# THE LANGUAGE OF POPULISM: DONALD TRUMP AND NICOLAS MADURO

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## Introduction

Populism has become a salient topic in public debate as political analysts have made attempts to cast light upon Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen's electoral success, upon the Brexit referendum and Venezuela's unprecedented humanitarian crisis. A sizeable academic literature in political science, history, and sociology has been trying to explain the phenomenon and its role in politics for more than 40 years. Broad agreement has been reached on the fact that populism pertains to democratic politics, mostly liberal democracy and that it spans ideological positions and world regions (Bonikowski, 2016).

The paper carries out a comparative analysis of the populist rhetoric and style of US populism and Venezuelan populism with the major aim to possibly identify commonalities and differences. Thus it has set the ambitious goal to outline the specific features of populism as a language and the possible theoretical and methodological framework within which it can be examined. The unprecedented success of the 45th US president Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential elections and the deep humanitarian crisis brought about in Venezuela, one of the world's richest countries and founding state of OPEC, by Nicolas Maduro is what determines the topicality of this piece of research.

When addressing this academic problem, the central research question that will be considered is: Do differences in political context and ideological background across nations and states provide sufficient grounds to argue that there is a language of populism – in terms of linguistic, discursive and cognitive elements?

In order to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the different topics addressed in this study, the following sub-questions will be explored in each corresponding section:

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1. What are the specific aspects of populism in the United States and in Venezuela within the tradition of populism in Latin America?

2. How is the positive representation of 'we' and the negative representation of 'they' suggested through linguistic and discursive means? In other words, how do the two leaders frame the vox populi and the corrupt elite?

3. Do the identified similarities suggest there is a language of populism and which are its major characteristics?

Based on the aforementioned questions, we have formulated research objectives, which will expand upon the latter:

- To identify the typical aspects of Trump's and Maduro's political context and ideological background and their differences with regard to the image of the populist leader.
- To identify the specific aspects of Trump's and Maduro's linguistic and discursive strategies.
- To evaluate the similarities in discourse and identify the major aspects of the language of populism.

The object of analysis in this paper comprises the rhetoric and style of populism of Donald Trump as expressed in his election campaign speeches and tweets on Venezuela and Nicolas Maduro's specific political style as expressed in his TV statements on the United States in the period 2016-2019.

The research topic pertains to the link between the specific discourses of the two leaders and the language of populism in general.

## Defining populism

Almost all researchers in the field of populism have agreed upon the conclusion that the term itself is among the most contested concepts (see Aslanidis, 2015, Bonikowski, 2016, Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017, Muller, 2016, Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, 2017, Rydgren, 2017). Populism is used to describe left-wing presidents in Latin America, right-wing challenger parties in Europe, and both left-wing and right-wing presidential candidates in the United States, positioned within the context of liberal democracy. This choice is more informed by empirics and theory than by ideology (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.1). In different world regions populism tends to be equated, and sometimes conflated, with quite distinct phenomena. For instance, in the European context populism often refers to anti-immigration attitudes and xenophobia, whereas in Latin America it frequently alludes to clientelism and economic mismanagement. It is a label ascribed to others, most often with a negative connotation, and academics and journalists use the term to denote a wide range of phenomena. The ideational approach is broadly used in a variety of academic disciplines, as well as more

implicitly in much journalism, it is but one of several approaches to populism [1] (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 2).

According to Bonikowski (2016), analyses of populism are often conceptually vague and have the tendency to conflate populism with related but distinct political phenomena, such as nationalism, social and economic conservatism, and anti-immigrant discourse, which "has an analytical cost: If we are unclear about the meaning of populism, we will have difficulty understanding its implications for political change" (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 2).

