

HOW TO UNDERSTAND TRUMP AS A POPULIST? DISCURSIVELY.

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It has been a great year for Populism. The election of reality TV star and real-estate mogul Donald Trump for presidency and the Brexit vote, amongst other, significantly changed the geo-political landscape.

In recent years, we have observed the rise of right-wing populist parties gaining popularity all across Europe and in several Asian countries. Scholars have described this era as having a “populist zeitgeist”.

In my research, I look at the election of Donald Trump as a representative case study for populism. As a president who is defiant to all political conventions comes into power, many have expressed concerns for American democracy. Therefore, the central question that informs my research is **“does the success of Donald Trump’s populism mean that US democracy is broken?”**

Most political theories of populism approach it as an ideology. My work suggests that a more fruitful way of understanding and analyzing populism is as a mode of discourse, and not as a specific set of ideas.

The current understanding of populism

The definition of populism is highly contested among scholars. Most commonly populism refers to the kind of politics that appeals to “the common people”, and blame the elites and the political establishment for all the woes of society. The dominant approach is to understand populism as a “thin-centered ideology.” That is, as a set of interrelated ideas that lack a definite core principle in relation to which they can be understood. Therefore most scholars connect populism to a “centered ideology” such as “socialism” or “conservatism.” This approach to understanding populism finds it hard to explain two important attributes of the populism of Donald Trump: 1. The lack of coherent ideological content and principles in many populist movements; 2. They find it hard to explain anti-establishment claims, choosing to focus instead on xenophobic and misogynic ideology. 3. This understanding in a way contributed to the moralizing of politics since it tends to gather all the ideological features of the movement without distinguishing the complex relationship between its ideas, its leader and supporters. This would lead to thinking that the people from the movement share the same ideological attributes. For example, to think that all the Trump supporters are racist/nativist when in reality they are very diversified.

Why a discursive approach

My discursive approach understands populism mainly as a discourse: speech and text that help create and communicate meaning. The three major aspects

that identify populist discourses are: 1. Utilizing and provoking a general sense of dissatisfaction and hurt in parts of society; 2. identifying an us/them distinction which seeks out a “enemy” to the “people”; 3. Defining an idea, a leader or a group to fight for the imagined “people” against the corrupt elites. The strength of the discursive approach to populism is that it can 1) identify populist politics by looking for the populist elements from the speeches and texts; 2) provide a broader examination of democracy in general by isolating the always-present pattern of populist discourse from the economic and social explanations which are often used when analyzing ideologies.

What have I learned?

My analysis finds that Donald Trump formed a strong and unique populist discourse in both the primaries and during the general election. He managed to construct a “people” that at the same time mobilized people who are dissatisfied with the status quo and excluded various out-groups from it. Therefore, creating a strong political divide which ultimately worked in his favor.

1. Trump successfully synthesized general grievances from different social aspects to target specific enemies (elites, immigrants, foreign countries) while generating more grievances of being in a hostile global environment.

- In economic aspect, he formed a powerful image of US’s in-competitiveness on the global scale and a dire domestic situation of job outsourcing targeting the incompetent Washington elites who cannot “make a good deal”.
- In social aspect, he accused the immigrants for the exaggerated social problems and blamed foreign countries by implying they are deliberately sending “criminals” meanwhile “killing us economically”.
- In political aspect, he testified with personal experience about the money politics and keeps telling the political-media complex is “rigged” against him. Therefore targeted the rich and the political establishment.

2. Moralize and divide the American people? That’s what he wants.

- He often incites political violence (but also, political passion) in his speeches and twitters. This is beneficial for him since this forces people to take a stance to be for or against him and eliminates any middle ground for undecided voters. You only need to support one of his vague claims to be on the side of the silent majority of the “People” against the corrupt “elites”.

3. His success and failure in constructing the “people”

- Anyone who is unhappy with the status quo could potentially be his supporter since he established the symbolic “us the people” through a negatively definition: They are those who have something to be against about. Survey into his supporter’s demographic supported this.
- However, since the general election started, his inflammatory speech and news regarding ethnical minorities and women posed a great difficulty to his symbolic “People”. To the problems facing these groups, he cannot distinguish their “enemy”(xenophobes and patriarchy) and integrate into his “enemy of the people”.

What does this mean to democracy?

- “The People “ is symbolically constructed and therefore could be seen as unstable. Against this instability that could de-legitimize popular sovereignty within democracy, we need address the problems of democracy such as representation gap beyond mere institutional solutions.
- A technocratic polices might not be the sole solution. There will always be unfulfilled social demands and problem of political representation, which breed the general grievances for populism. There will always room to spin them into a populist discourse.
- Populist elements are always present in politics, it is a matter of stopping the moralization of politics and thus creating a vibrant political ground in democracy.