Building Populist Discourse: An Analysis of Populist Communication in American Presidential Elections, 1896–2016

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Objectives. This article examined the history of the use of populist frames in American presidential campaign discourse in order to answer a set of interrelated questions about how populist discourse is constructed and employed. *Methods.* Using a novel database of presidential campaign speeches ($n = 189$) from 63 major candidates from 1896 to 2016, I coded these speeches for presence or absence of a set of 11 populist frames. Mokken scale analysis was conducted to determine if populist discourse is "built" in a logical way by political candidates. Regression analysis was conducted to measure if outsider candidates were more likely to employ populist framing. *Results.* Eight of the 11 frames comprise a stable Mokken scale that measures populist discourse. Results show that anti-bureaucratic and nativist frames do not load onto the same factor as other populist frames, suggesting that they may be measuring a separate concept. Candidates are more likely to use generic, less threatening aspects of the populist frame than they are to use illiberal, "risky" frames. Less experienced and third-party candidates are also more likely to use populist discourse. *Conclusion.* Populism is a flexible but coherent set of discursive frames present across modern campaign history. Populist framings are most commonly utilized by outsider candidates.

The emergence of Donald Trump in the 2016 campaign, a much maligned businessman with no political experience, a penchant for racist language, and little respect for democratic norms, caused political scientists and political observers more broadly to scramble to understand his victory. A number of explanations were proposed to explain the rise of Trump, with some focusing on the alleged "economic anxiety" of particular sectors of Americans; others emphasizing the support Trump garnered from voters with racialized, sexist, or nativist views (Luttig, Federico, and Lavine, 2017); as well as arguments that pointed to the salience of a seemingly besieged "white identity" as best explaining Trump's victory (Mutz, 2018). But despite vigorous debate over the proximate causes of Trump's victory, most of the commentariat seemed to agree on one thing—that his victory was a symbol of the "rise of populism" in American politics (Mudde, 2015; Liasson, 2015; Wallace-Wells, 2016).

Is Donald Trump the latest iteration of American populism, or is he an aberration in American politics, unique in his rhetorical style? To answer this question, and place Trump in broader historical perspective, it is first necessary to clarify what one means when they call Donald Trump (or Bernie Sanders) a "populist." Thankfully, an explosion of scholarship in recent years has brought much needed consensus to the concept, which is most often understood to be ideational in nature (Mudde, 2019). This article employs the work

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of Aslanidis (2016) who, drawing on the work of Laclau (2005), argues that populism should be understood not as an ideology but as a flexible discursive frame that pits the ordinary people and their inherent sovereignty in a Manichean struggle against the corrupt elite. Taking seriously the idea of populism as a discourse, I identify the four "building tasks" of populism *as practiced by presidential candidates*: (1) constructing a valorized people to which the candidate and his followers belong; (2) identifying his opponents as members or tools of anti-democratic and elite interests; (3) convincing the audience that these two groups are engaged in zero-sum competition; and (4) advocating for the direct, unmediated rule of the people through his person. From this definition I propose a set of eleven historically sensitive populist "subframes," drawn from the American and comparative literature, which I use to measure levels of populism across time and within specific presidential campaigns. This "thicker" conceptualization allows for greater precision in differentiating between different candidates, as well as helping to illustrate how populist claim-making has changed over time. I measure these frames through the collection and creation of a novel database of full-text speeches ($n = 189$) of 63 presidential candidates from 1896 to 2016.

After the speeches are coded, descriptive and inferential analyses are run to answer a set of four questions about populism in American politics. The first is simply determining which campaigns employ the highest levels of populist discourse. I find that Trump's 2016 campaign does qualify as unusually high in populist content, along with other notable campaigns including those of William Jennings Bryan (1896, 1900, 1908) and the third-party campaigns of Teddy Roosevelt (1912), Robert La Follette (1924), George Wallace (1968), and Ross Perot (1992). Second, this project examines how candidates strategically "build" populist discourses—are some of the subframes I identified more or less common, and if so, why? I find that candidates are more likely to use frames that are not inherently threatening to democratic liberalism—such as criticizing elite politicians or business monopolies—than they are to use illiberal frames such as demonizing the media or attacking the judiciary.

Third, I seek to understand whether *nativism* and *anti-statism*, framings commonly associated with populism, are best understood as core components of the populist project or are instead closely related but distinct concepts. Using Mokken scale analysis (MSA), I find that while 8 of my 11 subframes *do* form a monotonic scale, the *nativism* and *anti-bureaucracy* frames do not load onto the same factor. This suggests that we should be cautious in equating nativist or anti-statist measures with measures of populist writ large. Finally, in line with previous research, I examine whether "political outsiders," are more likely to employ populist frames than more establishment politicians. My analysis shows that third-party general election candidates are much more likely to employ populist frames than major party candidates; and that more experienced candidates on average are less likely to use populist framings. By analyzing all major general-election candidates since the advent of modern campaigning, this piece shows the analytic utility of conceptualizing populism as the employment of specific discursive frames by outsiders in political rhetoric.

Literature Review

Defining populism at times appears to be a quixotic task—because candidates and parties rarely refer to themselves as "populist," and because there exist no seminal texts from which it can be drawn—the term is particularly prone to conceptual stretching (Canovan,

1981; Sartori, 1970). Unlike other definitional debates in political science, scholars at times do not even appear to agree on what "class" of thing populism belongs to—different authors variously consider it to be an ideology, a logic, a strategy, or a discourse (Hofstadter, 1955; Laclau, 2005; Weyland, 2001; Aslanidis, 2016). As recently as 2016, the definitional debates around populism had reached near farcical levels, as scholars of populism felt duty-bound to recognize the essentially contested nature of the term before beginning any analysis (Moffitt, 2016). Nevertheless, there are signs that certain definitions appear to be approaching consensus; and, that at the very least, some "core" aspects of populism have emerged. While alternate understandings of populism still are usefully employed by scholars within the discipline—such as populism as a strategy that emphasizes unmediated, direct communication between a candidate and his supporters (Weyland, 2001; Roberts, 2006); or populism as the deliberate "flaunting of the low," in the dyadic relationship between candidate and supporters found in the sociocultural approach of Ostiguy (2019)—I agree with Hawkins et al. (2019) and Mudde (2019) that the broadly construed *ideational* approach of populism is by far the most widely used and accepted conceptualization in modern populist studies.

