Populism in Comparative Perspective: America and the 2016 Presidential Election

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Introduction

With the election of Donald Trump, populists have come to power in the US for the first time in many years, perhaps since the Jacksonian era. However, US political scientists have been flat-footed in their response, largely failing to anticipate or measure populism's impact on the campaign or to offer workable policy responses post-election. In contrast, populism has long been an important topic for political scientists studying other regions, especially Europe and Latin America. The empirical and theoretical insights of comparativists can benefit US political scientists and policymakers, helping us place events in perspective and giving us insight into the occasional failures of democracy here at home. I make this argument by referring to data from the US campaign collected by my colleagues in Team Populism (https://populism.byu.edu/).

Measuring Populism in the Election

An important question is just how populist the candidates were in the election—especially Trump—and what it means to say they were populist. During the election, some commentators suggested that the presidential campaign was part of a larger international wave of populism, and that a Trump victory would turn the US into the next Venezuela (Calamur 2016; Grillo 2016; Hamid 2016). But was this true?

Comparativists define populism in a few ways (Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin 2013; Di Tella 1965; Weyland 2001), but almost all feature populist ideas as an essential component. Hence, a number of comparativists currently focus on these ideas, defining populism in minimal terms as a political discourse that views politics as a struggle between the will of the common people and a conspiring elite. We can think of this as a performative style, emphasizing the ways in which this message is conveyed nonverbally (Moffitt 2016); or as a discursive frame or thin-centered ideology, emphasizing instead the (often verbal) content (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Either way, no single organizational form, economic policy, or political coalition defines populism, although these may be contingent products of the ideas; populism can be on the right or left, and it can appear in the form of charismatic movements and institutionalized parties. What matters is how issues and organization efforts are framed.

If we accept this ideational approach, it should be clear that populism characterized the rhetoric of at least some candidates in the US presidential campaign. But we can gauge this more precisely. To measure populism in the campaign, my colleagues and I applied a technique of textual analysis known as holistic grading to a sample of the candidates' speeches, final debates (Trump and Hilary Clinton only), and respective party platforms. Unlike traditional content analysis which breaks a text down into individual words or sentences, holistic grading has coders read a text in its entirely and compare it to a set of anchor texts that typify points along a scale. This technique is most suitable for diffuse, latent meanings in text, such as we find with political discourse. In our study, we used two coders per text. Texts were scored using a decimal scale running from 0=no populism to 1=strong, consistent use of populism. A total of 51 texts were coded (2 platforms, 3 debates—twice each—and 46 speeches) yielding 54 candidate-observations.

Scores for speeches and debates are shown in Figure 1, arrayed chronologically. The trend for most candidates is stable, but at widely varying levels. Among Democrats, Clinton's rhetoric is clearly not very populist (unweighted average of all texts is .09) while that of Sanders appears high—indeed, the highest among all the candidates (.75). Among Republicans, Ted Cruz's rhetoric is moderately populist (.39) while that of Marco Rubio (.13) and John Kasich (.03) is close to zero. In contrast to all of these, Trump's rhetoric (.41) is moderately populist but inconsistent. It starts out weakly populist but becomes stronger as the campaign progresses. Even then, it continues to oscillate and scores noticeably low in debates with Clinton, as well as the victory speech.

