

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. To analyze populist speech, I used automated dictionary analysis on a dataset of over 2 million tweets spanning from 2012-2020. I then created a dictionary based index of populist rhetoric. Overall, using populist language was associated with greater engagement on Twitter (favorites, retweets) and with increased candidate fundraising (dollars, number of donors). 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. Additionally, there is evidence of a marked increase in populist rhetoric among members of both parties coinciding with the 2016 election, a trend possibly linked to the great success of populist branded candidates such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

Introduction

In many ways, Donald Trump¹ 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,” [?] defined as much by what he stands *against* as what he stands for [?]. 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

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

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 Clinton⁷ 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 large volumes of text. Further, the communications 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.

⁶E.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/>.

⁷Beauchamp, 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/>.

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

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 rhetoric⁹ simply involves references to some unified “people” [?]. An elaboration on this concept involves the populist reifying the people’s desires¹⁰ 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 characters that can be seen to represent essentially all institutions and decision-makers [?], 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 [?] 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” [?].

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 [?].

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.

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

¹⁰This 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.

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 employed¹² 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 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

¹¹Although 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.

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

¹³That is, classifying as “populist” texts that do not reflect the concept as defined in this research.

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.

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 ?? 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 [?], providing politicians ample room to spread populist messages [?]. Indeed, the “mass” nature of social media would seem a natural conduit for the politics of the masses that aspiring populists crave to direct [?]. 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 [?].

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 relatively unconstrained medium¹⁵ 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-

¹⁴I 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.

¹⁵Although not entirely “unmediated:” see, e.g., Gerbaudo 2018.

constituent relations due to its low cost, speed of transmission, and potential to reach a wide audience [?]. 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 [?].

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 [?]. Finally, another aspect that may underlie populist politicians’ affinity for Twitter is populism’s association with ideological extremism. Multivariate analyses [?] indicate that extremists were particularly likely to be early and enthusiastic adopters of Twitter.

Figure 1: Mean Populism Over Time
[width=1.0]mean_score_{time}.png

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. 2022. Figure ?? shows the distribution of tweets collected by year. In order to facilitate easier analysis of the text, I pre-processed the

¹⁶The 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.

tweets, excluding urls, retweets (RTs), and removing punctuation and numbers.¹⁷ 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 ?? lists the 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.

H₁: More junior members of Congress will use populist rhetoric more frequently.

H₂: Among recently elected members, those that had prior experience in politics use populist rhetoric less frequently than members who never held public office.

H₃: 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

¹⁷I did not remove “stop words” as this would have interfered with the identification of some of the dictionary terms.

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 leadership¹⁸

H₄: 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 followers,¹⁹ 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 [?]. I operationalize ideological extremity here using a measure of the member’s ideological distance from the majority party median in that Congress.²⁰

H₅: 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.

H₆: Members of the minority party will use populist rhetoric more frequently.

H₇: 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;

¹⁸Explanatory variables gathered from Volden and Wiseman’s “Lawmakers” data as well as Voteview data.

¹⁹Hughes, 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/>.

²⁰Measure constructed using Poole and Rosenthal’s DW-NOMINATE scores.

Morris 2001), which likely extends to populist messaging as 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.

H₈: 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 members²¹ While the cost (in 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).

H₉: 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

²¹Smith 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).

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 politicians that express themselves in a manner more consistent with “establishment” politics.²² 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 [?].

Women, on the other hand, may see pressures to act in an “agreeable” manner and promote compromise in the institution to avoid harsh punishment [?], 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.

H₁₀: 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.

²²See 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).

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 politicians tend to view populism through the prism of class, whereas right-wing politicians tend to imbue their populism with nationalism [?]. 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 corporations²³ and right-wing populists like Donald Trump focusing on bureaucrats in the “Deep State.”²⁴ 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.

H₁₁: 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 [?], but this hypothesis has not been investigated in the context of the U.S. Congress.

H₁₂: 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 [?].

²³Johnson, 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).

²⁴Abramson, 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).

The most logical explanation to the “astronomical sums” [?] invested by populists into social media and online advertising is that these investments more than pay for themselves.

Results

My results indicate that MCs became more populist in their rhetoric over the time series. Figure ?? 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 elites²⁵ on social media when they use populist rhetoric. Figure ?? displays the relative proportion of tweets that targeted political elites by party compared to the relative proportion that targeted economic elites.²⁶ 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 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.

²⁵See ‘targets’ in Appendix A1 for full details.

²⁶That is, the percentage of each category within tweets that mentioned a specific elite target.

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

Table ?? 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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 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

²⁷In this analysis a standard of $p < 0.05$ is used for establishing statistical significance.

²⁸Results are substantively similar when the chamber median is used as a comparison point instead.

Figure 2: Accounts/Tweets per year
[width=0.8]accounts.png [width=0.8]tweets.png

Figure 3: Frequency of Terms
[width=1.0]freq_a*ntielite.png*

into real world increases in fundraising for members that choose to express themselves as populists.

Populist Tweets Garner Much More Engagement

Figure ?? 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.²⁹ Interestingly, when the engagement results are broken out by year (see Figures ?? and ??), 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. Both average and year specific increases are substantively significant when one considers that the average tweet for a member in the dataset received 448 favorites and 125 retweets.

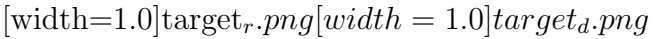
Populist Tweets Lead to More Donors and Increased Fundraising.

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.³⁰ These effects are impressive when one considers that the median member raised 17,673 dollars in a month

²⁹For full results including coefficients for control variables, see Appendix A3.

³⁰Analysis completed with FEC data compiled and graciously shared by Ballard et al.

and had 26 donors. Indeed, the benefits of adopting populist rhetoric do not seem at all limited to just the social media sphere.

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


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 extremity 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.

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Appendix A1: Dictionary

Opposition to Elites³¹

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, shall*, 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

³¹Dictionaries in extant research consulted: Bonikowki & Gidron 2016, Bruter & Harrison 2011, Oliver & Rahn 2016, Grundl 2018, Theiele 2020

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 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 es-

tablishment, 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

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.³² 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 politicians/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 A1.

The dictionary performs quite well compared to the hand-coded sample in terms of both precision (P) and recall (R). Specifically, the *precision* of the

³²I 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.

Table 3: Confusion matrix

		<i>Human coding:</i>	
		0	1
<i>Dict. Coding</i>	0	1166	87
	1	136	361

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

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Retweets Above Average	Favorites 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)
Distance from Maj. Median	45.7* (41.8, 49.7)	113.2* (97.2, 129.3)
No. 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