Scholars of populism will note that Cas Mudde, perhaps the dominant voice in the study of populism within the last 20 years, previously conceptualized populism not as *ideational* but as a thin-centered *ideology* that emphasizes a division between the valorized people and the corrupt elite, drawing on the work of Freeden (1998). According to this conceptualization, populism's "thin-centered" nature meant that it was malleable enough to be attached to other "-isms" to form more comprehensive ideologies: national populism, socialist populism, or ecological populism. Nevertheless, a particularly acerbic critique by Aslanidis (2016) demonstrated that populism clearly failed to meet the minimum qualification for an ideology as defined by Gerring (1997), Seliger (1976), and Sartori (1970): coherence. Labeling a candidate, individual, or party as "populist" tells us little about their position on any meaningful policy dimension. For this reason, in his most recent work Mudde (2019) has shifted from defining populism as an "ideology" to the "ideational study" of populism. Mudde (2019) argues that regardless of whether scholars define populism specifically as a "discourse," "language," "mode of identification," "political frame," or "political style," the central components are the same. Nearly all definitions of populism focus on the study of how candidates or parties advance an understanding of the world as *morally divided* between a *corrupt elite* and *valorized people* who appeal to a crude Rousseauian notion of a *general will*.

Nevertheless, while ideational approaches share much in common, the decision to measure populism as a "discourse," does have important theoretical and empirical implications. First, Mudde's insistence that the elites and the people are divided along some "moral" dimension—as opposed to a division between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie as in Marxism, or along the Aryan/non-Aryan dimension in Nazism—is a distinction without a difference in most polities. Few who read Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* (1848) or Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925) would argue that they eschew moral judgments in their conceptions of how the world is divided. As Asliandis points out, once the ideological (or moral) dimension is removed from Mudde's (2004) definition, an entirely discursive definition results: populism is "…[a discourse] invoking the supremacy of popular sovereignty to claim that corrupt elites are defrauding 'the People' of their rightful political authority" (Aslanidis, 2016:96).

Understanding populism as a discourse naturally means focusing on the speech acts of populist candidates—whether these are party texts, campaign ads, or, most commonly, political speeches—in order to measure the relative "levels" of rhetorical populism. Scholars

of discourse have long recognized that any type of speech can be understood as more than simply representing ideas—rather, language is an act of construction (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Various discourse analysts have identified the constructive tasks that discourse producers can achieve: for instance, Waring (2018) argues that discourse is capable of accomplishing action, negotiating identities, and constructing ideologies. The question of who is related to whom, which identities are relevant and important, what individuals ought to do, and how goods ought to be provisioned are collective questions that are answered through the practice of politics. This is accomplished through the process of framing in communication (Goffman, 1974), where speakers use particular words, images, rhetoric, and stylistic choices to privilege some understandings of the world over others (Klar, Robison, and Druckman, 2013).

Understanding populism as a discursive project therefore means understanding what "tasks" the populist seeks to accomplish through his speech. In particular, the populist must *enact specific relationships* and *construct identities* through discourse. The populist (1) constructs a valorized people to which he and his supporters belong, (2) identifies his opponents as members and/or tools of anti-democratic elite interests, (3) convinces the audience that these two groups are not merely distinct but engaged in zero-sum competition with one another, and (4) advocates for the direct, unmediated rule of the people through his election. It is important to note that, with the exception of an avowedly moral dimension, this discursive definition maps neatly onto leading ideational approaches (Mudde, 2019; Hawkins et al., 2019; Hawkins, 2009). These four tasks, which comprise the heart of the flexible populist discursive frame, can be further subdivided into a set of 11 specific frames (shown in Table 1), which I measure in my examination of my novel data set of presidential speeches. Ten of these frames are explicitly drawn from the theoretic and empirical study of populism, while an 11th, *anti-bureaucracy*, is included to see if elements of anti-statism covary with the populist project.

Two of the frames are concerned with the first "building task" of populism, constructing a valorized people to which he and his supporters belong: the *nativism* and *producerism* frames. As mentioned previously, Mudde (2007) argues that "the people" in populism are uniquely "moral" compared to the elites. In contrast, I argue that *any* identity could feasibly serve as the distinction between "the people" and "the elites" because this division will inherently acquire moral valence. The construction of the people requires some shared identity such that individuals can understand themselves as members of the same community—in American political development, two particularly potent divisions are between native versus nonnative (broadly defined) Americans and workers versus nonworkers.

The study of European populist parties points to the importance of nativism as a key component of the populism, emphasizing a return to an idyllic past without immigrants complicating the national myth (Wodak, 2015). Importantly, while from a modern vantage point nativism appears to belong largely within the Republican party, in the American tradition, nativism was present in both major parties and within sporadic third-party challenges such as the Know-Nothings and People's Party of the mid-to-late 1800s (Hofstadter, 1955; Smith, 1993). Likewise, within the American tradition, the Populist Party of the 1890s was often associated with fears of immigrants thought to owe allegiance to foreign governments or religions (Hofstadter, 1955). We may therefore expect that populists will seek to construct a valorized people on the basis of their racial or ethnic status.

By contrast, the *producerism* frame defines the valorous people not based on an ascriptive hierarchy but on the belief that those individuals who engage in the material production of goods are superior to nonworkers and inheritors of wealth. This frame is particularly potent

