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# WE (NOT THEM) THE PEOPLE:

# POPULIST RHETORIC IN THE CONTEMPORARY U.S. CONGRESS

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WE (NOT THEM) THE PEOPLE:

POPULIST RHETORIC IN THE CONTEMPORARY U.S. CONGRESS

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# Contents

# Abstract

This dissertation provides evidence that populist rhetoric shapes Congress, parties and individual politicians in rich and contextual ways. I collected a dataset of over 2 million tweets (2012-2020: Chapter 2) and over 150,000 speeches (110th-116th congresses: Chapter 3) from the congressional record, and analyzed these texts using automated dictionary analysis. Populist language on Twitter was associated with greater engagement (favorites, retweets) and with increased candidate fundraising (dollars, number of donors). Analyzing speeches, members that are ideological extremists and engage in dilatory tactics use populist rhetoric more, while the most productive legislators use it less. My final substantive chapter (4) details survey experiments that gauge the impact of populism on voters' perceptions of Congress as an institution and on candidate perceptions. Candidate characteristics do affect voter perceptions of honesty and authenticity, although overall I caution against the overinterpretation of these results due to their inconsistency and small substantive size.

# Chapter 1

# Introduction

American voters are all too familiar with politicians' claims that they are acting in our best interests. Donald Trump often opined at the beginning of his presidency that he was acting in the interests of the "forgotten men and women of our country."[1] Joe Biden decided to cut out the middleman entirely and (in)famously declare: "I am the Democratic Party."[2] Indeed, it is a holdover from the founding of the nation explicitly against tyrannical governments that its politicians must always appear to have the public on their side, using whatever grandiose assertions necessary.

In modern political life in the United States, politicians such as Trump, Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Ted Cruz, and others trumpet a specific subcategory of these representational claims: populist rhetoric. These politicians and others like them are often heralded by the media as using innovative rhetoric that speaks directly to the American people. Under a more critical eye, though, the "new" populism is just old wine in new bot-

[1]Hamblin, Abby. "10 most populist lines from Trump's inauguration speech for 'the people.' " *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 20, 2017. Accessed December 4, 2023.

[2]Sherfinski, David. "Joe Biden: 'I am the Democratic Party right now.' " *The Washington Times*, September 29, 2020. Accessed December 4, 2023.

tles. Populists have long been making the claim that they alone are arbiters of the popular will. They will use government to remove the obstacle of conspiring elites, whether they be big banks, large corporations, the political establishment, Wall Street, the "globalists," or some other boogeyman. Once they are out of the way, representation par excellence will be unfettered.

To investigate these claims, my dissertation research focuses on members of Congress, as they represent a body of politicians who have significant incentives to present themselves as populist seers of the public will. Practically, Congress is also more suitable than the presidency for systematic analysis due to the availability of a large pool of politicians and data on their policy positions via the roll call record.

My dissertation makes a contribution to the field of legislative studies in several areas. First, in chapters 1 and 2, I use datasets of over 2 million tweets and over 150,000 speeches from the congressional record to investigate how populist language in Congress is associated with specific measurable indicators of legislative behavior, such as legislative productivity, ideology, party voting, and use of dilatory tactics, as well as outcomes that have real-world consequences for members of Congress and the voting public, such as social media engagement and fundraising. In these chapters, I also provide a systematic approach (using automated dictionary analysis) that serves both to classify language as populist and to identify specific party-based differences in uses of language. In my final chapter, I turn to how populist rhetoric influences voters' perceptions of our political institutions or of individual populist politicians. Through its innovative focus, this chapter provides a blueprint that can push forward studies of how this

specific form of rhetoric may impact our political system at the voter level.

I argue that because of populism's unique claims and increasing relevance in U.S. political life, it is important to know which politicians are employing it as a rhetorical strategy, what results they are achieving in doing so, and how these strategies impact the opinions of the voting public. The following chapters provide my insights from a comprehensive study of populist language at the congressional level.

In summary, I find that populist language on Twitter was associated with greater engagement (favorites, retweets) and with increased candidate fundraising (dollars, number of donors). Analyzing speeches, members that are ideological extremists and engage in dilatory tactics use populist rhetoric more, while the most productive legislators use it less. My final substantive chapter details survey experiments that gauge the impact of populism on voters' perceptions of Congress as an institution and on candidate perceptions. Candidate characteristics do affect voter perceptions of honesty and authenticity, although overall I caution against the overinterpretation of these results due to their inconsistency and small substantive size.

# Chapter 2

# Populism on Twitter

## Introduction

In many ways, Donald Trump[1] has taken the mantle of the archetypal figure for right-wing populism in American politics over the past 4 years. His politics could be characterized as "anti-ism," (Erlich 1977) defined as much by what he stands *against* as what he stands for (Shaw 2016). Partly due to the simplicity from the media's perspective of covering the American presidency versus covering all 435 members of Congress and partly because of Trump's singular personality, his fervent supporters are deemed "Trumpists,"[2] with Trump often accused of developing and benefitting from a "cult of personality."[3]

[1]By referencing Trump in the development of my framework for populist rhetoric, I do not mean to imply that I will be solely focusing on the manifestation of right-wing populism among members of Congress. I do think it is important, though, to consider Trump in any conceptualization of contemporary American populism. It is highly likely that many or most of the populists identified in this research, especially those on the right-wing, are those seeking to emulate Trump and capture the elements of his eccentric appeal that led to his success in 2016.

[2]E.g. Bacon Jr., Perry. "The Five Wings of the Republican Party." *FiveThirtyEight*, March 27, 2019. Accessed April 9, 2020. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-five-wings-of-the-republican-party/.

[3]Weiner, Greg. "Don't let Trump's Cult of Personality Make COVID-19 Worse."April 8, 2020. Accessed April 9, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/opinion/covid-

I argue, though, that investigating populism in American politics should not stop at President Trump, even if in recent years he has often sucked much of the proverbial political oxygen out of the room within the American media landscape. Little systematic evidence has been gathered in the academic literature about how much Trump's populist rhetoric has influenced the representational styles of members of Congress (MCs), even though it is often assumed that these politicians (perhaps strategically) mimic Trump.

In order to develop systematic conclusions about how MCs use populist rhetoric, I engage in a dictionary-based text analysis of tweets from MCs' accounts. As I discuss further below, this provides a unique opportunity to observe members' rhetoric on a platform that is open to all members at a relatively low cost. Thus, the purpose of this paper is two-fold: first, I seek to establish a valid dictionary for measuring populism in the U.S. context. Second, I present analyses that inform continued studies of how members of Congress employ populist rhetoric on social media.

## Populist Rhetoric in the Age of Trump

President Donald Trump marked his formal succession to the presidency by appealing to "the forgotten men and women of this country" in his inaugural address. Bill Clinton, similarly, opined that his vision was to build an American republic that is not "Republican or Democratic," but "rooted in the vision and values of the American people."[4] Jimmy Carter announced his speech accepting the nomination for the presidency at the

trump-presidency.html.

[4]Clinton, William J. "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in New York," July 16, 1992. *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25958

1976 Democratic National Convention would be "uniformly populist in tone."[5] Most contemporary observers of politics would agree that these types of speeches do not represent anything new in American politics, and many would agree that they are explicitly "populist." What *precisely* is meant by populism in American politics, though, is a hotly contested debate, especially considering that the popular press has alternately asserted that the odd bedfellows of Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump,[6] and Hillary Clinton[7] all use rhetoric that could fall under some broad populist umbrella.

Populist rhetoric in Congress, though, has not received nearly as much attention as the concept has in studies of the American presidency. There are a few likely reasons for this. In part this is a function of rhetoric itself. That is, the president is the only national official for whom every American has a say in his election, which often gives him a more credible rhetorical argument of acting in accordance with the interests of the American people.[8] The other component is practical and methodological: the president of course speaks frequently, but it is much easier for one analyst to sift through the communications of a single individual than to sift through the communications of 435 persons. Only recently has the level of computing power become available to aid researchers in making inferences about

[5]Kneeland, Douglas E. 1976. "Plains Residents Cheer Carter as He Returns Home and Repeats Pledge to Win." *New York Times*, July 17, 1976. Accessed October 2, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/1976/07/17/archives/plains-residents-cheer-carter-as-he-returns-home-and-repeats-pledge.html

[6]E.g. Kathleen Hennessey, "The Populist Sentiment Fueling Both the Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump Campaigns," *The Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2015. Accessed April 9, 2020. https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-trump-sanders-20150814-story.html; Jonah Goldberg, "Sanders and Trump: Two Populist Peas in a Pod?" National Review, August 19, 2015. Accessed April 9, 2020. https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/08/donald-trump-bernie-sanders-populism/.

[7]Beauchamp, Scott. "The Populism of Hillary Clinton." The Atlantic, August 10, 2015. Accessed April 9, 2020. http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/hillary-the-populist/400376/.

[8]In fact, the president may attempt to appeal to the people by painting Congress as a "common enemy" (Shaw 2016)

large volumes of text. Further, the communciations of MCs are also considerably more fragmented across media than the communications of the president. Until recently, the president did not rely on social media as one of his primary modes of communicating, and members of Congress used publications like newsletters as their primary vehicle of communication, an avenue that is not applicable to presidential communication. Identifying potential sources of data to analyze congressional rhetoric is a relatively simple task, though, in comparison to narrowing in on a precise definition of what actually constitutes populist rhetoric.

## Conceptualizing Populism

The task of identifying common themes in populist rhetoric is more difficult than it might appear at first glance. As mentioned above, this is due in part to the classification of the rhetoric of politicians on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum as "populist." Additionally, what constitutes populism in common parlance in one country may differ substantially from populist rhetoric and positions in another country.

In synthesizing extant literature wherein researchers seek to systematize conceptions of populism, a layered conception emerges. The most basic form of populist rhetoric[9] simply involves references to some unified "people" (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). An elaboration on this concept involves the populist reifying the people's desires[10] in explicit opposition to the second key conception of populist rhetoric, a conspiring elite. Within the populist worldview, elites comprise an ever-expanding cast of charac-

[9]It should be noted that a significant portion of scholars do not accept this rudimentary definition as constituting populism.

[10]This dimension of populism can be used as an explanation for why populists are often hostile to institutions and in favor of purely majoritarian political mechanisms.

ters that can be seen to represent essentially all institutions and decision-makers (Laclau 2012), including "big banks, multinational corporations, media pundits, elected politicians and government officials, intellectual elites and scientific experts, and the arrogant and privileged rich" (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 6). The particular elites targeted in populist rhetoric (whether economic, political or cultural) vary (Hameleers 2018b) and are often theorized to correspond to specific ideological perspectives (e.g. Kriesi 2014). In populist discourse, politicians often link these conspiring elites to widespread societal dysfunction, or dysfunction within "the system" (Maurer & Diehl 2020).

These first two components are the most widely used in studies of populism, but some researchers also discuss other subcomponents, such as the link between populism and authoritarianism as well as nativism. First, populist politicians tend to admire authoritarian strongmen and charismatic leaders. Second, related to praising the "ordinary people," populist leaders show favoritism towards that defined group at the expense of diversity and multiculturalism, with a propensity towards advocating for closed borders and traditional values (Mudde 2007). In sum, many experts in studies of populism argue that the more of the above components that are expressed in a particular source or corpus, the more "complete" the expression of populism (Jagers & Walgrave 2007).

In this research, I will focus on the *anti-elitism* subcomponent of populism mentioned above: rhetoric that depicts elites conspiring against the American public. I focused on this element of populism for several reasons. First, a consensus of scholars include conspiring elites in their definitions of populism. Second, previous scholars have been able to identify the elitism

subcomponent with a high degree of reliability.[11] Finally, some element of the will of the people will be captured within the anti-elitism subcomponent, as one of the fundamental modes of populist rhetoric is to pit the "pure"/"true" will of the people against the conspiring elites working behind the scenes to frustrate the people's wishes. To construct a dictionary, I used an inductive process of analysis.

## Measuring Populism in Congress

In order to develop an index of populism based on congressional communication, I used a multi-step iterative process. I started by using dictionaries other scholars had employed[12] to classify populist language and then refined and added to this initial list of terms.

First, in order to maximize the validity of my dictionary, I manually searched the text corpora for the words that were identified inductively and through consulting extant dictionaries from other scholars. Then, I looked for surrounding words and phrases that may have been missed in the initial dictionary construction. I also used the R-package *quanteda* to identify additional keywords in context.

Next, I used an iterative process to increase the measurement validity of the classification process. After making an initial attempt at classifying the texts using the dictionary, I looked through and identified terms that produced large "false positive" rates.[13] Upon identifying terms with a

[11] Although a dictionary was constructed for a "people-centrism" dimension, the dictionary performed too poorly in comparison to human hand-coders to include in the final analysis.

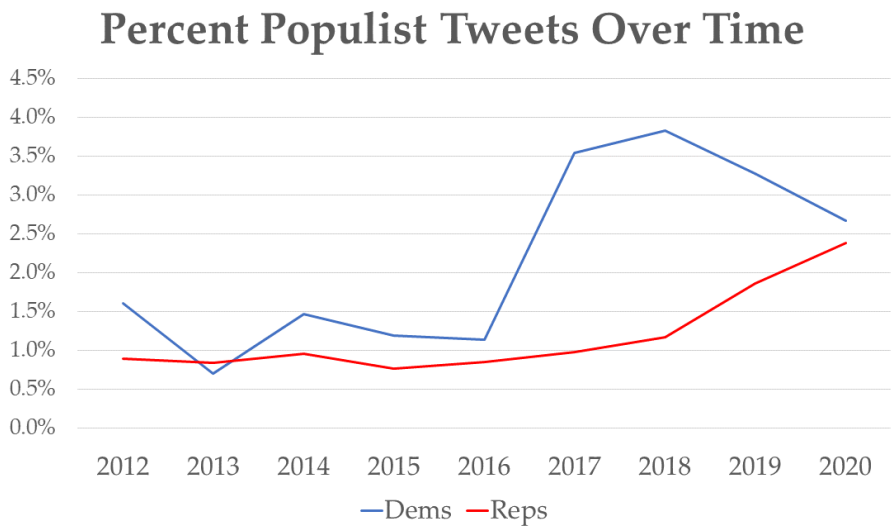
[12] Dictionaries in extant research consulted: Bonikowki & Gidron 2016, Bruter & Harrison 2011 Oliver & Rahn 2016, Grundl 2018, Theiele 2020

[13] That is, classifying as "populist" texts that do not reflect the concept as defined in this research.

false positive rate greater than 50 percent, I eliminated these terms and then re-evaluated the measurement validity of the dictionary to gauge further improvement.

Finally, to further validate the dictionary I compared the dictionary's performance on a random sample of tweets to the performance of a human coder on the same subset of tweets. By classifying tweets by hand into binary categories (e.g. representing elitist rhetoric or not) and comparing the manual classification to the dictionary-based classification, this allowed for evaluation of the dictionary based both on *recall*, "how well the dictionary captures relevant items and avoids false negatives," as well as *precision*, or "how well the dictionary captures relevant documents and avoids false positives" (Thiele 2019, 10; Grundl 2018). For a full discussion of the performance of the dictionary compared to a hand coded sample of tweets, see Appendix A2.

Figure 2.1: Mean Populism Over Time




Tweets were classified as "anti-elite" if they contained at least one

term from the anti-elite dictionary.[14] I generated member-year level populism scores by dividing the number of anti-elite tweets a member sent out during a year by the total number of tweets they sent out during that period. Figure 2.1 shows the average populism scores for Democrats and Republicans in each Congress.

## Populist Rhetoric on Social Media

Previous scholars (e.g. Gainous & Wagner 2013) have argued that the adoption of social media by political actors signaled a major change in how politicians and ordinary citizens communicate. In general, social media has become increasingly fertile ground for populist rhetoric (Bartlett, Birdwell, & Littler 2011), providing politicians ample room to spread populist messages (Engesser et al. 2017). Indeed, the "mass" nature of social media would seem a natural conduit for the politics of the masses that aspiring populists crave to direct (Gerbaudo 2018). The lack of gatekeeping on social media can also create the illusion for voters that politicians are speaking directly to them and in touch with "the people," even though a politician's presence on social media does not validate any special claim to being in touch with public opinion (Moffitt 2018).

With regard to congressional rhetoric, analyzing posts from MCs on social media provides a useful theoretical contrast in comparison to looking at institutional communication such as one- and five-minute speeches and special order debates. In contrast to these more formal settings where MCs address a very general audience (at least in theory), social media offers a

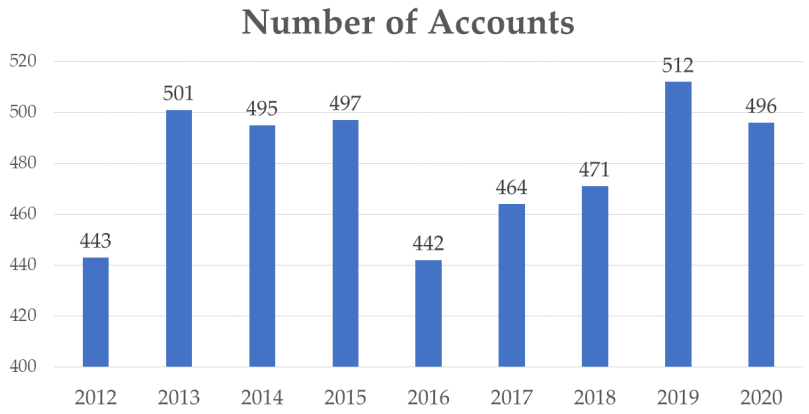
[14] I considered various methods of classification here. Ultimately because tweets can be very few characters I wanted to construct a dictionary that could classify tweets based on a single word. While this could have the potential to inflate false positives, Appendix A2 indicates the dictionary performs very well when compared to hand coding. So this (in part) validates this methodological decision.

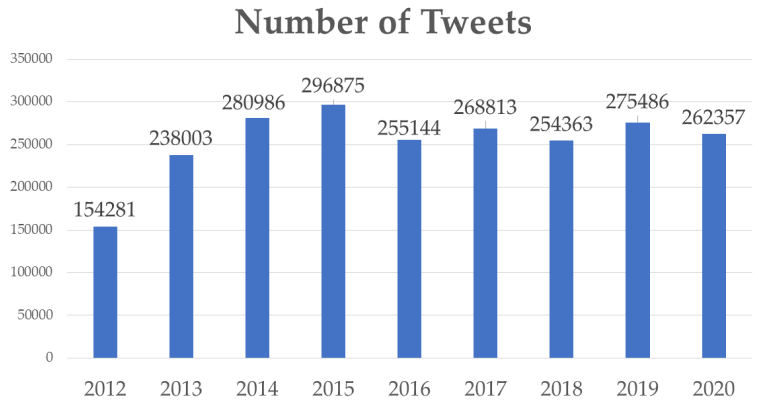
relatively unconstrained medium[15] in which to address voters and provide more specialized and targeted expressions of rhetoric. Some researchers have gone as far as to herald the digital revolution a transformation of member-constituent relations due to its low cost, speed of transmission, and potential to reach a wide audience (Straus & Glassman 2016). Tromble (2016) notes that senators often use social media to employ party cues and communicate as one "of the people" (9). MCs also engage in increasingly sophisticated hashtag campaigns in order to frame discourse surrounding issues of public policy (Hemphill et al. 2013a).

Also relevant to this study are arguments by previous scholars that social media provides an avenue for institutionally disadvantaged politicians to connect to voters. As argued above, there are good reasons to believe that institutionally disadvantaged and less senior members may be more likely to express themselves in populist terms; therefore, social media provides an interesting case study which could provide some leverage on how severely institutional norms and procedures restrict the expression of populism in formal communications within the chamber. Some evidence exists that politicians use Twitter to rally voters directly to political action, although this is far less common than simply advertising one's political positions or providing basic information (Hemphill et al. 2013b). Finally, another aspect that may underlie populist politicians' affinity for Twitter is populism's association with ideological extremism. Multivariate analyses (Peterson 2012) indicate that extremists were particularly likely to be early and enthusiastic adopters of Twitter.

[15] Although not entirely "unmediated:" see, e.g., Gerbaudo 2018.

Figure 2.2: Accounts/Tweets per year



## Data

To investigate populist rhetoric on social media, I analyzed tweets from the official accounts of members of the House and Senate.[16] The tweets span 2012-2020, and the accounts represented are a comprehensive selection of members that were active on Twitter during this time period (1,322 unique accounts in total).

The tweets were collected from the Twitter API in 2022, and were obtained by "hydrating" the original twitter metadata from Tweet IDs provided by Ballard et al. 2023.[17] Figure 1.2 shows the distribution of tweets collected by year. In order to facilitate easier analysis of the text, I pre-processed the tweets, excluding urls, retweets (RTs), and removing punctuation and numbers.[18] Roughly 2 million tweets remained after the text was pre-processed.

