Framing Economic Populist Rhetoric: The Economically Aggrieved Find a Voice

Jordan Baker
Illinois Wesleyan University, jbaker2@iwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation

Framing Economic Populist Rhetoric: The Economically Aggrieved Find a Voice

Abstract

The use of economic populist rhetoric seems to be a growing trend in America. Current literature situates a positive relationship between economic insecurity and support of populism, however the strength between the two is debated. Furthermore, much is focused on individual or country level economic insecurities as it relates to populist support, but little is focused on economic insecurities at levels in between the individual and countries. Even less is written on how often populists employ economic populist messaging, as it relates to the economic insecurities in which they are speaking. In order to determine if a relationship between the two exists, this paper will look at U.S. state-level economic data and compare it to speeches made by Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election campaign. I expect to find a positive relationship between U.S. state-level economic insecurity and the amount of populist's speech dedicated to economic populist messages. This is an important topic to study as it relates to the structure of elections and the desire for populists to tailor their messages in order to gain voter support and political power.

Framing Economic Populist Rhetoric: The Economically Aggrieved Find a Voice

Jordan K. Baker

Abstract

The use of economic populist rhetoric seems to be a growing trend in America. Current literature situates a positive relationship between economic insecurity and support of populism, however the strength between the two is debated. Furthermore, much is focused on individual or country level economic insecurities as it relates to populist support, but little is focused on economic insecurities at levels in between the individual and countries. Even less is written on how often populists employ economic populist messaging, as it relates to the economic insecurities in which they are speaking. In order to determine if a relationship between the two exists, this paper will look at U.S. state-level economic data and compare it to speeches made by Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election campaign. I expect to find a positive relationship between U.S. state-level economic insecurity and the amount of populist's speech dedicated to economic populist messages. This is an important topic to study as it relates to the structure of elections and the desire for populists to tailor their messages in order to gain voter support and political power.

An Introduction to Populism

Populism as a movement often entails an "us versus them" approach, with populist leaders using fearful rhetoric that presents events or ideological failures as crises that they alone can fix (Mudde 2009; Mueller 2017; Moffitt 2014). Populists identify failures and tailor their rhetoric to rouse an affected group. The economy, for populists, is a particularly strong target to focus their rhetoric on.

Looking at economic populist rhetoric is ripe given the rise of populism in western nations in the past few decades. Rising populist movements and leaders across the world make it necessary to study how populists maneuver their rhetoric in such a way to gain a base of followers on the platform of extreme and overly simplistic ideas (Blassnig, Buchel, Ernst & Engesser 2018; Gerstle & Nai 2019 ; Mueller 2017 ; Moffitt 2015). On the topic of rhetoric itself, scholars such as Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins have developed theories on how populists

frame problems and foment divisions between a target audience (the pure) and the identified

problem (the corrupt). Scholars such as Benjamin Moffitt have researched the role of

performance as it relates to turning failures into active crises. Other scholars also take a broad

look at how a nation's economy and ability to deliver job stability affects support for populist

movements (Mughan, Bean & McAllister 2003; Rodrik, 2017). However, most literature has

looked at country level data and its relationship to populist support. Given that the United States

is a vast nation with many regional and state-level differences, a gap in the literature appears.

This paper will attempt to bridge that gap by researching possible connections between U.S.

state-level economic data and populist's use of economic populist rhetoric. The rest of the paper

is dedicated to the review of populist rhetoric formation and the role that the economy plays in

the rise of populist movements. This will be possible by looking at economic data from states in

the United States and speeches and debates of the two populist candidates from the 2016 U.S.

Presidential Election: Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

Populist Messaging

Populist leaders are in a constant search for perceived or actualized problems within a

society, and by capturing the raw emotion from the population, seek to implement new

systematic changes (Moffitt, 2014). Candidates running on populist platforms often times focus

their narrative on ideas that they are specialized in (Gerstle & Na,i 2019). While not wholly

detached from mainstream political candidates, populists are masters at simplifying complex

problems and ideas (Gerstle & Nai, 2019; Blassnig et al., 2018; Mueller, 2017).