TABLE 1

Populist Subframes in American Presidential Discourse

Frame	Description	Task
Producerism	Positive language praising Americans perceived as contributing to the material production of wealth in society.	1
Nativism	Negative language/blame attribution toward immigrants or nonnative individuals.	1
Anti-elite finance	Negative language/blame attribution toward large business/financial interests seen to have undue influence on the political process.	2
Anti-elite politicians	Negative language/blame attribution toward politicians and party elites seen as out of touch representing the peoples' interests.	2
Anti-Elite Liberalism	Negative language/blame attribution toward media organizations/intellectuals associated with classic liberalism.	2
Anti-elite generic	Negative language/blame attribution toward unspecified elite actors/special interests.	2
Zero-sum	Language framing politics as a competition between two groups, one moral and one immoral, whose fortunes are inversely related.	3
Apocalyptic politics	Language expressing the dire, cataclysmic consequences of political decisions, in particular the election at hand.	3
Direct rule	Positive language expressing the importance of "the people" ruling directly and faith in their judgment.	4
Anti-courts	Negative language expressing doubt about the unelected nature of the courts and their role in thwarting the people's judgment.	4
Anti-bureaucracy	Negative language toward the perceived wastefulness, corruption, or inefficiency of the "fourth branch" of government, the bureaucracy.	NA

because both provide justification for why one's own group is superior to others (Diani, 1996), while also neatly dividing the world into those who normatively deserve assistance and those who do not. This deserve/not-deserve dichotomy is often noted by scholars who study populist social movements, including the Tea Party Movement (Skocpol and Williamson, 2016). This is the frame most commonly associated with turn of the century populists such as William Jennings Bryan, who understood politics as "…a struggle between the idle holders of idle capital and the struggling masses who produce the wealth and pay the taxes of the country" (Dickinson, 1896). This frame also gives populism much of its moralistic tinge, arguing that the people deserve to rule because of the material value they add to the body politic.

The second and most numerous set of frames (*anti-elite finance, anti-elite politicians, anti-elite generic*, and *anti-liberal*) are those which concern themselves with the construction of the elite identity against which the populist stands. Scholars have noted

that populism is frequently associated with a conspiratorial style of thinking that posits unsubstantiated beliefs in a shadowy cabal of elites controlling the democratic process (Bergmann, 2018; de Jonge, 2019). The reason is that it helps solve a central paradox at the heart of populist thinking: if "the people" are more numerous than their opponents, why are they consistently frustrated in their political project? The answer lies in understanding history as a grand conspiracy—that the numerous and virtuous public has only been unsuccessful because they have been swindled. Elites, in coordination with some other group that cannot be considered part of the rightful body politic, have held the people back. In this way, the populist discursively constructs a relationship between groups of elites who together frustrate the people's will. The three most common targets of the populist ire are elite politicians; elite financial interests; and the traditionally "liberal" media and intellectual elite class. The *generic anti-elite* frame was included as candidates frequently invoke the shadowy specter of "special interests" without clearly referencing who those nefarious actors are. These frames often function in tandem, with candidates blaming elite politicians in the other party as allying with elite interests, such as when Woodrow Wilson alleged that the maintenance of the tariff was "…for the purpose of keeping as large a number as possible of the rich and influential manufacturers of the country in a good humor with the Republican Party, which desired their constant financial support" (Wilson and James, 1912). Wilson's discourse is clearly aimed at identifying the Republican Party as the party of narrow elite interests, and therefore unworthy of mass political support.

The third set of frames is concerned with the zero-sum nature of populist claim-making (*zero-sum*, *apocalyptic politics*). The word most commonly associated with the populist is "Manichean," which refers to an early Persian religion that understands the world as perfectly bifurcated between good and evil, or moral and immoral actors (Mudde, 2007; Hawkins and Rovira, 2017; Çinar, Stokes, and Uribe, 2020). Manicheanism can clearly be broken into constituent parts, and someone engaging in a Manichean discursive project must accomplish the exact same tasks as the populist: dividing the world into two, portraying one group as valorous and the other as irredeemably evil. The *zero-sum* frame portrays the elites and people as engaged in a zero-sum conflict with one another; this is typified by Truman's (1948) blunt characterization of a Republican tax bill as one that "…helps the rich and sticks a knife in the back of the poor." It is important to note that the zero-sum nature of Manicheanism is distinct from its dyadic worldview: one can imagine dividing the world into two mutually exclusive groups, *but* where these groups are engaged in *nonzero-sum* competition. This is the essence of consensualism, which is antithetical to populism. The second related frame is the *apocalyptic politics* frame, which expresses the dire and cataclysmic consequences that would result should their candidacy fail. Because populists are often perceived as outsiders, they must justify to voters why the campaign warrants such a risk: they do this by framing the election as political Armageddon. The combination of Manicheanism and apocalyptic politics also captures most of the religious imagery that is often noted as a part of populist speech, specifically a tendency toward messianic figures. Rather than a broadly religious frame—which might capture more banal references asking God to bless America—I specifically operationalize the aspects of religious imagery most relevant to populism.

The fourth set of frames (*direct rule* and *anti-courts*) is related to the importance of the direct, *unmediated* rule of the people; or what is sometimes referred to as the appeal to popular sovereignty. This set of frames is critical for distinguishing between traditional candidates who exhort people to vote for them in the classic representative model, from the populists who identify themselves as a conduit for the people's will. The first of these is the *direct-rule* frame, which is defined as positive language expressing the importance of

the people ruling directly and the faith in their judgment. This is the frame that Donald Trump employed in his 2016 nomination acceptance speech, where he repeatedly self-identified as the "voice" of the "forgotten men and women" of the country (Plumer, 2016). The final hypothesized populist frame is rhetoric oriented against the unelected branch of government, which allegedly thwarts the will of the people: the courts (*anti-courts*). Because populism is fundamentally a profoundly democratic but illiberal set of frames (Pappas, 2019), the unelected courts are easy targets for the populist speaker.

Finally, an *anti-bureaucracy* frame is included to see if general anti-statist articulations covary with the populist project, or if they represent a theoretically distinct discourse.

Equally important in my conceptualization is explaining which frames are *not* included for analysis, including those relating to nationalism or religious imagery. Nationalism, religious imagery, and populism are clearly often intertwined—indeed, Griffin (1991) defines fascism as a "…palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism." Populists are sometimes characterized as highly nationalistic, especially in Europe, where populism is often used as shorthand for far-right nationalist and Euro-skeptic parties. Nevertheless, the concepts of religious rebirth (palingenesis) and nationalism are distinct from populism and should be measured separately. de Cleen (2017) points out that nationalism and populism differ in the core of their discourse: while nationalism appeals to an imagined, sovereign community belonging to a specific time and place, the discourse of populism centers around a central division of "the people" and "the elites." In fact, it is often precisely the combination of populism *with* nationalism that makes it such a threat to democracy because the ascriptive status of citizen/noncitizen becomes imbued with the moral certitude of populist thought (Bonikowski et al., 2017). Having operationalized the concept, I will now turn to a brief examination of existing studies of populism in the United States, in order to better contextualize this piece.

