

# Populist Claims-Making in U.S. Presidential Elections, 1952-1996

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## 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 long-standing 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.

Adversarial politics are rife with moral claims-making. As political actors attempt to mobilize public support for their political projects, they routinely diagnose existing social problems and frame them as publicly salient (Snow and Benford 1988). In the process they frequently assign blame for those problems to others and offer themselves and their allies as agents of change, who can deliver the solutions that will improve the welfare of their target publics (Essary and Ferney 2013). In many cases, the distinction between those who are responsible for the problems and

those who have the legitimate authority to solve them is predicated on the evaluation of moral worth, with sharp discursive boundaries drawn around entire social groups. Such moral boundary work (Lamont 1992) serves as a powerful mobilizing strategy, but it also drastically oversimplifies a complex political reality, often distracting the public from credible policy solutions. Furthermore, when such practices target ascriptive groups, they contribute to the reproduction of durable inequalities by reaffirming collective stereotypes (Tilly 1998).

This paper will focus on populist claims-making, a specific subset of moral boundary work in politics, which has gained considerable scholarly attention with the recent radicalization of right-wing European politics. 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 (Mudde 2007). We argue that populism has been neglected in the sociological study of politics, despite the field's long-standing interests in moral classification (but see Berezin [2009] and Jansen [2011]). While political scientists have been more receptive to populism research, they have been reluctant to generalize beyond specific geographic and historical contexts.

In contrast to political science accounts of populism as a radical political ideology found primarily among extreme right-wing parties in Western Europe and left-wing parties in Latin America, we posit that populism is an endemic—though often problematic—feature of democratic politics that cuts across traditional ideological cleavages. We propose 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 the binary categories that constitute populist claims. Thus our primary contributions are twofold: (1) to set a

new agenda for the study of moral discourse in politics and of populist rhetoric in particular and (2) to demonstrate that automated methods for the analysis of extensive corpora of digitized texts are useful for capturing moral boundary-making processes, allowing researchers to carry out large-scale studies of political discourse.

To demonstrate the utility of our theoretical and empirical model, we analyze 2,382 speeches of U.S. presidential candidates from 1952 to 1996 using supervised-learning computational methods. We view U.S. presidential politics as a particularly stringent test case for three reasons. First, despite the historical roots of populism in nineteenth-century U.S. agrarian movements and the recent successes of the Tea Party, the U.S. rarely features in comparative politics research on populism within political science. Consequently, evidence of widespread populist claims-making by mainstream American political actors would challenge accepted accounts of contemporary populism as a uniquely Western European and Latin American phenomenon. Such a finding would also call for the reconsideration of the common perception of populism as an ideology restricted to fringe political parties and movements (as in Europe) and charismatic personalistic leaders (as in Latin America).

Second, while U.S. presidential politics are largely absent from the populism literature in comparative politics, they have been thoroughly studied by Americanist political scientists and historians, though rarely under the rubric of populism. This byproduct of the disciplinary fragmentation of political science works to our advantage, because we are able to leverage the extensive research on each presidential election to develop expectations for our own empirical results. To the extent that our findings are consistent with those expectations, we can be reassured that our method and conceptual apparatus offer a valid approach to the study of political rhetoric. Of course, we do not limit our analysis to confirming insights from past

research. We also inspect our results for temporally specific findings that may not have been immediately apparent from a review of the historical evidence; we also use our data to examine long-term trends in populism that are outside of the scope of the Americanist literature.

Third, because presidential candidates in general elections are seeking to communicate with a broad cross-section of the electorate, their speeches are less likely to feature incendiary rhetoric than those of candidates running in primary elections or lower levels of government. Should we find clear instances of populism in these speeches, this would suggest that populism could be even more widespread in other domains of American electoral politics.

To foreshadow our findings, populist claims-making has a unique discursive structure that can be inductively identified using automated tools for textual analysis. This in itself, we believe, is an important finding that demonstrates the utility of computational methods for the comparative and historical analysis of political discourse. From a substantive perspective, populism appears to be a dominant part of American presidential campaign speeches for both Democratic and Republican candidates. The specific usage of populist rhetoric, however, varies systematically across time and party. The prevalence of populist language in U.S. presidential politics appears to be driven in large part by exogenous events such as economic recessions, cultural crises, and political scandals. While candidates from both parties attack elected political elites, Republican focus on anti-bureaucratic populism, while Democrats tend to adopt an economic variant of populism. Moreover, our analysis reveals long-term patterns in candidates' reliance on populist claims: although there is no overall secular trend between 1952 and 1996, the use of populism increases steadily from 1974 to 1996 among both Democrats and Republicans. We argue that this development is a result of the gradual radicalization of the Republican Party and the response of the Democratic Party to growing economic inequality.

**Moral Classification in Political Sociology**

The study of moral classification is among the core preoccupations of sociological research, dating back to Durkheim (1995). More recently, political and cultural sociologists have become particularly interested in how evaluations of moral worth are utilized in political discourse, as evidenced by work on social movement mobilization (Benford and Snow 2000; Mische 2003), welfare policy framing (Katz 1989; Mohr 1994; Steensland 2006), and civil society (Alexander 2006; Baiocchi 2006). The driving assumption in this work is that the manner in which people talk about politics reflects deeply rooted cultural schemas that organize the social world into categories of worth (Boltanski and Thevenot 2006). Such schemas are reproduced by—and at the same time legitimate—institutionalized social practices.

Given that the moral classifications in question assign social groups into categories of moral deservingness, they are an integral element in processes of social stratification. For instance, the non-working poor in the United States have long been perceived as unworthy of social support by the state, a view that resonates with dominant narratives about the American work ethic and individual self-sufficiency (Katz 1989). This shared perception of the non-working poor serves to justify a welfare state regime that treats work as a prerequisite for social program eligibility. Indeed, policy reforms that are perceived as benefitting the non-working poor have failed precisely because they threatened to blur the sharp moral distinction between deserving and undeserving subsets of the poor (Steensland 2006).

Not surprisingly, the tendency in the sociological literature has been to focus on moral depictions of disadvantaged populations, because the resulting narratives of moral profanity and pollution have often stood in the way of progressive social policy. As a result, to the degree that

institutional politics are discussed in sociology, the emphasis is typically on the framing of specific policy proposals and rarely on elections or internal party dynamics.

Whereas in policy framing research the agents of moral classification are typically elites and the targets are disadvantaged groups, the situation is reversed in social movement scholarship. Social movements typically represent an aggrieved constituency that seeks to transform the political status quo on a particular issue. Consequently, the moral classification in which movements engage typically focuses on the virtues of the disadvantaged population and the culpability of political or economic elites. In this respect, most social movements are fundamentally populist. Yet, for all the attention to framing in social movement research, few scholars have attended to the internal logic of movements' populist claims-making and its more general implications for moral classification in contemporary society.

Heeding Steensland's (2009) call for the sociological study of fundamental political processes, it is our position that sociologists should attend to mainstream political discourse and do so outside of the limited context of specific policy debates. The growing literature in political science on populism represents an ideal opportunity for such an intervention. Populist politics represent a fascinating case of meaning making, where elites are both the producers and the targets of moral classification, but where the producers position themselves as the authentic representatives of the people while accusing the targets of elite excesses. This process necessarily depends on political actors' ability to make credible claims to authenticity, which is often a tenuous accomplishment in professional politics.

At the same time, however, populist discourse is not solely limited to the jockeying between elite actors. Quite frequently, the targets of populist attacks are presented as having been co-opted by a variety of perceived out-groups—from welfare abusers to immigrant and ethnic

minorities. In this manner, populist speech often takes advantage of and reproduces systems of moral classification focused not on elite actors but on various disadvantaged populations (Tilly 1998). It is quite striking then that sociologists have not devoted more attention to the forms, causes, and consequences of populist politics.

### **Populism Research in Political Science**

In contrast to sociology, populism research has a long history in political science. Scholars have convincingly shown that “populism leave[s] an imprint on important political phenomena” (Hawkins 2010:49), by shaping repertoires of political mobilization (Madrid 2008; Subramanian 2007), galvanizing new forms of political engagement (Skocpol and Williamson 2012), and contributing to party system polarization and more general political realignments (Fella and Ruzza 2013; Laclau 2005; Pappas 2013). In demonstrating these effects, studies have typically taken three distinct approaches to conceptualizing populist politics: populism as ideology, as a political style, and as a form of political organization (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013).