In addition to simplification, populist candidates can identify a group of citizens who

hold grievances against governments and other large scale organizations. After finding a base of

aggrieved voters, populist leaders inevitably must come up with solutions, however generalized they may be. In order to contrast themselves against establishment candidates, populists rely on ideas outside the mainstream in order to please their aggrieved base (Gerstle & Nai, 2019) . A general theme of populists is the idea of returning power to the people, among other highly directly democratic languages. Populists rely on listening to "the least advantaged" and making vocal their platform by "bringing the excluded [ideas] into politics" (Mueller, 2017). A key sub-population that has been identified as the least advantaged are those that have seen negative returns as a result of increased economic globalization.

Globalization and Rapid Economic Change

A particular form of populist grievance relates to the economic security of individuals, groups, and the nation. In theory, when the economic fortunes of a country go through recessions or depressions, it exacerbates economic populist appeals. One theory postulates that economic populism rises during economic instability, and is a key component among those who have been on the "losing" side of globalization and the free-market system set up after World War II (Formisano, 2017; Mueller, 2017). While all populist leaders will assign blame on a certain group in order to explain structural failures, populists who focus on economic insecurity tend to project blame onto immigrants, supranational organizations, or a corrupt economic elite (Mudde, 2009; Rodrik, 2017; Gerstle & Nai, 2019)

Even though it has been observed that economic grievances are real either through perception or actualized, it must be clear that there are limitations on the strength of economic populism as the conduit for populist support. The argument that losers "in the process of modernization" support populist leaders stems from Max Weber and other researchers of the

1950s and 1960s (Mueller, 2017). Their conclusions, while not wholly rejected, do not take into account non-economic factors that might influence one's support for populism. Additionally, Mueller found that "personal socioeconomics is less correlated to populist support, but instead on a more general assessment of the situation" (Mueller, 2017). While this may diminish the strength of economic populist messages, it does not reject a populist candidate targeting potential supporters through dispositional means.

It is evident that those who perceive themselves to be in hardship are more likely to support populism. It is also clear that during general economic downturns, amidst prolonged economic changes, people who feel their economic status as stagnant or decreasing will be more likely to turn to a populist who draws upon their economic anxieties. Especially amidst the backdrop of the 2008 Great Recession, presidential candidates and the media paid particular attention to the white working class voters (Formisano, 2017). Despite this going against conventional wisdom, Princeton political scientist Larry M. Bartels finds there has been a trend over time that white voters "continue to attach less weight to social issues than to economic issues" (Formisano, 2017).

Economic anxiety is not singular to a particular industry's decline, but can become specifically targeted at a group or nation. Cas Mudde, in his book Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe, lays out four types of enemies populists focus on. The four groups are: 1) Within State/Within Nation, 2) Within State/Outside Nation, 3) Outside State/Within Nation, and 4) Outside State/Outside Nation. The first plays to nativist rhetoric, the second plays to xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric, the third is less common as it attacks expats and emigrants, and the fourth attacks external group, nations, and to a broader extent, globalism (Mudde, 2009).

However, this typology is only geared toward right-wing populist framing. For left-wing populism, their enemy is organizations, groups, and individuals who are "profit-maximizers who threaten the material interests of ordinary hard working citizens" (Hameleers, 2018). Taking a page out of the "losers of economic globalization" argument, Hameleers surmises that the left-wing connects to "a collective sense of losing out because of the negative influence of economic actors" and their destruction of ordinary citizen's labor (Hameleers, 2018).