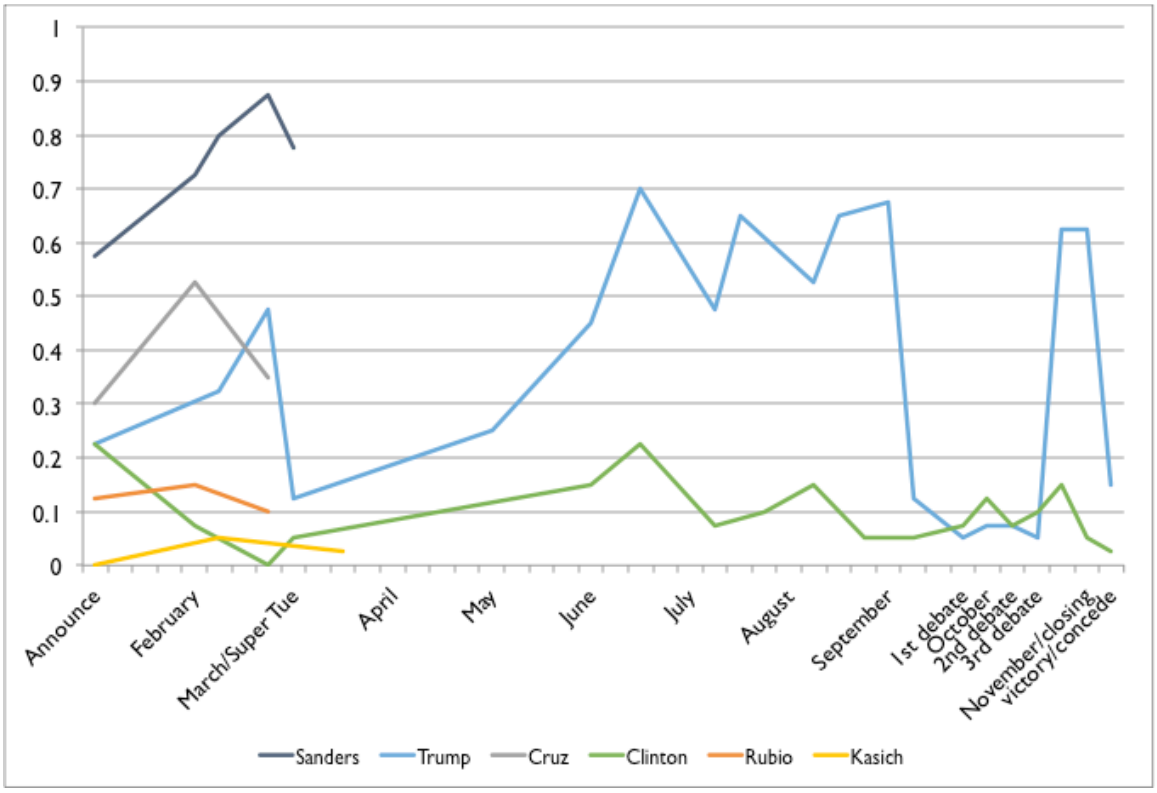

Figure 1 Level of Populism in Campaign Speeches and Debates, by Candidate

While we could have used other techniques to measure populism in the campaign (cf. Bonikowski and Gidron 2016), one of the features of holistic grading is that it works easily across countries. Thus, we can truly get a sense of how populist the campaign was comparatively. For that comparison, we chose two other countries with successful populist parties: Spain in its 2015 parliamentary election, and Venezuela in its 2013 presidential election. To render the samples comparable, we consider a subset of two speeches for each US candidate—the announcement of their candidacy and their final speech before election day—as well as their party's platform, with all scores weighted equally. Note that including the party platform yields slightly different averages for the US candidates than those just reported.

As Table 1 shows, populism in the 2016 US election was moderate by international standards, closer to Spain 2015 than Venezuela 2013. In Venezuela 2013, both the incumbent and opposition showed extremely high levels of populism in their speeches and party platform. In the US 2016, only Sanders' discourse came close to these levels and was still somewhat distant. It more nearly equaled that of the Spanish reformed communist party Izquierda Unida, while Trumps'

discourse approximated that of Podemos, a leftist party that formed in response to the 2008 Eurozone crisis.

Table 1 Populist Discourse of Major Candidates/Parties in the US, Spain and Venezuela

US 2016 / Candidate (Party)	% of Vote	Average Score
Bernie Sanders (Dem)	-	0.54
Donald Trump (Rep)	46.1	0.33
Ted Cruz (Rep)	-	0.22
Hillary Clinton (Dem)	48.2	0.17
Marco Rubio (Rep)	-	0.16
John Kasich (Rep)	-	0.09
Electorally weighted average	-	0.23
Spain 2015 / Party	% of Vote	Average Score
Izquierda Unida	3.7	0.65
Podemos	20.7	0.40
PP	28.7	0.05
PSOE	22.0	0.05
Ciudadanos	13.9	0.00
Electorally weighted average		0.13
Venezuela 2013/ Candidate (Party)	% of Vote	Average Score
Nícolas Maduro (PSUV)	50.6	0.85
Henrique Capriles (PJ)	49.1	0.75
Electorally weighted average	-	0.80

I could say more about the inconsistency of Trump's discourse, which my colleagues and I analyze elsewhere (we suspect Trump's populism is getting supplemented by his speechwriters). For now, my point is that comparative data allows us to characterize the level of populism with much greater precision and perspective than Americanists have realized. These data confirm that populism is a real feature of contemporary US politics (especially with a moderately populist candidate in the presidency), but they also show that it is not yet as strong as it has been in other countries. This makes it more likely that democratic institutions in the US will weather the current storm (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2016).