*Populism as ideology.* Cas Mudde, a leading scholar of European right-wing populist parties, defines populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004:543). Unlike more systematic paradigms, such as socialism or liberalism, thin-centered ideologies do not provide answers to major socio-political questions; instead, they entail rudimentary principles about the way in which the political world works. This quality makes populism compatible with a variety of other political perspectives, both on the political left and right. Since the categories of the people and the elites are socially constructed and contested by political actors in specific circumstances, their content is likely to vary across

time and space. This ideational approach has been influential for recent studies of populism, especially those focused on Western Europe (Mudde 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Pauwels 2011; Rooduijn, de Lange, and Brug 2012; Stanley 2008).

If populism is seen first and foremost as a bundle of ideas, it follows that it should be observable in official statements produced by partisan organizations. Not surprisingly, work in this tradition has tended to rely on textual analysis—mostly qualitative but more recently also quantitative—of party manifestoes and publications (Arter 2013; Pankowski 2010; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). This in turn has led to the treatment of parties—or occasionally their leaders—as primary units of analysis, with scholars typically classifying partisan actors as either populist or non-populist and tracing the origins and political consequences of their populist ideas.

*Populism as political style.* A closely related perspective views populism as a rhetorical style rather than an ideology. In one of the few historical analyses of populism as a recurrent phenomenon in American politics, Kazin (1995) defines populism as a language used by those who claim to speak for the majority of the nation. Like Mudde, Kazin argues that this language is predicated on the dichotomy between “us” and “them,” with the latter typically standing for the elites, who ostensibly ignore, manipulate, and betray the core ideals of American democracy. Kazin’s work echoes Hofstadter’s (1965) notion of paranoid style in American politics, a form of discourse characterized by heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial worldview. Similar notions of conspiracy and impending crisis are apparent in other instances of populism outside the U.S. (Hawkins 2009).

If populism is a rhetorical style rather than a deeply held ideology (even a thin-centered one), scholars should be less concerned with identifying populist actors—whether individual or collective—than with identifying instances and varieties of populist language in political

discourse (Hawkins 2009; Pauwels 2011). As Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009) suggest, when viewed as a rhetorical style, populism becomes a “quality” rather than a “thing,” which “shifts our assessments from binary opposition—a party is populist or not—to a matter of degree—a party has more populist characteristics or fewer” (p. 822).

Thus, even if the formal characteristics of populist language are similar in the ideological and rhetorical approaches, these two perspectives imply distinct units of analysis: the former focuses on types of political actors, while the latter emphasizes types of political claims. Given our interest in the construction of moral categories across ideological cleavages, our analyses follow the latter approach.

*Populism as form of political organization.* A third tradition, prevalent mostly among scholars of Latin American politics, views populism not as a set of interrelated ideas or discursive tools, but rather as a way of organizing political action. Weyland (2001), for instance, argues that populism is “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” (p. 14). Similarly, Levitsky and Roberts (2011) define populism as a form of “top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established political or economic elites on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo” (pp. 6-7). Thus, the anti-elite content of populist claims is present in this work, but it is supplemented by an emphasis on the figure of the charismatic leader whose appeals to the populace are not mediated by a traditional party apparatus. Indeed, these two aspects of populism are viewed as mutually reinforcing, as “the empty heart of populism, the lack of key values, means that it is particularly liable to the politics of personality” (Taggart 2000:101).

While these scholars' focus on charismatic political figures is likely to be partly shaped by the particularities of some Latin American cases (but see Barr 2009), the tendency to favor direct forms of democracy may in fact be a more widespread feature of populist claims-making. For instance, in their study of European right-wing extremism, Kitschelt and McGann (1995) suggest that "populism signifies the effort to destroy established institutions of interest intermediation and elite control and to put in their place some kind of 'direct' voice of the people, embodied in the leader of the populist party" (p. 160).

Finally, in one of few sociological studies of populism, Jansen (2011) synthesizes the discursive and organizational approaches to populism research, by defining populism as a form of political mobilization—that is, "any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people" (p. 82). Thus, what matters is not only the content of populist claims, but also the social position of the target audience and its relationship to the political actors engaged in populist claims-making.

What is less clear, however, is whether the marginalization of the social sector in question needs to be objective or whether this group can merely perceive itself as marginalized. This is an important distinction because the former scenario implies a particular configuration of power that is independent of political discourse itself, whereas in the latter scenario any group could in principle come to feel marginalized as a result of sufficiently convincing populist rhetoric. For instance, white men are clearly not a marginalized group in the United States, but narratives of white victimization due to "reverse racism" are powerful tools of identity formation and political mobilization (McKinney 2005). Restricting populism to claims made on behalf of

objectively marginalized groups risks missing some of the more pernicious forms of populist mobilization.

Finally, a number of historical studies have sought to track change in populism over time in a variety of cases. This comparative literature covers a wide range of political developments, from the agrarian populism of farmers' movements in Russia and the United States in the late 19th century, through the emergence of Latin American populism in the mid-20th century, to the recent resurgence of populism in Western Europe and Latin America (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Levitsky and Roberts 2011; Rosenthal and Trost 2012; Taggart 2000).

In the aggregate, this research suggests that despite its frequent identification with specific parties, populism in fact cuts across geographical borders and historical eras, as well as across ideological cleavages. In Western and Eastern Europe an exclusionary right-wing variant of populism emerged, targeting immigrants and national minorities (Ivarsflaten 2007; Mudde 2007). In Latin America, on the other hand, populism is mostly associated with an inclusionary vision of society, bringing together different ethnic identities into shared political projects (Madrid 2008). In the United States, populism has been associated with a variety of economic positions and parties, from the Populist Party of the late 19th century to the New Left of the 1960s to present day free-market economics (Kazin 1995). Given this ideological variation, we expect to find populism on both sides of the political spectrum in the United States—a finding that would challenge the overly actor-centric and ideological perspectives on populist politics.

### **Toward a Synthesis**

The present paper seeks to build on the respective strengths of the sociological literature on moral classification and the political science research on populism in order to offer a more systematic and theoretically meaningful perspective on populist claims-making in democratic

politics. We view the conceptual apparatus developed by political science as useful for narrowing down the specific form of moral discourse that permeates institutional politics in democratic societies. The political science literature, however, has not been attentive to the specific ways in which the moral categories constitutive of populist rhetoric are constructed. Given that theorizing the distinctions between sacred and profane dimensions of social and political life has been a long-standing preoccupation of sociological research, sociologists have much to contribute to the scholarly understanding of populism.

In particular, a sociological approach to the topic would place more emphasis on the symbolic and interactional aspects of populism, viewing it as a meaning-making process that evokes and reproduces (and often subtly alters) cultural schemas widely shared in a given society's political culture. From this perspective, populism would not function as a decontextualized ideology inherent in certain social actors but instead take the form of a dynamic intersubjective accomplishment, whose meaning depends not only on the ideology of the speaker, but also on the speaker's relationship to his or her intended audience (Mische and Pattison 2000). Thus, whether or not a presidential candidate chooses to engage in populist claims-making is only partly a function of his or her party's platform; other factors are likely to play an equally important role, like the impact of the candidate's personal trajectory and the party's popular perception on the credibility of the candidate's anti-elite claims, the effect of exogenous political and economic events on the political climate of the day, the status of the candidate as an incumbent or a challenger, and the heterogeneity of the audience toward whom the populist claims are targeted.

While sociology has much to offer the study of populism, the topic and its particular conceptualization in political science also represents an opportunity for a continued engagement

between political and cultural sociology and the expansion of the field's focus to the study of fundamental political processes, such as "voting, agenda setting, policymaking, civic engagement, and interest-group influence in developed democracies, and state formation and democratization in developing countries" (Steensland 2009:928). Given the discipline's core commitment to understanding social organization and change, we view its reluctance to engage with institutional politics as puzzling and ultimately indefensible. As psychology becomes increasingly engaged with group-level moral processes and their impact on politics (Green 2013; Haidt 2012; Lakoff 1996), it is it high time for sociology to contribute to the discussion as well.

### **Defining the Phenomenon**

In broadest terms, we define populism as a form of political claims-making predicated on a fundamental moral opposition between a virtuous populace and corrupt elites (Mudde 2007). Such claims are based on a particular view of democratic representation, whereby the people—usually broadly construed—are the only legitimate source of political power and should therefore be engaged in political decision-making in as direct a fashion as possible. The people's interests are viewed as incompatible with those of representative institutions and elite actors, who are perceived as having abandoned democratic principles in favor of the pursuit of their own self-interested ends. Given this diagnostic framing of the central problem facing everyday people (Snow and Benford 1988), the prescriptive solution is to radically alter the configuration of power, so that the people are once again in control of their political fate. The extent of this desired transformation can vary from a conventional electoral transition that replaces the ostensibly corrupt elites with legitimate representatives of the people to major reforms of the political system or even to social revolutions.