In terms of the overall global economy, advanced globalization and free trade agreements have become less influential in expanding economic opportunities. Lack of opportunities is an important reason why globalization becomes politically more contentious in its advanced cycles. For the United States specifically, two major events opened the doors to greater international trade: the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and China's membership into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in late 2001. However, trade along cannot explain the growing demand for populism by those economically disaffected. Another reason that accelerated globalism is increased global capital mobility. With greater mobility, companies can move production and invest in developing nations with lower wage workers. This not only hurts domestic labor power, but creates an unbalanced negotiating platform between workers and the companies they work for (Rodrik, 2017). The liberalization of capital has statistically demonstrated long lasting declines in the labor share of income and statistically significant increases in the GINI index.

The rapid globalization of the U.S. economy starting in the 1990s shifted nearly five million manufacturing laborers to other industries, primarily service based. The economic anxiety created in shifting industries and a decline of wages pushes those affected to find a

channel for their economic frustration. This creates a demand for a populist leader who can craft a message that resonates with those affected. As populist leaders spring up with their own crafted messages, they not only capture the original group of disaffected voters, they also create a greater supply of populist-minded voters (Rodrik, 2017).

Turning Failure into Crisis

A core fundamental of populist rhetoric is the framing of language to assign blame on a group that is perceived or actually corrupt. Populist leaders will often present their group as "pure" and "moral," while contrasting it with a group of corrupt elites. Anyone who does not follow that particular leader is part of the problem and is not pure. Scholars depict this as a battle between a "virtuous public" and "anti-elitism" (Busby, Gubler & Hawkins, 2019; Mueller, 2017). Hence, a major part of populist framing is the impurity and "out-group" nature of those who disagree or disapprove of the populist leader and their ideology (Mueller, 2017).

Frequently, leaders will depend on fallacies to make their case to the public. In one study, "widespread use of fallacies" were noted in the rhetoric of prominent populist leaders, with "ad consequentiam" being the most frequented fallacy (Blassnig et al., 2018). Ironically, the paper notes, "false analogies and red herrings" were among the least likely of fallacies to be employed by populist leaders (Blassnig et al., 2018). All in all, populist leaders seek to frame blame on a corrupt elite, perceived or actual, and make claims to "the people" in an effort to indirectly define who is part of the group, and who is not.

Framing theory suggests that populist rhetoric works best when it targets those who have a "perceived or actualized [view] of widespread government failures" (Busby et al., 2019). It attempts to clearly separate a stagnant or corrupt organization with a virtuous public, or "the

common man." Organizations can be attacked if it is perceived to be a failure of representation, especially when the opposition party is in power. Large groups can also be targeted if they are perceived to be part of "systemic causes such as globalization or technological change" (Busby et al., 2019).

Framing theory also pertains to how a populist candidate tailors their speech to the individual. Populist leaders "encourage individuals to consider political problems in dispositional terms rather than situational terms" (Busby et al., 2019). Dispositional framing seeks to blame a person or group directly for problems, and that their actions were intentional and with maleficence in mind. Conversely, situational framing is common among non-populist leaders who blame impersonal forces outside of the control of individuals or groups for society's problems. Research on framing theory have found wide differences in use of dispositional framing between populist and non-populist candidates (Busby et al., 2019). However, research has also found that dispositional arguments only carry muster when there are widespread failures that have been afflicting or perceived to be affecting a large enough group to carry political weight.

Framing theory goes hand in hand with crisis performance. Crisis performance, as described by Moffitt, details a six step process in which a failure, perceived or actual, is transformed into a crisis to rally populist support. A populist leader must first identify the failure, then link it to a wider framework. He or she must create a Manichean conflict and use media to propagate their individual performance. Their solutions should be simple and always project strong leadership. Finally, they must continue to propagate the crisis using the media and other tools (Moffitt, 2014). Note that turning the failure into a crisis itself does not constitute populism

always, but the "necessary precondition for populism is the performance" itself (Moffitt, 2014).

It is no surprise that a candidate such as Donald Trump, who starred on television and movies, is

able to harness the power of performance to generate voter support.

