

## **The Political Geography of American Populism**

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### **Introduction**

In both global and historical analogies, Trump has invited comparison to populist figures. His anti-elite and anti-establishment stances initially reminded observers of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and George Wallace (Donald Trump Is... August 27, 2015 Politico). The day after the 2016 election, New York Times writers Amanda Taub and Max Fisher attributed Trump's victory to the rise of "white populism." In the unusual case of Trump's unexpected victories in the primaries and general election, populism has taken on a particular significance. Some populist stories of the election draw on what have historically been themes of the populist *left*: economic inequality and anti-elitism. Yet, at the same time, the populist label functions as a way of concealing the white ethno-nationalism and historically anchored racism that also undeniably contributed to Trump's appeal.

The past and present of American populism is also tied to geography and place. During the 2008 campaign, Sarah Palin drew criticism for referring to a North Carolina as "real America." However, the potent connection between geography and populism – what Anna Grzymala-Busse describes as "an anti-elite movement that expresses the general will of an organic and wholesome "people," (Grzymala-Busse 2017) – has continued. In an article on possible Democratic challenges to Donald Trump, a Republican spokesperson was quoted saying, "[Trump's 2020 opponent should be] Somebody who speaks to common-sense American values — that is what the Democrats

need. I'm not sure who that person is, but I am pretty sure she or he does not reside in New York, Massachusetts or California.” (Cohen 2017).

The theme of populism has been an especially potent one in explaining Trump's appeal to a geographically key group of so-called “white working class voters.” (Gelman and Azari 2017) Political analysts disagree about what constitutes working class – education, income, culture, hopes for the future? However, a powerful election narrative has emerged to highlight the importance of these disaffected voters. According to this interpretation of the 2016, election, their anger, despair, resentment – or something else – was a crucial factor for turning Ohio, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan red in 2016. Whether Trump's message is truly populist is another matter. In *The New Minority*, Justin Gest theorized about the appeal of Donald Trump to white working class voters. He suggests that the anti-establishment nature of Trump's candidacy and the voicing of views by people who feel silenced are part of the story. More than other candidates, Gest argues, Trump addresses the “acute sense of loss” in white, non-college-educated, post-industrial communities (193-194).

Historians and scholars of social movements have treated the geographical element as more or less a given. Populism on the left in the 1890s came out of movements that were specifically agrarian and rooted in the interior west. This geography is evident in electoral maps from that era. In the 1960s, populism on the right, in the style of George Wallace, dealt with distinctly Southern issues. In the twenty-first century, parties are less rooted in and fractured by region. Yet populist appeals have emerged

under these more nationalized conditions. How are these appeals – and candidates – different from the populist politics of the past?

### **Conceptualizing populism**

What is populism? This label is often invoked in the study of political parties in Latin American and European politics, often applied to left parties in the former context (see, for example, [Roberts 2012](#)) and to far-right, anti-immigrant parties in the latter context. Cas Mudde offers a conceptual definition of populism: “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ and the corrupt elite and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” (2004, 543) This definition guides the operationalization in the following analysis, but some adaptations are necessary in order to fit the context of twenty-first century presidential politics across party lines.

Populism has been a well-traveled if contested subject among scholars of American political history and presidential rhetoric. Some have characterized it as an ideology, while others classify it as a political style with the potential to transcend ideological boundaries. Applying populism as an ideological label to the Democratic Party between 1896 and 1948, John Gerring (1998) points to themes such as reconciling with a strong state, pitting the people against capital, and embracing plebiscitary democracy. Gerring’s analysis of twentieth century Republicans, however, reveals that “populism on the right” is also a distinct ideology, with an emphasis on voluntarism and civil society. Historian Michael Kazin describes an essential element of twentieth century populist rhetoric as the “mad as hell” factor (1995, 230). In a study of populism in

presidential rhetoric, Terri Bimes and Quinn Mulroy note that while populist language was once more common among Democratic presidents, it has become a more common rhetorical strategy among contemporary Republican leaders (2004). They identify two central dimensions of populist rhetoric: attacking the special interests and claiming an electoral mandate.