Studying Populism in the United States

Though the term is arguably derived from the mid–19th century American *People's Party*, whose followers were referred to as "populists," the phenomenon of populism in the United States is relatively understudied compared to Western Europe and Latin America (Kaltwasser et al., 2019). Most research has been conducted by historically oriented scholars, such as Kazin (1995), who understands populism as a "flexible mode of persuasion" utilized by subjects as diverse as Father Coughlin, Huey Long, Ronald Reagan, the prohibitionist crusade, and George Wallace. Likewise, Gerring (1998) identifies the Democratic Party ideology between the years of 1896 and 1948 as "populist" in nature, due to its emphasis on the antagonistic relationship between the people and the special interests. However, two studies in particular focus on the use of populist discourse by politicians and are most relevant to this piece (Bimes and Mulroy, 2004; Gidron and Bonikowski, 2016).

Bimes and Mulroy (2004) study populism as exclusively practiced by sitting presidents. They define "presidential populism" as consisting of two core features: the "legitimation of presidential action through popular authority," and "the use of an antagonistic appeal that pits the people as represented by the president against a special interest" (Bimes and Mulroy, 2004:138–40). Their study focuses on populism as practiced by presidents from 1828 to 2004 in formalized pieces of discourse: specifically, annual messages delivered to Congress and inaugural addresses. They use both hand-coding and text-as-data dictionary approaches to show that the use of presidential populism varies by candidate. They find that Democrats during the 18th and early 19th centuries employed populism regularly,

before shifting to a more consensual language in the second half of the 20th century, while Republican presidents largely eschewed the use of populist language until their limited embrace of an anti-bureaucratic, anti-intellectual version of populism from the 1960s onward. Gidron and Bonikowski (2016) employ a much larger database of campaign speeches from all major party candidates from 1952 to 1996 (with the exception of Barry Goldwater) to trace how populist language has been employed over time. Using automated text analysis, they find that less experienced and nonincumbent candidates are more likely to employ populist discourse. They also find that levels of populism vary based on time to the election and the audience in question. These two studies do much to advance our understanding the use of populism by presidents and presidential candidates in the United States. This study adds to this literature in two primary ways. First, this article develops a "thicker" measure of populism by measuring 11 specific possible frames of discourse, which allows for a finer distinction as to what aspects of the populist frame particular candidates utilize. Second, this article examines a different set of candidates from the previous work: in contrast to Bimes and Mulroy who are interested in the study of populist language for presidents *while in office*, and Gidron and Bonikowski who study only major party candidates from 1952 to 1996, this piece examines nearly every presidential candidate who received more than 10 percent of the vote from 1896 to 2016, inclusive of third-party challengers.

Data and Methods

This article relies on a corpus of speeches ($n = 189$) delivered by American presidential candidates from 1896 to 2016. The year 1896 was chosen as the first campaign in which candidates responded to their nomination with a substantive speech longer than a simple formality (Vallely, 1988). As such, it looks at populism across a wider range of candidates and officeholders than some prior research, in order to see what commonalities exist in populist discourse over a 120-year timeframe. Nearly all candidates—including third-party candidates—were included if they received higher than 10 percent of the popular vote, for a total of 63 presidential candidates. Only three candidates were omitted completely due to their almost complete absence from the campaign trail—Theodore Roosevelt and Alton Parker in 1904, and Charles Evan Hughes in 1912. Due to the paucity of full-text speeches for many American presidential candidates—especially, those in the first half of the 20th century—random sampling is impossible. Instead, as with the work of Team Populism (Hawkins et al., 2019), a quota sample framework is applied. Team Populism utilizes four distinct types of speech for each executive under study: a campaign speech, a "ribbon-cutting" speech, an international speech, and a widely disseminated "famous" speech. A quota sample ensures commensurability across different contexts. While Team Populism uses this to study cross-nationally, I will utilize a similar mechanism cross-temporally.

For each campaign, three speeches were chosen to provide a holistic measure of their use of populism across different audiences: (1) their speech accepting their party's nomination; (2) a speech nationally televised, broadcast on national radio or reproduced in newspapers across the country; and (3) a standard "stump" speech delivered to supporters during a campaign, oriented toward the specific live audience. There is no existing corpus of speeches across the time period of interest (1896–2016), and so a novel data set was compiled. Speeches were drawn from a variety of different sources, including the Annenberg/Pew Archive of Presidential Campaign Discourse at the University of Pennsylvania (1952–1996), the Miller Center at the University of Virginia, the archives of the *New York*

Times, the Library of Congress, individual candidate archives, and the manual transcription of televised and radio campaign addresses by the author. I was able to obtain each of these types of speeches for all but 3 of the 63 candidates, all of whom ran on a third-party ticket that did not hold a national convention (George Wallace in 1968; Ross Perot in 1992; Robert La Follette in 1924). For these three candidates, an additional nationally disseminated speech was substituted. While there are reasons to be concerned about the sensitivity of this measurement due to the size of the corpus, Hawkins (2009) has shown that candidates tend to be fairly consistent in their use of populist discourse regardless of sample size.[1] Likewise, the authors believe that certain speeches are simply more important and more emblematic than others, and worthy of closer inspection.

Once the corpus of speeches was collected, a method of coding must be selected. Generally speaking, studies of populist discourse can be split between those who use machine-learning or dictionary-based techniques to analyze large numbers of speeches (Çinar, Stokes, and Uribe, 2020) versus those who use human hand coding more akin to traditional close readings of populist texts (Hawkins et al., 2019). This piece elects to use human coding because the content of the subframe is not located in single words, but rather in complex groupings of words that must be interpreted by humans capable of more sensitive analysis. Further, most measures of populism are either dichotomous or at most contain a few indicators to be measured: by contrast, this piece seeks to measure the frequency of *eleven* separate discursive frames. Çinar, Stokes, and Uribe (2020), in a piece examining the relative levels of populist rhetoric in American presidential elections, measure six presidential candidates, and tentatively assign to Franklin D. Roosevelt the label of left-wing populist. They recognize, however, that their measures need refinements in order to offer a "firmer categorization" of hard cases such as FDR. One of the main contributions of this piece is that it offers a much more specific description populist discourse as employed by presidential candidates.