Causes and Policy Implications

Comparative research into populism also offers clues concerning the causes of this latest populist wave and what appropriate policy responses would be. Again, this is an area where Americanist research has been weak. Studies of the US have tended to emphasize either voters' economic concerns or a cultural backlash as a result of globalization (Inglehart and Norris 2017; Rathbun, Iakhnis, and Powers 2017; Sides and Tesler 2016).

Comparativists have already invested considerable resources into the study of populist demand at the mass level. They find that among citizens, populist attitudes exist as a distinct, coherent set of ideas that are distinct and that help explain support for populist politicians, such as voting (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Andreadis et al. forthcoming; Van Hauwaert and van

Kessel 2017). In fact, two related studies by Oliver and Rahn (2016) and Rahn (forthcoming) of the 2016 US campaign find that populist attitudes exist and correlate with support for populist candidates in the campaign, even after controlling for other factors such as issue positions and ideology.

While this research affirms the importance of populist ideas, it also reveals a puzzle: populist attitudes in all of the countries studied are fairly common, with cross-country and cross-time variation being much lower that variation within countries. Yet populist parties only occasionally come to power, even in countries where they are the most prevalent.

There are several answers to this puzzle, one of which may be that the right kind of populist supply is not always available. But another solution that my colleagues and I have been promoting is that populist attitudes are not always salient (Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels 2017). As with other attitudes and traits, populism seems to represent a latent disposition that must be activated and mobilized by context. Several contextual factors come into play, including the right kind of framing and a credible partisan organization to articulate it, but the most important condition is a failure of democratic representation: a situation in which politicians are intentionally ignoring or even harming one set of constituents in order to benefit a favored group that includes themselves. Such failures of representation represent more than ineptitude, but a violation of democratic norms of equality of citizens before the law and a betrayal of trust. In most of the developing world, this context comes in the form of widespread corruption, which provides a constant, powerful push to support radical populist forces promising to clean out the halls of government. In contrast, in developed democracies such as the US where corruption is less of a problem, parties do sometimes pursue policies that ignore the wishes of their constituents or even harm them. This is problematic if politicians and their allies are not the ones being called on to make these sacrifices, and even more if they belittle the constituents who are on the losing side of the policy battle. According to this argument, the problem is not just that US politicians have implemented policies that increase inequality or privilege a progressive cultural agenda, but that they have done so knowing this harms their constituents and not really seeming to care.

Evidence for this argument is still scanty—the study of populism's causes in this recent wave is fairly new, even among comparativists. But a few studies note the strong correlation between populist party success and corruption (Castanho Silva forthcoming; Hanley and Sikk 2016; Hawkins 2010). More recent experimental work by my colleagues and I confirms this finding. Importantly, one of these studies was done in the US presidential election and finds that treatment effects are strongly moderated by prior populist attitudes (Busby et al. forthcoming; Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2016).

This is still scant evidence, but one of the features of the argument that we like is that it provides novel policy advice. It suggests that the best way to combat populism is not by silencing or sneering at it; doing so not only ignores the underlying causes but adds fuel to the populist fire, suggesting that the conspiracy theories really are true and the politicians are part of a selfish political class. For developing countries, the real long term solution is to enhance the rule of law and create states that function with impartiality. But even in developed countries such as the US where state institutions are generally more effective, non-populist politicians can try harder to understand the legitimate bases of populist complaints and respond with a more respectful public discourse. For example, progressives can acknowledge the need for immigration reform that respects the rights of current citizens, while conservatives can accept the need for a social safety net capable of providing free-trade remediation. These are difficult policy stances to adopt these days, but a more careful scholarship that incorporates insights from abroad can provide policymakers, and not just political scientists, with greater perspective.

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