bürgern |
| https://www.afd.de/zuwanderung-asyl/ | Zuwanderung | Asyl | Person |
| https://www.afd.de/familie-bevoelkerung/ | Familie | Bevölkerung | Personen |
| https://www.afd.de/familie-bevoelkerung/ | Familie | Bevölkerung | Souveränität |
| https://www.afd.de/bildung-schule/ | Bildung | Schule | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/kultur-medien/ | Kultur | Medien | Demokratie |
| https://www.afd.de/kultur-medien/ | Kultur | Medien | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/steuern-finanzen-wirtschaft-arbeit/ | Steuern | Wirtschaft | Arbeit | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/steuern-finanzen-wirtschaft-arbeit/ | Steuern | Wirtschaft | Arbeit | demokratischen |
| https://www.afd.de/gesundheit/ | Gesundheit | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/energie-umwelt-klima/ | Energie | Umwelt | Klima | Bürger |
| https://www.afd.de/umwelt-agrar-verbraucher/ | Natur | Agrar | Verbraucher | Bürger |

Democratic Words CDU

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| page\_url | page\_title | word |
| https://www.cdu.de/themen/aussen-und-verteidigungspolitik | Außen- und Verteidigungspolitik | Bürger |
| https://www.cdu.de/themen/entwicklungs-und-menschenrechtspolitik | Entwicklungs- und Menschenrechtspolitik | demokratische |
| https://www.cdu.de/themen/innere-sicherheit-und-rechtspolitik | Innere Sicherheit und Rechtspolitik | Demokratie |
| https://www.cdu.de/themen/kultur-medien-und-netzpolitik | Kultur, Medien und Netzpolitik | demokratischen |
| https://www.cdu.de/themen/menschen-mit-behinderungen-inklusion | Menschen mit Behinderungen/Inklusion | Person |

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