## Academic approaches to the exploration of populism

Several major approaches to the study of populism have been identified. C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser (2017) summarize the different approaches to the phenomenon used across academic disciplines or geographical regions. They can be grouped under five major headings as follows:

- The agency approach argues that populism refers to a democratic way of life built through popular engagement in politics [2].
- The Laclauan approach that is analysed within political philosophy and critical studies, has been applied mostly to the study of West European and Latin American politics [3].
- The socioeconomic approach was dominant in studies of Latin American populism during the 1980s and 1990s. Economists such as Rudiger Dornbusch and Jeffrey Sachs understood populism primarily as a type of irresponsible economic policy, characterized by a first period of massive spending financed by foreign debt and followed by a second period marked by hyperinflation and the implementation of harsh economic adjustments.
- Populism is also seen as a political strategy employed by a specific type of leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers; this approach emphasizes the emergence of a strong and charismatic figure, who concentrates power and maintains a direct connection with the masses.
- Populism has also been explored as a folkloric style of politics, which leaders and parties employ to mobilize the masses, mostly in communication studies and mediatized politics. In this understanding, populism alludes to unprofessional political behavior that aims to maximize media attention and popular support. By disrespecting the dress code and language manners, populist actors are able to present themselves not only as different and novel, but also as courageous leaders who stand with the people in opposition to the elite (Bonikowski, 2016, pp. 3-4).

## Theoretical and methodological framework

Despite the academic debate on the definition of populism, there has been a constant invariably present in it – the dichotomy between the elite and the pure or moral people, in Mudde's words (Mudde 2004, p. 543), and the corrupt elite (Roberts 2016, p. 70). According to Bonikowski (2016), there has been some consensus among scholars, who agree that "at its core, populism is a form of politics predicated on the juxtaposition of a corrupt elite with a morally virtuous people." The political scholar further claims that populism is neither primarily an ideology, nor is it limited to the right. The author conceptualizes the phenomenon as "dynamic and ideologically variable", to contribute to the interpretation of its causes and implications in contemporary politics. Bonikowski examines populism as a discursive frame (Bonikowski, 2016, pp. 12-18).

## The ideational approach to populism. Populism as discursive framing

For decades, populism was the studied mainly in Latin America, where most of the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical work was carried out (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, 2017). However, the center of gravity has shifted with the rise of populist radical right parties in Europe and since the emergence of the Tea Party and Occupy movements in the 2000s, followed by the 2016 president campaign in the United States. There have been various conceptualizations of the notion – economic, political, discourse. According to the ideational conceptualization, the "organizational features of populist movements and their structural preconditions are contingent aspects, which sometimes but not always accompany populism" (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 514).

Some authors make an overview of the concept of framing within the theoretical framework of mediatized politics (Aslanidis, 2015; Bonikowski, 2016). Framing is the practice of presenting an issue from a particular perspective in order to maximize its resonance with a given audience [4]. The most effective frame is allegedly the one that best resonates with the existing assumptions and beliefs of the audience. Hence populism should be treated as a speech-level phenomenon pertaining to rhetoric and speech patterns and becomes "a strategic tool selected based on context" [5]. Based on such insights, Bonikowski argues that the longer a politician is in power, the less likely he or she is to rely on populist claims to outsider status because these are likely to be viewed as increasingly inauthentic. Aslanidis (2015) gives a detailed account of the development of the concepts of discourse and framing within the field of political science.

Frames, as introduced in social science by Erving Goffman, are 'schemata of interpretation' that allow their users 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' complex events taking place in daily life (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). David Snow

has employed Goffman's insights to analyze the importance of frames for social mobilization, where collective action frames are employed to provide meaning to events and occurrences out there, 'to organize experience and guide action' (Snow et al., 1986, p. 464). The impact of framing on influencing individual judgement has been repeatedly proven empirically in the aftermath of the Nobel Prize-winning work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1984) in cognitive science, and political primers have been published to take advantage of properly framing issues in political communication (Lakoff, 2004).

## The populist discourse and frame

This theoretical framework has found application in social movement studies, and resonates strongly with populist logic. Populist discourse can equally be perceived as the systematic dissemination of a frame that diagnoses reality as problematic because 'corrupt elites' have unjustly usurped the sovereign authority of the 'noble People' and maintains that the solution to the problem resides in the righteous political mobilization of the latter in order to regain power. This, therefore, can be labelled the 'populist frame' (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 13).