Just as the objectives of populist talk vary, so do the categories that constitute the populist binary. The category of “the people” can be construed in vague terms that allow for broad identification across a variety of target audiences (e.g., the speaker may rely on an undefined first person plural or on generic concepts, such as “everyday people”), but this category may also be defined using more specific criteria, such as those based on class, ethnicity, geographic region, or religion. Similarly, which elites are viewed as having betrayed the people can vary: elected officials and bureaucrats (i.e., political elites) are likely to be the most frequent offenders, but populist rhetoric may also target economic elites (e.g., bankers, CEOs), intellectual elites (e.g., academics, artists), or cultural elites (e.g., Hollywood actors, mainstream media). Furthermore, some of the more pernicious varieties of populism draw a direct connection between the elites and other disparaged out-groups, such as immigrants and racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, based on the claim that the latter have co-opted and thus morally corrupted the elite actors.

This formal understanding of populism—that is, one that emphasizes the binary structure of populist claims—raises important new questions for research in political sociology: How do populist claims vary in content and prevalence across national contexts and over time? Under what circumstances do populist arguments become dominant in political discourse? What types of political actors are more or less likely to rely on populist rhetoric? What determines the success of populist claims-making? Under what circumstances does populism have a detrimental impact on democratic politics? The present paper will tackle only the first of these questions, but in so doing, it will provide a theoretical and analytical starting point for developing a more systematic and nuanced understanding of populist politics in democratic polities.

## Data and Methods

Our analyses rely on data from the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse (2000), a digital compendium of verbal communication by U.S. Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. The data cover twelve elections from 1952 to 1996; the only missing campaign is the 1964 Republican Goldwater-Miller ticket. The dataset contains 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 the candidates' public speeches, which range from 41 for George H. W. Bush's 1988 campaign to 319 for John F. Kennedy's 1960 campaign. The total number of speeches is 2,482.

Given the difficulty of manually coding the large volume of textual data, we employ computational text analysis methods to automatically detect populist language in the candidates' speeches. The approach that best suits our objectives is the non-parametric supervised learning algorithm developed by Hopkins and King (2010), made available through the ReadMe package in R. The algorithm is first trained on a subset of the total corpus that is manually classified by human coders; this selection of texts is typically referred to as the training set. The algorithm then inductively detects patterns of word co-occurrence in the classified texts—in our case, texts coded as populist—and uses those patterns to estimate proportions of those same categories in the uncoded texts, or what is called the test set. Each proportion estimate is accompanied by a standard error that captures the uncertainty in the pattern detection process.

We proceed by taking a 10 percent random sample of the total corpus of speeches to serve as the training set. The 253 speeches in this set span all the years in the data and include candidates from both parties. The breakdown of the speeches by election year is presented in Table 1. To manually code the speeches, we developed a qualitative coding scheme that flagged

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for training dataset.

Year	All					Democratic					Republican				
	Sample N	Total N	Sample Prop.	Populist	Populist	Sample N	Total N	Sample Prop.	Populist	Populist	Sample N	Total N	Sample Prop.	Populist	Populist
1952	38	421	0.09	11	0.29	12	191	0.06	1	0.08	26	230	0.11	10	0.38
1956	26	118	0.22	3	0.12	13	75	0.17	3	0.23	13	43	0.30	0	0.00
1960	48	448	0.11	8	0.17	36	312	0.12	1	0.03	12	136	0.09	7	0.58
1964	9	111	0.08	2	0.22	9	111	0.08	2	0.22	0	0	0.00	0	0.00
1968	20	211	0.09	6	0.30	18	153	0.12	6	0.33	2	58	0.03	0	0.00
1972	16	157	0.10	7	0.44	10	98	0.10	5	0.50	6	59	0.10	2	0.33
1976	16	184	0.09	4	0.25	7	55	0.13	2	0.29	9	129	0.07	2	0.22
1980	13	158	0.08	1	0.08	8	89	0.09	1	0.13	5	69	0.07	0	0.00
1984	20	176	0.11	5	0.25	10	66	0.15	1	0.10	10	110	0.09	4	0.40
1988	5	107	0.05	1	0.20	5	66	0.08	1	0.20	0	41	0.00	0	NA
1992	22	202	0.11	7	0.32	12	76	0.16	5	0.42	10	126	0.08	2	0.20
1996	20	189	0.11	4	0.20	14	111	0.13	1	0.07	6	78	0.08	3	0.50
Total	253	2482	0.10	59	0.23	154	1403	0.11	29	0.19	99	1079	0.09	30	0.30

all instances of populist language in each speech. In particular, we focused on instances when the speakers classified an entire category of elite actors as morally suspect. Thus, for instance, attacks on specific political adversaries or the other party were not coded as populist, but moral critiques of all bureaucrats or Washington politicians as self-interested or corrupt were. We paid special attention to instances when the speaker glorified the common people—either explicitly or implicitly (for instance, by using the personal pronoun “us” or “we”). This was not, however, a sufficient criterion for a claim to be treated as populist—it was also necessary for the speaker to simultaneously juxtapose the virtue of the people with the moral failings of elites.

For the purposes of training the ReadMe algorithm, we used a speech-level dichotomous measure of populism, whereby a speech was classified as populist when it contained at least one instance of populist language. Even though this measurement strategy is rather crude, it simplified the training process and, as we shall demonstrate, provided satisfactory results.<sup>1</sup> A

<sup>1</sup> An alternative approach would be to score each speech on a continuous measure of populism that reflected the proportion of sentences or paragraphs that contained populist rhetoric. The ReadMe algorithm, however, can only process mutually exclusive, nominal classifications of texts, which made this option unfeasible.

second training procedure focused on distinct varieties of populism. Rather than simply coding the texts as populist or not, we examined how the binary categories of the people and the elites were constructed, with specific codes indicating, for instance, references to vilified economic or political groups.

A few examples may help illustrate our coding strategy. One variety of populist rhetoric, for instance, is based on claims that politicians do not in fact represent the electorate at all. 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 general first-person plural, McGovern draws boundaries around a unified community of voters with shared interests and, simultaneously, includes himself within its bounds. Second, he conflates the government and 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 frequent populist strategy that depicts elected officials as having abandoned the interests of people in favor of clientelistic ties to another group, typically 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 most common explicit targets of populist claims-making are economic elites, including leaders of the financial sector. 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 Democrats 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 precisely 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).

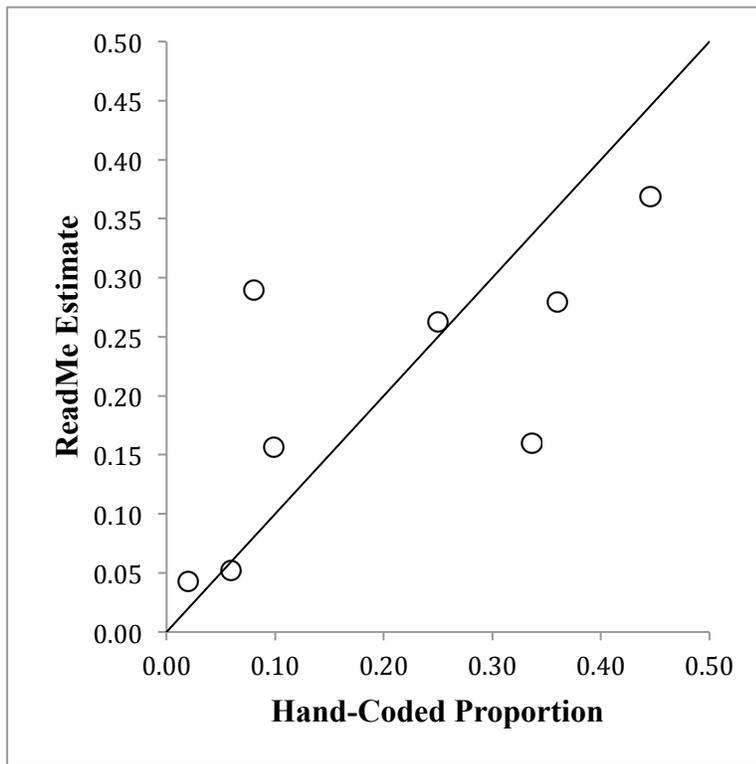
As these examples illustrate, populism takes on multiple forms, all of which adhere to an overarching binary structure that places moral judgment on elite groups and privileges the virtue of the common people. We use such instances of populist rhetoric as input for the ReadMe

algorithm, which then locates similar language in the thousands of unclassified speeches in the corpus. It is to this process that we now turn.