Studies of presidential populism and the growth of the plebiscitary presidency generally note the special capacity of the presidency to claim to speak for the people (Tulis 1987; Beasley 2001; Azari 2013). In the Trump era, populism from the U.S. executive has taken on a more worrisome cast. Populist claims can delegitimize the mere concept of opposition and often rely on the idea of undermining formal institutions (Grzymala-Busse 2017). Populism itself can indicate that the foundations of politics are shifting; as Joseph Lowndes observes, populism has its “greatest purchase...in moments of crisis, when popular sovereignty, and national identity itself, are open to new interpretations.”(2005, 146) These possibilities combine dangerously with the power of the American executive. The geography question ties into how a populist executive or presidential candidate constructs the “true people” and mobilizes against opponents.

### **Left populism of the rural west**

The leftward populism of the late nineteenth century crossed regional borders, and many of its main activists sought to build a broad coalition. At the same time, the movement’s claims and grievances were to some degree rooted in the region’s rural economic and political identities.

The electoral map from 1892, when the Populist Party ran its own candidate, James Weaver, and from 1896, when the Democratic Party nominated the populist William Jennings Bryan (who was subsequently nominated by the Populist Party), illustrates the geographic nature of this movement. Elisabeth Clemens offers an institutional explanation for this argument, observing that the weaker parties in the western states allowed for the emergence of new political movements. (1997, 75)

### **Right populism of the segregated south**

Defining the conservative populism of the south is more complicated. The focal point for the merging of a populist political messaging style and the substance of southern anti-integration was Alabama governor and presidential candidate George Wallace. Of Wallace's backlash populism, Joseph Lowndes writes:

His politics were both Southern and national, because he insisted that the south was *the most* American region: that only this region could lead the struggle to safeguard the nation's historic virtues; while liberals claimed that true American identity resided in Gunnar Myrdal's racially inclusive creed to which the South was an anomaly. Wallace, through an inversion, made the South the guardian of the national soul. (Lowndes 2005, 150)

The conservative populism of the late 1960s differed from the economic populism decades earlier; it focused on the middle class and "ordinary" Americans. This emphasis was part of a political strategy to break away from the party's disadvantage relative to Democrats with working and middle class voters, as well as an effort to capitalize on post-Civil Rights racial resentment (Mason 2010, 220). Joel Olson makes more explicit this merging of "ordinary Americans" claims with racialized politics:

"...In the wake of the civil rights movement, whiteness went from a publicly recognized form of social status to a form of power that reproduces white advantage despite legal equality via norms that implicitly define white interests, assets, and aspirations as archetypal. Whiteness as norm is a system of tacit and concealed racial privileges that is reproduced less through overt forms of discrimination than through market forces, cultural habits, and other everyday

practices that presume that white interests and expectations are the norm and that white advantage is the natural outcome of market forces and individual choices.” (Olson 2008, 709)

Wallace biographer Dan Carter contrasts the segregationist governor with more “authentic” populist voices genuinely concerned with reform (344), and suggests that both the slippery definition of the term and Wallace’s own lack of conformity to received ideological categories drove the use of this label. Nevertheless, conservative populism can trace its anti-elite, anti-government and, to use Olson’s phrase, “white ordinariness” roots to a geographically segmented system of politics.

### **Modern American political geography**

Political geography has historically been a driving force in American political institutions, parties, and elections. The Electoral College and the Senate were designed to ensure representation of states *qua* states, an idea that included protection of the regional institution of slavery. The logic of the hypothesis about persistent regional variation within parties rests on two key premises: first, parties are multi-regional coalitions; second, that regions of the country have distinct and discernible interests. The first claim is consistent with the inherent nature of American political parties, which must build broad coalitions in order to be competitive in a first-past-the-post system. The second premise finds support in the scholarly literature. Mellow (2008) finds that region exerts an independent effect on legislative support for a wide range of policy issues, including trade, abortion, and welfare. McKee and Teigen (2009) similarly find that region shapes voter preferences, even when taking into account other factors such as the type of locality (urban, suburban, etc.)