Populism is a discourse, "invoking the supremacy of popular sovereignty to claim that corrupt elites are defrauding 'the People' of their rightful political authority." The author further argues that populism "becomes an anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People," which is how "the concept has been operationalized in the growing quantitative literature" (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 9; italics as in the original). Even though this perspective might be rejected "as overly behavioristic, the fact remains that populism is a systematically recurring political phenomenon empirically located within political discourse." Furthermore, "ideological or even strategic claims, purport to have glimpsed inside the 'populist's head' and to have discovered an ulterior motive for this type of behaviour (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 10). By applying a frame theoretical perspective on studying populist discourse and by introducing the notion of the 'populist frame', cognitive aspects of populist argumentation are addressed and the significance of agency without bearing normative implications is highlighted (Aslanidis, 2015, p. 14). Populist frames, as formal vessels of meaning, readily contain ideational elements that have been mistaken for constituting ideology. As William Gamson (1995) explains, collective action frames are both adversarial and aggregative in their demonstration of a collective 'we' in opposition to some 'they'; this quality explains the largely accepted Manichean nature of populism. The fact that frames are straightforward communicative forms, bereft of the nuances and intricacies of ideologies, indicates that the simplistic and Manichean nature of the populist message fits better with frames rather than ideologies. Moreover, the diagnostic function of the populist frame explains why populism

has been frequently associated with a sense of crisis (Moffitt, 2014; Taggart, 2000) since political urgency is required to successfully portray a situation as gravely problematic during the diagnostic stage (Moffitt, 2014). As Benford and Snow (2000) explain, political entrepreneurs engage in strategic framing in order to persuade audiences to tune into their own representation of reality – something that reverberates strongly with Michael Kazin's (1995, p. 3) understanding of populism as a 'flexible mode of persuasion'.

## Core concepts and discourses: the people, the elite and the general will

The people as the first major discourse are seen as (C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 9-10):

- The people as the sovereign: This notion of the people is based on the democratic idea of the people as the ultimate source of political power and as "the rulers." However, the formation of a democratic regime does not imply that the gap between governed and governors disappears completely. Under certain circumstances, the sovereign people can feel that they are not being (well) represented by the elites in power, and, accordingly, will take action against the establishment. This function is reminder of the fact that the ultimate source of political power in a democracy derives from a collective body.
- The common people: this notion refers to a broader concept that combines socioeconomic status with specific cultural traditions and popular values. It often refers to a critique of the dominant culture, which views the judgments, tastes, and values of ordinary citizens with suspicion. In contrast to this elitist view, the notion of "the common people" vindicates the dignity and knowledge of groups who are being excluded from power due to their sociocultural and socioeconomic status. This is the reason why populist leaders and constituencies often adopt cultural elements that are considered markers of inferiority by the dominant culture. To address the interests and ideas of "the common people" is indeed one of the most frequent appeals that we can detect in different experiences that are usually labeled as populist. This meaning of the people tends to be both integrative and divisive: not only does it attempt to unite an angry and silent majority, but it also tries to mobilize this majority against a defined enemy (e.g., "the establishment"). This anti-elitist impetus goes together with a critique of institutions such as political parties, big organizations, and bureaucracies, which are accused of distorting the "truthful" links between populist leaders and "the common people."
- The nation: This notion is used to refer to the national community, defined either in civic or in ethnic terms. This implies that all those "native" to a

particular country are included, and that together they form a community with a common life. Accordingly, various communities of "people" represent specific and unique nations that are normally reinforced by foundational myths. Nevertheless, the definition of the boundaries of the nation is anything but simple. To equate "the people" with the population of an existing state has proven to be a complicated task, particularly because different ethnic groups exist on the same territory.

