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**The Populism of Andrew Jackson**

MEMORANDUM

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Recent populist movements around the world have focused scholarly attention on populism, and the study of contemporary populism has prompted related inquiry into the historical precedents of populism. The research summarized in the tables below demonstrates the degree to which Andrew Jackson, oft-described as the earliest or most quintessential example of American populism in the presidency (Formisano 2010; Jenkins 2017; Baker 2017), can truly be characterized as populist.

Methodology

This project uses the holistic grading method of measuring populism, wherein coders read each speech in its entirely and, using a rubric, evaluate it for essentially three important elements of populism: a Manichaean discourse, a populist notion of the people, and references to an evil elite. Each speech is ranked on a scale of 0-2, with 0 indicating a discourse that is completely non-populist, and 2 indicating a speech with strong themes of all the essential elements of populism. Ideally, each speech is double coded to ensure accuracy, and results typically show a high level of inter-coder reliability (Hawkins 2009; Hawkins and Kocijan 2013).

When measuring the populism of political chief executives, comparability is maintained by coding a speech from four distinct categories: a campaign speech, a famous speech, an international speech, and a ribbon-cutting speech. Each of these categories has slightly different characteristics. For example, populism is often higher in campaign or famous speeches, and lower in small, spontaneous speeches to domestic audiences.

The historical record limited our ability to find speeches from the four categories indicated; in Jackson’s time, candidates did not campaign for themselves, thus leaving no campaign speeches, and difficulty of travel meant that no American president travelled abroad while in office until 1906. There are consequently no speeches given by Andrew Jackson to international audiences. Though he addresses Congress on international subjects on occasion, and I have tried to include some of these speeches in the sample, these are not truly comparable with the usual definition of an international speech.

Given the limited access to the usual categories of speeches, I revised my research methodology. The selection of speeches now includes four representative examples from each presidential term, or eight total. My goal was to still measure for populist discourse in as many situations as possible (since higher levels of populism are more commonly found in famous speeches than in routine or ordinary speeches) and to maintain reasonable comparability between terms. Accordingly, the speeches from each term include speeches to large audiences (the First Inaugural Address, the Farewell Speech) and speeches just to Congress; speeches on controversial issues (like Indian Removal and Nullification) and fairly routine speeches (accepting an honor as head of state, reporting to Congress).

Additionally, I have analyzed one 1824 campaign speech and one 1828 campaign speech given on behalf of Jackson and one 1828 campaign speech given in support of John Quincy Adams, in order to ascertain whether Jackson was only portrayed to be populist by his supporters, contributing to a misperception that he displayed high levels of populism in his own discourse. I analyzed the Adams speech in order to determine whether portraying candidates as populist was common, or distinct to Jackson. Even such campaign speeches were limited in availability; however, I analyzed the most pertinent samples available in order to gain some insights into this possibility. All speeches were taken from archives of presidential speeches made available by the American Presidency Project, the Miller Center of the University of Virginia, and the Library of Congress.

I coded all speeches, and to verify the reliability of my coding, selected a sample of two speeches from each term, or 50% of the sample, for a second experienced coder to code and verify. This method provides enough inter-coder reliability that I am satisfied with the results of the other speeches; all of the double coded scores were within a half-point of the scale from each other.

Results

Table 1.1 Jackson’s Populist Discourse, 1829-1837

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Type** | **Date** | **Coder 1 Score** | **Coder 2 Score** | **Average/Final Score** | **Title** |
| Term 1.1 | March 4, 1829 | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0.3 | First Inaugural Address |
| Term 1.2 | January 19,1830 | 0.0 | ~ | 0.0 | Acceptance of A Gold Medal from Colombia, Special Message to Congress |
| Term 1.3 | February 22, 1831 | 0.1 | ~ | 0.1 | Message Regarding Indian Relations |
| Term 1.4 | July 10, 1832 | 0.8 | 0.9 | 0.85 | Bank Veto |
| Term 2.1 | January 16, 1833 | 0.4 | 0.8 | 0.6 | Message Regarding South Carolina Nullification of Federal Legislation |
| Term 2.2 | December 12, 1833 | 0.0 | ~ | 0.0 | Message on the Constitutional Rights and Responsibilities of the President |
| Term 2.3 | December 1, 1834 | 0.4 | ~ | 0.4 | Sixth Annual Message to Congress |
| Term 2.4 | March 4, 1837 | 1.6 | 1.6 | 1.6 | Farewell Address |

Table 1.2 Populist Discourse in the 1824 and 1828 Presidential Campaigns

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Type** | **Date** | **Score** | **Title** |
| Campaign Literature | 1824 | 1.7 | Address Delivered Before the Jackson Convention of Delegates |
| Campaign Literature | January 8, 1828 | 2.0 | New Jersey State Convention |
| Anti-Jackson Campaign Literature | January 8, 1828 | 0.0 | Proceedings of the Anti-Jackson Convention |

Discussion and Conclusion

A fairly consistent pattern emerges from the above results. On average, Jackson is only moderately populist. Many of the speeches display traces of populist discourse, but only two score at or above 0.5 and one at or above 1.5. Jackson’s discourse certainly exemplifies elements of populism, which is significant because most executives are completely pluralist/non-populist. Nevertheless, in many places where he could have been a much stronger populist, he did not seize the opportunity to do so. For example, in his low-scoring Inaugural Address and in other speeches, Jackson is mildly Manichaean and does emphasize the will of the people as the greatest good—but fails to define any kind of conspiring elite who stand in opposition to the people. It seems likely that much of Jackson’s populist perception comes from the way his campaign supporters portrayed him, or from selections of just a few speeches.

As Table 1.2 demonstrates, in contrast to Jackson’s own discourse, the campaign speeches given by Jackson’s supporters are overwhelmingly populist. The high scores on these latter speeches not only show that strong populist discourse was a possibility in US campaigns of the era, but may explain why Jackson was perceived as a populist president. Note also the low score for the speech on behalf of Adams, showing that populism was not always a feature of campaign rhetoric. Thus, though Jackson is often cited as strong example of an early American populist leader, his discourse simply does not support that assertion for any but a few speeches. Scholars or commentators hoping to link modern examples of populist leaders to Jackson should do so cautiously.

It is true that the speeches here represent only a small sample of Jackson’s presidential speeches, and this report does not offer a comprehensive analysis of the historical context. However, given that these addresses include some of his most famous speeches (and therefore most likely to have a populist tone), it is unlikely that further analysis would significantly alter Jackson’s overall populism score. Further coding efforts on Jackson’s speeches might yield additional qualitative insights into to the important issues of Jackson’s day and how he and observers of his time perceived his relationship to the people.

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