

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

*We (Not Them) the People: Who
Makes Credible Populist Appeals and
How this Impacts our Institutions*

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October 11, 2023

¹Special thanks to Mike Crespín, Chuck Finocchiaro, Rachel Blum, Peter McLaughlin, Nathan Barron, Sarah Anderson, and participants in the 2022 WPSA Annual meeting for feedback on this research project.

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 2019), increased transparency (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 1995), legislative productivity (Durr, Gilmour & Wolbrecht 1997), and a lack of responsiveness from members.² 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 ineffectual, 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

²"Congress and the Public." *Gallup*, n.d. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx> (accessed September 25, 2020).

politics,³ 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, Riding & Mudde 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 to assess the direct impact of populist rhetoric. To address this, I will use a survey experiment 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 on

³E.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).

populism by defining populist ideology as containing the two sub-components which have garnered the widest consensus among scholars: anti-elitism and the reified will of the people. The most basic form of populist rhetoric⁴ simply involves references to some unified “people” (Jagers & Walgrave 2007). An elaboration on this concept involves the populist reifying the people’s desires⁵ 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.

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

⁴It should be noted that a significant portion of scholars do not accept this rudimentary definition as constituting populism.

⁵This 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.

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).⁶ 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 & Rovira 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, Martínez i Coma & Maier 2019).

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

⁶That is, one characterized by “negative partisanship.”

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 ideology⁷ 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.⁸

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 to 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. Below, I outline two studies that address these questions as part of an online survey.

Study 1 design

In Study 1, participants will read an excerpt from a mock news story that contains a statement from an MC criticizing Congress as an institution. In the "mainstream" condition, respondents will read a statement accompanying the mock story from a fictional member of Congress, James Davis, employing

⁷That is, even a "thin-centered" (Mudde 2004) ideology, or an idea set that is expressed through discourse (Van Kessel 2014).

⁸In 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).

a more conventional criticism of Congress that admonishes politicians in the institution for not cooperating and promoting dysfunction. 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.⁹ Whether the member is presented as an incumbent or congressional challenger is also randomly varied in the news excerpt. For draft texts of these stimuli, please see the Appendix.

In order to better isolate the effect of rhetoric, I do not explicitly tell respondents the partisanship of the candidate in Study 1. Rather, respondents are first presented with the treatment and then presented with a partisanship battery incorporating their strength of partisan identification. By waiting until after presenting respondents with the scenario to bring up partisanship, I will be able to more accurately gauge the impact of the speech itself, which otherwise might be dwarfed in effect by party loyalties.

Dependent variables

In Study 1, the primary dependent variables will be questions gauging respondents’ approval of Congress’ job performance (structured as a feeling thermometer) as well as their likelihood of supporting the hypothetical MC (structured as a Likert scale). I will also include variations of the question about

⁹In 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.

Congress that inquire specifically about Republicans' and Democrats' job performance in the institution. My final DV asks respondents to characterize the ideological extremity of the hypothetical MC (structured as a Likert scale).

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 "mainstream" 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 critique of Congress as an institution from an MC will prime voters' memories of instances where Congress has performed less than adequately in their minds, leading to a more unfavorable evaluation of the institution versus their pre-test approval ratings. I also expect that the populist critique will lead to a greater magnitude of change versus the mainstream treatment, due to the pointed anti-institutionalist flavor of populist

rhetoric (as discussed above).

H₃: Once partisanship is primed, strong partisans will rate the performance of their favored party more positively and the performance of the opposition party more negatively. The magnitude of this effect will be stronger for Republicans than Democrats.

A broad group of scholars within political science argue that in recent decades citizens can increasingly be described as expressing affective polarization, that is a tendency to associate negative emotions and a general sense of distrust with the opposition party (e.g. Mason 2018).¹⁰ Because of this increased animosity, it is likely that priming partisanship in an experimental setting will lead to increased blame attribution towards the opposition party, particularly among strong partisans. That is, when primed, partisanship should become a more salient concern at the expense of respondents' other potential identities (Gaertner & Dovidio 2000). This prediction corresponds with previous research showing stronger in-group biases among partisans (Kranton, Pease, Sanders & Huettel 2020) and among those that identify as conservatives or with right-wing parties in particular (Altemeyer 1981; 1988; Duckitt 2001; Hodson and Bussieri 2012; Oc, Moore & Bashshur 2018).¹¹

¹⁰Extant research suggests these biases likely extend to non-political realms as well as political (e.g. Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

¹¹It is important to note, however, that other scholars have disputed the asymmetric bias hypothesis, arguing instead for a symmetric pattern of bias among liberal and conservative partisans (e.g. Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, and Wetherell 2014; Chambers, Schlenker, & Collison 2013; Crawford 2017; Ditto et al. 2019).

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 that are predicted to be more receptive to populist rhetoric, on average.

H₄: voters that indicate frequent usage of social media will express higher baseline support for populist candidates.