Throughout the analysis I rely on illustrative regional groupings for states. The categories include: South, Midwest, Northeast, Pacific Coast, Interior West, border region, and DC area. The South includes the Confederate states, plus Oklahoma and Kentucky, and minus the parts of Virginia that are part of the Washington, D.C. area. The Northeast includes New England and the mid-Atlantic region, including the parts of Maryland that lie outside the D.C. area. The Pacific Coast consists of Alaska California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington. The Midwest includes the following states: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa. The interior west includes the Dakotas, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, and New Mexico. This classification scheme is similar to the one offered by Mellow, with some adjustments. I treat the DC area as a separate and distinct region in order to account for presidential speeches made with these audiences in mind. I also moved the line dividing the interior west from the Midwest, grouping Iowa and Minnesota with more similar states including Wisconsin and Illinois.

### **The political geography of Republican populist rhetoric**

To assess the political geography of Republican rhetoric, I created a dataset of speeches given on domestic presidential trips, using the speech archive The American Presidency Project at the University of California-Santa Barbara ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)). I looked for the following categories when assessing for populist rhetoric: references to the character of the American people, references to ordinary or private life, and references to grievances directed at economic, cultural or political elites.

I use the months of March, June, and September of 2004. The comparison with Trump's first 100 days is not a perfect apples-to-apples comparison; Bush was touring the country running for reelection, while Trump had just taken office. However, the two periods cover roughly the same number of days. Comparing Trump's early period in office also allows us to think systematically about the conventional wisdom surrounding the "permanent campaign" and Trump's use of campaign-style events like rallies. Did Trump really act like a candidate running for office when traveling in 2017?

### *George W. Bush and Populism*

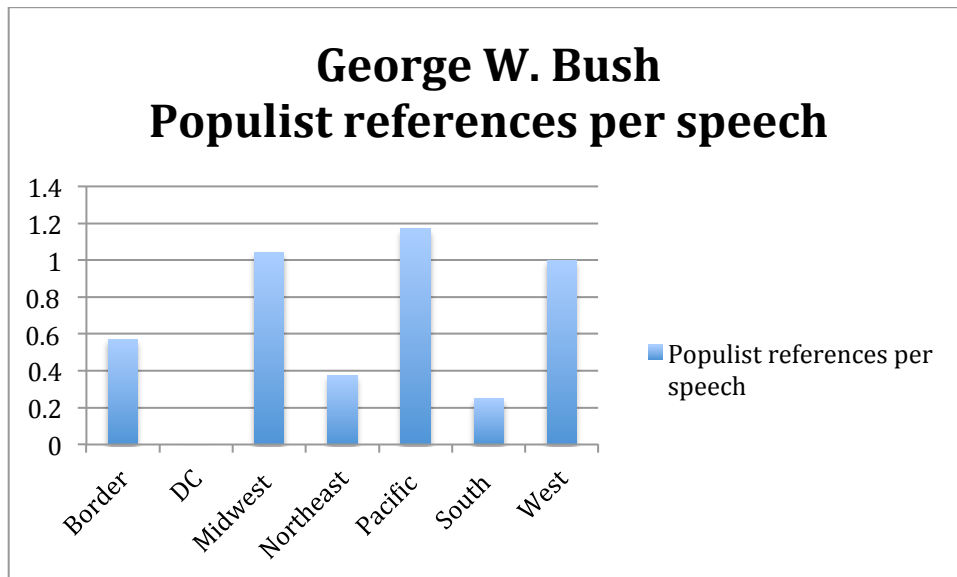
Bush represents a particularly interesting challenge for scholars of conservative populist rhetoric. There were several elements of his political approach that touched on populist themes: anti-intellectualism, folksy rhetorical style, and a skeptical approach to political opposition. Narratives around his campaigns, especially his 2004 reelection campaign, cast him as an ordinary and personable individual with whom one would want to have a beer. This impression, of course, was somewhat at odds with Bush's personal story of conversion to an evangelical strain of Christianity and his battle with alcoholism. So the populist potential of Bush is ambiguous. What do the data tell us?

In order to establish a basis for comparison, I look at George W. Bush's populist appeals during the 2004 election. This dataset consists of 78 speeches delivered in 26 states, plus Washington, D.C., during March, June, and September of 2004. Populist rhetoric was not a dominant theme. Bush had 54 populism references in total – an average of less than one per speech. Many of these references were variations on a particular bit of campaign rhetoric that Bush employed throughout his travels: "Finally, you've heard the rhetoric before, as well, and you know that the so-called rich hire



lawyers and accountants for a reason—that's to stick you with the bill. That's what happens every single time, isn't it? We're not going to let him tax you. We're going to carry Wisconsin, and we're going to carry this country next November.”