The second major discourse if the construction of the elite as the presumably negatively constructed "them". They comprise the following characteristics (C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 11-15):

- on the basis of power – those holding leading positions within politics, the economy, the media and the arts;
- in economic terms – done mostly by left-wing populists, who try to merge populism with some vague form of socialism, also useful for populists in power as thus they account for their lack of political success as they are sabotaged by the elite that continues to hold economic power (arguments often launched in post-communist Eastern Europe and typical of Chavez, who held the economic elite for undermining the efforts at democratizing Venezuela).
- It may be merged with nationalism, when the distinction between the people and the elite is both moral and ethnic, something typical of Latin America.

The third major discourse pertains to the so called general will (C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 16-18)**,** which is closely linked to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy of representative government and in particular to the distinction between the general will (volonté générale) and the will of all (volonté de tous). The former refers to the capacity of the people to join together into a community and legislate to enforce their common interest, the latter denotes the simple sum of particular interests at a specific moment in time. As the researcher suggest, "populism's monist and moral distinction between the pure people and the corrupt elite reinforces the idea that a general will exists" (C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 16). Hence Rousseau's concept of the general will refers to an aristocratic form of power, in which citizens are seen as passive agents, mobilized by general or local elections in which they simply select their representatives in government. As a result, presumably there exists "elective affinity between populism and direct democracy" and "a direct relationship between the populist leader and their constituencies". Furthermore, the populist notion of general will is based on that of common sense. This way populism "enacts a specific logic of articulation" whereby "a popular subject with a strong identity (the people) is able to challenge the status quo (the elite)". This carries the risk of the establishment of an authoritarian regime. Another weakness of this notion is that the people have "a homogeneous identity that allegedly is authentic

and incorruptible." More importantly, claiming to oppose "political correctness" and break the "taboos" imposed on the people by the elite, populists promote the repoliticization of certain topics, which either intentionally or unintentionally are not (adequately) addressed by the establishment, such as immigration in western Europe or the policies of the so-called Washington Consensus in Latin America (Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 17-19).

## Overview of the construction of the populist image in the three discourses

As populism is first and foremost a set of ideas that can be employed by various political actors, the prototypical populist leader is non-existent as such, though in academic and popular research, the charismatic strongman is the stereotypical populist (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 62). However, the set of the populist's typical features is culture-specific. We can therefore presume that Donald Trump and Nicolas Maduro are different in the characteristic features as individuals, considering the different cultures in which they operate. Nevertheless, what all populist leaders have in common is that they present themselves as the voice of the people, which means as both political outsiders and authentic representatives of the common people.

## The charismatic strongman

Many researchers argue that populism heavily relies on strong leaders who are able to mobilize the masses or conduct radical reforms, which is to some degree true. Furthermore, in their behavior and speech, they should be able to present themselves as the vox populi. In this context, it comes as no surprise that Taggart should argue that populism "requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary of people" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017., p. 63).

In Latin America the stereotypical populist leader is the caudillo (a generic term with roots in the Latin caput head). This term alludes to a strong leader, who "exercises a power that is independent of any office and free of any constraint" and who "tend to rule on the basis of a 'cult of the leader,' which portrays him as a masculine and potentially violent figure" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 62). Admittedly, the link between populism and strongmen goes back to president Juan Domingo Péron of Argentina [6]. A more recent example of a populist strongman is Hugo Chávez, another military man turned into a successful civil politician. Non–Latin American strongmen tend to lack a military background, but they share the other features [7] (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 63).

Populist strongmen tend to craft an image of themselves as men of action rather than words, courageous enough to take difficult and quick decisions, even

against expert advice. Hence they draw upon anti-intellectualism and a sense of urgency, claiming that the alleged crisis requires immediate action and common sense solutions. Hence to claim authenticity among the common people, populist leaders tend to use simple and even vulgar language. They relate to "the common man" by playing on sexist stereotypes and by using coarse language.