With the corpus collected and frames elucidated, measurement of the prevalence of populist discursive frames was conducted. Each speech was read at least twice, first for general comprehension and a second to apply the codes. A score of 1 (presence of the frame) and 0 (absence of the frame) was given for each of the 11 frames. This analysis differs from the existing measures of populism in that rather than giving a rough measure of "how populist" an entire document is, I seek to identify how fully the speaker embraces all aspects of the populist frame. An individual who utilizes the majority of the theorized frames is therefore more "populist" than one who uses just one or two of the frames. As an additional measure of robustness and to ensure that this measure accurately captured how intensely populist a speech is, one third of the speeches ($n = 62$) were also assigned a measure of intensity by two independent coders, adapted slightly from the criteria proposed by Hawkins et al. (2019). A correlation between the raw total number of subframes and this intensity measure was conducted, and the score was high ($r = 0.76$). This indicates that both general measure of intensity and finer grained subframe analysis are measuring the same underlying concept of populism. Due to time and financial constraints, the majority of the coding was conducted by the author. However, to ensure reliability, double coding of approximately 45 percent of the corpus ($n = 82$) was conducted by a total of four independent coders. These coders were unaware of the overall thesis and were given a random sample of speeches along with a codebook (included in the supplementary Appendix). The coders marked each speech for the presence/absence of each of the 11 frames. An intercoder reliability check of Krippendorff's (2011) α was calculated, and an intercoder reliability score

[1]This claim is also tested empirically in supplementary Appendix C, where the analysis is rerun with a new permutation of a subset of the data. All results are substantively identical.

of 0.79 was obtained, suggesting very strong reliability and increasing confidence in the stability of our results.

Once the frame counts were input, MSA was conducted. MSA is a nonparametric version of item-response theory and is itself a probabilistic modification of classic Guttman scaling models (Guttman, 1944). While Guttman/Mokken scales are most commonly used in the analysis of questionnaire responses, the scales can theoretically be used to analyze any concept in which the constituent "items" are intended to measure the same construct, but where each item is not considered equally "difficult" to achieve (van Alphen et al., 1994). MSA is based on a set of assumptions that make the resulting data theoretically interpretable (Vaughan and Grace, 2018). In particular, the data used to construct Mokken scales are assumed to be monotonic (the function is entirely non-decreasing) and unidimensional—if these assumptions are met, then the resulting scale can be interpreted as a measure of the overall construct that I am theoretically intending to measure. In this case, this means that higher scores on the Mokken scale indicate higher levels of populism. Additionally, because Mokken scales are monotonic, the frequency of the subframes is theoretically relevant: some frames are not "randomly" rarer than others. Rather, if subframes form a Mokken scale, than individuals who use "rare" frames are more likely to also use "common frames," suggesting that populist discourse is built in a logical, stepwise fashion.

Hypotheses

The primary contribution of this piece is descriptive, in that it provides a consistent and theoretically informed measure of populist claim-making over 120 years of American presidential elections. Nevertheless, I propose three hypotheses regarding the use of populist discourse by presidential candidates, summarized as follows.

Hypothesis 1: Most populist subframes will load onto a single factor, indicating that they are capturing the same underlying concept of populism
While the populist frame is flexible and is employed by populists of differing ideologies, it is still coherent. Understanding to what degree the constituent aspects of populism covary should help us to understand if populism "hangs together" as a consistent concept versus functioning as simply an amalgamation of distinct frames. Insofar as subframes do not covary with the underlying populist scale, they may be measuring a theoretically distinct concept

Hypothesis 2: Frames that explicitly challenge liberal democratic institutions should be used less frequently compared to those that do not.

While Pappas (2019) understands populism as "democratic illiberalism," not all aspects of the populist discursive project are prima facie equally threatening to liberal democracy. For instance, while the *producerism* and *nativism* frames both concern themselves with the construction of a valorized people, only the *nativist* frame excludes a portion of potential voters based on an ascriptive characteristic—it is therefore more "risky" than the producerism frame, which appeals to the nearly universal American norm of "hard work." Likewise, frames that attack institutions designed to ensure checks and balances or maintain constitutional guarantees (such as the courts and the media) should be less popular than frames that attack nonconstitutionally guaranteed branches (such as the bureaucracy). I therefore expect that the frames should form a monotonic function, with higher risk frames (*zero-sum game, nativism, apocalyptic politics, anti-courts*, and *anti-liberal*)

having lower frequency than lower risk frames (*anti-elite politicians, anti-elite finance, anti-bureaucracy, generic anti-elite, producerism, direct rule*).

Hypothesis 3: Because populism is simultaneously a low-cost (available to all) but high-risk strategy, it ought to be practiced most often by political outsiders; specifically, third-party candidates, candidates with less political experience, and candidates whose previous position was in state rather than federal government.

The concept of insider versus outsider is a fraught but powerful concept within studies of American presidential elections (Hinich, Shaw, and Huang, 2010). Likewise, distinguishing between anti-establishment, outsider, and populist candidates is a critical task of political theory (Barr, 2009). I expect that candidates who belong to a third party, candidates with less political experience, and candidates whose previous position was in state rather than federal government exhibit higher levels of populist discourse.

Results

The first task is to determine if the variables identified measure the same concept, which is accomplished using MSA. The first step in MSA is identifying if and how many scales our data form, which is accomplished using Item Automated Selection Procedure, and functions similar to factor analysis (Sijtsma and Molenaar, 2002). The 11 subframes were entered, and a single scale composed of eight of the variables—*producerism, anti-elite politicians, anti-elite finance, generic anti-elite, anti-elite media, zero-sum, anti-courts*, and *direct rule*—was identified. Three items—*nativism, apocalyptic politics*, and *anti-bureaucracy*—did not scale. In order not to violate the assumption of unidimensionality, these items were removed from the scale. For the remaining S set of items, Loevinger's coefficient H measures the coefficient of scalability, with 0.3 considered the minimum cutoff point for determining whether items scale. H_s measures the scalability of all items within the scale, H_i measures the scalability of individual items, and H_{ij} measures the scalability of all item pairs within the scale. Items are traditionally included in a Mokken scale only if $H_i \geq 0.3$ and $H_{ij} > 0$. Data are considered inappropriate for scaling when $H_s < 0.3$; "weak" if $0.3 \leq H_s \leq 0.4$; moderate if $0.4 \leq H_s \leq 0.5$; and "strong" if $H_s > 0.5$. Our H_s (0.59) suggests a strong Mokken scale.