As this quotation suggests, the idea that rich people would stick ordinary taxpayers with the bill – and so best to avoid a high bill in the first place – was employed throughout Bush’s campaign travels in the competitive Midwest. But it was not tailored to particularly Midwestern issues, nor was it delivered exclusively there. These remarks were part of Bush’s stump speech in places like Maine, New York, and Arizona. Overall, populist rhetoric was a consistent, but moderate presence in the 2004 sample, with some geographical variation but not an obvious underlying geographic logic.



### *Trump’s populism on the road*

Trump gave twenty speeches on the road between his January inauguration and the end of April. In contrast to Bush in 2004, Trump was no longer actively campaigning for an imminent election. Obviously, their purposes were different and one of the

defining features of the Trump presidency has been his unusual rhetorical choices that often defy categorization. This endeavor is no exception. It is worth noting at the outset that Trump's rhetoric was qualitatively different from Bush's in ways that will not be surprising to most political observers. It included much stronger grievance claims toward elites, particularly the media.

Is there a political geography to Trump's populist rhetoric? The numbers in the table are too small to draw concrete conclusions. However, we do observe some geographical differences. Trump delivered two Midwestern speeches during this period, one in Wisconsin and one in Michigan. In a speech in Wisconsin on April 18 about his "buy American and hire American" executive order, Trump invoked "the people" through the context of the election:

"But this election, the American people voted to end the theft of American prosperity. They voted to bring back their jobs and to bring back their dreams into our country."

However, despite much emphasis on Trump's success in the upper Midwest and the importance of populism for those victories, his travel to the Midwest was infrequent in the first 100 days and his populist references there fairly light.

The main factor driving Trump's populist rhetoric in the south appears to be whether the speech was at a Make America Great Again rally or another kind of address. At MAGA rallies in Tennessee and Kentucky, Trump referred to forgotten Americans, a key idea from conservative populism (Gerring 1998):

“There's no place I'd rather be than with all of you here tonight, with the wonderful, hard-working citizens of our country. I would much rather spend time with you than any of the pundits, consultants, or special interests, certainly—or reporters from Washington, DC./”  
“We're going to apply common sense.” (TN, 3/15)

“Most importantly, we are going to take power back from the political class in Washington, and return that power to you, the American people. It's happening. It's happening. It's happening. (Applause.) It started on November 8th. Remember that beautiful, beautiful day? That beautiful day. We're going to give it back. (Applause.) That was a beautiful day.” (KY, 3/20)

Compared with other southern speeches, Trump's remarks were light on references to ordinary Americans and their concerns. Only at a Make America Great Again rally in Melbourne, FL on February 18 did he make such a reference. Describing a new directive to the Department of Justice to “protect police” and reduce violent crime.

“So the statute is so plain and so clear. I said last week—I was speaking to a great group of sheriffs, the sheriffs group in Washington, and I said, if you have a college education, you can understand it; if you have a high school education, you can understand it; if you were a bad student in high school, you can understand it.”

Trump's use of populism in this context is instructive. By linking crime enforcement and the protection of law enforcement to a “simple” statute, the president implied that complexity and nuance were the obstacles to these clear, straightforward, and morally upright goals. However, the other five Florida speeches were devoid of this rhetoric.

At the same Melbourne, FL rally, Trump included one of his signature attacks on the news media: “When the media lies to people, I will never, ever, let them get away with it. I will do whatever I can that they don't get away with it. They have their own agenda, and their agenda is not your agenda.”

The idea that the media served as the enemy of the “true people,” instead representing an unscrupulous, agenda-driven elite, became a common trope for Trump's speeches and tweets. His first 100 days travel rhetoric reveals an unexpected geography to these

claims: media-focused populist grievance was less common in the south and the Midwest. Instead, we observe these claims in the northeast (specifically, Pennsylvania), and when Trump delivered speeches in the Washington, D.C. area. The latter group includes his address to the 2017 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC).