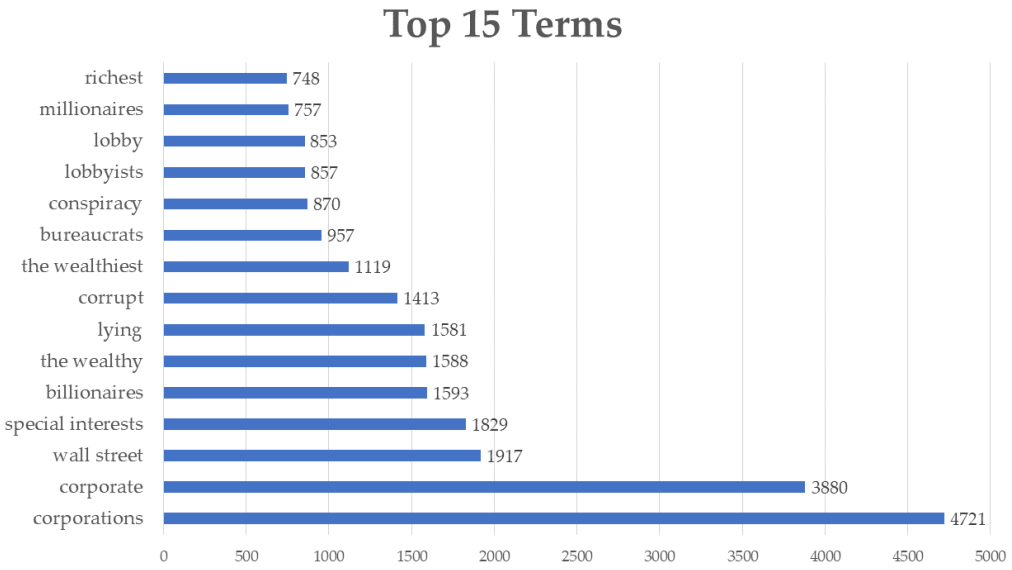
To classify members as more or less populist, I constructed an index that is calculated as a simple proportion of a member's populist tweets in a year divided by their total number of tweets in that same year. Tweets were classified as populist if they contained at least one dictionary term, and members received populism scores for each year that they had at least 50 tweets. I established this baseline because a member tweeting 50 times in a year would communicate with constituents about once a week, on average, assuming the tweets were roughly evenly spaced out. Figure 1.3 lists the

[16] The analyses in the main text of the paper include all accounts identified for members during this time period. Auxilliary analyses separating "official" accounts from "unofficial" (personal, campaign) did not yield results that were substantively different.

[17] A note: the dataset is comprised of tweets that could be recovered using the rehydrator app *rehydratoR* using account information and tweet IDs from Ballard et al. 2023. This dataset likely does not encompass the universe of tweets for these congresses.

[18] I did not remove "stop words" as this would have interfered with the identification of some of the dictionary terms.

Figure 2.3: Frequency of Terms




top 15 dictionary terms across the time series.

**Hypotheses: Predictors of Populism**

In order to better describe the relationship between the characteristics of members of Congress and the degree to which they employ populist rhetoric, I will employ regression analysis. Specifically, I generate several hypotheses that predict relationships between observable legislator, district, and chamber-level covariates and the usage of populist rhetoric.

*$H_1$: More junior members of Congress will use populist rhetoric more frequently.*

*$H_2$: Among recently elected members, those that had prior experience in politics use populist rhetoric less frequently than members who never held public office.*

*$H_3$: Congressional leadership will be less likely to use populist rhetoric.*

Because challengers need some way of differentiating themselves from incumbents electorally, they are more likely to use populist rhetoric on the campaign trail in order to frame incumbent candidates as part of

a corrupt establishment. This framing paints the incumbent as a foil to the less experienced candidate, which is attuned to the will of the people (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). Given the tendencies of speakers to make their message more inclusive when they are speaking to a more heterogeneous audience (Mische 2003) it is likely that recently elected members will moderate their populist tendencies somewhat on their official Twitter account in comparison to how they may have initially come across on their campaign account.

However, after winning election it will remain the case that less senior members will be more likely to come across as self-styled populists. Similarly, previous experience in politics will influence a candidate's perceived credibility in using populist arguments, and thus their probability of doing so (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). More senior members (especially members of the congressional leadership) are easily painted as members of the very corrupt establishment that populists seek to denounce. To operationalize these hypotheses, I use an index variable that combines whether the MC was a state legislator previously and a measure of legislative professionalism (the Squire Index) as well as a measure of the number of terms the member has been in office (seniority). I also include an indicator variable for whether the member is a part of the minority or majority congressional leadership[19]

*$H_4$: More ideologically extreme members of Congress will be more likely to use populist rhetoric.*

Social media presents incentives for members to engage in extremist rhetoric. Ideological extremity is a strong predictor of Facebook follow-

[19]Explanatory variables gathered from Volden and Wiseman's "Lawmakers" data as well as Voteview data.

ers,[20] perhaps because extremist candidates tend to share posts that promote discord online and drive overall engagement. Journalists also fuel this cycle with their tendency to cover extreme and conflictual stories more often (Padgett et al. 2019). I operationalize ideological extremity here using a measure of the member's ideological distance from the majority party median in that Congress.[21]

*$H_5$: Republican members of Congress will be more likely to use populist rhetoric after the election of Donald Trump.*

In addition, I predict that there will be an observable increase in the aggregate usage of populist rhetoric in the Republican Party after Donald Trump's election. Among academics and journalists there seems to be a rough consensus that congressional Republicans have been "following Trump's lead rather than tempering his discourse and policy positions" (Hawkins & Hawkins 2018, 53). Pressures from loyal Trump supporters are likely to lead even Trump's relatively moderate co-partisans to adopt a more populist tone.

*$H_6$: Members of the minority party will use populist rhetoric more frequently.*

*$H_7$: Members of Congress who do not belong to the party of the president will be more likely to use populist rhetoric.*

The reasons for more frequent usage of populist rhetoric by the minority party are two-fold: first, previous studies have identified that minority party members simply communicate more frequently (Maltzman & Sigelman 1996; Morris 2001), which likely extends to populist messaging as

[20]Hughes, Adam, and Onyi Lam. "Highly ideological members of Congress have more Facebook followers than moderates do." Pew Research Center, August 21, 2017. Accessed January 7, 2022. http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/hillary-the-populist/400376/.

[21]Measure constructed using Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores.

well. One justification for this increased use of communication is that minority party members are forced to make direct appeals to voters because of their relative lack of institutional power. Second, similarly to incumbents versus challengers in a campaign, out-party members will be perceived by voters as more credible in positioning themselves in opposition to the political establishment.

In considering the rhetoric of members who are in the opposite party from the president, a similar logic to that used in justifying the previous hypothesis applies. That is, members with less institutional power will turn to populist rhetoric more often. An additional consideration, though, is that opposite party members can also more easily turn to criticizing the bureaucracy, a frequent target of populist rhetoric (especially on the right). I operationalize these hypotheses with a dummy indicator of majority party status.

*$H_8$: More legislatively productive members will be less likely to use populist rhetoric.*

Going back to the famous distinction between "work horses" and "show horses" (e.g. Payne 1980), members that spend a lot of time making media appearances and trips to their district often compromise their ability to actually push legislation through Congress. Although social media presents unique opportunities to network with constituents, it is probably not entirely a coincidence that congressional productivity has declined alongside an explosion of social media use by members[22] While the cost (in

[22]Smith and Shah. 2021. "Though not especially productive in passing bills, the 116th Congress set new marks for social media use." Pew Research Center. January 25, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/25/though-not-especially-productive-in-passing-bills-the-116th-congress-set-new-marks-for-social-media-use/ (accessed January 7, 2022).

terms of time) of communicating on social media is comparatively small, I predict that members that would prefer to spend time doing the laborious work of legislating will also seek to avoid the kind of dramatic attention that populist speech often brings. I operationalize legislative productivity by including measures of the number of bills a member sponsored in a Congress as well as Volden and Wiseman's Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LESs), an index measure of a member's success as shepherding legislation through the institution at various levels (committee, floor, into law).

*$H_9$: Electorally safe members will be more likely to use populist rhetoric versus marginal members.*

I predict that safe members will be more willing to engage in populist rhetoric than marginal members (those with a higher probability of electoral defeat). Previous research (e.g. Russell 2021) has indicated that safe members are more willing to use partisan communication, and populist speech often takes on a character that is quite ideological. Marginal members will also likely be more focused on passing legislation that appeals to a broad swath of the populace or securing distributive gains for their district instead of cultivating a populist profile.

**Other predictors included**

I also include several predictors for which I do not have a specific directional expectation: variables indicating whether a member is non-white, female, or a member of the Senate. With regard to demographic characteristics, members that are female or non-white take on unique considerations when cultivating an image in the media. Non-white members, for example, are more likely to represent majority-minority districts, and minority voters (particularly black voters) are often predisposed towards politi-

cians that express themselves in a manner more consistent with "establishment" politics.[23] Conversely, Latino voters have shown a higher than expected propensity to support Trump, and in multivariate analyses areas with higher Latino populations are positively correlated with a propensity to support populists (Watts 2020).

Women, on the other hand, may see pressures to act in an "agreeable" manner and promote compromise in the institution to avoid harsh punishment (Bauer et al. 2017), or they may feel similar pressure to non-white members to speak out aggressively for radical change. I also include a Senate variable to capture aspects of the unique institutional structure and incentives to engage in populist rhetoric that may be at play for senators in contrast to House members.

**Hypotheses: Targets and Incentives**

Beyond just theorizing about the raw likelihood or degree of usage of populist rhetoric, I make some predictions about who members will target when using populist speech and regarding the incentives for using populist rhetoric on Twitter in terms of increased engagement and fundraising.

*$H_{10}$: Democrats will be more likely to use populist rhetoric that criticizes economic elites, while Republicans will be more likely to use rhetoric criticizing governmental elites.*

This hypothesis stems from the general agreement amongst scholars of populism that notions of populism are not static across ideologies. For example, it has been argued that left-leaning parties and polticians tend

[23]See for example, Bacon Jr., Perry. 2019. "Why Black Voters Prefer Establishment Candidates Over Liberal Alternatives." FiveThirtyEight. Oct 2, 2019. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-do-black-democrats-usually-prefer-establishment-candidates/ (accessed January 5, 2022).

to view populism through the prism of class, whereas right-wing politicians tend to imbue their populism with nationalism (Kriesi 2014). In the U.S. context, an ideological divide often emerges whereby left-wing and right-wing populists choose different targets to demonize, with left-wing populists such as Bernie Sanders focusing on "the richest 1 percent" of Americans, banks, and corporations[24] and right-wing populists like Donald Trump focusing on bureaucrats in the "Deep State."[25] To test this hypothesis, I follow Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) in grouping the terms in my dictionary indicative of populist rhetoric into categories of economic (such as "Wall Street, wealthy few, big corporations" (1607), big banks, etc.), anti-statist ("bureaucrats, big government, Washington elites" (1607), the "Deep State," etc.) and generic terms.

*$H_{11}$: using populist rhetoric will be associated with increased Twitter engagement (favorites, retweets) for an MC.*

Previous studies have argued that citizens will be politically mobilized by the in-group threat suggested by anti-elitist populist language (e.g., Hameleers, Bos, et al. 2018). I argue here that this theory of engagement will also apply to citizens' behavior on social media, expressed as a greater number of retweets and favorites for tweets containing populist language versus those that do not. A comparative study of populist language on social media found that in diverse contexts populist messaging provokes significantly more engagement over alternative forms of messaging (Cassell 2021), but this hypothesis has not been investigated in the context of the

[24]Johnson, Jake. 2017. "Sanders: 'Richest 1 Percent Is Responsible for 70 Percent of All Unpaid Taxes.'" *Truthout*, July 9, 2020. https://truthout.org/articles/sanders-richest-1-percent-is-responsible-for-70-percent-of-all-unpaid-taxes/ (August 28, 2020).

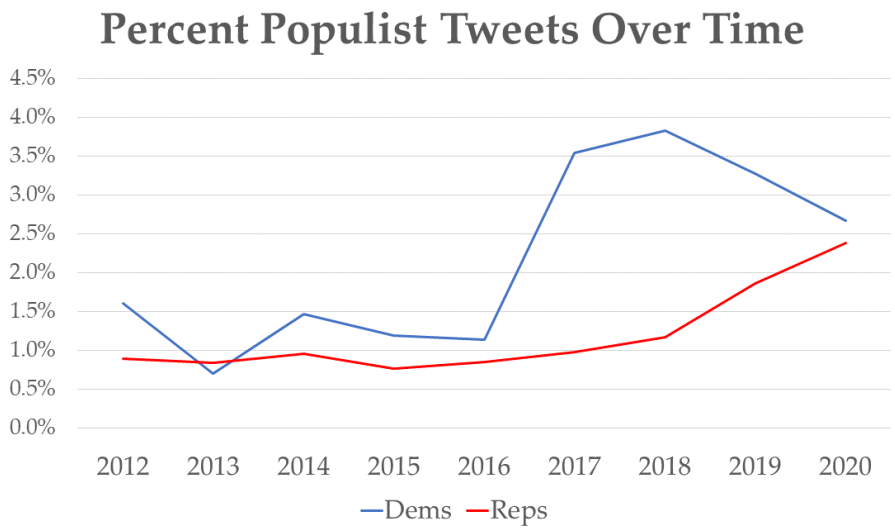
[25]Abramson, Alana. 2017. "President Trump's Allies Keep Talking About the 'Deep State.' What's That?" *Time*, March 8, 2017. *https://time.com/4692178/donald-trump-deep-state-breitbart-barack-obama/* (August 28, 2020).

U.S. Congress.

*$H_{12}$: using populist rhetoric will be associated with increased fundraising and more donors for an MC.*

If only politicians that were "'true believers" in populist ideology employed populist rhetoric, it seems very unlikely that we would see populist language in the U.S. becoming as widespread as it has. It stands to reason, then, that rather than paying a penalty for using populist rhetoric, politicians in at least some contexts will actually be incentivized to use populist language due to the associated material or status-based rewards. Populists have historically been adept fundraisers (see, e.g., Coniff 2012), and have uniquely employed digital technologies to their benefit, including for fundraising (Davis & Taras 2022). The most logical explanation to the "astronomical sums" (Jacobs 2023) invested by populists into social media and online advertising is that these investments more than pay for themselves.

Figure 2.4: Mean Populism Over Time



## Results

My results indicate that MCs became more populist in their rhetoric over the time series. Figure 2.4 above plots the mean populism index value for each year. Contrary to my earlier expectation, members of both parties became more populist in their rhetoric after 2016. Whereas through 2016 only about 1 percent of tweets from MCs contained populist rhetoric, regardless of party, by 2020 this number increased to around 2.5-3 percent. In the following sections I will investigate in more detail who is targeted in populist tweets, what individual characteristics are correlated with using populist language on Twitter, and whether we can observe real world consequences in terms of engagement and fundraising for using populist rhetoric.

### Republicans Target Political Elites, Democrats Target Economic Elites

There is also evidence to support the hypothesis that Democrats and Republicans attack different categories of elites[26] on social media when they use populist rhetoric. Figure 2.5 displays the relative proportion of tweets that targeted political elites by party compared to the relative proportion that targeted economic elites.[27] The results reflect the earlier prediction that Republicans would largely target political elites while Democrats would attack economic elites. Democrats disproportionately mention economic elites throughout the time series: in most years political elites are targeted in 8 percent or less of tweets that mentioned an elite target, although this number rises to about 12 percent at the end of the time series. Republicans are more balanced on the other hand, but still overwhelmingly target

[26] See 'targets' in Appendix A1 for full details.

[27] That is, the percentage of each category within tweets that mentioned a specific elite target.

political elites in each year represented. Moreover, one interesting trend is that Republicans were less likely to target political elites after the election of President Trump, although the relative percentages return to their pre-Trump levels later in the president's term.

Figure 2.5: Fig. 4: Elites Targeted by Party Over Time

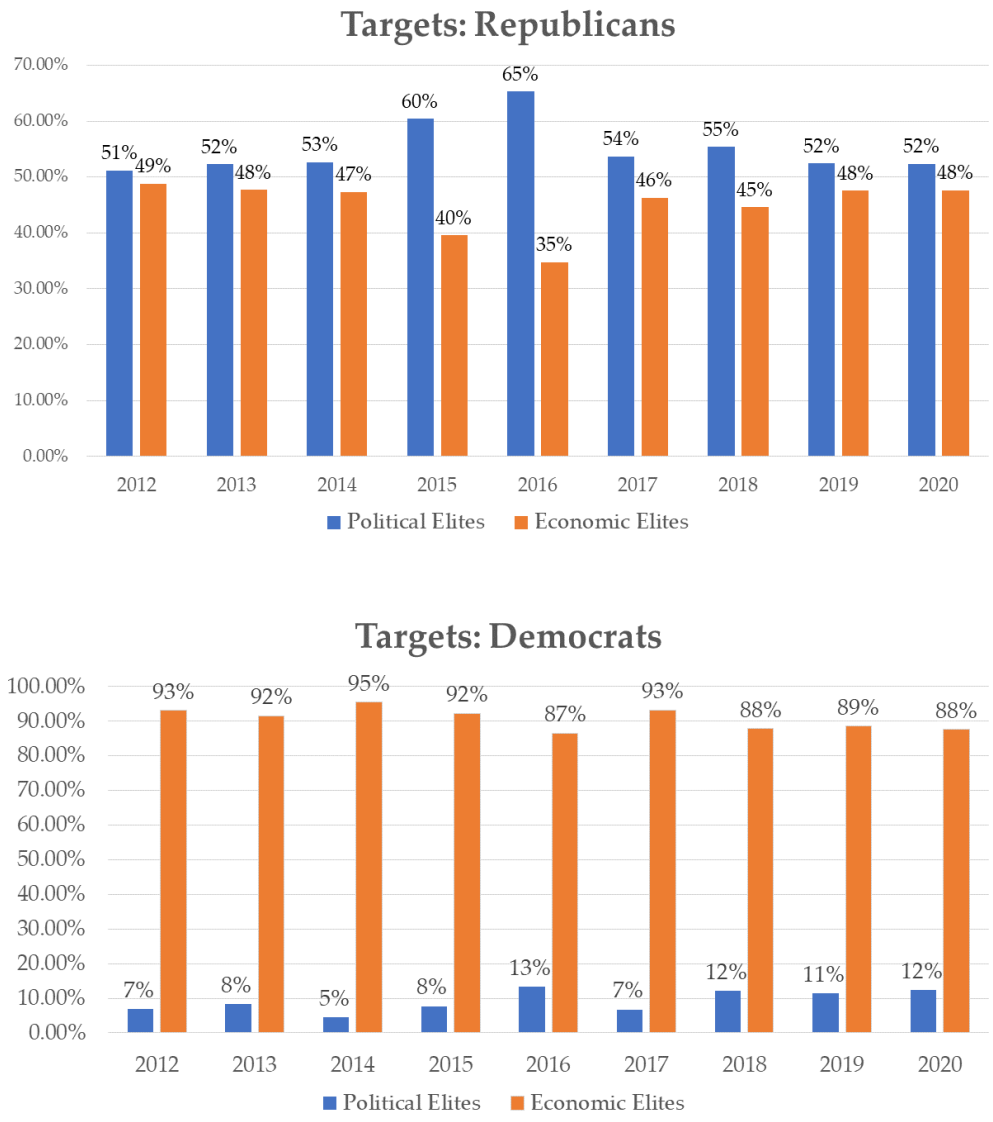


Table 2.1: Predictors of Populist Tweets (DV: Populist Tweet Proportion)

| | Democrats | Republicans |
|---|---|---|
| Vote Pct. | −0.0001 | −0.00003 |
| | (−0.0002, 0.00002) | (−0.0001, 0.00003) |
| Distance from Maj. Median | 0.073* | 0.025* |
| | (0.064, 0.082) | (0.020, 0.031) |
| No. Bills Sponsored | 0.0001* | 0.0002* |
| | (0.0001, 0.0002) | (0.0001, 0.0002) |
| LES | −0.0002 | −0.002* |
| | (−0.002, 0.001) | (−0.002, −0.001) |
| Seniority | −0.0004* | 0.00002 |
| | (−0.001, −0.0001) | (−0.0001, 0.0002) |
| Female | −0.004* | −0.002 |
| | (−0.006, −0.001) | (−0.004, 0.0001) |
| Nonwhite | −0.009* | −0.001 |
| | (−0.012, −0.007) | (−0.004, 0.003) |
| Leadership | 0.007* | 0.005* |
| | (0.004, 0.011) | (0.002, 0.007) |
| Leg. Professionalism | 0.0001 | 0.001 |
| | (−0.005, 0.005) | (−0.003, 0.006) |
| Majority Party | 0.054* | 0.011* |
| | (0.047, 0.061) | (0.007, 0.016) |
| President's Party | 0.004* | −0.003* |
| | (0.001, 0.007) | (−0.005, −0.001) |
| Senate | −0.021* | 0.003* |
| | (−0.023, −0.018) | (0.001, 0.004) |
| Constant | −0.022* | −0.005 |
| | (−0.031, −0.013) | (−0.011, 0.001) |
| Observations | 2,663 | 2,382 |
| $R^2$ | 0.221 | 0.128 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.218 | 0.123 |

*Note:* *p<0.05

**What predicts whether a member will use populist rhetoric on Twitter?**

Table 2.1 presents multivariate (OLS) regression analyses of the predictors of populist rhetoric by MCs. The dependent variable is the yearly share of tweets for a member classified as populist. In these regressions some interesting variation emerges between Democrats and Republicans as to what predictor variables are statistically significant.[28] For Democrats, demographic characteristics act in the expected direction, with female and non-white members sending fewer populist tweets overall. There is also a substantial negative effect of being in the Senate, with Democratic senators sending about 2 percent fewer populist tweets on average than their House co-partisans. Additionally, being in the majority party seems to result in sending more populist tweets, on average, a finding that contradicts my earlier expectation. This majority finding also holds for Republicans, although overall for Republicans being a Senate member does not seem to influence use of populist rhetoric, and neither do MC demographics. For both parties ideological extremity and being a member of the leadership both seem to influence the use of populist rhetoric. Ideology acts in the expected direction, with members more distant from the majority party median being more likely to use populist rhetoric.[29] For Democrats, moving 0.1 on the NOMINATE scale away from the chamber median results in a roughly .7 percent increase in populist tweets, whereas for republicans the same movement would result in about a .25 percent increase. The leadership variable contradicts expectations, with leaders being more likely to use populist rhetoric. This could be due to leaders seeking to mimic successful candidates at the presidential level in their rhetoric, either because

[28] In this analysis a standard of $p < 0.05$ is used for establishing statistical significance.