Next, the assumption of monotonicity was checked, along with measures of reliability. The measure of monotonicity for item j is a criterion ($Crit_j$), with any $Crit_j \geq 40$ casting doubt on the monotonicity assumption (Molenaar, Sijstma, and Boer, 2000). None of our items j approached 40, suggesting the monotonicity assumption holds. I then evaluated invariant item ordering (H^t) to determine if the items could be meaningfully ordered—finding an H^t above 0.5 (0.59), strong item ordering is indicated. Finally, a reliability check using Mokken's ρ (0.87) was conducted, with values above 0.7 indicating reliability. Overall, eight of the variables appear to form a very strong Mokken scale, providing support for *Hypothesis* 1. A new variable was then created to aid in the remaining analysis—*populism*, a summation of the eight components of the Mokken scale. This variable was then normalized from 0 to 1, to allow for interpretation as a percentage of total possible populist subframes utilized.

Next, in order to analyze whether certain frames were more or less common, the relative frequency of the frames included in the Mokken scale was calculated and displayed as a percentage of overall speeches in Table 2, with frames ordered in descending order of

TABLE 2

Mokken Scale of Populist Subframes in Campaign Discourse

Frame	H_i (*SE*)	Frequency (%)
Zero-sum game	0.73 (0.05)	11.1
Anti-elite politician	0.62 (0.06)	57.7
Anti-courts	0.60 (0.16)	6.9
Direct rule	0.58 (0.07)	47.1
Anti-elite finance	0.58 (0.07)	47.6
Anti-elite generic	0.57 (0.07)	36.5
Producerism	0.54 (0.08)	29.1
Anti-liberal	0.48 (0.10)	9.0

NOTE: Loevinger's H (H_S) = 0.59; invariant item ordering (H^t) = 0.59; reliability (Mokken's ρ) = 0.87; N = 189.

their H_i values. The frequency of the frames varied widely, with the most common frame (*anti-elite politicians*) used nearly 58 percent of the time; and the most uncommon frame *(anti-courts*) being used in less than 7 percent of speeches. The frequency of frames largely conforms to our prediction in *Hypothesis* 2, which suggested that frames that were more threatening toward liberal democracy would be employed at relatively lower rates than less "risky" frames. The campaigns were then ordered by level of populist discourse, with the results reported in Table 3. The mean score on the (normalized) *populism* variable was 0.31 ($\sigma = 0.22$), with a minimum of 0.0 (Johnson in 1964) and a maximum of 0.83 (William J. Bryan in 1900, Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, and Robert La Follette in 1924).

Finally, in order to assess *Hypothesis* 3, a set of regressions were run with the Mokken scale *populism* variable as the dependent variable, with results reported in Table 4. The models are identical except for the inclusion of a trend variable, *Election*, in the second model. Both models included a number of theoretically informed variables thought to influence likelihood of using populist discourse. The dummy variable *Incumbent* was included under the assumption that candidates who currently hold the presidency will find it more difficult to plausibly assume the mantle of an outsider compared to a challenger. *Democrat* and *Third-Party* variables, with *Republican* as the reference category, were included to assess the degree to which identification with a major party decreases levels of populist discourse. Two variables that measure most recent political office—*None* and *State*, with *Federal* as the reference category—were included to determine whether political neophytes or candidates located outside Washington were more likely to employ populist rhetoric. A log transformation of total years of experience in statewide or federal office (*Experience Log*) was also included as the difference between zero years of experience and serving a single term as governor is likely much larger than between 30 and 31 years, justifying a log.

The model was estimated and a series of diagnostic tests of linearity, skewness, kurtosis, heteroskedasticity, and collinearity were conducted; no assumptions were violated. The overall model was significant at the $p < 0.01$ level ($F = 9.1$, df = 56). Four individual variables attained significance in the main model, Model 1: *Democrat* and *Third-Party* at the $p < 0.01$ level, *Incumbent* at the $p < 0.05$ level, and *Experience Log* at the $p < 0.1$ level. Compared to a reference category of Republicans, being a member of the Democratic Party was associated with a 15 percent increase in our *populism* variable, while *not* being a member of either major party was associated with a 51 percent increase in the *populism* variable. Being an *Incumbent* was associated with a 14 percent decrease in the Mokken *populism* score versus being a challenger. Finally, a 1 percent increase in years of

TABLE 3

Presidential Campaigns by Level of Populist Discourse, 1896–2016

Candidate (Year)	Populism
William J. Bryan (1900)	0.83
Theodore Roosevelt (1912)	0.83
Robert La Follette (1924)	0.83
William J. Bryan (1896)	0.75
Donald Trump (2016)	0.75
George Wallace (1968)	0.71
William J. Bryan (1908)	0.63
Harry Truman (1948)	0.63
Ross Perot (1992)	0.63
Woodrow Wilson (1912)	0.58
Alf Landon (1936)	0.54
Jimmy Carter (1976)	0.54
John Davis (1924)	0.50
Bob Dole (1996)	0.46
Al Smith (1928)	0.42
Franklin D. Roosevelt (1932)	0.42
Franklin D. Roosevelt (1936)	0.42
George McGovern (1972)	0.42
Bill Clinton (1992)	0.42
Walter Mondale (1984)	0.38
James Cox (1920)	0.33
Al Gore (2000)	0.33
John Kerry (2004)	0.33
Barack Obama (2012)	0.33
Woodrow Wilson (1916)	0.29
Barry Goldwater (1964)	0.29
George H.W. Bush (1988)	0.29
Barack Obama (2008)	0.29
Hillary Clinton (2016)	0.29
Wendell Wilkie (1940)	0.25
Ronald Reagan (1980)	0.25
John McCain (2008)	0.25
Calvin Coolidge (1924)	0.21
Herbert Hoover (1932)	0.21
Franklin D. Roosevelt (1940)	0.21
Dwight D. Eisenhower (1952)	0.21
Michael Dukakis (1988)	0.21
Mitt Romney (2012)	0.21
William McKinley (1896)	0.17
William Taft (1908)	0.17
Adlai Stevenson (1956)	0.17
Richard Nixon (1960)	0.17
Richard Nixon (1968)	0.17
Richard Nixon (1972)	0.17
Jimmy Carter (1980)	0.17
Ronald Reagan (1984)	0.17
Bill Clinton (1996)	0.17
William Taft (1912)	0.13
Herbert Hoover (1928)	0.13
Thomas Dewey (1948)	0.13
Hubert Humphrey (1968)	0.13