A crucial first step in any computational text analysis is validation (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). Given that classification algorithms attempt to automate work that is otherwise painstakingly accomplished by human coders, the hand coded documents can serve as the baseline against which the quality of the automated results are judged. To verify whether ReadMe was able to adequately capture instances of populist claims-making in presidential speeches, we ran the algorithm on speeches from the 1988 campaigns of both parties. We then hand-coded all the speeches from that year and compared the results of the automated and manual procedures. Those 1988 speeches that had already been included in the 10-percent training set were removed from the validation test set.

Results of the validation, presented in Figure 1, suggest that ReadMe generates adequate, though imperfect, estimates of the proportion of populist speeches in the test set. The correlation between the predicted and actual proportions is 0.71, with most of the estimates falling close to the  $x=y$  correlation line. This level of predictive accuracy is in line with other studies of populism that have relied on computational methods (e.g., Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011).

There are two major outliers, however, that bear mentioning. The first is the proportion of Republican speeches, with a ReadMe estimate of 0.29 and a manual coding result of 0.08. The second is the proportion of economic populism (i.e., populism where the vilified category consists of corporate and financial elites), with a ReadMe estimate of 0.16 and a manual coding result of 0.34. In both cases, the ReadMe results are closer to the proportions found in the full-sample training set than to the actual proportions in the manually coded 1988 test set. This suggests that the full-sample training set exerts an “anchoring” effect on the ReadMe estimates,

**Figure 1.** Hand-coded and estimated proportions of populism in 1988 election

whereby actual extreme low proportions in the data will be overestimated and actual extreme high proportions will be underestimated. While this affects the precision of some of the specific point estimates generated by ReadMe, it should not present major problems for the analysis of variation in populism over time, which relies on the comparison of relative proportions across multiple time points. Indeed, any temporal fluctuations in populism detected by ReadMe should be interpreted as conservative estimates of what in reality are more extreme patterns of change.

### **Analytical Strategy**

The analysis will proceed in two steps. First, the ReadMe algorithm will be used to calculate the proportion of populist speeches for each party in each election year. This will make it possible to examine the temporal fluctuation in populist politics across ideological camps. Second, the overall variation will be disaggregated into multiple varieties of populism based on the specific

content of the binary categories used by the speaker. Here too, we should observe variation over time and across parties.

The objective of both analyses analysis is to map and explain changes over time in the use of populist rhetoric by Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. Much existing political science research on populism sidesteps the issue of within-party variation, because it assumes that populism is a stable attribute of political actors, typically identified with the single pole of the ideological spectrum. Such work typically asks why populist parties come to power and how their successes impact policy outcomes. The starting point for our analysis is quite different. We expect that both of the major U.S. parties are likely to draw on populist arguments, though their incentives to do so will vary depending on the social, economic, and political circumstances during a given election.

Should these predictions be correct, our results are likely to have major implications for existing accounts of populism. In particular, they would demonstrate that: (a) populism is an important feature of political culture in the United States, a case typically ignored in comparative populism research; (b) populism cuts across ideological cleavages and should be thought of as a rhetorical style or political strategy rather than an ideology; and (c) parties' reliance on populism must be explained by external factors rather than the parties' central ideological commitments.

The need to explain fluctuations in populism with external factors highlights the fundamentally sociological fact that populism is an interactional phenomenon that is structured not only by the speaker's qualities, but also the qualities of the audience and the broader context within which both the speaker and the audience are located (Goffman 1959; Mische 2003). Political actors are likely to rely on populist rhetoric when they can reasonably expect their

simultaneous identification with “the people” and vilification of elites to be viewed as salient and credible by the target audience—in this case, the general electorate (Snow and Benford 1988).

One way to proceed with the analysis would be to generate and test a set of general hypotheses concerning the impact of multiple contextual factors on the salience and credibility of populist claims. Our data, however, do not lend themselves well to such an approach. Because we observe only eleven elections, we do not have sufficient variation to make inferences about all political contests. Any given pattern in the use of populist rhetoric is likely to be produced by a confluence of multiple causal factors, including highly idiosyncratic ones like the presidential candidates’ personalities and life experiences. With each election occurring only once and sharing only a small subset of attributes with other elections, it is impossible to account for “net” effects of individual variables or even specific combinations of multiple factors. Of course, this problem is not unique to our study; it is a common feature of all small-N historical research (Griffin 1992; Kiser and Hechter 1991; Lieberman 1991; Mahoney 2000; Ragin 2004).

Given these limitations, we refrain from stating our expectations in general terms. What we do instead is use historical sources to identify salient moments in presidential politics of the latter half of the twentieth century that should be associated with particularly notable fluctuations in populist rhetoric. In addition to comparing the specific predictions with our results, we examine the patterns identified by the ReadMe algorithm for any other changes in populism that were not easily predictable using the historical record. It is only in the final section of the paper that we use our results to formulate general hypotheses that could be tested in future research.

The difference between standard hypothesis testing and our analytical approach is important to emphasize: we do make informed predictions concerning our specific sample of elections but do not posit broader expectations that would necessitate inferences outside of that

sample. Both approaches involve a combination of description and explanation, but the former does not depend on the identification of universal mechanisms. In this respect, our research design is reminiscent of the pragmatist notion of abduction (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), whereby the researcher enters the field with preliminary expectations based on prior research, searches for both confirmatory and surprising findings, and uses the encounter between theory and data to generate broader hypotheses. Given the sparseness of sociological research on populism, and on discourse in mainstream politics more generally, an abductive research design is particularly appropriate, because it prioritizes data-driven theory development.

#### *Aggregate Variation in Populist Claims-Making*

Based on extant research in history and political science, we approach our first set of analyses with several expectations regarding long-term secular trends in the prevalence of populist rhetoric and differences between the two parties in specific historical moments.

First, accounts in the popular press and academic scholarship suggest that the past two decades have witnessed a general surge in populist politics, giving rise to “a populist zeitgeist” in Western democracies (Mudde 2004). In Europe, discussions of this trend have focused on the rise to prominence of new right wing parties, while in the United States the focus has been on social movements and intra-party politics. Populist voices within the Republican Party have received the most sustained attention, particularly after the rise of the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2012, Rosenthal and Trost 2012). As Kabaservice (2011) notes, however, the Tea Party is merely the latest manifestation of a long-term trend that has seen the gradual replacement of moderate conservatives in Congress with successive cohorts of increasingly populist Republican politicians.

At the same time, the steady rise in economic inequality in the U.S. since the 1970s should result in an increase in populist rhetoric among Democrats. The growing popular perception of economic elites as disconnected from working people presents an ideal opportunity for political candidates to position themselves as defenders of the downtrodden. Given that policy positions focused on ameliorating inequality and improving the social welfare of the poor have long been the domain of the Democratic Party, we should expect such moral boundary work to be used more frequently by Democratic candidates.

Together, the above arguments suggest that we should observe a secular trend of increasing reliance on populist rhetoric among American presidential candidates from both parties. Conservative populism should reflect the growing anti-statist radicalism within the ranks of the Republican Party, while progressive populism should reflect the Democratic response to the growing economic inequality in American society.

Other strands of research, however, lead us to expect a different pattern in the data, one characterized by a divergence between the two parties and a decline in populism among the Democrats. In their longitudinal study of presidential rhetoric, Bimes and Mulroy (2004) 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 come to terms with ‘big government’” (p. 138). While the authors do not argue that populism has disappeared altogether from American political discourse, they do suggest that compared to previous historical eras, contemporary political leaders’ ability credibly to utilize populist appeals has diminished. To the extent that populism persists, however, it should be found primary among Republicans.

A between-party divergence in populist claims-making is also suggested by work on the decline of grassroots activism and membership-based associations in American society (Putnam 2000). As civic life in the U.S. has shifted from member-based voluntary associations to increasingly professionalized advocacy groups focused on myriad specialized policy issues, the incentives for mobilizing large-scale public support around broad policy agendas have waned (Skocpol 1999). This development, however, has been highly uneven, impacting progressive groups far more than conservative organizations. In contrast to the left, conservative interest groups have combined the power of traditional mobilization networks, such as those embedded in Evangelical church organizations, with growing expertise in media relations and professional lobbying to present a more unified populist front (Skocpol 2007).