[29] Results are substantively similar when the chamber median is used as a comparison point instead.

they are trying to make sure their base supports the party or because they themselves are positioning for a run for higher office.

While these effects may seem substantively small at first glance, it is important to consider that most tweets are mostly devoid of policy/political substance, and that most members do not tweet using populist language very often. Members send about 1 populist tweet per month on average; even a fraction of a percentage increase in this context is quite substantial. Of course, if populist rhetoric is infrequent, it becomes necessary to show that it has a real impact on both social media and in real world politics. In my next section, I provide some preliminary evidence that indicates that using populist rhetoric both increases engagement on social media and translates into real world increases in fundraising for members that choose to express themselves as populists.

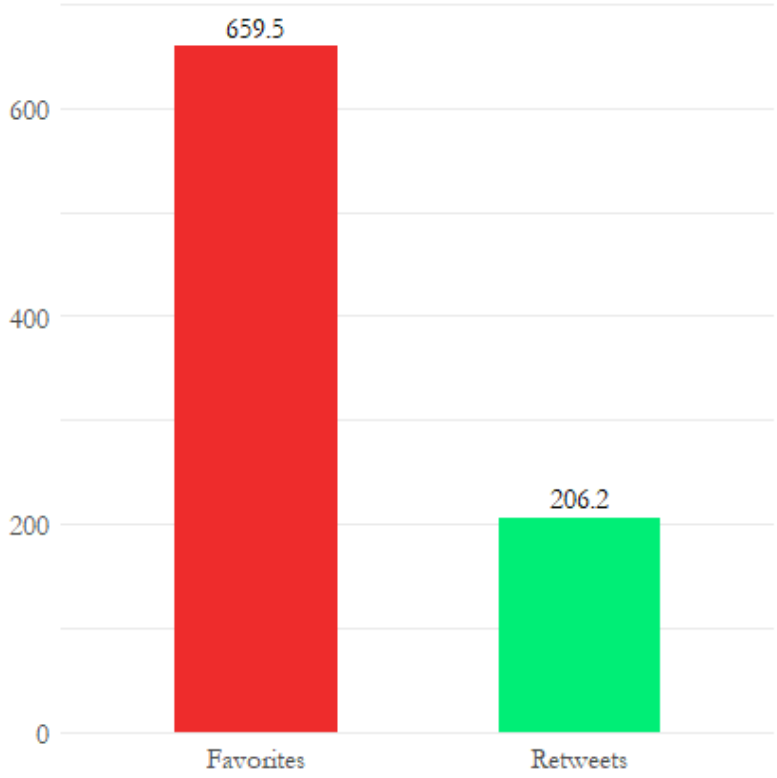
**Populist Tweets Garner Much More Engagement**

Figure 2.6 shows that on average populist tweets garner significantly more engagement (favorites/retweets above average) than those that do not use populist rhetoric. Specifically, populist tweets receive about 660 more favorites and 206 more retweets when compared to a member's average tweet for that year.[30] Interestingly, when the engagement results are broken out by year (see Figures 2.7 and 2.8), it becomes clear that the trend of increased engagement is primarily driven by years after 2016. For instance, while a populist tweet from 2016 received about 25 more RTs and about 75 more favorites, in 2020 an average populist tweet received about 350 more RTs and 1300 more favorites.[31] Both average and year specific increases are

[30]For full results including coefficients for control variables, see Appendix A3.

[31]The baseline for these mesaures is the number of favorites or retweets above average that a populist tweet receives compared to the member's average tweet in that particular

Figure 2.6: Populist Tweet Favorites/Retweets Above Average




substantively significant when one considers that the average tweet for a member in the dataset received 448 favorites and 125 retweets.

**Populist Tweets Lead to More Donors and Increased Fundraising.**

It could be, however, that while populist tweets garner excitement and controversy on social media through increased engagement, they have little effect on MCs political careers beyond increased social media visibility. My preliminary evidence suggests this is not true, however. In a multivariate analysis with time (month/year) fixed effects, each additional populist tweet from a member was associated with an almost 4,000 dollar increase in funds raised for that month, and an additional 31 donors.[32] These effects

year.

[32]Analysis completed with FEC data compiled and graciously shared replication information from Ballard et al. 2023

Figure 2.7: RTs Above Average By Year

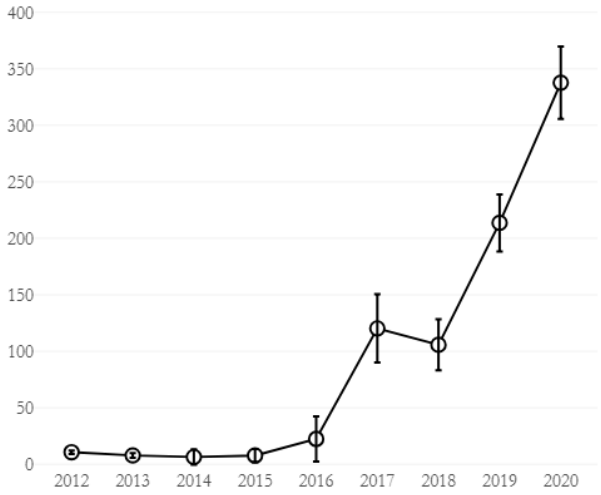
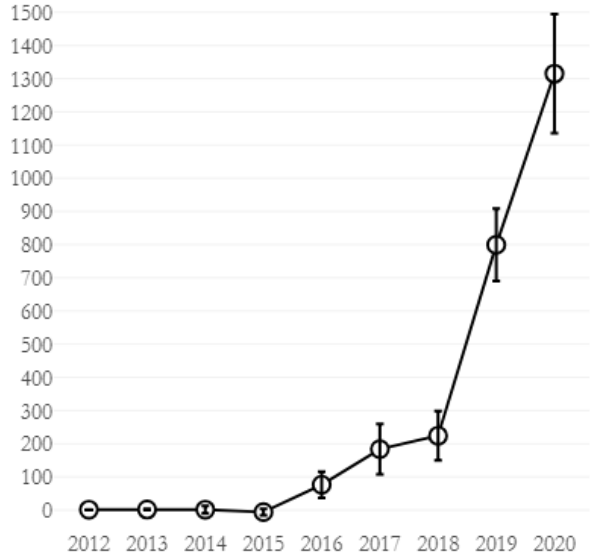



Figure 2.8: Favorites Above Average By Year



are impressive when one considers that the median member raised 17,673 dollars in a month and had 26 donors. Indeed, the benefits of adopting populist rhetoric do not seem at all limited to just the social media sphere.

Table 2.2: Populist Tweets and fundraising (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | *Dependent variable:* | |
|---|---|---|
| | Dollars Donated | No. of Donors |
| No. of Pop. Tweets | 4,227.3* | 32.7* |
| | (3,394.0, 5,060.5) | (27.3, 38.1) |
| Democrat | 305.4 | −30.0* |
| | (−4,243.3, 4,854.1) | (−59.6, −0.4) |
| Female | 6,774.0* | 70.6* |
| | (2,005.4, 11,542.6) | (39.6, 101.7) |
| Majority Leader | 42,393.2* | 353.8* |
| | (31,173.7, 53,612.7) | (280.8, 426.9) |
| Minority Leader | 9,503.3 | 143.9* |
| | (−40.2, 19,046.8) | (81.8, 206.0) |
| Dist. from Maj. Med. | −16,709.7* | 16.1 |
| | (−22,282.2, −11,137.2) | (−20.2, 52.4) |
| Bills Sponsored | 986.1* | 5.3* |
| | (851.7, 1,120.5) | (4.4, 6.2) |
| Senate | 43,664.7* | 119.0* |
| | (37,295.1, 50,034.2) | (77.6, 160.5) |
| Observations | 72,645 | 72,645 |
| $R^2$ | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.002 | −0.003 |
| Date fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

## Conclusion

This paper provides preliminary evidence that populist rhetoric is an important component of congressional discourse on social media, and that the parties use populist rhetoric in distinctly different ways. Both parties' populism was consistently predicted by factors such as ideological extrem-

ity and being in the leadership, while Democratic members' rhetoric was also influenced by their chamber and demographic characteristics such as race and gender. The parties also seem to choose different types of elites to target when they do engage in populist rhetoric, with Democrats preferring to name economic elites and Republicans discussing political elites most often. Both parties also seem to engage in populist rhetoric much more frequently following 2016-2017, a trend possibly linked to the highly successful candidacies of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

I have also provided evidence that while populist tweets are relatively few on social media, their importance seems to be outsized. Candidates garner significantly more engagement, on average, when using populist language, and populist tweets are associated both with more monthly dollars raised and a higher number of donors. These trends are somewhat alarming when one considers that members seem to be reaping even greater rewards in terms of engagement in later years in the time series. MCs seem to be reacting to incentives to adopt a populist persona in order to engage both the public and donors. While determining the exact cause of these trends is beyond the scope of this research, it is normatively alarming that members seem to be able to reap such significant gains by directing criticism at elites.

Future research should give more attention to both how voters respond at an individual level to these populist claims levied by MCs and to whether these claims are primarily a product of the social media environment or are also becoming more prevalent and influential in other settings. It will also be important for future researchers studying social media to be especially attentive to platform changes and problems caused by

data restriction, given the observations of contextual differences in scholarly research on political communication (Blum et al. 2023) and recent platform changes (e.g., "X"). My data was collected before the recent restrictions placed on academic usage of the Twitter API, but I would recommend to future researchers to preserve metadata as much as possible and be attentive to API changes in social media platforms. Although not possible for Twitter, researchers should also seek to open-source data whenever possible to further studies of political communication.

# Appendix A1: Dictionary

## Opposition to Elites[33]

### Unigrams

aristocra*, arrogan*, arrogan*, betray*, billionaire*, brazen*, bureaucr*, ceos, conspirac*, corporat*, cron*, crooked, damning, decaden*, donor, egghead*, elitis*, executives, executives*, foolish, gasli*, greed*, hoodwink*, illegitimate, illegitimate, koch*, leftis*, liar*, lobby*, lying, millionaire*, monopol*, msm, nobility, olig*, oligarchy, presumptuous, racket, richer, richest, rig, rigg*, rightis*, rot, rotten deal, scheme*, schemer, scheming, sham, shill*, snooty, soros*, superlobbyist*, sycophan*, technocra*, unaccountable, unresponsive, venal, warmonger*

### Bigrams

1 percent*, 99 percent*, abuse* of, american oligarch*, before profit*, big biz*, big business*, big government*, big interest*, big money*, big money*, big oil, big pharma*, big profit*, big tech, big tobacco, blatant* lie*, breaking promise*, broken promise*, business elit*, campaign contribution*, campaign donation*, controlling elite*, corrupt, corrupts, cover* up, dark money, dc elit*, deceiv* voter*, deep state*, democrat* establishment, destroy* america*, disinform* camp*, downplay* aware*, easy street, elite* consensus, empty promise*, establishment democrat*, establishment elite*, establishment republican*, extreme left, extreme right, fake expert*, fake intellectual*, far left, far right, fat cat*, flyover country, flyover state*, foreign interest*, forgotten american*, forgotten man*, forgotten people*, gop establishment, hard left*, hard right*, he lie*, hedge fund*, hit piece*, ingrained corruption, intentionally destroy*, left wing*, lib media, liberal media, mainstream media, media elit*, mega bank*, misinform* campaign*, moneyed interests, not accountable, obscene* wealth*, one percent*, outright lie*, over profit*, overthrow democr*, people betrayed, political apparatus, political corruption, political elit*, political establishment, political machine*, political theater, power broker*, power grab*, power hungry, power monger, power obsessed, powerful elit*, predatory lender*, pressure group*, privilege* few*, privileged few, professional politician*, profiteer*, radical environmentalists, radical left*, radical left*, radical right*, rampant corruption, real America*, record profit*, republican establishment, revolv* door*, rich friend*, rich* elit*, right wing*, rip* off, robber baron, rul* class*, rul* group*, ruling class*, self serving, she lie*, special interest*, super rich, super wealthy, super wealthy, sweeping corruption, target* disinform*, target* misinform*, tax cheat*, tax scam*, tech oligarch*, the rich, the swamp*, the

[33]Dictionaries in extant research consulted: Bonikowki & Gidron 2016, Bruter & Harrison 2011 Oliver & Rahn 2016, Grundl 2018, Theiele 2020

wealth*, uber rich, uber wealthy, ultra rich, ultra wealthy, voter* deceived, voter* deception, voters betrayed, wall st*, washington elite*, washington establishment, wealth* few, well connected

**Trigrams**

Top 0.1 percent, abus* her power*, abus* public* trust, abuse* his power*, ahead of profit*, betray* the people, betray* the voters, billion* in profit*, bottom 90 percent, breach of trust, cover* it up, culture of abuse, culture of corruption, downplay* the prob*, drain the swamp, fly over state*, for personal gain, for the profit*, foreign policy establishment, forgotten campaign promises, forgotten election promises, fossil fuel* industr*, government by elit*, military industrial complex*, million* in profit*, new world order, plot to defund, plot to overturn, plot to rip, plot to steal, plot to take, profit for one, profit* over people*, promises not kept, record breaking profit*, silicon valley oligarch*, silicon valley oligarch*, so called expert*, so called intellectual*, suppress* free speech, suppress* the truth, the president lie*, the richest american*, the richest people, who pays you, wreck* our country

**Four-grams +**

abus* the public* trust, ahead of the profit*, government by the elit*, lie* to the American people,, profit for a couple, profit for a few, suppress* free speech, those at the top, too big to jail, who* do you represent

**Targets: Political Elites**

bureaucr*, technocra*, leftis*, left wing*, rightis*, right wing*, gop establishment, republican establishment, democrat* establishment, washington establishment, establishment republican*, establishment democrat*, dc elit*, political establishment, establishment elite*,big government, professional politican, washington elite*, the swamp, deep state, drain the swamp, who pays you, abuse of office, who* do you represent,technocra*,political apparatus, political machine*, forgotten election promises, forgotten campaign promises, betray* the voters, gun lobby*, revolv* door*

**Targets: Economic Elites**

1 percent*, ahead of profit*, ahead of the profit*, before profit*, big banks, big money, big pharma*, big profit*, big tech, big tobacco, billionaire*, ceos, corporat*, corporat*, easy street, executives*, fat cat*, fossil fuel* industr*, greed*, koch*, loophole for corporations, millionaire*, monopol*, olig*, one percent*, over profit*, privileged few, profit for a couple, profit for a few, profit for one, profit* over people*, profiteer*, record breaking profit*, record profit*, rich friend, rich* elit*, robber baron*, soros*, wall st*, wealthy few

# Appendix A2: Hand-coder Dictionary Validation

In order to validate the automated dictionary analysis, I coded a stratified random sample of 1750 tweets by hand as either anti-elitist (1) or not (0). Tweets were coded as anti-elitist if they expressed negative sentiment towards elites of a broad group of categories, such as "big banks, multinational corporations, media pundits, elected politicians and government officials, intellectual elites and scientific experts, and the arrogant and privileged rich" (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 6).In the American context, this also included entities such as bureaucrats, the swamp, the media, Wall St., big business, the 1 percent, interest groups, the "Deep State," the political establishment, tech companies, big pharma, "technocrats," big banks, etc.[34] In sum, the anti-elite component had to express more than just partisanship or disagreeing with a particular policy: it entailed portraying the other side as conspiring elites or "the establishment," and possibly included allegations that policitians/elites were engaging in sabotage or other actions that would hurt the American people (e.g., coverups, corruption, trying to ruin/overthrow democracy).

The stratified random sample included a much larger proportion of populist tweets (about 30 percent) than the overall dataset of congressional tweets (from 1 to 3 percent depending on year). This served to provide a "tough test" for evaluating the dictionary's performance: it would be quite easy, after all, to have a "well-performing" dictionary (at least in terms of overall accuracy) with a small sample of populist tweets because most tweets in the parent dataset are not populist and further are entirely devoid of policy content. I include 3 measures of dictionary performance here: first, the overall classification accuracy of the dictionary versus the hand coded sample, then the *precision* of the dictionary (the sum of true positives over the sum of false and true positives) and the *recall* of the dictionary (the sum of true positives over the sum of true positives + false negatives). I also include a confusion matrix below as Table 2.3.

Table 2.3: Confusion matrix

| | | *Human coding:* | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 0 | 1 |
| | 0 | 1166 | 87 |
| *Dict. Coding* | 1 | 136 | 361 |

The dictionary performs quite well compared to the hand-coded sam-

[34] I coded a tweet as anti-elite only if it included an elite directly relevant to the American context, that is, not foreign dictators/actors. The only exception here would be if the member made some allegation that the foreign actor was conspiring to control the U.S. government.

ple in terms of both precision (P) and recall (R). Specfically, the *precision* of the dictionary was measured at 73% and the *recall* at 81%. Validated dictionary approaches to measuring populist language are scarce, but this compares favorably to previous dictionary approaches such as Thiele's (2020) which obtained a precision (P) of 73.3 percent and an (R) of 83.3 percent on the anti-elitism component. The overall classification accuracy of the dictionary was 87 percent.

# Appendix A3: Engagement Full Results

Table 2.4: Retweets and Favorites Above Average (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | *Dependent variable:* | |
|---|---|---|
| | RTs Above Average | Favs Above Average |
| Populist Tweet | 206.2* (197.7, 214.8) | 659.5* (624.8, 694.2) |
| Democrat | 9.4* (6.2, 12.6) | 32.5* (19.6, 45.4) |
| Female | −1.2 (−4.4, 2.0) | 66.8* (53.9, 79.7) |
| Majority Leader | 43.2* (36.1, 50.2) | 174.4* (145.9, 202.9) |
| Minority Leader | 91.4* (85.6, 97.2) | 387.7* (364.3, 411.1) |
| Dist. from Maj. Med. | 45.7* (41.8, 49.7) | 113.2* (97.2, 129.3) |
| Bills Sponsored | 1.2* (1.1, 1.3) | 5.5* (5.1, 5.8) |
| Senate | 29.9* (26.3, 33.5) | 66.0* (51.5, 80.6) |
| Constant | −8.4* (−11.3, −5.5) | −47.8* (−59.6, −36.0) |
| Observations | 2,017,821 | 2,017,821 |
| $R^2$ | 0.004 | 0.003 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.004 | 0.003 |

*Note:* *p<0.05

# Chapter 3

# Populism in the Halls of Congress

## Introduction

There is little doubt among contemporary observers of American politics that populism in the American system has reached a relative pinnacle. However, as an animating force to American politics, populism is, in a sense, "old wine in new bottles," with the influence of populist parties and rhetoric waxing and waning throughout our history. Populists have mobilized for action in ways that have at times improved the health of our democratic system, providing necessary challenges to the two-party system both from the left and the right (Kazin 1998; Lee 2020). However, populism is a blunt tool[1] that operates mainly in the modes of anger, threat, and fear, which can be noble[2] or severely misguided.

In recent years, politicians adopting the populist "zeitgeist" (Mudde 2004) have spurred impressive enthusiasm among low propensity voters[3]

[1]See Jonah Goldberg's memorable analogy in: Goldberg, Jonah. 2010. "The chainsaw of populism." *National Review* September 3, 2010. Accessed October 12, 2023. *www.nationalreview.com/g-file/chainsaw-populism-jonah-goldberg/*.