Continued

TABLE 3

Continued

Candidate (Year)	Populism
George W. Bush (2000)	0.13
William McKinley (1900)	0.08
Franklin D. Roosevelt (1944)	0.08
Thomas Dewey (1944)	0.08
Adlai Stevenson (1952)	0.08
John F. Kennedy (1960)	0.08
Gerald Ford (1976)	0.08
George H.W. Bush (1992)	0.08
Warren G. Harding (1920)	0.04
Dwight D. Eisenhower (1956)	0.04
George W. Bush (2004)	0.04
Lyndon B. Johnson (1964)	0.00

TABLE 4

Regression on Normalized Mokken Scale of Populism

Populism (Mokken Scale) Regression		
	Mokken scale populism	
	(1)	(2)
Democrat	0.150***	0.152***
	(0.045)	(0.044)
ThirdParty	0.513***	0.500***
	(0.091)	(0.092)
Incumbent	−0.135**	−0.134**
	(0.053)	(0.052)
ExperienceLog	−0.068*	−0.058
	(0.040)	(0.040)
None	−0.111	−0.064
	(0.148)	(0.152)
State	−0.080	−0.076
	(0.057)	(0.057)
Election		−0.003
		(0.002)
Constant	0.441***	0.460***
	(0.120)	(0.120)
N	63	63
R^2	0.495	0.510
Adjusted-R^2	0.441	0.447

NOTE: *$p < 0.1$; **p < 0.05; ***$p < 0.01$.

experience is associated with a 0.06 percent decrease in the overall *populism* score; though this correlation narrowly misses significance in Model 2 once a control for time (*Election*) is included. Taken together, our regression results mostly provide support for *Hypothesis* 3: while third-party candidates, nonincumbents, and less experienced candidates were significantly more likely to use the populist frame than major party candidates, the previous position held appeared not to be significantly correlated with populist discourse.

Discussion

These findings largely support our hypotheses, though with some important caveats that can help inform future research. Using MSA, I found that 8 of the 11 subframes form a Mokken scale measuring the underlying concept of populism. This suggests that robust, omnibus measures of populism are a plausible way forward for researchers interested in "thickening" more thin conceptualizations of populism and provides strong support for *Hypothesis* 1. Two of the frames often commonly associated with populism—*nativism* and *anti-bureaucracy*—did not scale with the remaining variables. This finding is critical for understanding how the populist project has changed over time and demonstrates the importance of historical sensitivity in the study of electoral populism. While today we may associate populism with Donald Trump's calls to "drain the swamp" and attack the bureaucracy, early populism was in fact deeply interested in *expanding* state capacity in order to institute needed reforms (Hofstadter, 1955; Morone, 1998). This means that our early populist candidates—Bryan, La Follette, and Roosevelt—sought to bridge the gap between election and representation by advocating for a more active state apparatus. Over time, as the bureaucracy consolidated and began to be viewed less favorably, anti-bureaucratic frames achieved near ubiquity in campaign rhetoric. Even candidates who were not committed to other constituent aspects of the populist frame, such as anti-elite framings and demand for direct rule, could employ anti-bureaucratic frames in mild attempts at critiquing politics-as-usual. By examining all presidential candidates—and not a sample, random, or otherwise—we can see that the *anti-bureaucracy* frame does not typify the populist, but rather has become a ubiquitous staple of the modern presidential campaign.

It is also not surprising that nativism does not covary with other frames of populism, and further supports existing work that suggests that while nativism may often be associated with populism, they are theoretically distinct concepts (Bonikowski, 2017). It is important to bear in mind that nativism is distinct from nationalism or simply racist sentiment, and so was employed regularly in the early half of the 20th century by candidates one would not immediately think of as populist, such as Herbert Hoover and William McKinley. Nevertheless, it is still possible that political candidates might perceive openly racist language as too "risky" in the pursuit of moderate voters. This may be the case for more traditionally conservative candidates like Richard Nixon—however, populists are often described as having a tendency to behave like "drunken dinner guests," or "provacteurs," saying out loud what others may be thinking (Nai and Martínez i Coma, 2019). If racist and/or nativist sentiment exists as part of the populist's appeal, it seems unlikely that they would be too bashful to articulate it.

This article also accomplished a descriptive function, by examining populism across the entire period of mass electoral politics in the United States and identifying the campaigns with the highest substantive content. The results appear to have clear face validity, with the campaigns with the highest scores of populism (Bryan, 1896, 1900, 1908; Roosevelt, 1912; La Follette, 1924; Wallace, 1968; Trump, 2016) commonly identified as exemplars of populism in American politics (Kazin, 2007; Carter, 2000). Likewise, the candidates who scored lowest on our overall scores (Johnson, 1964 and Harding, 1920) are usually characterized as insider candidates who largely pursued change through consensus, and so would be unlikely to employ the populist frame. Studying all campaigns also allows us to usefully compare candidates beyond simple dichotomous conceptions—rather than simply claiming that Carter (1976) and Trump (2016) are populists while Wilkie (1940) and McKinley (1896) are not, we can elucidate precisely which frames they employed and

also order them along a spectrum. A scan of the 10 most populist campaigns helps to show the utility of this approach with regard to Donald Trump. Trump's 2016 campaign does stand out as quite populist, employing 75 percent of possible populist subframes—however, three campaigns do score higher, all of which took place during the first 25 years of the 20th century. What distinguishes Trump from these early 20th century populists is his embrace of nativism and anti-statism *in addition to more classic populist frames* (Young, Ziemer, and Jackson, 2019). Though nativism and anti-statism were not included in the final measure, Trump used these two frames in every one of the speeches in his quota.