Predicting Outcomes

There are three research questions that pertain to the literature. First, does U.S. state-level

economic opportunity affect the amount of economic populist messaging used by candidates in

their speeches? Based on the literature, areas that are economically disaffected are more likely to

have a populist base. Therefore, it would make sense that populist leaders would utilize more

economic populist messaging in areas with lower economic opportunity. Second, what kind of

language do populists utilize? It is expected that Donald Trump will adopt language that pertains

to jobs, Americanism, and attack places that he perceives American jobs have fled to. For

Sanders, it is expected that he will employ language that pertains to economic inequality and

injustices. Finally, how do populists frame their message in a way that resonates with voters?

Predictively, it is expected that Donald Trump will operate using right-wing typologies, and

Bernie Sanders will utilize left-wing typologies. In typologies that have no ideological

undertones, it is likely to see symbiosis between the candidates.

Methodology

Within the first research question, the independent variable being measured is economic

opportunity. In order to measure this, data was provided by Opportunity Nation and Child

Trends. The data compiled was of 2016 U.S. State-level economic opportunity. Each state was

assigned a composite value between zero and one-hundred based on seven factors:

unemployment rate, median household income, the percent of the population below the federal

poverty level, income inequality, access to banking, affordable housing, and access to broadband internet service. The higher a state's economic opportunity score, the better their economy.

To answer the first research question and later content analysis, speeches were compiled from C-Span the UC Santa Barbara American Presidency Project. All speeches came from the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, with a focus on primary speeches, given that both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders were candidates. However, to raise the number of speeches for Donald Trump, speeches he made during the general election were included. Each state, if the candidate spoke in them, received a maximum of one speech. If multiple speeches were given in a state, the earliest speech by date was chosen. This was especially salient for Trump speeches, as keeping the dates as close to the primary election was an attempt to gain more internal control over the data.

After combing each site, fifteen Trump speeches and thirteen Sanders speeches were compiled. Two of Trump's speeches, one in New Hampshire, and one in Virginia, were discarded. His speech in New Hampshire dealt solely with immigration and terrorism, while the Virginia speech was dedicated to VA reform and Veteran's causes. So as to not create an outlier in the data, these were not used. As a final count, thirteen speeches were used for each candidate. There were five states in which both candidates spoke: Arizona, Iowa, Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania. Trump-only speeches occurred in Colorado, Florida, Maine, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Texas, and Washington. Sanders-only speeches occurred in California, Delaware, Illinois, New Hampshire, Oregon, South Carolina, Wisconsin, and West Virginia.

Returning to the first research question, it is important to explain the coding mechanisms used to define what is "economic messaging." A subset of speeches of the candidates were

chosen at random and were fully read, highlighting key words that were present during an economic message or policy. In total, forty-two key words were selected with derivatives of the base word possible (i.e "jobs" and "job"). The full list of economic key words can be found in Appendix A. Each key word was searched for in the speech, and a determination was made whether or not the key word was being used in an economic message or not. If it was determined that the message was economic, then it went to a second test to determine if there were populist elements in the message. To determine if the message had populism within, the list of populist typologies was employed. The typology chart was determined by the literature that suggests nativism, xenophobia, offshoring and outsourcing, globalism, and authoritarianism tend to be right-wing typologies. On the left, a collective sense of losing out was used. Throughout the literature, general populist themes arouse regardless of ideology such as anti-elitism, exaggerations and breach of political norms, anti-establishment, and fighting for the people. If the message employed an economic message within the key words, and displayed populist typologies from the chart, the total number of sentences were recorded to then be divided by the total amount of economic sentences. The percentage result is the dependent variable within the first research question.

In order to create the word map, all economic populist messages were copied onto a website that specializes in creating word maps. Words that contained three or less letters were discarded, as the most likely candidates in this range are articles or contractions, neither of which carry an economic nor populist meaning.