[2]For example, see Obradovic et al. 2020 for a discussion of how anger in particular can be wielded in order to increase individuals' political efficacy.

[3]See Desilver, Drew. 2016. "Turnout was high in the 2016 primary season, but just short of 2008 record." *Pew Research Center* June 10, 2016. Accessed October 12, 2023.

and brought attention to dormant issues.[4] Meanwhile, their political dealings have caused a firestorm at the U.S. Capitol and repeatedly led to chaos within the governing parties in Washington, most recently culminating with the removal of Rep. Kevin McCarthy as Speaker of the House (an effort spearheaded by self-styled populist Matt Gaetz).[5]

While the mainstream media (often rightly so) gives a lot of attention to presidential candidates and individuals with outsized personalities, political science can employ more rigorous tools to give policymakers and voters a better sense of how self-styled populist politicians contribute to the image of our parties and the outputs of our democratic insititutions. In particular, the U.S. Congress provides an ideal (and understudied) vehicle for studying contemporary U.S. populism, due to its prominence within the political system and its abundance of cases to study in comparison to investigations of the presidency.

In this paper, I build on earlier work examining congressional populists on social media (Ashton 2023), turning my attention instead to how Members of Congress (MCs) express themselves within the institution. Although MCs' statements on social media have garnered increased mainstream media attention of late because of the ease of covering politicians' posts and the incentives for politicians to stoke controversy, it is clear that members (whether populist or not) still attach great importance to their communications within the chamber.

In this research project, I provide a systematic account of MCs' populist communication within the chamber, detailing how populist language

[4]Jones, Jeffrey M. "Debt, Gov't. Power Among Tea Party Supporters' Top Concerns." *Gallup* July 5, 2010. Accessed October 12, 2023.

[5]Freking, Kevin. "These 8 Republicans stood apart to remove Kevin McCarthy as House speaker." *Associated Press* October 3, 2023. Accessed October 12, 2023.

has been used in Congress over time as well as what observable quantities are associated with MCs' usage of populist language. Ultimately, I find that populist rhetoric can be systematically predicted by key indicators of legislative behavior. Specifically, ideological extremists and those that more frequently employ dilatory measures in the form of rejected amendments tend to express themselves as populists more frequently. I find effective lawmakers, on the other hand, are more infrequent users of the populist style, with mixed results for lawmakers that are more loyal to their party in terms of roll call voting.

## Studying Populism- Why Speeches?

As many scholars (e.g., Grimmer 2010, 2013) have argued previously, studying MCs' speeches provides a way of examining members' stated preferences as well as their representational style, both of which have an impact on legislator behavior in the district and in the institution. Speeches, in particular nonlegislative debate such as one and five minute speeches, offer members the opportunity to express their preferences in a fashion that is not constrained by the agenda of party leaders. Indicators such as roll-call votes, in particular, suffer from this bias due to institutional mechanisms such as majority party agenda control (Cox & McCubbins 2005; Gailmard & Jenkins 2007).

Studying members' rhetoric within the halls of Congress may initially seem like an antiquated venture, particularly when voters now seem to have politicians at their fingertips via social media. There is significant evidence, however, that both politicians and voters regard what is said on the congressional record as important. First, anecdotal accounts indicate that members pay significant attention to what is said in Congress, with

MCs or their staffs tuning in to C-SPAN daily to (at least superficially) observe the content of other members' speeches (Shogan & Glassman 2016). Second, in the modern era floor speeches are televised and publicly available to any interested constituent. Finally, the congressional record serves as a permanent source that constituents or potential opponents can leverage to conduct research on the member (Grimmer 2010, 2013).

It is likely that studying the prevalence of populist rhetoric in formal institutional communications will return a conservative estimate. Indeed, the clearest context for populist rhetoric is in political campaigns, where one candidate (most often the more inexperienced challenger) seeks to demonize his or her opponent as part of a corrupt and ineffective political establishment.[6] However, by also including non-legislative debate in my analysis of speeches in the congressional record I have an opportunity to analyze the speech of marginalized members that may not otherwise be able to make much of an impact on the day to day proceedings of Congress (Maltzman & Sigelman 1996; Morris 2001; Rocca 2007, Kalaf-Hughes 2020), such as members with less political experience (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016), MCs that are ideological or issue-based outliers (Polk et al. 2017), or electorally disadvantaged MCs (Dai and Kustov 2022). Indeed, speech data remains an important source of information for learning about congressional behavior because speech making represents an activity fundamental to all members in seeking to represent their constituents and/or signal to interest groups.

[6]See, e.g., Bonikowski & Gidron 2016; Dai & Kustov 2022; Gennaro et al. 2021; Vitale 2022.

## Data- The Congressional Record

To investigate which MCs present themselves as populists within the chamber, I employed automated dictionary analysis on the Congressional Record.[7] The Congressional Record in raw form incorporates all speeches made by members within the chamber, all measures considered (bills amendments, resolutions, etc.), and any recorded roll call votes. For this research, I used data collected and processed by Gentzkow et al. (2018) that included speeches from the 110th to the 114th congresses (2007-2017). Data for the 115th-116th congresses (2017-2021) was obtained using the *congressional-record* parser from GitHub.[8] I chose to restrict my analysis of speeches to members of the U.S. House both because of data availability (ease of parsing the record and availability of some dependent variables) as well as the methodological convenience of only having to remove highly procedural speech corresponding to one set of floor procedures (see below for more details). In both instances I used data from the "daily" edition of the congressional record versus the "bound" edition that compiles daily editions and is published at the end of each annual session of Congress[9] As for the choice of the particular congresses, I wanted to analyze recent congresses due to the obvious relevance of the Trump presidency to discussions of populism. Additionally, the period from the 110th-116th congresses is interesting because it contains variance in both which party controlled the House as well as which party controlled the presidency.

[7]See section below and the appendix for more detail on the dictionary analysis and dictionary terms used.

[8]See Judd, Nicholas, Dan Drinkard, Jeremy Carbaugh, and Lindsay Young. *congressional-record*: A parser for the Congressional Record. Chicago, IL: 2017. *github.com/unitedstates/congressional-record*.

[9]See U.S. Government Bookstore, "Congressional Record Bound:" *bookstore.gpo.gov/catalog/congressional-record-bound*.

Because I am primarily interested in members' political rhetoric rather than their use of procedures within the congressional record, I took several measures to isolate substantive political speech. First, I only included speeches that had an identifiable author. Second, I limited my analysis to speeches of at least 120 words. This methodological decision closely follows other automated investigations of the congressional record[10] Additionally, I chose a 120 word benchmark because speech experts have identified that the average individual speaks at approximately 125-150 words per minute. Thus 120 words should encapsulate the conservative end of a 1 minute speech while still censoring many short non-political or procedural comments. Finally, I employed a classification procedure created by Gentzkow et al. (2018) to censor primarily procedural speeches. Using a dataset comprised of bigrams from Robert's Rules of Order and procedural phrases identified by a classification algorithm created by the authors, I removed any speech that had over 30 percent of its bigrams classified as "procedural."[11]

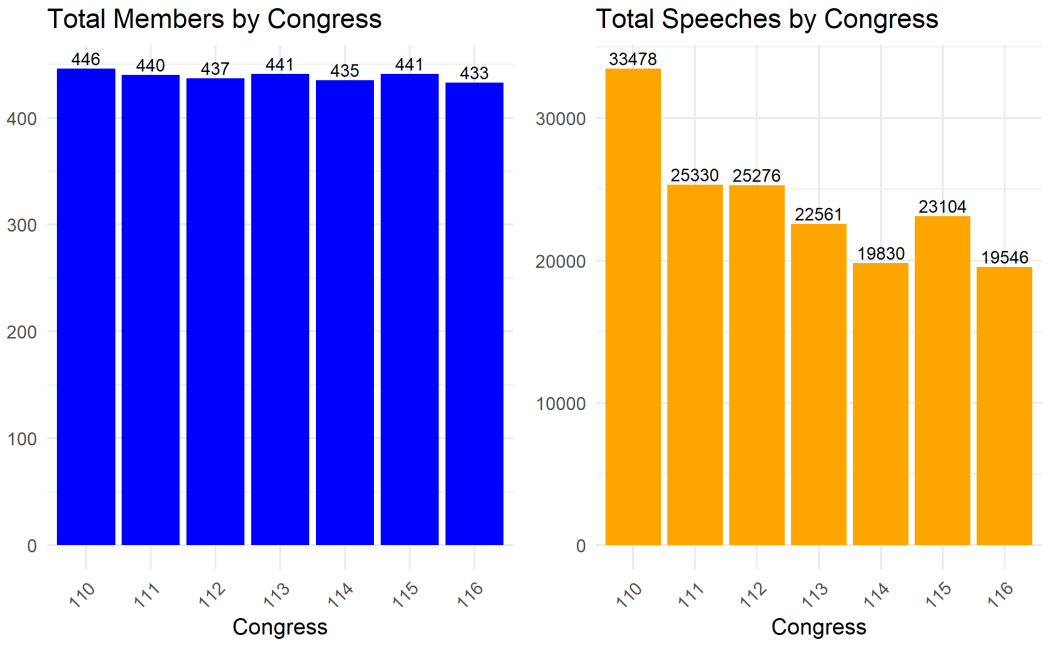
Figure 3.1 shows counts for members and speeches by congress. the member total hovers around 435 for each Congress. The variance in member count is attributed to some members not having speeches that meet the length requirement. It is also possible that inaccuracies in the parser failed to identify speeches for some members, although previous authors using these data (e.g., Gentzkow & Shapiro 2018 and Nicholas, Drinkard, Carbaugh, and Young 2017) have performed validations of the parsers used to make sure that they can accurately identify speakers. Most congresses have

[10]Tucker, Capps, & Shamir (2020) chose a 1000 character or roughly 140-word demarcation

[11]For more detail on this classification procedure, please see the codebook from Gentzkow, Shapiro, & Taddy (2018): *https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:md374tz9962/codebook_v4.pdf*

a similar number of speeches, with the 110th being a notable outlier. More hand reading would be needed to accurately validate why this is, but with a cursory reading of speeches this appears to be tied to the political salience of exogenous events such as the Iraq War surge and the "Great Recession."

Figure 3.1: Member and (Identified) Speech Counts by Congress




## Measuring Populism in Congressional Speech

Pinning down "populism" in political science research requires both identifying which elements of populism have broad consensus as part of the belief-system as well as, more practically, identifying which of these components can actually be measured with a high degree of accuracy. The most basic conception of populism is some sort of general reference to "the people"[12]). An elaboration on this concept involves the populist reifying the people's desires[13] in explicit opposition to the second key conception of

[12]It should be noted that a significant portion of scholars do not accept this rudimentary definition as constituting populism

[13]This dimension of populism can be used as an explanation for why populists are often hostile to institutions and in favor of purely majoritarian political mechanisms.

populist rhetoric, a conspiring elite. Within the populist worldview, elites comprise an ever-expanding cast of characters that can be seen to represent essentially all institutions and decision-makers (Laclau 2012), including "big banks, multinational corporations, media pundits, elected politicians and government officials, intellectual elites and scientific experts, and the arrogant and privileged rich" (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 6). The particular elites targeted in populist rhetoric (whether economic, political or cultural) vary (Hameleers 2018b) and are often theorized to correspond to specific ideological perspectives (e.g. Kriesi 2014). In populist discourse, politicians often link these conspiring elites to widespread societal dysfunction, or dysfunction within "the system" (Maurer & Diehl 2020).

In this research, I will focus on the *anti-elitism* subcomponent of populism mentioned above: rhetoric that depicts elites conspiring against the American public. I focused on this element of populism for several reasons. First, a consensus of scholars include conspiring elites in their definitions of populism. Second, previous scholars have been able to identify the elitism subcomponent with a high degree of reliability.[14] Finally, some element of the will of the people will be captured within the anti-elitism subcomponent, as one of the fundamental modes of populist rhetoric is to pit the "pure"/"true" will of the people against the conspiring elites working behind the scenes to frustrate the people's wishes. To construct a dictionary, I used an inductive process of analysis.

[14] Although a dictionary was constructed for a "people-centrism" dimension, the dictionary performed too poorly in comparison to human hand-coders to include in the final analysis.

**Automated Dictionary Analysis**

Due to the significant resource cost of hand-coding thousands of congressional speeches, I employed automated dictionary analysis. In addition to saving considerable time in the research process when large text corpora are involved, dictionary approaches can be less computationally intensive than machine learning approaches.[15] I created a dictionary of terms signifying populist speech both through consulting other extant scholarly dictionaries[16] and through my own domain knowledge of American politics.[17] Because populism in the U.S. system manifests itself on both the right and the left, my analysis incorporated terms that are emblematic of both right-wing and left-wing strains of populism.

To validate my dictionary, I engaged in a multi-step process: first, I manually went through a sample of speeches to get a sense of which terms seemed to be performing badly or if any additional terms needed to be added. Next, I used *quanteda*'s "keywords-in-context" (KWIC) function to search for terms around dictionary terms I had already included, both to serve as a validation check and also to identify any terms I may have neglected to include in earlier dictionary iterations. Finally, because an automated dictionary risks being an overly simplistic vehicle for coding speech due to its essentially binary method of classification, it is standard practice to compare the dictionary's performance to the "gold-standard" of hand-coding. To validate my dictionary, I hand-coded 500 speeches that

[15]For recent examples of machine learning approaches to estimating an abstract concepts from communications, see the ideal point estimation in Gaynor et al. 2023 or the measure of polarizing speech in Ballard et al. 2022.

[16]Dictionaries consulted: Bonikowki & Gidron 2016, Bruter & Harrison 2011 Oliver & Rahn 2016, Grundl 2018, Theiele 2020

[17]For full dictionary, see Appendix.

contained populist terms and compared this to the automated coding.[18]

## Populism: Cheap Talk or Indicative of More?

In part, the populist style has endured in American culture because of the unique allure for voters that surrounds the representational claims that populist politicians routinely make. First, their goal is to paint the opposition as out of touch representatives of the political establishment (see, e.g., Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). Second, populists want to position themselves as uniquely attuned to the will of the people. In essence, populist politicians position themselves as the conduit of the desires of the moral people, which are contrasted with the amoral elites (Mudde 2004).

My goal with this research project is not only to come up with a valid way of measuring populist expression within Congress as an institution, but also to investigate how representation is related to populism. That is, I want to investigate if populism is better thought of as a performative form of rhetoric (e.g., Kissas 2020) that is deployed merely for convenience or as a rhetorical style that can be systematically predicted by observable aspects of legislative behavior.

My a priori assumption is that I believe key indicators used to measure legislative behavior such as legislator ideology, partisan voting, legislator productivity, and the use of dilatory tactics will be systematically predictive of the usage of populist speech in the chamber. In so much as these behaviors turn out to be systematic, political science can inform voters of the likely packages of behaviors they are "getting" by voting for or keeping a populist member of Congress in office. In the next section, I develop spe-

[18] See Appendix for full results of hand coding validation.

cific theoretical expectations about how these aspects of political behavior will relate to MCs employing populism. I also develop expectations for the frequency and content of populist speech at the level of political parties.

## Specific Expectations for Populism and Congressional Behavior

### Individual-level expectations

*$H_1$: More ideologically extreme members of Congress will express themselves as populists more often.*

Populist politicans are often mistakenly painted by the media as "extremists" when they are simply heterodox figures in their party.[19] Recent scholars have argued for an ideological "thickening" of populism, however, most often in the context of observing populist behavior on the far right.[20] Indeed, in protecting a special "people" from others in society, much populism tends towards an extreme form of social conservatism (Stankov 2021). In the U.S., we have also seen examples of prominent left-wing MCs that are at least "radical" in comparison to the rest of their party, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Additionally, in comparative studies extremist attitudes across the political spectrum have been found to significantly correlate with populist attitudes[21]

*$H_2$: MCs that vote against their own party more frequently will also use populist rhetoric more frequently.*

[19]Donald Trump, for example, seems to tilt left-ward compared to the median Republican on nearly as many issues as he flirts with the far-right.

[20]See, e.g., Guderjan & Wilding's 2018 case study of populism and Brexit.

[21]See, e.g., Marcos-Marne 2022. Correspondingly, I believe that ideologically extreme members in Congress will be more likely to echo populist sentiments.

In addition to being painted as extremists, there have been prominent examples lately in the media of populist politicians causing massive headaches to their own political party, such as the aforementioned Matt Gaetz' successful coup of the House against Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Additionally, populist views are often associated with distaste and cynicism for the political establishment (Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin 2011; Schumacher & Rooduijn 2013),[22] perhaps giving politicians wider latitude to deviate from the party line.

*$H_3$: MCs that are more legislatively productive will use populist rhetoric less frequently.*

In general, the most prominent populists in the American system are known more for their podcasting abilities and emotionally-stirring rhetoric than for their track record of great legislative accomplishment. For example, the Center for Effective Lawmaking (CEL) recently released a press release declaring Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez one of the least effective members of Congress, at least in terms of getting any action on bills beyond simply introducing them. Populist flavored movements like the Tea Party and associated Freedom Caucus, moreover, have not exactly positioned themselves as particularly amenable to legislative compromise. Due to this general disposition, I believe MCs' committee and lawmaking success will be negatively associated with the usage of populist language in floor speeches.

*$H_4$: MCs that engage in dilatory tactics more frequently will also use populist rhetoric more frequently.*

This prediction stems from aspects of my previous logic, but takes the oppositional stance of populism to a more concrete level. I theorize that

[22] Although, see Voogd & Dassoneville (2020) for evidence that populist voters in at least some contexts are no more or less loyal.

those MCs that take advantage of opportunities provided to them by the rules of the chamber to actively act as a thorn in the side to the opposition will also more often express themselves as populists.

**Party-level expectations**

I also develop several expectations at the party level for populist rhetoric.

*$H_5$: Congressional parties will employ populist rhetoric more often when they have a minority of House seats.*

From a strategic perspective, members will in aggregate deploy populism proportionally more often when they have a credible elite threat to rail against. Additionally, populism's riskiness, one reason that scholars assert it is more often employed by amateurs (see, e.g., Bonikowski and Gidron 2016, Gennerao et al. 2021), is somewhat neutered when your party does not have to face the possibility of actually legislating. Also, minority party members tend to speak more by volume (Maltzman & Sigelman 1996; Morris 2001) and may be more willing to try out varied arguments to test which may appeal to voters.

*$H_6$: Democrats will primarily target economic elites when using populist language, and Republicans will primarily target political elites.*

Although populism in general is targeted towards "the elites" writ large, different ideological flavors of populism tend to direct critiques at different types of elites. Even across countries[23] left-wing parties tend to direct more of their ire toward the financial sector and large corporations, while right wing parties tend to be more directed towards those classified

[23]See, e.g., da Silva & Perfeito 2023 and Kriesi 2014

as societal "others" as well as the political establishment. My dictionary allows me to capture instances where elites both in the financial sector and in government are negatively targeted by politicians, and my prediction is that the ratio of targets will follow this established left-right dichotomy.