These results also show that the strategic employment of populist frames is not entirely stable, but contingent on the political environment. Most candidates who ran in multiple elections had variable scores. For instance, Carter's first run in 1976 scored in the upper quartile of populism, while his second run in 1980 scored in the bottom quartile of populism. This pattern is consistent across nearly every candidate who won the presidency: their reelection campaign was almost always lower in populist content than their first campaign. However, candidates who ran multiple times as a challenger—including Bryan (1896, 1900, 1908), Stevenson (1952, 1956), and Nixon (1960, 1968)—tended to employ relatively similar levels of populist content across their multiple runs, with Bryan scoring high and Stevenson and Nixon much lower. This suggests that there *are* certain candidates with an affinity or aversion to populist framings. However, populism is clearly not a stable ideology that can easily be carried into office—it is much more difficult to criticize the bureaucracy or elite politicians when one is ostensibly in charge of or a member of these groups. Once in office, candidates tend to pivot toward a more traditional form of political argumentation.

One illustrative disagreement with previous work is the characterization of Dwight D. Eisenhower—while Bonikowski and Gidron (Gidron and Bonikowski (2016) characterize Eisenhower's 1952 campaign as the second most populist between 1952 and 1996, Eisenhower scores very low on both scaled and unscaled measures of populism. Likewise, Bonikowski and Gidron found that Bob Dole scored so high on populist measures that he was *removed* as an outlier from all multivariate analysis; our study finds that while Dole was certainly above average in his employment of populist frames, he is by no means unusual. These differences are due to two factors that point out the importance of clear conceptualization and the development of precise indicators. First, Bonikowski and Gidron measure populism by conducting a text analyses of large corpora of speeches using a bespoke dictionary, which includes grams such as "bureaucrat," "unresponsive," "ordinary taxpayer," and "too big." As discussed above, because the *anti-bureaucracy* frame has become increasingly ubiquitous in American political discourse, it may not serve as a sufficiently discriminatory measure of populism. Second, studies that rely on a simple dummy variable measure of populism for a high number of speeches risk compounding their errors due to a tendency for candidates to deliver nearly identical speeches many times over the course of a campaign. In Eisenhower's case, in 1952, the vast majority of his populist rhetoric falls under the *anti-bureaucracy* and *anti-elite generic* frames. Eisenhower's classification as a populist by other scholars is therefore a function of his steadfast commitment to a criticism of Washington's largesse in nearly all of his speeches, rather than a deeper commitment to the populist project. This is not to say that other definitions of populism are wrong. Rather, by identifying which types of populist discursive frames particular candidates utilize, we can understand if their classification as populist by scholars is due to their employment of anti-statist calls against the bureaucracy, relentless nativism, or consistent railing against Wall Street.

This article also provided evidence that not all subframes of populism are employed equally, providing evidence for *Hypothesis* 2. Three frames—*anti-elite politicians, direct rule*, and *anti-elite finance*—were employed by approximately half of the speeches in the analysis. By contrast, five frames—*nativism, zero-sum game, apocalyptic politics, anti-liberal*, and *anti-courts*—were used in less than 15 percent of speeches. This supports an understanding of analyzing presidential discourse as strategic in nature—because of plurality voting in American presidential elections, there is a tendency for candidates to appeal toward the median voter (Downs, 1957). Candidates are therefore encouraged to utilize frames that are less likely to alienate potential voters. In this case, that either means the employment of negative framings that target popular "punching bags" such as the bureaucracy, elite politicians, and big business; or positive frames that advocate for more direct rule or which praise average, "hardworking Americans."

Finally, this article found results that mostly confirm previous findings regarding the relationship between outsider identity and populist claim-making. In particular, being a third-party candidate and having less experience correlated with significantly higher scores on the *populism* measure, while incumbents were significantly less likely to employ populist framings. However, this model found no significant relationship between previous position held—in particular, having not served in elected office or having served most recently in a state-level office—and higher scores. Insofar as we are interested in whether outsiders are more likely to employ populist language, these results mostly confirm my intuitions and the finding of previous scholars (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2016). Running as a third-party candidate is perhaps the ultimate marker of outsider identity, as it clearly rejects the most dominant institutions in American electoral politics, the Republican and Democratic parties.

Likewise, all things equal, candidates with less experience in elected office—coming from business or the military—both can and do credibly claim that they represent a break from politics as usual. However, the "outsider" mantle is not entirely objective but is in some sense constructed. By antagonizing existing party structures, rhetorically criticizing the Washington establishment, or adopting idiosyncratic political styles, candidates such as Bernie Sanders or Robert La Follette can attempt to cast themselves as outsiders in spite of their position as U.S. senators. However, a simple measurement of whether a candidate served most recently at the state or federal level may not be specific enough—for instance, four former governors of New York have later become president, while six have become vice president. By contrast, serving as governor of states will less traditional ties to the presidency such as Arkansas (B. Clinton) and Georgia (Carter) may make outsider claims more credible. Future research could focus on specific ways that candidates seek to construct their identity as outsiders.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the historical study of American populism in a number of ways. By examining every campaign that secured more than 10 percent of the vote in American presidential elections since 1896, I am able to develop a historically sensitive measure of populism across time. After elucidating a set of 11 subframes of populist discourse, I have shown that it is possible to develop a reliable, multifaceted measure of populism. Scholars of populism often get bogged down in definitional debates about the precise cut points for considering a candidate populist (Canovan, 2004)—this article argues instead for thinking of candidates as existing on a spectrum from "more" to "less" populist.

Drawing on the work of previous scholars, I have provided evidence that populism is not a stable ideological aspect of political candidates, but rather is a discursive technique employed strategically by political campaigns (Hawkins, 2009; Aslanidis, 2016). As evidence for this strategic consideration, I have shown that not all populist subframes are utilized in equal frequency, with more "illiberal" frames used less frequently. This helps to explain why so many candidates are often identified as "populist," especially within the American context—certain frames, such as vilifying elite politicians and attacking the bureaucracy, are nearly ubiquitous in modern political discourse (Kazin, 1995).

This article also serves a descriptive function, by examining populism across the entire period of mass electoral politics in the United Sttaes and identifying the campaigns with the highest substantive content. Studying all campaigns allows us to usefully compare candidates beyond simple dichotomous conceptions, by elucidating precisely which frames they employed and by ordering them along a spectrum. Additionally, I have shown that third-party candidates, nonincumbents, and less experienced candidates are more likely to use populist frames. Taken together, this article demonstrates the importance of conceptually precise and historically grounded studies of populist discourse in American politics.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

Supporting Information