Analysis

After analyzing the speeches made by Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, and calculating the total number of economic populist sentences by total number of sentences, the three research questions presented earlier exhibit mixed results. As stated, the first research question dealt with the interconnection between U.S. state-level economic data and the amount of economic populism in candidate speeches. The prediction states lower economic opportunity states will experience higher levels of economic populism in candidate speeches was not realized. In fact, both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders demonstrated the opposite, in that, the higher a state's economic opportunity was, the more economic populism injected into candidate speeches.

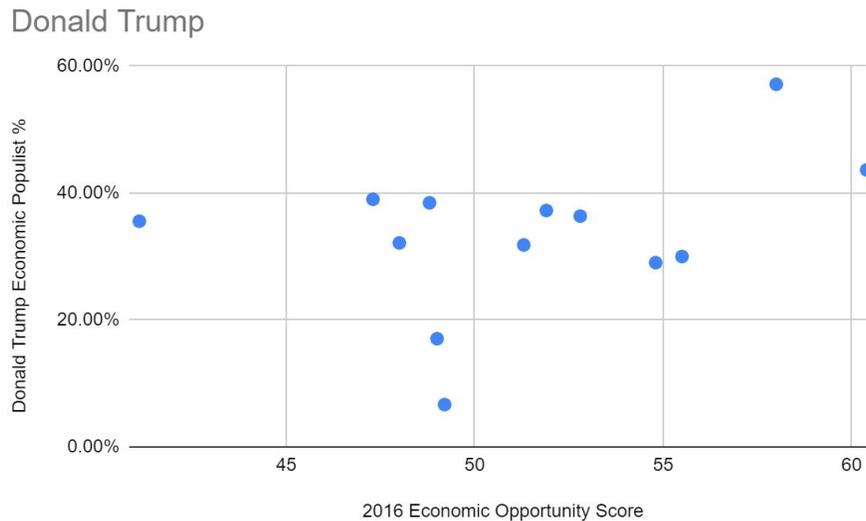**Figure 1 - Donald Trump Economic Populist Regression Scatterplot**

Figure 2 - Bernie Sanders Economic Populist Regression Scatterplot
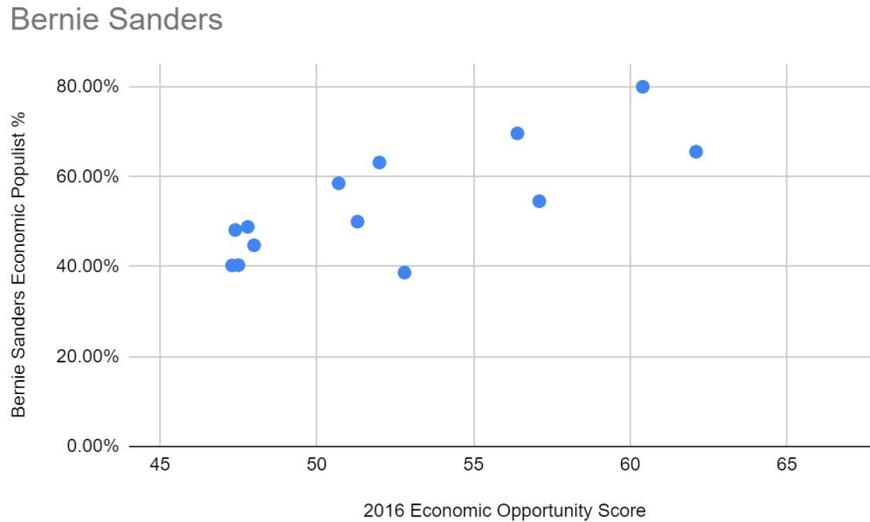
While Mr. Trump's bivariate correlation (0.366) was not statistically significant, Senator Sanders' Pearson's R value (0.771) was significant at the .01 level. One reason for the significance of Sanders' relationship is that his economic message was more concise and targeted than Mr. Trump's. At any rate, it is surprising to find the opposite trend than the prediction. It is possible that in attempting to broaden the base of support, going after areas with lower populist tendencies will yield higher margins of return. In areas that already support populist leaders, the extent to which populist language sways opinion is minimal compared to areas with low populist tendencies.