## Results

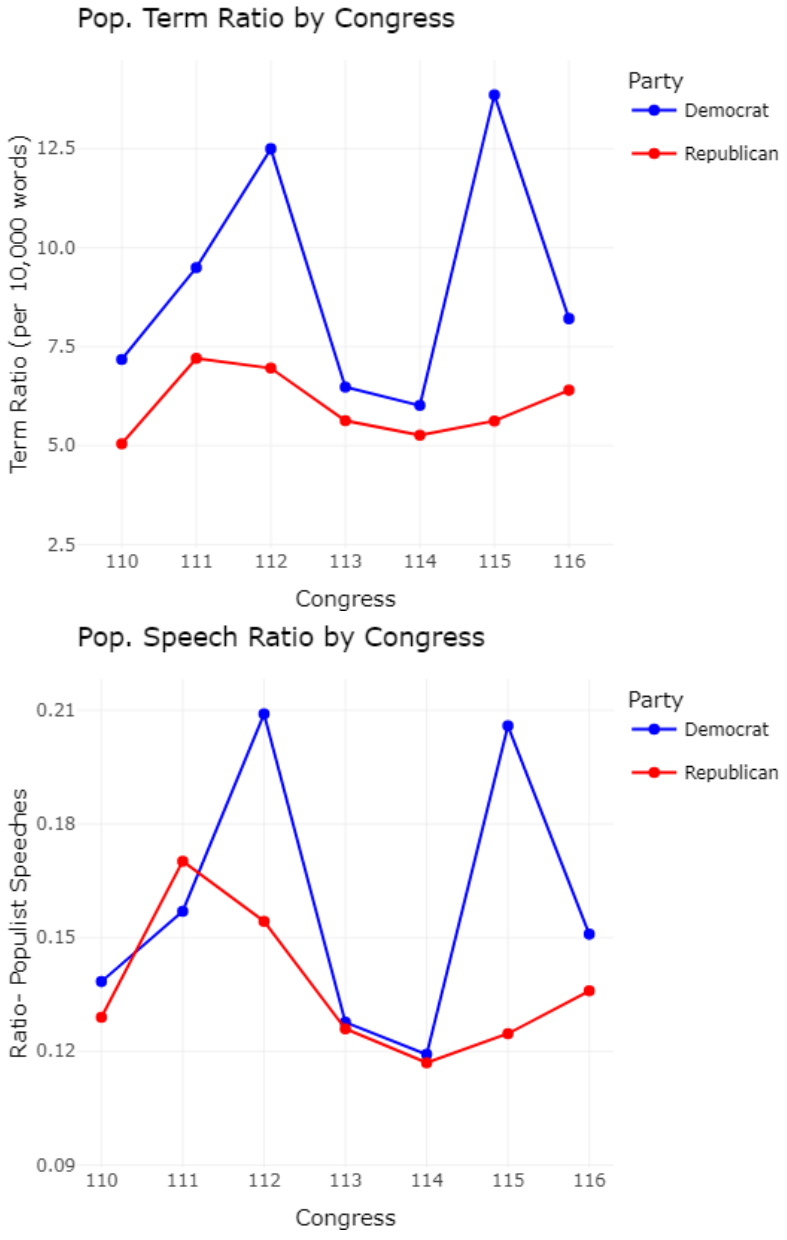
To assess the usage of populist speech in Congress, I created two different variables to measure speech at different levels. First, I created a variable that is simply the number of populist terms the member used per 10,000 words spoken in that session of Congress. This allows me to control for members that simply speak a lot on the congressional record, because a higher word count in a session would obviously be correlated with a greater count of dictionary terms. The word count variable was measured before pre-processing text[24] Second, I measured populist rhetoric at the speech level simply by coding a speech as populist if it contained at least one dictionary term. I then created a second variable that was a ratio of the speeches containing at least one dictionary term to the total number of speeches given in that session. In this way, I can account for both members that give speeches on many occasions containing at least some populist language as well as members with a high concentration of populist terms overall, regardless of which speech the terms were uttered in.

## Party level results

Figure 3.2 breaks these variables down by congress at the party level, and some interesting trends emerge. First, the most striking trend is the in-

[24]Text was also minimally pre-processed: I only removed punctuation and symbols because some dictionary terms contained relevant "stop words".

Figure 3.2: Populist Speech and Term Ratio By Congress



crease in populist speech in the 112th and 115th congresses by Democrats. Indeed, it seems there is some support for the hypothesis that parties become more willing to use populist rhetoric when they have been relegated to the minority, as Democrats' 2nd highest data point (the 112th) for using populist rhetoric occurred when they were relegated to the minority party in a historic defeat. The trough in in the 113th/114th congresses and spike in the 115th does not fit the theory neatly, however. Perhaps the sudden surge in populist sentiment corresponding to the 115th congress can be in part to attributed to Democratic opposition to the presidency of Donald Trump.

Although Republicans do use populist rhetoric more frequently in the 111th Congress (after suffering a major defeat to the Democrats in the previous election), we do not observe a marked increase in populist rhetoric in the 116th congress following a major loss. Democrats also used more populist rhetoric in the 111th congress despite gaining seats, and declined in usage in the 113th/114th congresses despite remaining in the minority. So, while there is some evidence that fits the predicted trend, minority status does not at all perfectly predict populism. On the contrary, as we will see in considering further evidence below, the primary story that emerges is the opportunistic and strategic usage of populism in key scenarios (following a historic loss and following Trump's election).

Figure 3.3: Elite Targets by Party

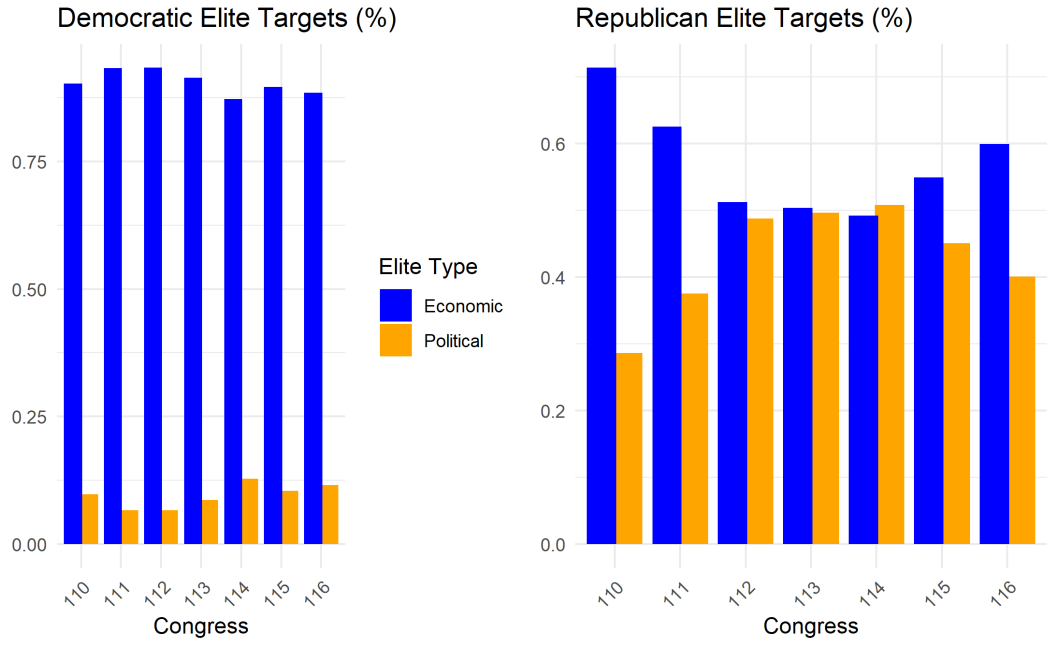



Figure 3.3 displays the share of economic targets and political targets mentioned out of the total number of instances an economic or political elite target was mentioned. Democrats overwhelmingly targeted economic elites while Republicans were more mixed in their targets. One interesting trend to point out is the decrease in the share of political elite targets for Republicans from the 114th to the 115th congress (following the election of Donald Trump), and a continued decline in the final 2 years of the Trump presidency. Figures 3.4 and 3.5 provide top dictionary terms by frequency across all congresses, also nicely illustrating this trend. High occurring terms for Democrats tend to be related to economic interests such as "billionaires", "the rich," and "wall street."[25] Republicans, meanwhile, are much more likely to mention bureaucrats, big government, and executives, with both parties mentioning corporations at a high frequency.

[25] An entity that had special salience at the beginning of the time series following the Great Recession.

Figure 3.4: Dictionary Terms- Democrats

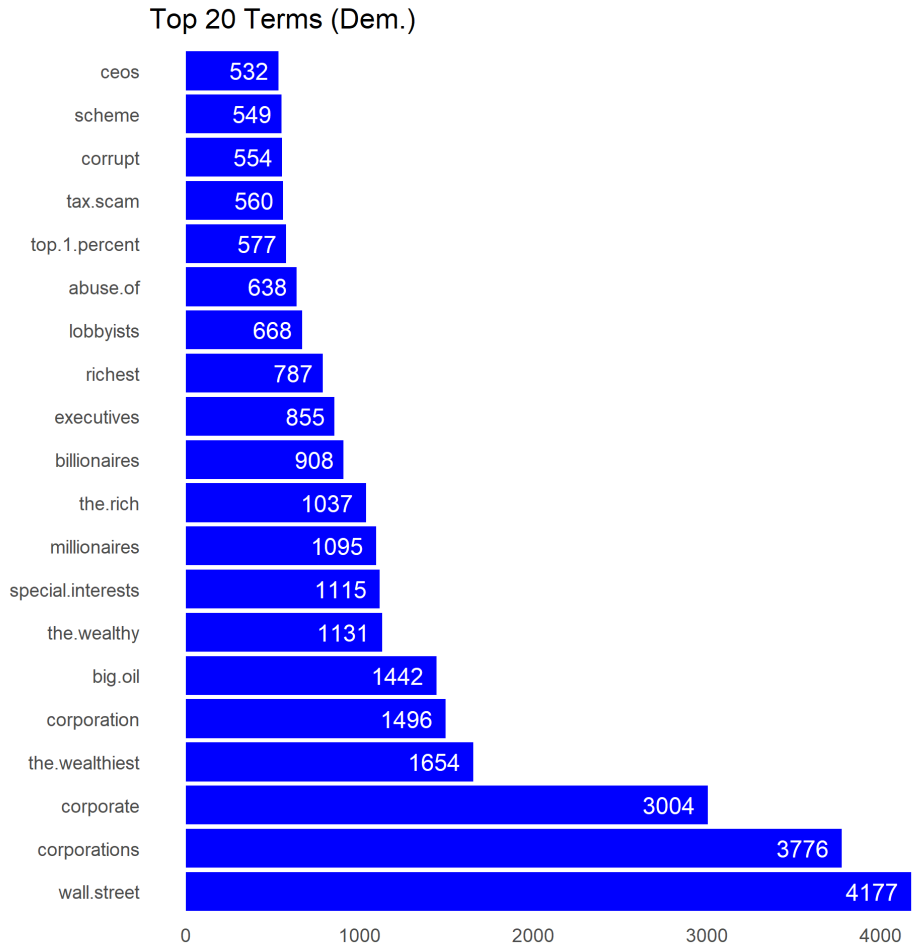
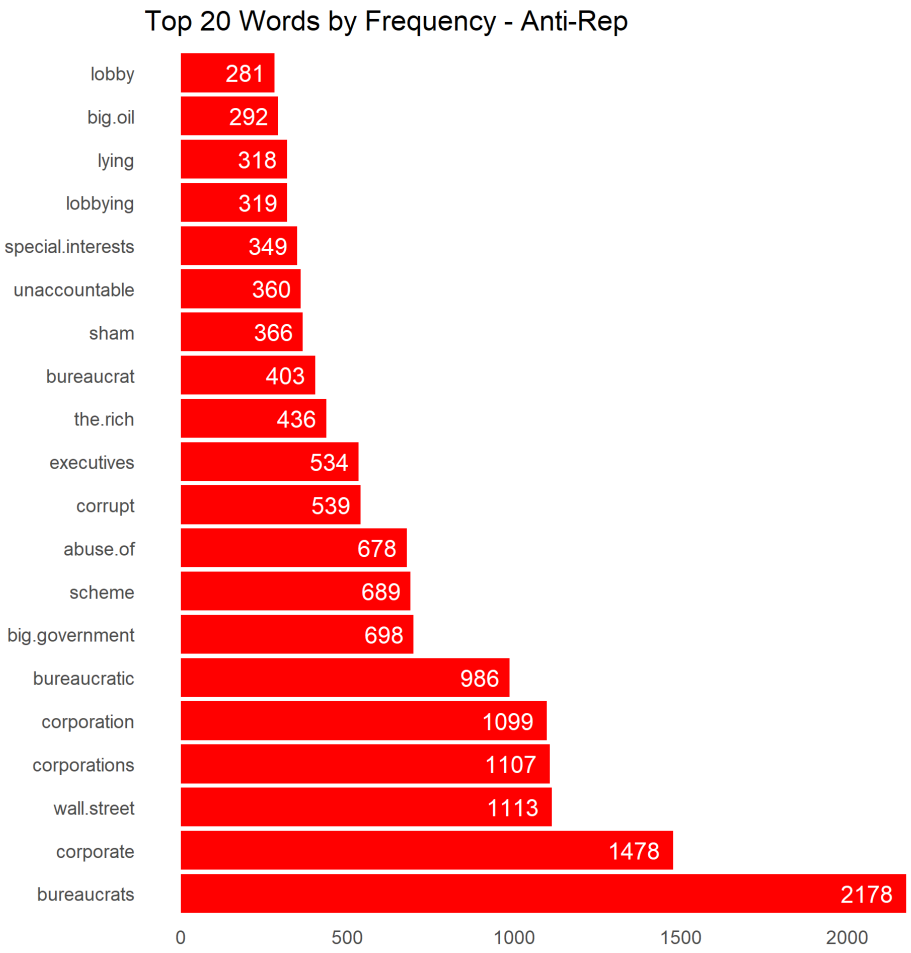


Figure 3.5: Dictionary Terms- Republicans



## Individual-level results

### Ideology and Party Unity

To investigate whether member extremity is associated with using populist rhetoric, I use OLS regression[26] with my independent variable of interest being the absolute ideological distance (DW-NOMINATE scale) from the chamber median and using my word ratio and speech ratio variables for dependent variables. I also control for other factors associated with member ideology (and, in theory, usage of populist rhetoric), such as member safety (vote share in previous election), member productivity- Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LESs)[27] and number of bills sponsored, member seniority, whether the member is a party leader, and some experiential characteristics-legislative professionalism as measured by the Squire index,[28] and whether the member was previously a state legislator.[29]

The analyses (see Table 2.1 and 2.2) indicate that ideological extremity is a statistically significant[30] determinant of populist speech. To contextualize the effect size, a one standard deviation increase in ideological distance from the chamber median would result in roughly 1 more populist term per 10000 words spoken for both parties and a 1 percent increase in populist speeches for Democrats. The word ratio effect size is similar for Republicans, but the speech ratio effect of a 1 standard deviation increase is a 3 percent increase in populist speeches. On first glance these effect sizes

[26] All models included Congress fixed effects and were estimated with the *plm* package in *R*

[27] See below section on productivity for more detail on LESs.

[28] See Squire 2007 for estimation details.

[29] See Meyer 2021 for an analysis indicating that legislator background is associated with member ideology.

[30] For this analysis, the conventional standard within political science of $p < 0.05$ will be used to determine statistical significance.

may seem insubstantial, but keep in mind that I am considering here all speech on the congressional record, much of which may be devoid of political substance. The median member in the dataset has populist content in only 13 percent of their speeches and uses a populist term roughly 8 out of 10000 words spoken.

Table 3.1: Ideological Extremity- Democrats (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | Word Ratio | Speech Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| Dist. from Chamber Med. | 4.3* (2.0, 6.6) | 0.05* (0.02, 0.1) |
| Vote Share | −0.01 (−0.1, 0.03) | 0.000 (−0.000, 0.001) |
| Sponsor | 0.1* (0.03, 0.1) | 0.001* (0.000, 0.002) |
| LES | −0.8* (−1.3, −0.3) | −0.01* (−0.02, −0.01) |
| Seniority | 0.02 (−0.2, 0.2) | 0.003* (0.001, 0.005) |
| Leader | 0.2 (−2.1, 2.4) | 0.01 (−0.02, 0.03) |
| Legislative Professionalism | 1.7 (−2.5, 6.0) | −0.01 (−0.1, 0.04) |
| State Legislator | −0.1 (−1.9, 1.8) | 0.01 (−0.01, 0.03) |
| Observations | 1,424 | 1,424 |
| $R^2$ | 0.03 | 0.05 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.16 | −0.14 |
| Congress fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

Next, I go on to investigate whether party loyalty is associated with the usage of populist rhetoric. To operationalize this, I calculated a loyalty measure comprised of the percentage of the times each member voted with a plurality of their own party in each congress using roll call data from *voteview.com*.[31] In these models I added control variables for ideological distance on the DW-NOMINATE scale from the party median and for the seat share the party possessed in that congress. The logic behind these inclusions would be that being ideologically closer to the party median might incentivize party loyalty if the leadership is passing legislation typically at

[31]Lewis, Jeffrey B., Keith Poole, Howard Rosenthal, Adam Boche, Aaron Rudkin, and Luke Sonnet (2023). Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database. *https://voteview.com/*

Table 3.2: Ideological Extremity- Republicans (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | Word Ratio | Speech Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| Dist. from Chamber Med. | 2.8* (1.5, 4.0) | 0.1* (0.05, 0.1) |
| Vote Share | 0.03* (0.003, 0.1) | 0.001* (0.000, 0.001) |
| Sponsor | 0.04* (0.01, 0.1) | 0.001* (0.000, 0.001) |
| LES | −0.2 (−0.4, 0.1) | −0.005 (−0.01, 0.000) |
| Seniority | −0.2* (−0.3, −0.1) | −0.002 (−0.004, 0.000) |
| Leader | 1.4 (−0.2, 2.9) | 0.04* (0.01, 0.1) |
| Leg. Prof. | 0.8 (−2.0, 3.6) | 0.03 (−0.02, 0.1) |
| State Legislator | −0.3 (−1.2, 0.7) | −0.01 (−0.02, 0.01) |
| Observations | 1,434 | 1,434 |
| $R^2$ | 0.04 | 0.06 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.16 | −0.13 |
| Congress fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

the median. Additionally, having a greater "cushion" in terms of seat share for the party might give members more incentive to deviate from the will of the party leaders. I also added variables indicating if the member was in the president's party or if the member was in the majority in that Congress, following similar logic to my minority party prediction above.

The results from the party unity regressions are interesting and surprising. In Table 3.3, the coefficient for Democrats is positive for both populist terms and speeches, contradicting my prior expectation. A one standard deviation (0.05) increase in party unity voting for a Democrat is equivalent to 1.5 more terms used per 10000 by the member and a 2 percent increase in populist speeches. The majority party variable is also in the expected direction: that is, Democrats use less populist language in the majority. Republicans (Table 3.4), on the other hand, produce totally different results. Party unity voting is associated with using *less* populist rhetoric for Republicans both in terms of words (best estimate) and speeches, and the effect for words is very small and statistically insignificant. The ma-

Table 3.3: Loyalty voting- Democrats (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | Word Ratio | Speech Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| Loyalty voting | 29.2* (14.1, 44.2) | 0.3* (0.1, 0.5) |
| Dist. from Party Med. | 0.03 (−8.5, 8.6) | 0.1 (−0.04, 0.2) |
| Seat Share | 1.0* (0.7, 1.4) | 0.01* (0.005, 0.01) |
| Vote Share | −0.04 (−0.1, 0.001) | 0.000 (−0.000, 0.001) |
| Sponsor | 0.1* (0.02, 0.1) | 0.001* (0.000, 0.002) |
| LES | −0.9* (−1.4, −0.4) | −0.01* (−0.02, −0.01) |
| Seniority | 0.1 (−0.1, 0.3) | 0.004* (0.002, 0.01) |
| Leader | 0.9 (−1.3, 3.1) | 0.01 (−0.01, 0.04) |
| Leg. Prof. | 2.2 (−2.0, 6.3) | −0.002 (−0.1, 0.05) |
| State Legislator | −0.2 (−2.0, 1.6) | 0.01 (−0.01, 0.03) |
| President's Party | −3.3* (−4.6, −1.9) | −0.03* (−0.05, −0.02) |
| Majority Party | −14.2* (−18.2, −10.1) | −0.1* (−0.2, −0.1) |
| Observations | 1,424 | 1,424 |
| $R^2$ | 0.07 | 0.08 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.12 | −0.11 |
| Congress fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

Table 3.4: Loyalty voting- Republicans (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | Word Ratio | Speech Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| Loyalty Voting | −5.8 (−16.0, 4.4) | −0.2* (−0.4, −0.05) |
| Dist. from Party Med. | 0.8 (−3.7, 5.3) | 0.02 (−0.1, 0.1) |
| Seat Share | −0.3* (−0.5, −0.1) | −0.01* (−0.01, −0.004) |
| Vote Share | 0.03 (−0.002, 0.1) | 0.001* (0.000, 0.001) |
| Sponsor | 0.05* (0.01, 0.1) | 0.001* (0.000, 0.001) |
| LES | −0.4* (−0.7, −0.1) | −0.01* (−0.01, −0.005) |
| Seniority | −0.2* (−0.3, −0.1) | −0.002 (−0.004, 0.001) |
| Leader | 1.5 (−0.04, 3.1) | 0.04* (0.01, 0.1) |
| Leg. Prof. | 0.5 (−2.3, 3.3) | 0.02 (−0.03, 0.1) |
| State Legislator | −0.1 (−1.1, 0.8) | −0.003 (−0.02, 0.01) |
| President's Party | −0.3 (−1.0, 0.4) | −0.01 (−0.02, 0.002) |
| Majority Party | 3.8* (1.7, 5.9) | 0.1* (0.04, 0.1) |
| Observations | 1,434 | 1,434 |
| $R^2$ | 0.03 | 0.05 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.17 | −0.14 |
| Congress fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

jority party effect for Republicans is also smaller (for words) and positive, contradicting my earlier prediction. In sum, these regression results, when combined with earlier insights in the paper, paint Democrats are more opportunistic in their usage of populist language. Party loyalists seem to weaponize populist language opportunistically or strategically, particularly (as noted above) after historic defeats or in opposition to Donald Trump.

