

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

*Populist legislators in Congress:
“Fighters” or Frauds?*

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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 tool² that operates mainly in the modes of anger (Rico, Guinjoan & Anduiza 2017), threat, and fear, which can be noble³ or severely misguided.

In recent years, politicians adopting the populist “zeitgeist” (Mudde 2004) have spurred impressive enthusiasm among low propensity voters⁴ and brought attention to dormant issues.⁵ 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).⁶

²See 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/.

³For example, see (Obradović, Power & Sheehy-Skeffington 2020) for a discussion of how anger in particular can be wielded in order to increase individuals’ political efficacy.

⁴See 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.

⁵Jones, Jeffrey M. “Debt, Gov’t. Power Among Tea Party Supporters’ Top Concerns.” *Gallup* July 5, 2010. Accessed October 12, 2023.

⁶Freking, Kevin. “These 8 Republicans stood apart to remove Kevin McCarthy as House

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 institutions. 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 of Congress. Although MCs' statements on social media have garnered increased 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 has been used in Congress over time as well as what observable quantities predict whether a member will use populist language. I also investigate the practical implications for Congress and our democratic system of an MC being a populist, investigating whether using populist rhetoric is associated with increased legislative effectiveness (in terms of lawmaking, bill sponsorship, and distributive politics) and whether populists take greater efforts to thwart the member's speaker." *Associated Press* October 3, 2023. Accessed October 12, 2023.

party or the chamber majority.

Ultimately, I find...

Studying Populism- Why Speeches?

As many scholars 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 both 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).

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.⁷ However, previous scholars have argued that analyzing congressional speeches (and non-legislative debate in particular) is valuable because it is prized by just the types of members that would not normally 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). Indeed, these often marginalized members, such as freshmen (or more junior members), ideological/partisan outliers, and minority party members are exactly those found by other scholars to be more likely to use populist rhetoric (see, e.g., Bonikowski and Gidron 2016;).

Populism and Representation Within the Chamber

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. Populist politicians seek to leverage a two-fold advantage that corresponds with the two main components of populist rhetoric: a conspiring elite and the reified will of the people (Mudde 2004). First, their goal is to paint their opponents as out of touch representatives of the political estab-

⁷See, e.g., Bonikowski & Gidron 2016; Dai & Kustov 2022; Gennaro et al. 2021; Vitale 2022

lishment. This technique is particularly prominent among populist challenger candidates pitted against incumbents (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 to see if being populist matters in terms of member behavior. As established above, populists tend to make unique claims that relate to their ability to represent their voters and their potential success in the institution if elected. Political science should be able to give voters a clearer picture of what they will be “getting,” on average, if they choose to elect a populist to Congress.

The expectation that populists may behave differently in representing constituents is supported by analyses of representation style since Fenno (1978), which indicate that different representational styles are associated with distinct behavioral patterns within the institution (e.g., Grimmer 2013; Grimmer 2014).

Measuring Populism in Congressional Speech

Data- The Congressional Record

To investigate which MCs present themselves as populists within the chamber, I employed automated dictionary analysis on the Congressional Record.⁸ 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.

Because I am interested in members' political rhetoric rather than how they use congressional procedure or how they vote on individual measures, 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 125 words. This methodological decision closely follows other automated investigations of the congressional record⁹. Additionally, I chose a 125 word benchmark because speech experts have identified that the average individual speaks at approximately 125-150 words per minute. Thus 125 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

⁸See section below and the appendix for more detail on the dictionary analysis and dictionary terms used.

⁹(Tucker, Capps & Shamir 2020) chose a 140-word demarcation

Robert's Rules of Order, Riddick's Senate Procedure, and procedural phrases identified by a classification algorithm created by the author, I removed any speech that had over 30 percent of its bigrams classified as "procedural."¹⁰

Automated Dictionary Analysis

Because populism in the U.S. system manifests itself on both the right and the left, my analysis incorporated

Predictors of Populism in the Chamber

H₁: Electorally safe members will be more likely to use populist rhetoric versus marginal members.

Other scholarly work (e.g., Russell 2020) has argued that, all else equal, safe members seem to be more willing to communicate as partisans than members who populate marginal districts.

Table 1: Predictors of Populist Speech

	DV: Pop. terms per 10000 words	
	Democrats	Republicans
Vote Pct.	−0.026 (−0.068, 0.016)	−0.012 (−0.036, 0.012)
(Abs) Dist. from Maj. Median	19.101* (14.424, 23.779)	9.945* (8.161, 11.730)
Bills Sponsored	0.042* (0.009, 0.075)	0.014 (−0.011, 0.039)
LES	−0.748* (−1.192, −0.304)	−0.305* (−0.546, −0.063)
Seniority	−0.102 (−0.208, 0.005)	0.058 (−0.006, 0.123)
Female	−1.349* (−2.400, −0.298)	−0.447 (−1.336, 0.442)
Nonwhite	−2.748* (−3.946, −1.551)	1.681* (0.227, 3.135)
Leadership	0.506 (−1.299, 2.311)	1.235* (0.055, 2.416)
Professionalism	0.372 (−1.942, 2.686)	0.380 (−1.226, 1.987)
Majority Party	6.701* (4.246, 9.157)	4.475* (3.528, 5.421)
President's Party	0.677 (−1.015, 2.369)	0.084 (−0.781, 0.948)
Senate	−0.600 (−1.657, 0.457)	−0.156 (−0.728, 0.417)
Constant	1.621 (−1.801, 5.043)	0.777 (−1.073, 2.627)
Observations	1,682	1,665
R ²	0.066	0.082
Adjusted R ²	0.059	0.075

Note:

*p<0.05; **p<[0.**]; ***p<[0.***]

Results

Populism and Legislative Behavior

Conclusion

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.¹¹

¹⁰For 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

¹¹One analysis (Harris 2005) found that approximately one-third of speeches are on topics coordinated by party leaders.

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Appendix A1: Dictionary

Opposition to Elites¹²

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 ob-

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

sessed, 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 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 politician,

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