There are two paths through which this development may affect the rhetoric of presidential candidates. First, given that Democratic and Republican politicians are likely to have divergent experiences with grassroots mobilization, they may employ distinct discursive repertoires. Democrats should rely on populist rhetoric less than on technocratic arguments honed in past interactions with professional political groups, while the opposite should be true for Republicans. Second, with the rightward shift in political discourse produced by the uneven professionalization of civic life, we should expect Democratic claims that vilify wealthy elites and defend working people to become less salient and credible, because they imply redistributive policy solutions that are no longer seen as tenable. In contrast, Republican populist claims should remain highly resonant because they echo well-rehearsed talking points of highly mobilized conservative organizations. If either argument holds, Democratic populist rhetoric should decline over time and the prevalence of populism across the two parties should diverge.

In addition to identifying long-term historical patterns, the literature on presidential politics can also be used to generate expectations regarding the usage of populist language in specific election campaigns. Building on this work, we focus on one election in each decade covered by our data (i.e., the 1960s to the 1990s), during which we would expect the prevalence of populism to exhibit notable peaks or declines.

We begin with the 1960s, a period of widespread anti-war and Civil Rights protests on the left and growing cultural backlash on the right, which contributed to a general crisis of traditional morality and elite authority (Converse et al. 1969; Lowndes 2008). As voters sought to make sense of the rapidly changing sociopolitical landscape and looked to new leaders to pave the way forward, presidential candidates' appeals to the popular will combined with critiques of established elites are likely to have been particularly resonant. Given that the cultural crisis came to a crescendo in the latter half of the decade, the rise in populism among both political parties should be particularly notable in the 1968 election.<sup>2</sup>

If the 1960s were likely to be a decade marked by populist appeals, the opposite should be true of the late 1970s, particularly among the Republicans (Bimes and Mulroy 2004; Hahn 1984; Miller 1978). The 1976 election followed the Watergate scandal, the single most dramatic crisis of presidential legitimacy in twentieth-century U.S. politics. Given the tremendous media attention garnered by the event, the unambiguous involvement of Republican politicians and operatives in the initial wiretapping and subsequent cover-up, and the resulting unprecedented resignation of a sitting U.S. president, it is highly unlikely that a Republican candidate could make a credible attack on elite power in the event's immediate aftermath. Thus, we expect

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<sup>2</sup> The 1964 election would also have been an opportune starting point for our analysis, because there is good reason to expect Goldwater's rhetoric to draw heavily on populist language (McGirr 2001). Unfortunately, the Annenberg data set does not include speeches from the 1964 Republican campaign.

Gerald Ford's 1976 campaign should be characterized by a particularly low prevalence of populist rhetoric.

In contrast, the 1980s should mark a high point for conservative populist mobilization, epitomized by the Reagan presidency. Reagan's political style is known (and venerated on the right) for its embrace of neo-liberal, pro-market imagery that juxtaposed an overbearing state with the virtues of hard-working, middle-class American tax payers. This sentiment is captured by Reagan's famous promise to "get the federal government off the backs of the people" (Bimes and Mulroy 2004:141). Furthermore, the success of the Reagan Revolution is often attributed to the consolidation of a broad social coalition whose internal tensions were overcome by a common populist framework: "Reagan's anti-communism and his upbeat populist challenge to liberal elites allowed the Right to appear to be talking common sense instead of mere ideology, and to promote its legislative agenda on that basis" (Kazin 2010:300; see also Lowndes 2008).

Finally, during the 1990s, we expect to observe a shift from the Republicans to the Democrats in the use of populist rhetoric, as suggested by historical research that depicts the Clinton presidency as particularly reliant on appeals to the popular will and on critiques of elite power (Kazin 1995; Thomas and Baas 2009). Indeed, Clinton's 1992 campaign, symbolized by the slogan "Putting People First," may represent the high water mark for populism among Democratic presidential candidates. Unlike the 1968 and 1976 elections, however, it is difficult to point to a single mechanism that would account for this outcome. Clinton's populist strategy is likely to have been a product of a confluence of factors, including the 1990-91 recession, the highly unusual three-term control of the presidency by the Republican Party, and Clinton's simultaneous sensitivity to public opinion and disdain for the press (Schneider 1994).

#### *Variation in Moral Classification within Populist Claims*

While the primary objective of the paper is to map changes in aggregate populist rhetoric across election years, we are also interested in the specific content of the moral categories that constitute populist claims-making. In fact, attending to the variation in the content of populism is among the unique contributions that a sociological approach can bring to the topic.

Following a formal approach to cultural analysis that emphasizes structural features of symbolic structures over their content (Mohr 1998; Yeung 2005), we view populism not as an expression of opposition to a specific elite group, but as an evocation of a more general dichotomy between the virtuous people (however defined) and any morally vilified elite. Consequently, in the first set of analyses we treat all anti-elite claims as analytically equivalent. Having established the general patterns of populist claims-making over time, we can then investigate whether this variation is consistent across multiple forms of populism that target different elite groups. Such an analysis should be especially useful for understanding how Democrats and Republicans structure their populist claims in distinct ways. The partisan differences in populism are the starting point for our hypotheses.

Based on the manual coding of the training corpus, we inductively identified five distinct ways in which the anti-elite categories are constructed in populist rhetoric. These categories targeted the following groups: (a) elected political elites (i.e., politicians, typically at the federal level); (b) economic elites (e.g., Wall Street, corporate leaders); (c) unelected political elites (i.e., bureaucrats); (d) intellectual elites (e.g., academics, pundits); and (e) legal elites (e.g., lawyers, judges). Because the prevalence of the last two categories was low in the training set, the estimates for the remaining documents are not likely to be very precise; consequently, we do not make any predictions about them. We do, however, have some systematic expectations regarding the remaining three groups.

First, given that the opposing party represents the easiest and most direct target for any political actor, we expect populism targeting elected political elites to be the most prevalent among both parties. This finding is especially likely in the United States, where suspicion of federal elites (or “Beltway insiders”) has long been highly resonant among the electorate.

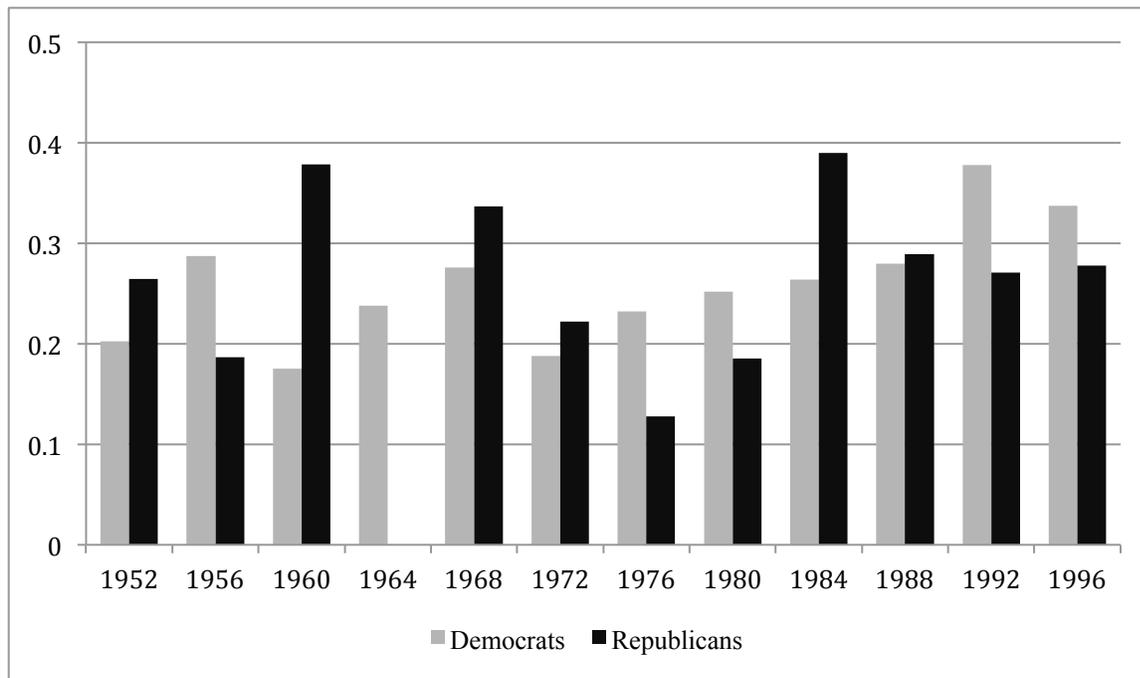
Second, while the specific priorities of both parties vary over time, their core ideological commitments have been relatively stable since the Second World War. As is commonly known, Democrats tend to favor redistribution and social protection, while Republicans tend to favor small government (at least when it comes to domestic policy) and the free market. Consequently, we expect unelected government elites to be more frequently vilified by Republicans than Democrats and economic elites to be more frequently vilified by Democrats than by Republicans.