**Member Productivity and Dilatory Tactics**

Next I turn to gauging the relationship between member productivity and the usage of dilatory tactics within the chamber and MCs' populist rhetoric. To gauge productivity, I use Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LESs), a weighted index that takes into account both member sponsorship activity and the member's ability to actually shepherd legislation through the congressional process into law.[32] The scores in the dataset range from 0 to 18.7, and are weighted and normalized so that in each Congress the average LES takes a value of 1. In addition to the control variables used in the prior models, I also include demographic controls here for gender and race (non-white), as these have previously been shown to be associated with LESs (Volden & Wiseman 2014). As shown in Tables 3.5 and 3.6, for both parties being a more productive legislator in terms of LES is associated with using populist rhetoric less frequently, although this effect is slightly smaller for Republicans for the ratio of dictionary terms used. For both Democrats and Republicans, a one standard deviation (1.3) increase in LES corresponds to about 1 fewer populist term per 10000 and approximately 1 percent fewer populist speeches.

Finally, I turn to looking at the usage of dilatory measures. Exam-

[32]See Volden & Wiseman 2014 for estimation and validation.

Table 3.5: LES- Democrats (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | Word Ratio | Speech Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| LES | −0.9* (−1.4, −0.4) | −0.01* (−0.02, −0.01) |
| Dist. from Party Med. | 20.6* (14.7, 26.5) | 0.3* (0.2, 0.3) |
| Vote Share | −0.04 (−0.1, 0.01) | −0.000 (−0.001, 0.001) |
| Sponsor | 0.04 (−0.01, 0.1) | 0.001 (−0.000, 0.001) |
| Seniority | 0.003 (−0.2, 0.2) | 0.003* (0.000, 0.005) |
| Leader | 0.1 (−2.2, 2.3) | 0.005 (−0.02, 0.03) |
| Leg. Prof. | 1.4 (−2.8, 5.7) | −0.01 (−0.1, 0.04) |
| State Legislator | −0.2 (−2.0, 1.6) | 0.01 (−0.01, 0.03) |
| Female | −1.3* (−2.6, −0.1) | −0.02* (−0.03, −0.002) |
| Nonwhite | −3.0* (−4.3, −1.6) | −0.03* (−0.05, −0.02) |
| Majority Party | 8.0* (4.9, 11.0) | 0.1* (0.1, 0.1) |
| President's Party | −1.5* (−2.7, −0.4) | −0.02* (−0.03, −0.01) |
| Observations | 1,424 | 1,424 |
| $R^2$ | 0.07 | 0.10 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.12 | −0.09 |
| Congress fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

Table 3.6: LES- Republicans (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | Word Ratio | Speech Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| LES | −0.3* (−0.6, −0.1) | −0.01* (−0.01, −0.003) |
| Dist. from Party Med. | 9.7* (7.6, 11.9) | 0.2* (0.2, 0.2) |
| Vote Share | −0.001 (−0.03, 0.03) | 0.000 (−0.000, 0.001) |
| Sponsor | 0.04* (0.01, 0.1) | 0.001* (0.000, 0.001) |
| Seniority | −0.05 (−0.2, 0.1) | 0.001 (−0.001, 0.003) |
| Leader | 1.5 (−0.04, 3.0) | 0.04* (0.01, 0.1) |
| Leg. Prof. | 1.2 (−1.6, 3.9) | 0.03 (−0.02, 0.1) |
| State Leg. | −0.4 (−1.3, 0.5) | −0.01 (−0.03, 0.01) |
| Female | −0.7 (−1.8, 0.3) | −0.01 (−0.03, 0.01) |
| Nonwhite | 2.1* (0.5, 3.8) | 0.03 (−0.004, 0.1) |
| Majority Party | 4.4* (3.3, 5.5) | 0.1* (0.1, 0.1) |
| President's Party | −0.1 (−0.7, 0.5) | −0.01 (−0.02, 0.002) |
| N | 1,434 | 1,434 |
| $R^2$ | 0.09 | 0.12 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.10 | −0.06 |
| Congress fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

ining dilatory measures is more difficult in the House versus the Senate because of the much stricter floor procedures. However, as a measurable indicator of a legislator's propensity to waste the majority's time, I rely on counts of rejected amendments that legislators introduced as members of the minority party. A high count of rejected amendments for an individual legislator does not seem to be indicative of a tendency towards seeking passage of legislation, but rather an attempt to message for the majority or seem to waste the other party's time. Indeed, Anderson's (2023) qualitative account of a large sample of amendments that were introduced in 2021 under restrictive rules indicates a large majority of these amendments were dilatory.

To get a count of how many minority amendments were rejected for each individual member, I use data from Madonna, Lynch, and Roberts (2016) that collected all amendments proposed for consideration under structured rules. The dataset only contains amendment data from the 109th-115th congresses, so in my analysis here I only include data from the 110th-115th congresses.[33] The Democratic regression contains data from the 112th-115th congresses when Democrats were in the minority and the Republican regression contains data from the 110th-111th congresses.

Examining Tables 3.7 and 3.8, the coefficients for rejected amendments do operate in the expected direction, but for Republicans the speech ratio coefficient is small and insignificant. Overall, however, increased submission of rejected amendments is associated with greater use of populist language in the chamber. Specifically, a one standard deviation increase in rejected amendments (roughly 14 amendments) corresponds to 2.8 more

[33]Note: the dataset only includes amendment data for the 1st session of the 115th congress.

Table 3.7: Rejected Amends.- Democrats (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | Word Ratio | Speech Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| Reject | 0.2* (0.1, 0.4) | 0.003* (0.002, 0.005) |
| Med. Dist. | 32.7* (23.0, 42.4) | 0.4* (0.2, 0.5) |
| Vote | −0.1* (−0.2, −0.02) | −0.001 (−0.001, 0.000) |
| Sponsor | 0.02 (−0.1, 0.1) | 0.000 (−0.001, 0.001) |
| LES | −1.5 (−3.4, 0.4) | −0.02 (−0.04, 0.004) |
| Seniority | 0.2 (−0.04, 0.5) | 0.01* (0.002, 0.01) |
| Leader | −0.3 (−3.5, 2.9) | −0.01 (−0.04, 0.03) |
| Leg. Prof. | −0.1 (−6.6, 6.3) | −0.03 (−0.1, 0.04) |
| State Leg. | 0.7 (−2.2, 3.5) | 0.02 (−0.01, 0.1) |
| Female | −1.7 (−3.6, 0.2) | −0.02 (−0.04, 0.01) |
| Nonwhite | −2.8* (−4.8, −0.8) | −0.02 (−0.05, 0.000) |
| Pres. Party | −5.8* (−7.6, −4.1) | −0.1* (−0.1, −0.03) |
| N | 740 | 740 |
| $R^2$ | 0.19 | 0.21 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.12 | −0.10 |
| Congress fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

Table 3.8: Rejected Amends.- Republicans (95% CIs in parentheses)

| | Word Ratio | Speech Ratio |
|---|---|---|
| Reject | 0.05* (0.03, 0.1) | 0.000 (−0.000, 0.001) |
| Dist. from Chamber Med. | 6.4* (1.6, 11.1) | 0.2* (0.1, 0.3) |
| Vote | 0.03 (−0.04, 0.1) | 0.001 (−0.001, 0.002) |
| Sponsor | 0.1 (−0.03, 0.1) | 0.002 (−0.000, 0.003) |
| LES | −1.6 (−3.3, 0.1) | −0.04* (−0.1, −0.01) |
| Seniority | −0.1 (−0.4, 0.3) | 0.001 (−0.01, 0.01) |
| Leader | 1.8 (−1.4, 5.0) | 0.05 (−0.02, 0.1) |
| Leg. Prof. | 0.6 (−5.3, 6.4) | 0.01 (−0.1, 0.1) |
| State Leg. | −0.2 (−2.3, 1.8) | −0.02 (−0.1, 0.02) |
| Female | 0.3 (−2.2, 2.7) | 0.004 (−0.04, 0.1) |
| Nonwhite | 3.8 (−0.3, 8.0) | 0.03 (−0.1, 0.1) |
| Pres. Party | 1.1* (0.1, 2.1) | 0.02* (0.01, 0.04) |
| Observations | 352 | 352 |
| $R^2$ | 0.34 | 0.29 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.54 | −0.68 |
| Congress fixed effects | ✓ | ✓ |

*Note:* *p<0.05

populist terms used per 10000 for Democrats and about 1 more for Republicans. For Democrats, the same increase in rejected amendments is associated with a 4 percent increase in populist speeches made. In the future, it would be interesting to run this analysis again once more data has been collected for the amendment activity of Republicans in the minority party.

## Conclusion

After engaging with this research, I hope the reader might take away a more layered and interesting conception of populism's role in the U.S. Congress. In addition to developing a dictionary that can be used to classify populist rhetoric in Congress, I have presented findings here that emphasize the opportunistic aspects of populism, such as Democrats' strategic usage of populist rhetoric individually by party loyalists and in the aggregate following their historic defeat under Obama and after the election of Donald Trump. I have also highlighted populism's oppositional nature, finding that legislators that attempt to waste the majority's time with rejected amendments and that are more ideologically extreme tend to use populist language more often. And I certainly have not totally dispelled the notion of populism as being primarily about legislative flair versus substance: the most effective legislators in terms of lawmaking actually seem less likely to use populist speech on the floor.

In future analyses, I would like to give more attention to the party dynamics that may accompany congressional speech. Historically, party leaders have organized efforts to have members give speeches on a shared topic.[34] I would also like to delve more into how specific policies shaped the

[34]One analysis (Harris 2005) found that approximately one-third of speeches are on topics coordinated by party leaders.

volume of debate (and populist sentiment) in the congressional record, in order to come to more specific and accurate conclusions about the dynamics driving the changes in populist language I observe here over time.

Ultimately, I would argue that the notion of being a "fighter" that is associated with populist politicians has been confirmed here, at least in part. Additionally, normative judgments on oppositional behaviors in Congress by other scholars and the media belie the truth that for a substantial segment of voters these behaviors are appealing in someone that represents them in America's premier legislative body. Voters may like high-minded values like compromise in the abstract, but many seem to ultimately prefer partisan (Harbridge et al. 2014) and divisive outcomes that are often associated with U.S. populism.

# Appendix A1: Dictionary

## Opposition to Elites[35]

### Unigrams

aristocra*, arrogan*, arrogan*, betray*, billionaire*, brazen*, bureaucrat*, ceos, conspirac*, corporat*, cron*, crooked, damning, decaden*, donor, egghead*, elitis*, executives, executives*, foolish, gasli*, greed*, hoodwink*, illegitimate, illegitimate, koch*, leftis*, liar*, lobby*, lying, millionaire*, monopol*, msm, nobility, olig*, oligarchy, presumptuous, racket, richer, richest, rig, rigg*, rightis*, rot, rotten deal, scheme*, schemer, scheming, sham, shill*, snooty, soros*, superlobbyist*, sycophan*, technocra*, unaccountable, unresponsive, venal, warmonger*

### Bigrams

1 percent*, 99 percent*, abuse* of, american oligarch*, before profit*, big biz*, big business*, big government*, big interest*, big money*, big money*, big oil, big pharma*, big profit*, big tech, big tobacco, blatant* lie*, breaking promise*, broken promise*, business elit*, campaign contribution*, campaign donation*, controlling elite*, corrupt, corrupts, cover* up, dark money, dc elit*, deceiv* voter*, deep state*, democrat* establishment, destroy* america*, disinform* camp*, downplay* aware*, easy street, elite* consensus, empty promise*, establishment democrat*, establishment elite*, establishment republican*, extreme left, extreme right, fake expert*, fake intellectual*, far left, far right, fat cat*, flyover country, flyover state*, foreign interest*, forgotten american*, forgotten man*, forgotten people*, gop establishment, hard left*, hard right*, he lie*, hedge fund*, hit piece*, ingrained corruption, intentionally destroy*, left wing*, lib media, liberal media, mainstream media, media elit*, mega bank*, misinform* campaign*, moneyed interests, not accountable, obscene* wealth*, one percent*, outright lie*, over profit*, overthrow democr*, people betrayed, political apparatus, political corruption, political elit*, political establishment, political machine*, political theater, power broker*, power grab*, power hungry, power monger, power obsessed, powerful elit*, predatory lender*, pressure group*, privilege* few*, privileged few, professional politician*, profiteer*, radical environmentalists, radical left*, radical left*, radical right*, rampant corruption, real America*, record profit*, republican establishment, revolv* door*, rich friend*, rich* elit*, right wing*, rip* off, robber baron, rul* class*, rul* group*, ruling class*, self serving, she lie*, special interest*, super rich, su-

[35]Dictionaries in extant research consulted: Bonikowki & Gidron 2016, Bruter & Harrison 2011 Oliver & Rahn 2016, Grundl 2018, Theiele 2020

per wealthy, super wealthy, sweeping corruption, target* disinform*, target* misinform*, tax cheat*, tax scam*, tech oligarch*, the rich, the swamp*, the wealth*, uber rich, uber wealthy, ultra rich, ultra wealthy, voter* deceived, voter* deception, voters betrayed, wall st*, washington elite*, washington establishment, wealth* few, well connected

**Trigrams**

Top 0.1 percent, abus* her power*, abus* public* trust, abuse* his power*, ahead of profit*, betray* the people, betray* the voters, billion* in profit*, bottom 90 percent, breach of trust, cover* it up, culture of abuse, culture of corruption, downplay* the prob*, drain the swamp, fly over state*, for personal gain, for the profit*, foreign policy establishment, forgotten campaign promises, forgotten election promises, fossil fuel* industr*, government by elit*, military industrial complex*, million* in profit*, new world order, plot to defund, plot to overturn, plot to rip, plot to steal, plot to take, profit for one, profit* over people*, promises not kept, record breaking profit*, silicon valley oligarch*, silicon valley oligarch*, so called expert*, so called intellectual*, suppress* free speech, suppress* the truth, the president lie*, the richest american*, the richest people, who pays you, wreck* our country

**Four-grams +**

abus* the public* trust, ahead of the profit*, government by the elit*, lie* to the American people, profit for a couple, profit for a few, suppress* free speech, those at the top, too big to jail, who* do you represent

**Targets: Political Elites**

bureaucr*, technocra*, leftis*, left wing*, rightis*, right wing*, gop establishment, republican establishment, democrat* establishment, washington establishment, establishment republican*, establishment democrat*, dc elit*, political establishment, establishment elite*,big government, professional politican, washington elite*, the swamp, deep state, drain the swamp, who pays you, abuse of office, who* do you represent,technocra*, political apparatus, political machine*, forgotten election promises, forgotten campaign promises, betray* the voters, gun lobby*, revolv* door*

**Targets: Economic Elites**

1 percent*, ahead of profit*, ahead of the profit*, before profit*, big banks, big money, big pharma*, big profit*, big tech, big tobacco, billionaire*, ceos, corporat*, corporat*, easy street, executives*, fat cat*, fossil fuel* industr*, greed*, koch*, loophole for corporations, millionaire*, monopol*, olig*, one percent*, over profit*, privileged few, profit for a couple, profit for a few,

profit for one, profit* over people*, profiteer*, record breaking profit*, record profit*, rich friend, rich* elit*, robber baron*, soros*, wall st*, wealthy few

# Appendix A2: Hand-coder Dictionary Validation

In order to validate the automated dictionary analysis, I coded a stratified random sample of 500 speeches by hand as either anti-elitist (1) or not (0). Speeches were coded as anti-elitist if they expressed negative sentiment towards elites of a broad group of categories, such as "big banks, multinational corporations, media pundits, elected politicians and government officials, intellectual elites and scientific experts, and the arrogant and privileged rich" (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 6). In the American context, this also included entities such as bureaucrats, the swamp, the media, Wall St., big business, the 1 percent, interest groups, the "Deep State," the political establishment, tech companies, big pharma, "technocrats," big banks, etc.[36] In sum, the anti-elite component had to express more than just partisanship or disagreeing with a particular policy: it entailed portraying the other side as conspiring elites or "the establishment," and possibly included allegations that policitians/elites were engaging in sabotage or other actions that would hurt the American people (e.g., coverups, corruption, trying to ruin/overthrow democracy).

The stratified random sample included a much larger proportion of populist speeches (about 30 percent) than the overall dataset of congressional speeches (median value 14 percent across years and parties). This served to provide a "tough test" for evaluating the dictionary's performance: it would be quite easy, after all, to have a "well-performing" dictionary (at least in terms of overall accuracy) with a small sample of populist speeches

[36] I coded a tweet as anti-elite only if it included an elite directly relevant to the American context, that is, not foreign dictators/actors. The only exception here would be if the member made some allegation that the foreign actor was directly conspiring to control the U.S. government, economy, etc.

because most speeches in the parent dataset are not populist and may be entirely devoid of political content (although the estimation procedure to remove largely procedural speeches addresses this in part). In sampling I also sample equally from both parties' speeches (250 each) in order to evaluate the performance of the dictionary equally for both Democrats and Republicans

I include 3 measures of dictionary performance here: first, the overall classification accuracy of the dictionary versus the hand coded sample, then the *precision* of the dictionary (the sum of true positives over the sum of false and true positives) and the *recall* of the dictionary (the sum of true positives over the sum of true positives + false negatives). I also include a confusion matrix below as Table 3.9.

Table 3.9: Confusion matrix

| | | *Human coding:* | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 0 | 1 |
| | 0 | 335 | 15 |
| *Dict. Coding* | 1 | 45 | 105 |

The dictionary performs quite well compared to the hand-coded sample in terms of both precision (P) and recall (R). Specfically, the *precision* of the dictionary was measured at 70% and the *recall* at 88%. Validated dictionary approaches to measuring populist language are scarce, but this compares similarly to previous dictionary approaches such as Thiele's (2020) which obtained a precision (P) of 73.3 percent and an (R) of 83.3 percent on the anti-elitism component. The overall classification accuracy of the dictionary was 89 percent. Compared to my previous effort (Ashton 2023) in classifying Twitter speeches, the dictionary performed slightly worse in terms of *precision* ( versus 73 percent) and slightly better in *recall* (88 percent

versus 81 percent). This is to be expected with the classification approach, as the much greater average text length makes them more likely to contain multiple related populist terms in a single speech (versus a Tweet). The more varied content and meaning of the speeches, moreover, may make accurately classifying a speech based on a single term more difficult. In my hand-reading of speeches, I found that the speeches containing a single populist terms were often the ones that were inaccurately classified by the dictionary.

# Chapter 4

# Populism, our institutions, and candidate perceptions

## Introduction

In recent decades, the approval of Congress as an institution has tumbled to historic lows. Academic scholars and polling organizations have suggested a number of factors that might explain this phenomenon in opinion polling, including political polarization (Ramirez 2009), economic factors (Rudolph 2002), less civility in the chamber (Boatright et al. 2019), increased transparency (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 1995), legislative productivity (Durr et al. 1997), and a lack of responsiveness from members.[1] Moreover, there are also good reasons to believe that what members *say* on the campaign trail and in the chamber contributes to voters' feelings of repulsion towards congressional politics. Although members do not want to serve in an institution that is viewed as fundamentally flawed and inef-

[1] "Congress and the Public." *Gallup*, n.d. *https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx* (accessed September 25, 2020).

fectual, nevertheless individual incentives exist that lead to members criticizing Congress to improve their own chances at re-election (Lipinski 2009).

In this research, I concentrate on another potential source of antipathy towards American institutions: populist rhetoric. One of the unique features of populism as an ideology and as a rhetorical strategy is a particular animosity towards political elites and institutions. It follows, then, that an influx of populist-sounding politicians could prove uniquely damaging to the reputation of institutions like the American Congress. Indeed, many academics and journalists have warned of the damage that the actions and words of President Trump and his political acolytes could do to the institutional landscape of American politics,[2] alongside more sober-minded evaluations recognizing the significant limits placed on Trump by existing political actors with their own individual agendas (Pierson 2017; Skocpol & Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

Currently, most extant research on populist rhetoric examines its usage at the elite level. However, a growing body of survey research suggests that populist attitudes are identifiable and widespread amongst ordinary citizens in westernized countries (e.g. Akkerman et al. 2014; Elchardus & Spruyt 2016), including the United States (Hawkins et al. 2012). However, while other research efforts have investigated voters' micro-level perceptions of populist rhetoric in presidential elections (e.g. Busby et al. 2019), scholars have not yet investigated how these dynamics may play out within legislative politics, nor have they examined populist rhetoric's effect on voters' evaluations of institutions. Due to the myriad factors that go into voter evaluations of candidates and Congress as an institution, it can be difficult

[2]E.g. Frum, David. 2017. "How to Build an Autocracy." *The Atlantic*. March 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/how-to-build-an-autocracy/513872/ (accessed February 21, 2021).

to assess the direct impact of populist rhetoric. To address this, I use a series of survey experiments administered via the online survey platform Lucid to investigate voters' response to scenarios where members of Congress (MCs) use populist rhetoric.