In researching the populist typologies used, one can get a better sense in the way in which each leader made their economic message populist in nature. The literature suggests that right-wing typologies such as nativism and xenophobia are more likely to be used by right-wing populist leaders such as Donald Trump. On the other hand, left-wing populist typologies such as

a collective sense of losing out are more likely to be incorporated by left-wing leaders such as Bernie Sanders.

Table 1 - Populist Typology Use in Economic Populist Messaging

Populist Typology	Donald Trump	Bernie Sanders
Nativism	9.45%	1.19%
Xenophobia	3.94%	0.00%
Offshoring/Outsourcing	4.72%	9.50%
Globalism	8.66%	0.00%
Anti-elitism	11.02%	69.12%
Exaggerate/Breach of Norms	24.02%	8.79%
Anti-establishment	17.32%	4.51%
"Fighting for the People"	3.54%	4.99%
Authoritarianism	10.63%	0.00%
Coll. Sense of Losing Out	6.70%	1.90%

It is somewhat surprising to visualize crossover between the two typologies. For one, the typology "offshoring/outsourcing", which is a typical right-wing typology, was used more often by Bernie Sanders (9.50%) than Donald Trump (4.72%). Furthermore, the left-wing typology in the "collective sense of losing out" was used more frequently by Donald Trump (6.70%) than Bernie Sanders (1.90%). This suggests populist leaders, while rooted in other ideologies than just populism itself, have the potential for ideological crossover. In looking at their core typologies, it

is no surprise that Donald Trump's most frequented typology is "Exaggeration/Breach of Norms" with 24.02%, followed by "Anti-establishment" (17.32%), and "Anti-elitism" (11.02%). Trump's diversification of populist typologies mirrors his overall campaign strategy of a broad message instead of specific policies. Contrastingly, Bernie Sanders' most frequented typology was used nearly three times more often that Donald Trump's most frequented typology. The staggering use of anti-elitism by Bernie Sanders should come as no surprise given his economic message against corporate greed and the one percent, but to constitute nearly seventy percent of all populist typology use is impressive.

The final research question dealt with the types of language populists use. The prediction that Trump will employ language related to Americanism and jobs and Sanders will adopt language related to economic inequalities was relatively successful.

Figure 3 - Donald Trump Word Map

Figure 4 - Bernie Sanders Word Map

Based on the word map, Trump's most used word was "jobs" and coupled with "losing", "American", "China", and "taken" it stands to reason that a major economic platform of Trump's was to return jobs to America and criticize countries that he perceives have taken them. This is in line with the prediction. For Senator Sanders, frequently used words such as "people", "Wall Street", "wealthiest", "rigged", "greed", and "one percent", highlight his anti-elite, economic injustice message by targeting the economic one percent.

Overall, among the three research questions, the one that dealt with what language populists use was most successful in its prediction. However, analysis of economic populist messaging related to state economic data suggests other factors are at play in deciding the overall economic message in each speech. In looking at the typologies employed by Trump and Sanders, there may be a connection between typical ideological typologies and their utilization by each candidate. Some crossover is evident, which highlights the broad nature of populism.

Conclusions

The North American Free Trade Agreement and China's acceptance into the World Trade Organization sparked a rapid change in the U.S. economy which caused a decline in manufacturing, and a rise in service-based jobs. Those who lost their jobs due to these two events were more likely to enter the service industry, not only taking a pay cut, but working in a different industry. These sharp economic changes mirrored the rise in demand for a leader who could coherently voice their concerns. In due time, voices such as Mike Huckabee in the 2008 Presidential Election, and more recently in 2016 with Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders tapped into the demand for populism. While the literature suggests a one-way avenue between the supply and demand of populist leaders, it is reasonable to theorize that the true nature of populist supply and demand is cyclical and involves two parties: the voter and the messenger. The voter, having experienced economic or social shock, seeks an outlet to vent these frustrations. With enough voters, a populist leader will recognize that certain messages will resonate with the disaffected. However, the cycle does not stop here as the populist leader will inevitably draw others to their camp that were not part of the original group. In a study completed by Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins, those who had low populist sentiments and received dispositional (populist) blame treatment…" looked just like those who were "high pretreatment populists" (Busby et al., 2019). Their research would back up the notion that populist supply and demand is indeed cyclical, however more research should be completed to verify this claim.