It is possible to formulate additional expectations concerning the fluctuations in each type of populism over time, but we hesitate to do so. The relative small samples of training-set texts within each category (and the relatively small number of test set speeches within each party-year) give us less confidence about the ReadMe proportion estimates for specific types of populism than for the aggregate patterns of populism as a whole. Consequently, we intend to be cautious in our interpretation of the results of the second set of analyses.

### **Aggregate Trends**

The first set of analyses is based on the proportions of populist texts estimated by ReadMe for each party in each election. The results are presented in Figure 2.

The first thing to notice about the results is that there is considerable fluctuation in the prevalence of populism among both parties. The proportion of populist speeches for Republicans ranges from 0.13 in 1976 to 0.39 in 1984, while for Democrats, it ranges from 0.18 in 1960 to

**Figure 2.** Aggregate Proportions of Populist Rhetoric in U.S. Presidential Elections

0.38 in 1992. Furthermore, neither party is consistently more populist than the other. Democrats exceed Republicans in their populist rhetoric in five elections (1956, 1976, 1980, 1992, and 1996), while Republicans exceed Democrats in six elections (1952, 1960, 1968, 1972, 1984, and 1988). These findings provide support for our core arguments that populism is a common feature of American presidential politics, that its use cuts across ideological lines, and that the prevalence of populism oscillates over time, sometimes becoming more common among Republicans and sometimes among Democrats.

Interestingly, however, we do not observe a secular increase (or decrease) in populism over the course of the 44 years covered by our data. One interpretation of this result is that political actors' decision to employ populist rhetoric is not a reflection of broader trends in American society, but rather of the specific historical context surrounding each election. This conclusion, however, becomes less plausible upon closer inspection of the second half of the time series, from the 1976 election onward. Within this range, the data do appear to exhibit a

secular upward trend. Contrary to the arguments made by Bimes and Mulroy (2004), both Democrats and Republicans become progressively more populist over time, with little evidence of divergence between the two parties.

This empirical pattern is consistent with Mudde's (2004) account of the emerging "populist zeitgeist" and historical evidence concerning the populist radicalization of the Republican Party (Skocpol 2007; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Kabaservice 2011; Rosenthal and Trost 2012). The fact, however, that Democratic populism moves in lockstep with Republican populism—and surpasses it after 1992—requires further explanation. This finding appears to be at odds with Skocpol's (2007) arguments about the changing political structure of civic association in the United States, which would have predicted a divergence between the two parties, and is largely orthogonal to theories of conservative radicalization.

Of the multiple expectations we had set out for the analysis, the one most consistent with the upward trend in Democratic populism is the rise of inequality in the United States. The dramatically increasing disparity in wages in the United States is among the most studied problems in the sociology and economics of social stratification. Though the explanations for the phenomenon vary widely—from union decline and skill-biased technical change to globalization and the financialization—there is a widespread consensus that the steady rise in income inequality began in the mid-1970s and has continued to the present day (Gottschalk and Danziger 2005; Western and Rosenfeld 2011). This trend coincides perfectly with the increase in populist rhetoric observed among Democratic presidential candidates. Given that the Democratic Party has made poverty and inequality a central element of its electoral rhetoric since Lyndon Johnson's presidency (Sloan 1997), the growing gap between the poor and rich has presented Democratic candidates with both a policy problem and a political opportunity. Among the voters

who have born the brunt of the economic changes, vilification of wealthy elites and promises of redistribution are likely to have become particularly salient—a fact to which Democratic campaigns appear to have been well attuned. A populist response of the Democratic Party to the rise in inequality is also consistent with predictions made by Acemoglu et al. (2013), who argue that left-wing politicians are likely to use populist rhetoric and policies “to signal to voters that they do not secretly have a right-wing agenda and are not 'in the pockets' of the rich elite” (p. 772).<sup>3</sup>

Thus far, we have shown that shifts in populist rhetoric appear to be consistent with broad economic and political trends in recent U.S. history. Next, we consider fluctuations in populism during specific election campaigns. We begin with the late 1960s. Because this unsettled time was characterized by a general mistrust of traditional authority and a sense of cultural unmooring, voters were more likely to consciously reconsider their ideological commitments (Swidler 1986) and to seek out reassurance from leaders with new ideas. This should have produced a populist reaction from both parties, as candidates sought to critique existing elites—a strategy that is likely to have met with widespread legitimacy among the public.

As illustrated in Figure 2, this is indeed what we see in the data, with both parties relying heavily on populist rhetoric in the 1968 election. This result is consistent with historical accounts of this time period. According to Converse et al. (1969), the 1968 election was characterized by extremely high levels of volatility, as George Wallace’s segregationist third-party campaign attracted both Republican and Democratic constituencies. Meanwhile, Richard Nixon was developing his own populist-rhetorical project: the construction of a new coalition of the “silent

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, however, that Acemoglu et al.’s (2013) definition of populism is strikingly different from ours: for them, populism consists of “the implementation of policies receiving support from a significant fraction of the population, but ultimately hurting the economic interests of this majority” (p. 772).

majority.” Adopting a less combative position than Wallace, Nixon “emerge[d] as a critic of ‘bloated bureaucracy,’ an advocate of ‘law and order’ and a moderate friend of the white South” (Lowndes 2008:107). The concept of the silent majority was built on negation: “they were ‘the non shouters, the non-demonstrators,’ those not on welfare, those who did not commit crimes.” (p. 131). In particular, Converse et al. (1969) emphasize the importance of law and order in the 1968 elections. In light of the surge in popular protest and a string of unsettling events (such as the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King), “there was a widespread sense of breakdown in authority and discipline that fed as readily on militant political dissent as on race riots and more conventional crime” (p. 1088). Students’ riots and left-wing displays of dissent set the stage for the rise of left-wing populism, and at the same time led to a conservative backlash and emphasis on issues of law and order.

The left-wing populism of the late 1960s was unique in its origins: “Never before in the United States had a radical upsurge that sought to win power for the common folk sprung from within the dominant order itself” (Kazin 1995:196). Organized mostly by students’ movements, this strand of populism supported many of the classic ideas of the New Deal: governmental responsibility, support for public provision of welfare, and an endorsement of unions. However, these groups believed that the Democratic Party had become overly complacent and was no longer loyal to its true goals. They therefore strived for “a self-conscious rebellion from below [that] could topple the corrupted liberal order” (Kazin 1995:197). Going further than previous protest groups within the Democratic Party, the students of the New Left called for new forms of participatory democracy, in which political power would be placed in the hands of the people; the movement made its demands heard particularly loudly during the demonstrations at the Democratic Party’s convention in the summer of 1968. Even though the Democratic nominee to

emerge out of the convention was a political insider, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, the protests had a long-lasting impact on the Democratic campaign, as Humphrey sought to capitalize on the populist sentiments of the anti-war movement and the civil rights struggles of African Americans and ethnic minorities.

If 1968 is a high point for populism in both parties, 1976 stands out in Figure 2 as the year when populism declined to its lowest level in the Republican Party. This outcome is also consistent with our expectations. The Ford campaign was likely to have been reluctant to rely on populism due to the drop in the credibility of Republican anti-elite rhetoric following the 1973-74 Watergate scandal. Ford, who took Nixon's place in the White House, was linked to Watergate by virtue of his prior service as Nixon's Vice President, but also as a result of his presidential pardon of Nixon in 1974. Given these associations, any attempt to critique elite power would have likely been viewed by the electorate as disingenuous and unconvincing. Even though disenchantment with Washington was mediated by partisan loyalties, with Democrats far more critical of the previous administration than Republicans, 58 percent of Republican voters in 1978 believed that that government had been co-opted by powerful elites (Miller 1978:139).

While Ford was reluctant to engage in populist claims-making, the opposite was true for Carter, whose campaign appears to have been considerably more populist than that of his predecessor, George McGovern. There are two likely explanations for this. First, the Republicans' loss of credibility was the Democrats' gain, so Carter was easily able to capitalize on the public's distrust of established elites. This resonates with historical accounts of the election: by combining religious overtones with a populist message, while stressing his outsider status as a Southern ex-farmer, Carter sought to distance himself from the corrupt Washingtonian establishment (Hahn 1984). Second, the period preceding the 1976 election was marked by a

major recession, during which the oil crisis, stagflation, and a stock market crash led to an unemployment rate of 9% and a GDP decline of 3.2%. It is reasonable to expect the challenger party—in this case the Democrats—to place blame for the economic conditions on the incumbent party and to frame the latter as dominated by entrenched elites disconnected from the plight of everyday people.