## Populism Operationalized

Before delving into theoretical perspectives regarding the impact of populist rhetoric, I feel that it is important to define exactly what I am referring to in this project when I mention "populism." I follow leading scholars of populism in defining populist ideology as containing the two subcomponents which have garnered the widest consensus among scholars: anti-elitism and the reified will of the people. The most basic form of populist rhetoric[3] simply involves references to some unified "people" (Jagers & Walgrave 2007). An elaboration on this concept involves the populist reifying the people's desires[4] in explicit opposition to the second key concept of populist rhetoric, a conspiring elite. Within the populist worldview, elites comprise an ever-expanding cast of characters that can be seen to represent essentially all institutions and decision-makers (Laclau 2012), including "big banks, multinational corporations, media pundits, elected politicians and government officials, intellectual elites and scientific experts, and the arrogant and privileged rich" (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 6). These two subcomponents of populism are the most widely accepted in the literature, provide the best generalizability, and have already been operationalized by many leading researchers.

[3]It should be noted that a significant portion of scholars do not accept this rudimentary definition as constituting populism.

[4]This dimension of populism can be used as an explanation for why populists are often hostile to institutions and in favor of purely majoritarian political mechanisms.

## Negativity, Populism, and Political Actors

There are many reasons for candidates to "go negative" in the abstract. Political psychologists have persuasively argued that voters will pay more attention to negative appeals than positive ones (e.g. Druckman & McDermott 2008; Marcus, Newman, & MacKuen 2000). For political challengers in particular, going negative may be the only reasonable strategy to induce voters to pay attention to new information that may alter their vote choice (Groseclose 2001), particularly in a political environment where voters seem to hate the other party more than they like their own candidates (Abramowitz & Webster 2016).[5] Further, negative rhetoric may be related to a natural psychological response from the campaigns themselves, with negative rhetoric from an opponent making a negative response significantly more likely (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995; Kahn and Kenney 1999).

In addition to these universal incentives, though, populist candidates have unique ideological incentives to attack. Populism, after all, is an ideology naturally drawn to conflict, pitting a virtuous citizenry against corrupt and conspiring elites (e.g. Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2017). Accordingly, populist parties are poised to take advantage of environments of rising negative partisanship using divisive rhetoric (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2018). This theoretical predisposition towards negative rhetoric has also been borne out empirically, with presidential candidates being more likely to use negative rhetoric when discussing elites (Maurer & Diehl 2020). In the United States, Donald Trump in particular has been an "outlier among the outliers" for his propensity to employ confrontation and negative emotionality (Nai 2019).

[5] That is, one characterized by "negative partisanship."

While it seems self-evident that populist rhetoric is worthy of study due to its antagonistic relationship with democratic institutions, also useful is for researchers to characterize its specific effects on public opinion, and to identify what type of politician may serve as the most effective mouthpiece for this potentially damaging rhetoric.

## The Effects of Populist Attacks on Institutions

Members of Congress have a long history of denigrating the very institution they serve in, characterized by the pithy formulation of MCs running for Congress by running against Congress (Fenno 1978). While many factors play into Congress' mediocre approval ratings, scholars have persuasively argued that members' own rhetoric, amplified and curated by the media, is a key component of voters' negativity. Indeed, Congress, in part because of the designs of the Founders and in part because of a lack of understanding among members of the public (Brady & Theriault 2001; Hibbing & Theiss Morse 1995), is in a unique position to suffer at the hands of appeals that emphasize its conflictual nature and unseemly elements (e.g. scandals). This is in no small way due to the way the media shapes congressional coverage (Mann & Ornstein 1994), but also due to how members express themselves. In a controlled setting, voters exposed to partisan rhetoric express more negative attitudes towards the government as well as expressing more partisan intensity themselves (Morris & Witting 2001).

Again, populism has a unique (and potentially insidious) role to play in the crumbling standing of American institutions. Populists explicitly reject institutions because they serve to frustrate the unfiltered will of "the people," favoring grassroots action and strong leaders that serve as the people's mouthpiece (Westlind 1997) instead of deferring to experts or political

elites. Indeed, the attacks on politicians that stem from such an ideology[6] intuitively seem to have a role to play in the observed decline in trust in the federal government; although, there is some question as to whether populist actors are the primary cause of increasing political cynicism and distrust, or whether they are merely responding to the demands of the voting public.[7]

## Methodology and Theoretical Predictions

In sum, given the consensus that negative rhetoric (and media coverage of such rhetoric) is both an important campaign strategy and an important component of elite rhetoric, there is surprisingly little research that attempts the isolate the effect of politicians' rhetoric on institutional standing. The literature is also underdeveloped on what politicians may serve as the most effective mouthpieces for attacks against our institutions. I conducted two different experimental studies that address these questions as part of two separate online surveys.

### Study 1 design

In Study 1, participants will read an excerpt from a mock news story[8] that contains a statement from an MC criticizing Congress as an institution. In the "traditional" condition, respondents will read a statement accompanying the mock story from a fictional member of Congress, James Davis, employing a more conventional criticism of Congress that admon-

[6]That is, even a "thin-centered" (Mudde 2004) ideology, or an idea set that is expressed through discourse (Van Kessel 2014).

[7]In at least some contexts, there is evidence for this "symptom" argument, with voters appearing to show greater interest in populist politicians where trust in institutions is low (e.g. Berman 2019, Doyle 2011, Simmons et al. 2018).

[8]For examples of other designs incorporating a similar style of excerpt, see, e.g., Clayton et al. 2019, Clayton et al. 2023, Kasper et al. 2015, Radnitz and Underwood 2017.

ishes politicians in the institution for not cooperating and promoting dysfunction. The "traditional" statement was modeled on a quote from Senator Richard Durbin in a *New York Times* article.[9] In the "populist" condition, respondents will read a statement (from the same fictional member) that accuses political elites in Congress of being morally corrupt and working for special interests instead of ordinary Americans.[10] Whether the member is presented as an incumbent or congressional challenger is also randomly varied in the news excerpt.

The manipulation text is embedded in a news story excerpt about a hypothetical day in the Senate where legislators failed to reach a consensus on several issues facing the nation. The issues and the party ID of the hypothetical legislator are left undefined to avoid cueing respondents' policy opinions or partisanship, and the Senate was chosen to maximize the effect of the incumbent legislator being seen as part of the political "establishment" (versus a House member). For stimuli text as well as a visual example of the manipulation text embedded in the mock news story, please see the Appendix.

[9]The quote: "Welcome to the United States Senate. I've been here for 25 years and I've seen the decline of this institution to the point where we nolonger function as we once did. Until we change the rules of the Senate and get serious about legislating on behalf of the American people, we're going to continue to suffer this frustration." For the rest of the article text, see: Weisman, Jonathan. 2021. "Congress Ends 'Horrible Year' With Divisions as Bitter as Ever." *The New York Times*. Jan. 2021. Updated Jan. 2022. *https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/us/politics/congress-gridlock-democracy.html* (accessed July 2022).

[10]In the interest of maximizing validity, I incorporated subtle language changes in these treatments rather than changing the text wholesale between conditions. In particular, the populist condition uses words that emphasize decisiveness, uses exaggerations, and has words that refer to a dire situation, in addition to including language criticizing political elites. These elements were identified by Bos et al. (2010), who argued that these more subtle elements represent a valid and reliable method for operationalizing populist rhetoric.

**Dependent Variables**

To measure respondents' opinions about Congress as an institution (Study 1 only), the primary dependent variables will be questions gauging respondents' approval of Congress' job performance, both overall (structured as a feeling thermometer) as well as in terms of trust in Congress as an institution (Likert scale). I also include separate questions (feeling thermometers) about voters' overall feelings towards congressional Democrats and Republicans. These measures are all used in a pre-post design to enable comparison of the magnitude of change of the measures across the populist and traditional conditions. Because I am also interested in candidate evaluations, I also include measures of candidate credibility, honesty, and authenticity to get at "character" evaluations (see study 2 below for more detail).

**Study 1 Main Predictions**

$H_1$**:** *voters that are exposed to negative rhetoric about Congress will express greater disapproval of Congress as an institution.*
$H_2$**:** *voters that are exposed to populist rhetoric versus a more "traditional" criticism of Congress as dysfunctional will have a greater magnitude of change in opinion in a negative direction towards Congress.*

Negative information tends to be more salient and potent than equivalent positive information when presented to individuals (Rozin & Royzman 2001), and Congress as an institution seems to be no exception in this regard (Ashton & Munis 2021). Indeed, media coverage of Congress has often been cited as a key factor in the institution's declining popularity ratings over time. Ironically, as Congress has become more transparent, voters

seem to think less and less of the institution (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 1995).

I hypothesize that exposure to a "traditional" critique of Congress as an institution from an MC will prime voters' memories of instances where Congress has performed less than adequetely in their minds, leading to a more unfavorable evaluation of the institution (in terms of overall favorability as well as trust) versus their pre-test ratings. I also expect that the populist critique will lead to a greater magnitude of change versus the traditional treatment, due to the pointed anti-institutionalist flavor of populist rhetoric (as discussed above).

## Study 2: Candidate Characteristics and the Effectiveness of Populist Rhetoric

Study 2 will ask respondents (registered voters) to evaluate a hypothetical candidate for the nomination of the party they identify with.[11] The respondents will read demographic characteristics (i.e., candidates with different gender, political experience, and/or occupation) about the candidate as well as a mock news story regarding the candidate announcing their (re-)election bid accompanied by a short speech by the candidate. A congressional election serves as an ideal case for examining populist rhetoric, as many of the issues that are frequently discussed by populist candidates are related to the federal government.

Creating hypothetical candidates for citizens to evaluate also allows for random variation of candidate characteristics that observational studies have found to be associated with the effectiveness of populist rhetoric. As noted above (e.g. Bonikowski and Gidron 2016), observational stud-

[11] Or lean towards, in the case of moderates/independents.

ies have identified that candidates that are challengers, or have little or no experience in government are more likely to use populist rhetoric. These candidates likely use populist rhetoric more often because they believe this style will resonate more with voters coming from a candidate of their background.

In Study 2 I use randomly varying candidate demographic profiles in order to directly assess the impact of candidate characteristics on voter perceptions. This creates a way of investigating theories of populist rhetoric that has more internal validity than observational studies. Specifically, I vary candidate incumbency status, political experience,[12] occupation[13] in a mock press release presented to respondents.

In the context of a "press release," the survey presents voters with some relevant characteristics about the hypothetical candidate as well as a short quoted speech from that subtly incorporates the elements of populist rhetoric derived from Bos et al. 2010 (as in Study 1). These elements include exaggeration ("time and time again"), reference to a dire situation ("crisis"), and criticism of political elites ("political establishment has failed us"). To incorporate the reified will of the people, I also include references to the distinct will of voters ("*their* interests") and "hard-working Americans."

One advantage of structuring the treatment in this fashion is that it provides a fairly realistic scenario involving candidates highlighting elements of their personal biography. Congressional (especially House) candidates tend to rely on elements of their occupational background or political resumé as proxies for candidate quality when conducting their campaigns,

[12] I.e., no experience, 2 terms as a state legislator, 2 terms as an MC, or both.

[13] In wave 1 of study 2 I investigated the effects of being an MC, state legislator, or veteran on candidate perceptions. In wave 2 I investigated the effect of being a COO, veteran, or small business owner (all without prior political experience).

as they often lack the high profile in their state typical of Senate or presidential candidates. For the full text of this treatment, please see the Appendix.

## Study 2 Main Predictions

To measure respondent support for the hypothetical member of Congress or congressional challenger, I will include closed-ended survey measures asking the voters about their perceptions of the candidate's honesty, credibility, and authenticity. I include these "character measures" because many scholars conceptualize populism primarily as a stylistic choice or a "thin-centered" ideology[14] Additionally, in Study 2 I will use a post-treatment Likert scale measure of the voter's likelihood of supporting the fictional candidate. I make the following predictions about voters' opinions of candidates in the studies:

*$H_3$: Candidates with less experience in politics will be viewed as more honest, credible, and authentic than those with more experience in politics when expressing populist rhetoric.*

*$H_4$: Challengers will be viewed as more authentic, credible, and honest than incumbents when expressing populist rhetoric.*

My primary predictions for candidate experience and incumbency align with previous observational studies of candidates (e.g. Bonikowski and Gidron 2016) as well as intuitive logic. All else equal, a candidate that the average voter would perceive as being further removed from the "political establishment" will be viewed as a more honest, credible, and authentic populist than one who is more entrenched in politics. So, for example, a candidate that is described as serving 2 terms in Congress and 2 terms in

[14]See Aslandidis (2015) for an overview.

the state legislature would be viewed as a less credible, honest, and authentic populist than a candidate who only served as a state legislator, and lower still on these measures in comparison to a candidate described as a veteran with no prior experience in politics. This prediction applies to the incumbency status of the candidate in Study 1, and the incumbency and political experience manipulations in study 2.

*$H_5$: Candidate occupations that can be categorized as "political outsiders" (e.g., veterans or small business owners) will be viewed as more authentic, credible, and honest versus candidates that could be viewed as part of the political or economic establishment (MCs, COOs).*

As established above, populist rhetoric frequently chooses elite targets to contrast with the nobility of the people, with the left often targeting economic elites and the right often targeting political elites (see, e.g., Kriesi 2014). All else equal, an individual such as a veteran or small business owner (or even a state legislator when compared to a Member of Congress) may be viewed as having more credibility when speaking as populists due to being viewed as existing outside the political/economic "establishment."

*$H_6$: Women will be viewed as less authentic, credible, and honest than men when expressing populist rhetoric, particularly among supporters of male populist candidates.*

Some extant literature underscores an observed gendered component of populist ideology. Indeed, populists (particularly on the right-wing) often seem to use gendered narratives to gain political support (Mostov 2021), with populist leaders taking up the mantle of strong men that compete over who can be the most "masculine" (Boatright and Sperling 2020). Because of the potential qualitative differences in flavors of populism, I

consider models with different conditional estimators of populist support (right-wing, left-wing, both).[15]

**Other Predictions**

When politicians speak as populists, they largely craft their rhetoric to appeal to a core group of devoted supporters rather than to a diverse mainstream. Because of this, it makes sense that studies of voters' perceptions of populist rhetoric largely concentrate on conditional effects, as it is likely that only a certain subsample of respondents will be receptive to populist messages. The following hypotheses identify relevant subpopulations (across both studies) that are predicted to respond more strongly towards populist rhetoric or may have different conditional effects in their evaluations of the characteristics of populist candidates. Thus, these predictions apply to respondent evaluations made across Study 1 and Study 2.

$H_7$: *voters that indicate frequent usage of social media will express higher baseline support for populist candidates and will have a greater shift towards negative sentiment regarding Congress than voters with infrequent usage.*

Communications scholars have argued that the advent of social media resulted in an environment "that while diverse and expansive was also hostile and prone to misinformation that may well have reinforced citizens' pre-existing viewpoints" (Groshek & Koc-Michalaska 2017, 1402). Social media platforms expose voters to unfiltered ideological messages, which often exist in isolated circles with little or no fact-checking from journalists or independent sources. Indeed, many politicians with a large social media following, such as Rep. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), have been ac-

[15]For more detail on the measures used, see Hypothesis 9 below.

cused of benefitting from social media "purity tests,"[16] whereby safe politicians or prospective candidates are able to craft an ideal ideological image for themselves that sitting members cannot live up to because of political realities. It stands to reason, therefore, that voters exposed to unfiltered ideological messages on Twitter would be significantly more likely to support populist candidates. These candidates are more likely to represent the ideologically "pure" viewpoints that highly online voters seek out (or are conditioned to seek out) on social media.

$H_8$**:** *the more similarity a respondent perceives between the Democratic and Republican parties, the more likely they will be willing to support a populist candidate.*

Another closely related prediction is that populist rhetoric will particularly appeal to voters who feel politically alienated. Populist politicians take advantage of the predispositions of discontented voters and also seem to have some success at creating additional discontent through the use of anti-elite rhetoric (Rooduijn et al. 2016). In addition to measuring cynicism and anti-establishment views, one way to get at this discontent is to identify respondents that feel that the Democratic and Republican parties are very similar, a fact which likely contributes to political alienation due to a forced choice between "tweedle-dee and tweedle-dum."[17]

$H_9$: *Respondents that indicated supporting Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, or Elizabeth Warren in the 2020 presidential primaries will express greater support for the hypothetical candidate versus voters that supported alternate candidates.*

[16]John Nichols, "AOC Tells Democrats How to Get It Right in 2020." *The Nation*, January 1, 2020. Accessed September 21, 2020. https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/2020-aoc-democrats/

[17]This formulation was (in)famously used by George Wallace in his 1968 run for president. Source: American Archive of Public Broadcasting. "George Wallace Presidential Campaign 1968." *Library of Congress* and *WGBH*. Accessed October 22, 2020. *https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_55-72b8hn64*

*Respondent evaluations of candidate characteristics will be conditional on populist primary vote.*

This last prediction served as a validity check in addition to a substantively interesting investigation. As a proxy measure for pre-existing "populists," I will consider separately those respondents who indicated supporting the most obviously "populist" candidates, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, in the 2020 presidential primary. My expectation is that these voters will be predisposed toward this type of rhetoric as they associate the trappings of populist rhetoric with their preferred candidate. In seeking to differentiate left and right wing populism, I will also examine Sanders and Warren voters separately. There is also good reason to be cautious in using 2020 Trump vote alone as an indicator of populism, as the 2020 "primary" was unique for Republicans in that Trump was essentially unopposed. Regardless, making the special effort to vote for Trump in an unopposed primary could indicate greater predisposition towards populism.

## Data

Survey data for this research comes from two online surveys conducted via Lucid, a 3rd-party survey distribution vendor. The first survey (N=2231) served as a pilot of Study 2 and was conducted in August of 2022. The second survey (N=1039) contained manipulations for both study 1 and study 2, and was conducted in October of 2023. Both surveys were programmed in Qualtrics and distributed via Lucid. There are several key methodological concerns about using data from Lucid surveys, namely: the representativeness of the sample, the attentiveness of the respondents, and the authenticity of the respondents. I first address the representativeness

Table 4.1: Online Survey 1 (N=2231) Demographics

| Demographic | Sample Pct. | Census Pct. |
|---|---|---|
| White | 66.9 | 75.8 |
| Male | 46.8 | 49.1 |
| Female | 53.1 | 51.1 |
| College | 43.3 | 37.5 |
| Democrat | 42.6 | 33 |
| Independent | 29.1 | 34 |
| Republican | 10.9 | 29 |
| Age 18-24 | 13.3 | 8.5 |
| Age 25-34 | 17.6 | 12.3 |
| Age 35-54 | 32.6 | 26 |
| Age 55-64 | 20 | 13.1 |
| Age 65+ | 16.5 | 17 |

of the samples by comparing the sample statistics to U.S. Census statistics (and a Pew Research survey for party ID figures):

The first survey 4.1 was largely representative, although it was slightly more female, more college education, and a bit older than the average population, with the largest deviation in age groups coming in the 35-54 group. The second survey 4.1 also had a fairly representative sample of individuals, with percentages for college education and gender being very close to Census 2020/Pew demographics. Party ID quantities were also similiar, with the exception being a higher number of Democrats and a lower number of Independents. The sample had representation from all different age groups, but the 35-54 group was significantly overepresented in proportion to the general population. Both samples were more diverse (non-white/hispanic) than the U.S. population overall.

Next, I addressed concerns about both the authenticity and the attentativeness of respondents on the platform by including several attention check items, with an attention check items placed immediately preceding the experimental items contained in the surveys. In both surveys, respon-

Table 4.2: Online Survey 2 (N=1039) Demographics

| Demographic | Sample Pct. | Census Pct. |
|---|---|---|
| White | 65.8 | 75.8 |
| Male | 49.2 | 49.1 |
| Female | 50.8 | 51.1 |
| College Degree | 35.6 | 37.5 |
| Democrat | 39.3 | 33 |
| Independent | 25.2 | 34 |
| Republican | 32.8 | 29 |
| Age 18-24 | 5.8 | 8.5 |
| Age 25-34 | 15.6 | 12.3 |
| Age 35-54 | 37.3 | 26 |
| Age 55-64 | 18.8 | 13.1 |
| Age 65+ | 22.5 | 17 |

dents were screened out of the sample if they failed the attention checks preceding the experimental items. In the second survey, an additional attention check item was inserted that served only as a validity check rather than immediately screening out respondents. These checks obviously address attentiveness but can also serve as protection against potential ”bots” programmed to simply randomly select answers in online surveys.

## Results

### Study 1 Results

First, I evaluate hypothesis 1, which simply seeks to discern if the news excerpt treatment measurably changed respondents' overall impression of Congress as an institution or their trust in Congress. To do this, I conducted t-tests on the pre- and post- measures for congressional approval (feeling thermometer) and trust.[18] On both measures, respondents opinions did shift in the expected direction, although the effects were rel-

[18]Specifically, a Gallup phrased question: “how much confidence do you (yourself) have in the U.S. Congress as a political institution?”

atively small. Respondents across treatment groups felt approximately 3 degrees cooler and shifted 0.2 categories towards lower levels of trust in Congress. Both of these results were significant at $p < 0.05$, the significance standard that will be used throughout this paper.