Trump's CPAC speech was replete with populist references, particularly those which tapped into specific anti-elite grievances. Drawing on a classic right populist theme, Trump promised that, "The forgotten men and women of America will be forgotten no longer. That is the heart of this new movement and the future of the Republican Party." He also made reference to the popular mandate from the election at several points in the speech:

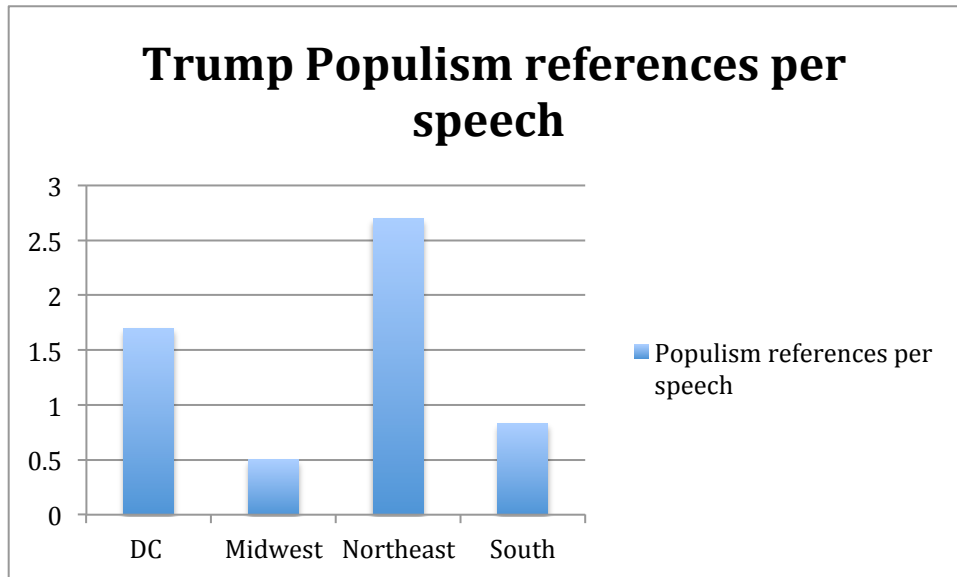
"Never underestimate the people, we won.

Our victory was a victory and a win for conservative values. And our victory was a win for everyone who believes it's time to stand up for America..."

Finally, he called the "fake news" the "enemy of the people" - one of eighteen uses of the phrase "the people" in the CPAC speech.

Another hub for Trump's populism was Pennsylvania, where he held a MAGA rally and also attended a Republican Congressional retreat. These two categories of events represent the arenas in which Trump appeared to make the most intense use of populist language, both in terms of the number of references and the qualitative tone. At the rally, Trump once again railed against the "dishonest media" and suggested that their "first 100 days" should be rated. At the Congressional retreat, the president raised several

populist grievances about the enforcement of immigration laws and the protection of the ballot box (both racialized issues).



### Conclusion

Examining recent Republican populist rhetoric through a geographical lens illustrates the utility of the thinking about multiple “populisms” in the U.S. case. Both Bush and Trump have used rhetorical populism removed from the original geographical grievances behind the concept. While Bush’s populism appeared to studiously avoid any references to the Southern populism of the 1960s, it instead incorporated economic anti-elite messages, emphasized slightly more in the West, Midwest, and Pacific states 2004.

Trump’s first 100 days in office represent a nationalized populist rhetoric of a different kind. Like Bush, Trump included very little in the way of specific geographic populist appeals. His rhetorical targets – the media, those who doubted he could win the election – remained similar across different geographical contexts.

In contrast with Bush, however, Trump’s populist appeals were geographically distinct from both the historical roots of economic populism and the narrative of his own 2016 campaign. Economic populism – an idea with origins on the left side of the political spectrum – is frequently cited as a reason behind Trump’s success in the upper Midwest and Rust Belt. Yet Trump’s speeches in Wisconsin and Michigan were much lighter in their populist tone than MAGA rallies delivered in Pennsylvania and throughout the south. In this regard, we see echoes of the anti-elite white populism of the Wallace movement. But perhaps most importantly, some of Trump’s most intense uses of populist grievance were – at CPAC and at a Republican Congressional retreat – not aimed at a “forgotten America” – but at other conservative elites.

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