Our results for the 1980s are somewhat more ambiguous. As we have argued, Reagan was widely viewed as an anti-establishment candidate, who was highly adept at connecting with the electorate (Bimes and Mulroy 2004). Yet, according to the results in Figure 2, Reagan's use of populist rhetoric in 1980 was relatively low by Republican standards, while his 1984 campaign exceeded all other Republican campaigns in its reliance on anti-elite claims. The 1984 results are consistent with our expectations, but the 1980 results are not.

Upon closer consideration of the historical literature, however, these unexpected findings become easier to interpret. The 1980 elections took place in the shadow of Carter's crisis-driven presidency. The combination of economic downturn and foreign affairs debacles (especially the hostage situation in the American embassy in Iran) were exacerbated by Carter's inability to shape the political agenda. Within this sense of malaise, "experts questioned the presidency's viability and even doubted America's sustainability" (Troy 2009:46). In an effort to capitalize on Carter's historically low approval rating, Reagan "neutralized the assaults [on him] by appearing as reasonable as possible, trusting Carter's unpopularity to sway the elections" (Troy 2009:49). This political strategy resulted in only a measured and limited use of populist rhetoric.

In contrast, the elections of 1984 took place in a very different context. The country experienced a period of economic growth after the 1982 recession, with higher jobs rates and lower inflation. Reagan took full advantage of this situation, with an optimistic, nationalist

message to the voters, epitomized by his famous “Morning in America” television commercial.

He attributed the country’s successes not to himself personally, but rather to his rightful channeling of the people’s will:

Our quality of life is improving because of your voices, voices of common sense, are finally getting through. Believe me, it wasn’t Washington experts who said government is too big, taxes are too high, criminals are coddled, education’s basics are neglected and values of family and faith are being undermined. That was your message.” (quoted in Troy 2009:76)

As can be expected, the federal government played an important role in Reagan’s construction of the moral opposition between the people and the elites. In Reagan’s populist imagery, big government was “the instrument of intrusive bureaucrats, liberal special interest groups, pork-minded Democratic Congressmen, and out-of touch elitist intellectuals,” with the victims being “the American people as a whole” (Bimes and Mulroy 2004:158).

Our final prediction concerned Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign. Here too the results are consistent with our expectations: the use of populism by Bill Clinton exceeds that of any previous Democratic candidate by at least 9 percentage points. Given the Republicans’ control of the presidency for the preceding three terms, Clinton’s populist campaign took advantage of George H. W. Bush’s vulnerability as a member of the Washington elite and presented the Democratic ticket as credible challengers of the established political order.

While the Republicans’ time in office presented the Democrats with an opportunity to run a populist campaign, this opportunity was further enhanced by the political and economic climate of the day. The early 1990s were framed in the popular media as a time of crisis due to the decline of manufacturing, growing economic inequality, and rise in crime (Kazin 1995), as well as “growing sense of frustration with politics-as-usual” (Thomas and Baas 2009:323). Clinton sought to capitalize on the likely resonance of anti-elite claims, as he “vowed to establish an administration that would take America back from ‘the privileged few’ and ‘put people first’”

(Kazin 1995:270). In particular, his campaign targeted lobbyists and special interests with big money who ostensibly enjoyed direct access to the Republicans in Washington. Interestingly, he attacked those elites in generic terms, without specifying any individual organizations or people (Bimes and Mulroy 2004). This allowed him to combine appeals to ordinary middle-class Americans with a business-friendly economic agenda.

The fact that our expectations concerning the four major flash points for populist rhetoric are borne out by our empirical results provides further evidence for the utility of the ReadMe algorithm for research on political discourse. Despite the possibility of anchoring effects for individual point estimates revealed by the 1988 validation analysis, the comparison of the estimates over time produces temporal patterns that are in line with historical scholarship on U.S. presidential politics. Yet, while most of our results confirmed our predictions, the results for the 1980 election led us to reconsider our expectations in light of additional historical evidence. This demonstrates the ability of our computation approach to be used in both deductively and inductively, with the former approach allowing us to test existing predictions and the latter to reveal surprising patterns that require further explanation. Indeed, such an iterative process is very much in line with the abductive research design we have set out for this paper.

### **Varieties of Populism**

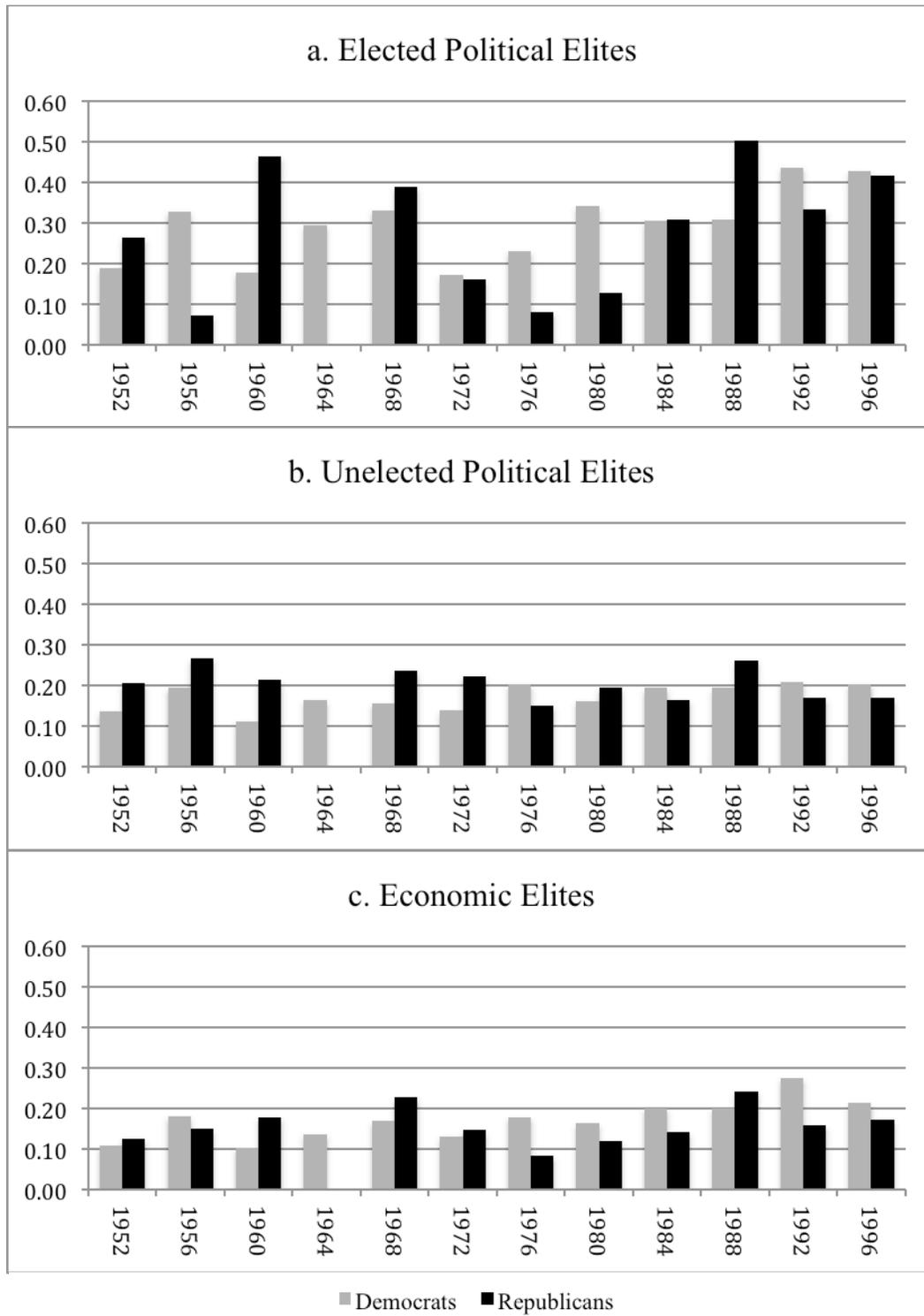
The second set of analyses focus on the relative prevalence of specific types of populism across the two parties. The assumption here is that the content of the moral categories that constitute populist rhetoric can vary, so that different political actors will construct the concepts of “the people” and, even more so, “the corrupt elites” in distinct ways. Presumably these choices will be driven partly by the parties’ ideological agendas, which tend to prioritize different socioeconomic problems and place blame for them on different elite actors.