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 accused of benefitting from social media “purity tests,”¹² 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

¹²John 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/>

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.

H₅: voters that indicate having negative views of immigrants will view Congress more negatively after being presented with populist rhetoric than voters with a neutral or positive view of immigrants.

Nativism has become a core component of contemporary populist movements, particularly those on the political right.¹³ Populist politicians differentiate the nation and “the people” from the immigrants and enemies that do not belong in those groups as they would define them (Oliver & Rahn 2016). Trump’s populism in America has not differed from previous populist movements in this respect. Indeed, survey research (e.g. Hooghe & Dassonneville 2018) has previously identified that anti-immigrant views are a significant predictor of support for Donald Trump.

H₆: voters that indicate more antipathy toward the political establishment will view Congress more negatively after being presented with populist rhetoric versus those with neutral or positive views of the establishment.

H₇: voters that express higher political cynicism will view Congress more negatively after being presented with populist rhetoric versus those with lower political cynicism.

¹³Mudde (2007) argues that “within the electorate of populist radical right parties more people are nativists (*quantity*) and they are more nativist (*quality*) than within the electorates of other parties” (221, emphasis original).

The other core components that are viewed as determinative of populist attitudes and support for populist parties are political cynicism and, relatedly, anti-establishment views. Previous scholars have found political cynicism to be a key predictor of support for populist parties (Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin 2011; Schumacher & Rooduijn 2013). Previous survey experiments (e.g. Bos et al. 2012) have also identified a relationship between cynicism and individual voters' receptiveness to populist rhetoric (Bos, Van Der Brug & De Vreese 2013).

H₈: 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, Van Der Brug & De Lange 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."¹⁴

H₉: Voters that indicated supporting Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential primaries and that receive the "populist" treatment will ex-

¹⁴This 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

press greater support for the hypothetical candidate versus voters that supported alternate candidates.

This last prediction serves 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.

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.¹⁵ The respondents will read demographic characteristics 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

¹⁵Or lean towards, in the case of moderates/independents.

found to be associated with the effectiveness of populist rhetoric. As noted above (e.g. Bonikowski and Gidron 2016), observational studies 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 whether the candidate is presented as an incumbent or a challenger, and whether the incumbent's past experience is presented as serving 2 terms in Congress, serving 2 terms in the state legislature, serving 15 years in the U.S. military, or as some combination of these factors. Regarding this last item, an individual such as a veteran may be viewed as having more credibility as a populist due to being viewed as existing outside the political establishment.

Study 2 design

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 the candidate that will subtly incorporate 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 incorpo-

rate 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 résumé as proxies for candidate quality when conducting their campaigns, 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. For Study 2, I expect that the predictions I developed above regarding social media usage, views on immigrants, views of the parties, political cynicism, and antipathy towards the establishment will also apply when the object of evaluation is an individual candidate versus Congress as an institution.

Dependent Variables

To measure respondent support after receiving the treatment, I will use a 7-point Likert scale measuring the voter’s likelihood of supporting the fictional candidate. Additionally, 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” ideology¹⁶ rather than as primarily containing objective issue-based content.¹⁷

¹⁶See Aslandidis (2015) for an overview.

¹⁷Particularly when comparing “populist” candidates across parties or countries.

Study 2 main predictions

***H*₁: 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*₂: Challengers will be viewed as more authentic, credible, and honest than incumbents when expressing populist rhetoric.**

My primary predictions for Study 2 align with results from 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 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. Thus, I will not only analyze the main effects of these characteristics across the entire sample, but (where sample size allows) compare the effects of candidate profiles in comparison to one another as well in order to test the validity of the “establishment proximity” logic.

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. This project hopes to shed light not only on the potency of populist rhetoric at achieving its own aims, but on which politicians are best positioned to deliver this rhetoric the most credibly, and which voter profiles prove the most susceptible to populist claims from members of Congress.

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Appendix: Study 1 Manipulation Text

“Mainstream” condition:¹⁸

“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**.”

¹⁸Text in bold corresponds to language that corresponds to a “mainstream” critique of Congress versus a “populist” critique.

Appendix: Study 2 Manipulation Text

Demographic characteristics

Name: Jack Miller

Age: 54

Family: Wife Jennifer and two kids, Rachel and James.

Occupation: **[District Attorney/Veteran]**

Political resumé: **[No prior experience in elected office/2 terms as a state legislator]**

Running as: **[Incumbent/Challenger]**

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

[Republican/Democrat] Jack Miller, a [District Attorney/Businessman] officially kicked off his [re/election] campaign Wednesday at his first campaign rally. [Miller has served 1 term as a member of the U.S. House prior to his decision to run for re-election/Miller has served 2 terms in the state legislature/Miller has spent 15 years serving as district attorney/Miller served 15 years in the U.S. military prior to his decision to run for Congress.]

"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."