Table 4.3: Trust and Congressional Thermometer (Study 1)

| | Dependent Variables | |
|---|---|---|
| | Trust | Cong. Therm |
| Populist Rhetoric Treat | −0.02 (−0.11, 0.07) | 0.59 (−1.84, 3.01) |
| Incumbent | 0.02 (−0.07, 0.11) | 0.13 (−2.30, 2.56) |
| Constant | −0.17* (−0.25, −0.09) | 2.74* (0.56, 4.91) |
| Observations | 1,038 | 1,039 |
| $R^2$ | 0.0004 | 0.0002 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.002 | −0.002 |

*Note:* *p<0.05

Table 4.4: Candidate Characteristics (Study 1)

| | Dependent Variables | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Credible | Honest | Authentic |
| Pop. Rhet. | −0.03 (−0.2, 0.1) | 0.02 (−0.1, 0.2) | −0.1 (−0.2, 0.1) |
| Inc. | 0.05 (−0.1, 0.2) | 0.1 (−0.1, 0.2) | 0.1 (−0.1, 0.2) |
| Pop*Inc | 0.1 (−0.1, 0.3) | −0.04 (−0.2, 0.2) | 0.01 (−0.2, 0.2) |
| Constant | 3.1* (3.0, 3.2) | 3.2* (3.1, 3.3) | 3.2* (3.1, 3.3) |
| Observations | 1,039 | 1,039 | 1,039 |
| $R^2$ | 0.004 | 0.002 | 0.002 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.001 | −0.001 | −0.001 |

*Note:* *p<0.05

To evaluate the effects of the study 1 manipulations, I used OLS regressions estimated in *R*. The study results are highly inconsistent and the effects of both manipulations (populist rhetoric and incumbency) are near zero and fall short of statistical significance for both the institutional variables (trust and congress thermometer- see Table 4.3)[19] and the 5-point Lik-

[19]Note: for all tables in this paper parentheses represent 95% confidence intervals.

ert measures (see Table 4.4) of the respondent's impressions of the characteristics of the hypothetical candidate/member of Congress (MC) in the news excerpt. For the candidate/MC characteristics Likert scales, I also included an interaction term to account for the possibility (as mentioned above) that voters may specifically evaluate the characteristics of *incumbents* that use populist rhetoric differently (i.e., incumbents may be punished more harshly in respondents' ratings of their characteristics). However, the effect of the interaction term is, again, small and statistically insignificant.

I also estimated OLS models with interaction terms to evaluate my remaining predictions regarding the conditional effects of support for populist primary candidates, perceived party differences, and social media usage on congressional opinion and candidate characteristics.[20] However, only one of the models (Warren/Sanders primary vote and trust) had predictors that reached conventional levels of significance (see Table 4.5).[21] In this model, only the main effect of voting for Warren/Sanders (a predictor that I did not develop an a priori expectation for) is significant, while the interaction effects in the model are insignificant. At face value, this negative effect indicates that, taking into account whether the respondent was exposed to populist rhetoric and incumbency, Democratic populist voters moved 0.5 categories towards *greater* trust in Congress[22] after being exposed to the manipulation text. There was no equivalent effect observed when examining primary voters for Trump and Sanders together (Table 4.5 model

[20]Due to limited sample size (i.e., statistical power), particularly in Survey 2, and interpretability concerns, I did not estimate models containing multiple conditional variables with interaction terms.

[21]Note: sample size is reduced because some respondents did not vote or did not remember whom they voted for in the primary.

[22]Trust is coded from " a great deal" to "very little"

2), for all "populist candidates" together, or for Trump vote alone. Due to the inconsistency of results across a large number of models and the nonsensical substantive nature of this result, it may also be more prudent to view this as a statistical fluke.

Table 4.5: Trust in Congress and Populist Primary Vote

| | Trust in Congress | |
|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) |
| Pop. Rhet. | −0.1 (−0.2, 0.03) | −0.1 (−0.2, 0.1) |
| Inc. | 0.01 (−0.1, 0.1) | −0.03 (−0.2, 0.1) |
| Dem. Pop. Vote | −0.5* (−0.9, −0.2) | |
| PopRhet.*DemVote | 0.4 (−0.03, 0.8) | |
| Inc*DemVote | 0.2 (−0.2, 0.6) | |
| Pop. Prim Vote | | −0.1 (−0.3, 0.03) |
| PopRhet.*Pop.Vote | | 0.1 (−0.1, 0.3) |
| Inc.*Pop.Vote | | 0.1 (−0.1, 0.3) |
| Constant | −0.1* (−0.2, −0.04) | −0.1 (−0.2, 0.03) |
| Observations | 834 | 834 |
| $R^2$ | 0.01 | 0.005 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.01 | −0.001 |

*Note:* *p<0.05

**Study 2 Results- Survey 1**

Study 2 (the candidate press release) was initially piloted as part of a larger survey. In this first survey, I investigated how variations of candidate occupation and political experience may influence respondent evaluations of their personal characteristics and respondent likelihood of voting for that candidate. Specifically, respondents were presented with a male hypothetical candidate, Jack Miller, who was randomly assigned to be either a congressional incumbent, a state legislator, or a veteran. Additionally, Miller varied between having no prior experience in office, 2 years as a state legislator, 2 terms in the House, or 2 terms in the House and 2 terms as a state

legislator. If described as a veteran, he was described as having 15 years of service in the U.S. Marine Corps.

Results from this first survey are displayed in Table 4.6.[23] Ultimately, none of the predictors of interest reach conventional levels of significance, although the signs for the Veteran and State Legislator dummies (reference category congressional incumbent) are in the predicted direction, indicating the best estimate (although again statistically insignificant) is that these occupations are perceived as more honest and authentic compared to a member of Congress when delivering populist rhetoric, although the effect sizes are small, especially in the case of the honest category.

The experience ordered variable (coded 0 for no experience, 1 for 2 years as a state legislator, 2 for 2 terms in the House, and 3 for 2 terms in the House and 2 terms as a state legislator)[24] also acts in the expected direction for the candidate characteristics variables, with the model's best estimate indicating that, on average, candidates that have greater political experience are perceived as less credible, honest, and authentic, although again the effect size is small and statistically insignificant. For vote likelihood, the veteran variable acts in the opposite direction from my earlier prediction that voters would find populist veterans more electorally appealing, and the state legislator variable has a near zero effect, with both failing to reach conventional levels of significance. I did not have an expectation for the experience variable and vote likelihood.

[23] I did not estimate effects for my other conditional hypotheses, as these variables were not contained in this survey wave.

[24] Model variations isolating specific kinds of experience such as state legislative experience and House experience provided substantively similar results.

Table 4.6: Candidate Characteristics (Study 2- Wave 1)

| | Credible | Honest | Authentic | Lik. Vote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Veteran | −0.1 | 0.03 | 0.1 | −0.1 |
| | (−0.4, 0.2) | (−0.2, 0.2) | (−0.2, 0.4) | (−0.4, 0.2) |
| State Leg. | −0.02 | 0.02 | 0.1 | 0.01 |
| | (−0.2, 0.2) | (−0.1, 0.2) | (−0.1, 0.2) | (−0.2, 0.2) |
| Experience | −0.04 | −0.03 | −0.02 | −0.04 |
| | (−0.1, 0.1) | (−0.1, 0.04) | (−0.1, 0.1) | (−0.1, 0.1) |
| Constant | 3.7* | 3.4* | 3.6* | 3.8* |
| | (3.4, 3.9) | (3.2, 3.6) | (3.3, 3.8) | (3.6, 4.1) |
| Observations | 2,231 | 2,231 | 2,231 | 2,231 |
| $R^2$ | 0.000 | 0.005 | 0.004 | 0.002 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.001 | 0.003 | 0.003 | 0.000 |

*Note:* *p<0.05

**Study 2 Results- Survey 2**

In the second survey (Wave 2) of study 2, I investigated the influence of slightly different candidate characteristics on respondents' perceptions, instead randomly varying candidate gender and a different selection of occupations. In this second wave, all candidates compared had no prior political experience. Respondents were randomly assigned to read about congressional challenger Jack or Jennifer Miller, who was this time described as either a COO of a large business, a veteran, or a small business owner. In these models there are some small positive and statistically significant effects for the veteran and small business owner (reference category COO) variables in terms of perceived honesty and authenticity. These predictors do have a "strong" relationship to the dependent variables in terms of variance explained (Cohen's D > 2), but I am hesistant to attribute much substantive value to them because of their small absolute magnitude (0.1 cate-

gory change).

Table 4.7: Candidate Characteristics Main Effects (Study 2- Wave 2)

| | Credible | Honest | Authentic | Lik. Vote |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Veteran | 0.05 | 0.1* | 0.1* | 0.1 |
| | (−0.1, 0.2) | (0.001, 0.2) | (0.02, 0.3) | (−0.01, 0.3) |
| Small Bus. | 0.01 | 0.1* | 0.1* | 0.1 |
| | (−0.1, 0.1) | (0.02, 0.3) | (0.02, 0.3) | (−0.1, 0.2) |
| Gender | −0.1 | −0.1 | −0.1 | −0.1 |
| | (−0.2, 0.03) | (−0.1, 0.04) | (−0.2, 0.02) | (−0.2, 0.03) |
| Constant | 3.6* | 3.6* | 3.6* | 3.4* |
| | (3.5, 3.7) | (3.5, 3.7) | (3.5, 3.7) | (3.3, 3.6) |
| Observations | 1,039 | 1,039 | 1,039 | 1,039 |
| $R^2$ | 0.003 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | −0.000 | 0.004 | 0.01 | 0.002 |

*Note:* *p<0.05

Next, I look at the conditional effect of respondent support of a *male* populist candidate (in the 2020 primary) on the on the main gender effect (see Table 4.8).[25] I find that whether the respondent voted for a either a male Republican or Democratic populist candidate (Trump or Sanders) has a negative interaction effect for the effect of gender on respondent evaluations of candidate authenticity, indicating that supporting a male populist candidate does appear to conditionally alter the effect of gender on evaluations of authenticity. I also estimated models for Trump primary vote and Sanders vote separately, to see if this effect was driven purely by "right-wing" populism or just Trump support. However, separately estimated models both show a negative main effect for gender, indicating that respondents showed a small but statistically significant decrease in perceived authenticity when evaluating a female candidate, accounting for Trump and Sanders primary

[25]Other models testing additional conditional predictions (i.e., social media usage, perceived party differences) were estimated but none reached conventional levels of significance.

Table 4.8: Populist Vote Interaction Effect (Study 2- Wave 2)

| | Dependent Variable: Candidate Authenticity | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Trump Vote | Bernie Vote | Trump/Bernie |
| Female | -0.1* (-0.2, -0.01) | -0.1* (-0.2, -0.004) | 0.01 (-0.1, 0.2) |
| Trump Prim. | -0.3 (-0.6, 0.03) | | |
| Bernie Prim. | | -0.2 (-0.6, 0.1) | |
| Trump/Bernie | | | 0.1 (-0.1, 0.2) |
| Veteran | 0.2* (0.03, 0.3) | 0.2* (0.03, 0.3) | 0.2* (0.04, 0.3) |
| Small Business | 0.2* (0.03, 0.3) | 0.2* (0.04, 0.3) | 0.2* (0.03, 0.3) |
| Female*TrumpPrim. | 0.1 (-0.4, 0.5) | | |
| Female*BerniePrim. | | -0.02 (-0.5, 0.5) | |
| Female*Trump/Bernie | | | -0.3* (-0.5, -0.04) |
| Constant | 3.7* (3.6, 3.8) | 3.7* (3.6, 3.8) | 3.6* (3.5, 3.8) |
| N | 835 | 835 | 835 |
| $R^2$ | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.02 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.02 |

*Note:* *p<0.05

vote, respectively. It is possible that the lack of observation of statistically significant interaction effects in these models is due to the reduced sample size present in the primary vote models.

## Conclusion

Although the stylized fact that members using rhetoric critical of institutions leads to contempt for government is widely cited, there is little systematic evidence isolating the effects of such rhetoric. Indeed, populism presents an important test case in gauging potential deleterious effects, as members speaking as populists routinely criticize political technocrats and career politicians.

The inconsistent results of this study do not provide much in terms of sweeping conclusions to be made about how populist rhetoric impacts voters' evaluations of Congress as an institution or of individual candidates,

although Wave 2 of Study 2 did point to some promising results for future work to build on when looking specifically at voters' perceptions of the authenticity of female candidates and perceptions of authenticity and honesty of different (non-political) occupations. I would caution against any broad interpretation of these results, however; the small magnitude and inconsistency of statistical significance across models and dependent variables indicates that these results should be taken with a large grain of salt. With regard to Study 1, it is possible that voters' opinions of Congress as an institution are simply too cemented to be significantly altered by a single news excerpt, perhaps dwarfed by the recent chaos in Congress caused by the battle for the Republican speaker's position.

Future research should delve more into the effects of specific aspects of populist rhetoric: it is possible that more fine-grained results could be observed if things like exaggeration or anti-elitism were isolated in politicians' use of rhetoric. It would also be interesting to explore additional candidate profiles to see how voters may adjust their specific evaluations, as well as developing new measures of candidate characteristics that may be able to display more variance across voter profiles.

In sum, while voters may have become accustomed to populist rhetoric and ragtag candidates with lower competence and little political experience (Cowburn 2022), this does not diminish the importance of scientific efforts to ascertain the effects of populism and the candidates that wield it on our system. The influence of populism has been present on both sides of the aisle in the U.S. system for centuries, and does not seem to be diminishing any time soon, whether in the types of candidates that seek office or the rhetoric they use.

# Appendix 1: Study 1 Manipulation Text

**"Traditional" condition:**[26]

"Congress has shown once again that it is **dysfunctional**," said Congressman James Davis. "Time and time again we have seen our legislators **fail to act**. We are truly **at a crossroads** in the United States. We need real change in Congress so that it starts working again for the interests of **the public**."

**"Populist" condition:**

"Congress has shown once again that it **has failed to represent the people**," said Congressman James Davis. "Time and time again we have seen that our legislators **are controlled by the whims of corrupt special interests**. We are truly **on the verge of disaster** in the United States. We need real change **now** in Congress so that it starts working again for the interests of **hard working Americans**."

[26]Text in bold corresponds to language that corresponds to a "traditional" critique of Congress versus a "populist" critique.

# Appendix 2: Study 2 Manipulation Text- Wave 1

**Demographic characteristics**

Name: Jack Miller
Age: 54
Family: Wife Jennifer and two kids, Rachel and James.
Occupation: **[Member of Congress/State legislator/Veteran]**
Political resumé: **[No prior experience in elected office/2 terms as a state legislator/2 terms as a U.S. House Member/2 terms as a state legislator and 2 years in the U.S. House]**
Running as: **[Incumbent/Challenger]**

**Press Release: Jack Miller announces [re-election] bid for U.S. House**

**[Republican/Democrat]** Jack Miller, a **[Member of Congress/State legislator/Veteran]** officially kicked off his **[re/election]** campaign Wednesday at his first campaign rally. **[Miller is seeking re-election after serving 2 terms in the U.S. House/Prior to serving 2 terms as a member of the House of Representatives, Miller served for 15 years in the U.S. Marine Corps/Miller is seeking re-election after serving 2 terms in the U.S. House. Previously, he also served 2 terms as a state legislator/Prior to making the decision to run for Congress, Miller served for 2 terms in the state legislature./Prior to making the decision to run for Congress, Miller served for 2 terms in the state legislature. He also served for 15 years in the U.S. Marine Corps/Prior to making the decision to run for Congress, Miller served for 15 years in the U.S. Marine Corps/Miller is seeking re-election after serving 2 terms in the U.S. House. Previously, he also served 2 terms as a state legislator and served in the U.S. Marine Corps for 15 years]**.

"I am seeking **[re-]**election to Congress because I feel that America has reached a crisis situation. Over the years the political establishment has failed us time and time again. I think people want someone who will **[continue to]** represent *their* interests rather than caving to the whims of special interests in Washington.

"I want to make it clear today that I am devoting myself to making sure that our government serves hard working Americans first and foremost. This is a warning to the **[left-wing/right-wing]** elites in Washington: your time is up."

# Appendix 3: Study 2 Manipulation Text- Wave 2

**Demographic characteristics**

Name: **[Jack Miller/Jennifer Miller]**
Age: 54
Family: **[Wife Jennifer/Husband Jack]** and two kids, Rachel and James.
Occupation: **[COO/Small Business Owner/Veteran]**
Running as: Challenger

**Press Release: [Jack/Jennifer] Miller announces [re-election] bid for U.S. House**

**[Republican/Democrat] [Jack/Jennifer]** Miller, a **[COO/Small Business Owner/Veteran]** officially kicked off **[his/her]** election campaign Wednesday at **[his/her]** first campaign rally. **[Miller ran a small business for 15 years prior to announcing a run for Congress/ Miller served 15 years in the U.S. military prior to announcing a run for Congress/Miller served as COO for 15 years prior to announcing a run for Congress]**

"I am seeking election to Congress because I feel that America has reached a crisis situation. Over the years the political establishment has failed us time and time again. I think people want someone who will represent *their* interests rather than caving to the whims of special interests in Washington.

"I want to make it clear today that I am devoting myself to making sure that our government serves hard working Americans first and foremost. This is a warning to the **[left-wing/right-wing]** elites in Washington: your time is up."

# Appendix 4: Study 1 Example Treatment

## Senate fails to reach consensus as stalemate drags on

By ZEKE MILLER and CATHERINE LUCEY 8 hours ago

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WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate failed Thursday to reach a legislative consensus on several issues facing the nation, leaving lawmakers and outside observers to wonder if the legislative branch can be rehabilitated.

Three key pieces of legislation all failed to pass when they were brought to the floor for a vote.

"Congress has shown once again that it has failed to represent the people," said Congressman James Davis. "Time and time again we have seen that our legislators are controlled by the whims of corrupt special interests."

"We are truly on the verge of disaster in the United States. We need real change now in Congress so that it starts working again for the interests of hard-working Americans."

# Chapter 5

# Conclusion

Using a variety of data and methods, this dissertation underscores that the study of populism need not be isolated to just the presidency. The results here have detailed the differing ways the parties use populism and the impact (or lack thereof) of populist rhetoric on voters' opinions of Congress as an institution and on perceptions of individual candidates. Importantly, this research systematically provides evidence that populist language is employed by politicians on the left and the right, and increasingly so. There are also key party differences in usage of populist language across multiple media sources. Democrats seem to be more opportunistic in their usage of populist language, responding quite dramatically to events in the political environment (such as a dramatic defeat by the Tea Party and Trump's ascendance). Democratic loyalists (in terms of party voting) also employ populist language more often, defying the conventional notion of the populist politician as "political outsider."

This research has also developed a systematic "profile" of a populist politician through cross-sectional analysis, and it is not always favorable for our democratic system as a whole. In particular, there is evidence that populist politicians use controversial language on social media to court donors,

which is likely in part a response to the incentives created by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA or McCain-Feingold) for politicians to pursue individual donors who tend to prefer more ideologically extreme candidates over moderates (Barber 2016). Voters that choose to elect or re-elect populists are also risking being represented by less productive members of Congress that instead prefer to waste the majority's time by engaging in dilatory measures. It is important, though, to recognize that in some circumstances these aspects may be viewed as a positive factor among constituents that may prefer a member that shows signs of being a "fighter" against the political establishment rather than one that primarily seeks compromise with other MCs.

It is interesting that the real world effects of populist language did not seem to extend to voter perceptions in the survey chapter (chapter 4). It is possible that the types of voters that might respond more dramatically to the usage of populist rhetoric are simply not the type of respondents that would be included in typical online survey experiment. As noted above, individuals that are predisposed to populist rhetoric might be very online, have unique attitudes about political parties or the system in general (e.g., cynicism), or have more general anti-government attitudes. Future research should also look into sampling a more concentrated group of individuals with these characteristics to test potentially different effects of populist rhetoric on special populations.

As much of the literature on populism extends beyond the U.S. context, it also may be prudent to examine ways in which this research generalizes more broadly. Certainly there are some results observed in this research also map onto populist tactics in other countries: Cassell's (2021) study of

Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Italy, and Spain indicates that voters in many contexts also engage more with populist rhetoric on social media, and, as noted above, the targets chosen in U.S. politics map more broadly onto the left (economic)/right (political) dimension that also characterizes parties in European countries (Kriesi 2014). The opportunistic adoption or adoption by party loyalists of populist language also dovetails with literature that suggests that politicians may be responding to the mainstream electorate adopting more "populist" opinions overall (Rooduijn 2016).

Many elements detailed here remain unique or peculiar to the U.S. system, however, and additional research is needed to determine how long lasting the impact of the new populist wave following the Trump presidency will be on American politics. It is clear that both parties have to some degree taken a gamble on using populist language to attract voters and to push their partisan agendas, and unless something dramatically changes in the political environment with regard to the regulation of social media or campaign donations it seems unlikely that politicians will stop responding to the unique incentives to sound like a populist any time soon.

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