The results of the analysis are presented in Figure 3. Each bar graph corresponds to a different type of populism, based on the particular elite targeted by the populist binary classification. The first graph illustrates patterns of populism directed at elected political elites. The results demonstrate that this is the most common form of populism among both parties, confirming our prior expectations. Indeed, the trend in Figure 3a maps closely onto the aggregate patterns shown in Figure 2, with Democrats exhibiting higher levels of populism in some elections and Republicans in others. The similarity of the two time series suggests that changes in populism targeting elected politicians drive much of the variation in populism as a whole. This is perhaps not surprising, given that electoral contests inevitably involve candidates' evaluations of themselves in contrast to their opponents; it is easy for such arguments to slip into more general critiques of an established political class that has fallen prey to the influences of special interests. Of course, the resonance of such claims depends on the candidates' ability to place themselves outside of the political class, which in the case of presidential candidates requires considerable discursive agility.

While attacks on the political class are part and parcel of prudential populism on both sides of the political spectrum, two other forms of populism should be more closely aligned with the respective ideologies of the two parties: Republicans should be more likely to criticize unelected political elites (i.e., bureaucrats) because of their complicity in excesses of an ostensibly bloated federal government, while Democrats should rely more frequently on economic populism, because of their concern with economic inequality and redistribution.

The results presented in Figure 3b and 3c are largely consistent with those expectations. Republicans outpace Democrats in their reliance on anti-bureaucratic rhetoric in seven of the eleven elections for which we have data on both parties, while Democrats outpace Republicans

**Figure 3.** Proportions of Populist Rhetoric by Type in U.S. Presidential Elections



in their reliance on economic populism in six of the eleven elections. Furthermore, comparing the trends within party across the two graphs, it is apparent that anti-bureaucratic populism is consistently more prevalent than economic populism among Republicans, while Democrats frequently rely on both types of populism, with economic populism exceeding anti-bureaucratic populism in a few elections (particularly in 1992).

Because our sample sizes become quite small when we consider specific types of populism by party and election, we can draw only tentative conclusions about the variation in the multiple varieties of populism. Nonetheless, our results do suggest that the two parties' populist claims-making repertoires differ in the degree to which they target specific elite groups. This helps explain the finding that populism is found on both ends of the political spectrum. The moral critique of elected political elites appears to be a bipartisan phenomenon, but the strategy of vilifying bureaucrats and economic elites is closely related to the two parties' ideological commitments.

### **Toward a General Account of Populist Politics**

We have been careful to interpret our findings in light of specific historical events, rather than to infer from them more universal patterns that apply to all elections. Nonetheless, our results are suggestive of possible explanatory factors whose generalizability could be tested with more extensive data. Such data could, for instance, take the form of a multi-country sample that includes a large number of electoral contests (though such an effort would have to take into account differences in political systems across countries); alternatively, in the context of U.S. politics, one could shift the focus from presidential campaigns to either Congressional or state electoral contests. In our own future work, we hope to examine populism across countries by

examining the speeches of Members of European Parliament; this project will allow us to test some of the general predictions to which we will now turn.

One of the starting points for our predictions is the assumption that populist claims are likely to be highly resonant in historical moments characterized by a widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo among the public. As suggested by our results for the Carter and Clinton campaigns, when the perceived problems are economic, we would expect the challenger party to rely on populism more than the incumbent party, given that the incumbent party is likely to bear some responsibility for the economic conditions. On the other hand, when the problems are more general, as in times of major social and cultural crisis, we would expect both parties to be equally likely to turn to populist rhetoric, because the causes of such problems and their possible solutions are likely to be decoupled from specific political ideologies. This would be in line with our results for the 1968 election.

Economic and cultural crises should affect the prevalence of populist claims targeted at elected political elites, because those who wield power and are responsible for ostensibly flawed policies are the most likely to be viewed as part of a morally failed establishment. At the same time, each type of crisis may also draw in other elite groups whose past leadership may be viewed as partly responsible for the events at hand. In the case of major recessions, frustration among those suffering the brunt of the economic shocks may turn toward the stewards of economic growth, such as bankers, CEOs, managers, and other business elites, whose wealth and relative insulation from the economic cycle may be perceived as morally suspect. Candidates for political office will capitalize on these sentiments, by framing themselves as protectors of working people intent on righting the moral wrongs of the rich and powerful.

Cultural crises should generate a very different populist response. While political elites

will bear the brunt of the critique, candidates for office are also likely to react to popular discontent with the existing intellectual establishment. Progressives may view many media figures, pundits, and public intellectuals as belonging to an entrenched cadre with retrograde views, while conservatives may resist the foment of liberal intellectuals in academia, progressive media outlets, and social movements. Both sources of discontent should increase the prevalence of populist claims that target intellectuals as being out-of-touch with the public—for being too liberal or too conservative.

The salience of popular grievances, however, is an important but likely insufficient condition for political actors' decision to rely on populist rhetoric. The moral boundary work inherent in populist politics must also be viewed as credible by its intended audience if it is to be effective (and our assumption is that political actors will only rely on such boundary work if they can reasonably expect it to be effective). Consequently, whatever the social, political, and economic conditions may be, we should expect presidential candidates to avoid populism in the immediate aftermath of major scandals that threaten their parties' moral legitimacy, as evidenced by our results for Gerald Ford's 1976 campaign. Moral crises directly related to the party's ability to effectively represent the interests of its constituents should be especially

These general predictions point to some of the contextual factors that may affect the salience and credibility of populist claims in democratic polities. Although they are consistent with the empirical patterns observed in U.S. presidential campaigns, whether or not they are widely generalizable is a matter for further research.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have sought to delineate an important feature of democratic political culture, which has been largely ignored by political and cultural sociologists. Thus far, research on

populism has been largely the domain of political scientists, who have made important progress in defining the phenomenon and explaining its role in electoral politics. It is our contention, however, that sociologists have an important role to play in further advancing our understanding of populist politics. Sociology is less encumbered than political science by intellectual boundaries between subfields and regional specialties, which make possible a sustained comparative research agenda that could generate a more general theory of populism across geographic and historical contexts. Furthermore, exciting new work is being carried out at the intersection of political and cultural sociology on the related topics of morality, symbolic boundaries, and social classification; such work can inform our understanding of populism in important ways. Because populism entails the production of binary moral categories, it is intimately tied to Durkheimian concerns over categorical purity and pollution (Douglas 1966) and to the role of such classification practices in social exclusion and the reproduction of inequality. By identifying the mechanisms that serve to structure the categories of the virtuous people and the corrupt elites (as we have sought to do here), sociologists can provide unique insights into the varied content, shifting prevalence, and political and social consequences of populist politics.

In particular, our paper has shown that populism is an important feature of presidential politics in the United States, with both parties frequently relying on dichotomous moral classifications that vilify elite groups. Some of these classification strategies are largely divorced from political ideology, as was the case with populism targeting elected political officials, while others appear to be aligned with the general ideological commitments of the two parties, as was the case with anti-bureaucratic and economic populism. Furthermore, our analyses have demonstrated that in the aggregate, populism is a rhetorical strategy whose use is driven in large

part by exogenous features of the social, economic, and political climate. Shifts in the prevalence of populist rhetoric appear to be influenced by economic recessions, cultural crises, political scandals, and deviations from typical patterns in the transfer of power between the two parties. These causal processes are themselves a function of the degree to which populist claims made by incumbents and challengers are likely to be perceived as resonant and credible by the electorate. In generating these novel conclusions, we have also sought to prove the utility of computational text methods for studying framing practices in political discourse. Though not without their limitations, this approach allowed us to observe variation across a large corpus of texts without having to rely on the labor-intensive and error-prone 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 generalizable theories of political discourse.

Despite its contributions, our paper is intended merely as a first step in the direction of greater sociological engagement with the topic of populist discourse, and of moral classification in electoral politics more generally. Future work should develop more precise estimates of populist claims-making by party, election, and type of populism. Scholars should also gather data that will allow for more conclusive testing of hypotheses related to the predictors and consequences of temporal trends in populism. Finally, this paper is part of a longer-term research agenda that seeks to develop a comprehensive theory of populist politics. To that end, we intend to compare the American case with other developed democracies, including the well-known cases from Western Europe and Latin America, but also less obvious ones like Canada, Australia, and the countries of Eastern Europe. By tracing the similarities and differences in the content and use of populist claims across a wide variety of contexts, we hope to avoid some of the limitations that characterize existing research on this topic.

Populism takes on many distinct forms, from the most progressive to the most pernicious, and its prominence waxes and wanes with the currents of history. Yet, for all this complexity, one thing appears to be clear: populism is an endemic feature of democratic political culture and as such, it must figure prominently among the intellectual concerns of social scientists.

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