

## **Abstract**

This paper examines populist claims-making, a specific form of moral boundary work in political discourse. We define populism as a rhetorical strategy that juxtaposes the virtuous populace with a corrupt elite and views the former as the sole legitimate source of political power. We argue that populism has been neglected in the sociological study of politics, despite the field's longstanding interests in moral classification. While political scientists have been more receptive to populism research, they have been reluctant to generalize beyond specific geographic and historical contexts. In contrast, we posit that populism is an endemic feature of democratic politics. Our paper offers an analytical strategy that combines sociological theories of moral classification with cutting-edge computation text analysis methods to study the temporal fluctuation in populist rhetoric, its shifting prevalence on the political left and right, and the changing content of populist binary categories.

Our empirical case consists of 2,482 speeches given by American presidential candidates during general elections between 1952 and 1996. Populism is shown to be a common feature of presidential politics, with both parties relying on binary moral classification. The degree to which each party relies on populist rhetoric, however, varies over time. We show that this temporal variation is a function of social, economic, and political conditions that impact the salience and credibility of populist claims. Furthermore, we demonstrate that each party tends to construct populist claims differently, with Democrats more likely to rely on economic populism and Republicans more likely to vilify federal bureaucrats.

Our results provide an important corrective to the existing understanding of populism in political science, while demonstrating the utility of a sociological approach to the topic. Furthermore, we demonstrate that computational text analysis is a powerful method that holds much promise for political and cultural sociologists interested in the study of discourse.