The results completed above is an introduction to qualitative and quantitative analysis into specific policy platforms of candidates. It did not seek to analyze typologies of the whole speech, but rather on economic messages alone. Future research could look into other subsets of

candidate speeches to discern whether certain candidates are more likely to utilize populist rhetoric on certain topics more than others. Additionally, further research must address the puzzling question on the relationship between U.S. state-level economic opportunity and economic populist messaging by candidates. This was by far the most surprising takeaway from the paper, but multiple, larger case studies should be completed to ascertain whether this is a trend.

In looking at how populists frame their message, the typologies they utilize, and how they tie their message to fit certain populations and locations, the general population can become more attuned to the messaging methods of populists. If it is true that populism is a threat to liberal democracy, especially the United States, it is apparent that a better knowledge of populism and the ways in which charismatic leaders take their message is necessary in critiquing populism instead of blindly following it. It can be tempting to automatically follow someone because one hears what they want to hear, but that is the point of populism. Populist leaders frame their message specifically to the disadvantaged to gain their vote. In the upcoming U.S. Presidential Election, two candidates stand out as populists, but many other candidates and politicians are starting to adopt increasingly populist tones. It is more important now than ever to have a grasp on how populists frame their message in order to truly understand their motives and ideologies.

Appendix

Appendix A - Economic Key Words

Prosper	Company	Employee
Debt	Deficit	Budget
Trillion	Trade	Tariff
China	Japan	Mexico
Economy	Wages	Income
Wealth	Middle Class	Wall Street
Job	Earning	GDP
Financial Institution	Bank	Glass-Steagall
Billionaires	Inequality	Poor
Factories	Business	Worker
Monopoly	Profit	Global
Products	Manufacturing	NAFTA
WTO	Greed	Dodd-Frank
Consumer	Fed	Federal Reserve

Works Cited

Blassnig, S., Büchel, F., Engesser, S., & Ernst, N. (2018). Populism and Informal Fallacies: An Analysis of Right-Wing Populist Rhetoric in Election Campaigns. *Argumentation*, 33(1), 107-136.

Bonikowski, B., & Gidron, N. (2015). The Populist Style in American Politics: Presidential Campaign Discourse, 1952-1996. *Social Forces,* 94(4), 1593-1621.

Busby, E., Gubler, J., & Hawkins, K. (2019). Framing and Blame Attribution in Populist Rhetoric. *The Journal of Politics,* 81(2), 616-630.

Formisano, R. (2017). *Populist Currents in the 2008 Presidential Campaign*. University of Illinois Press.

Gerstlé, J., & Nai, A. (2019). Negativity, Emotionality and Populist Rhetoric in Election Campaigns Worldwide, and Their Effects on Media Attention and Electoral Success. *European Journal of Communication,* 34(4), 410-444.

Hameleers, M. (2018). A Typology of Populism: Toward a Revised Theoretical Framework on the Sender Side and Receiver Side of Communication. *International Journal of Communication,* 12, 2171-2190.

Moffitt, B. (2014). How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism. *Government and Opposition,* 50(2), 189-217.

Mudde, C. (2009). *Populist Radical Right Parties.* Cambridge University Press.

Bean, C., Mcallister, I., & Mughan, A. (2003). Economic Globalization, Job Insecurity and the Populist Reaction. *Election Studies,* 22(4), 617-633.

Müller, J. (2017). *What is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Rodrik, D. (2017). Populism and the Economics of Globalization. *Journal of International*

    Business Policy, 1(1-2), 12-33.