Perhaps the most contentious feature of the populist strongman is charisma. According to the majority of researchers, charisma is a set of extraordinary personal qualities of the leader, which are considered universal. According to Max Weber, charismatic leadership refers to "the authority of the extraordinary and personal gift of grace, the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, heroism, or other qualities of individual leadership" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 66). Weber believed that charismatic leadership is especially relevant in times of crisis, when people would seek refuge in the specific characteristics of certain individuals, often political outsiders, rather than in the most common sources of authority. In a Weberian understanding, charismatic leadership is about a specific bond between leader and followers, which is defined as much by the expectations and perceptions of the followers as by the individual characteristics of the leader. Hence, charisma and its individual features are again culturally determined. Stressing the importance of individual leaders for the electoral success of populist parties, commentators have come up with terms such as the "Le Pen effect" or the "Haider phenomenon." Some scholars have argued that charismatic leadership can be institutionalized within political organizations, leading to "charismatic parties" rather than mere charismatic leaders. Examples of populist leaders with strong coterie charisma would be FN leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, who single-handedly kept an extremely heterogeneous coalition of far right groups together, or Vladimir Zhirinovsky, founder-leader of the seriously misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 65-67).

## The vox populi

Considering that populist politics is essentially a struggle of the pure people against the corrupt elite, it is essential that populist leaders should present themselves as the vox populi. This basically involves two interrelated processes: separation from the elite and connection to the people. Whereas the former process is related to the outsider status of populist leaders, the latter process is linked to their claimed authenticity (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.68).

C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser make a distinction between two groups of more unlikely populist actors who portray themselves as voices of the people by using their profession and ethnicity (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.70). Admittedly, it is to these two groups that Donald Trump and Nicolas Maduro

belong. The first group consists of the entrepreneur-populists who typically present themselves as honest and self-made businessmen that have made their fortune despite the corrupt political class. The economic entrepreneur is a rather common albeit largely underestimated populist leader. Among the successful businessmen who belonged to the richest people in their country before becoming the voice of the common people are the Shinawatras in Thailand, the Berlusconi family in Italy, Ross Perot in the United States. Such populists were able to use their business acumen to construct their status as a political outsider. Moreover, entrepreneur-populists claim to be reluctant politicians, who, unlike professional politicians, do not enter politics to profit from it financially. Even though it might seem a hard task to become the voice of the ordinary people, they often use their wealth to connect to the people and "bestow an aura of authenticity" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.71).

The second group encompasses the so called ethnic leaders (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.72). There is a difference in ethnopopulism as interpreted in Europe and Latin America. The populist radical right parties

tend to combine it with authoritarianism, nativism, and populism, whereas in Latin America the term denotes a particular type of populism, related to mobilization by indigenous peoples. While both types of populism use ethnicity to establish their authenticity, they do it in fundamentally different ways. For the European populist radical right ethnicity is not part of the populist distinction between the people and the elite, who are part of the same ethnic group, but rather of the nativist distinction between "natives" and "aliens," in which the latter are considered to be part of neither the people nor the elite. In the case of Latin American ethnopopulism, on the other hand, the nation is defined as a multicultural unit, within which the people and elite are divided by both morality and ethnicity. The two researchers single out Evo Morales in Bolivia and his party MAS as the prototypical case of ethnopopulism [8].

## The insider-outsider

According to C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 73-76), there are three types of populist leaders: the true outsider, the insider-outsider, and the insider.

In their attempt to separate themselves from previous governments and from the alleged corruption and incompetence of politicians, populists often claim to be political outsiders, which is in tune with their anti-establishment attitude. Furthermore, the reluctant politician is readily compared to and differentiated from the professional politicians of the mainstream. The populist also claims to be motivated to engage in politics in the name of bringing politics back to the people. In reality, populist leaders "often belong to the same sociodemographic strata as the political elite, i.e., highly educated, (upper) middle-class, middle-

aged males of the majority ethnicity". Some female populists "inherited" their position as populist leader: Isabel Péron was the widow of Juan Domingo Péron, Marine Le Pen is daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen. Hugo Chávez was a low-ranking officer in the Venezuelan army whose public acknowledgement was due to a failed coup d'état in 1992. According to the two researchers, outsiders are probably more successful in more personalized and fluid political systems, such as the presidential systems in Latin America, than in more institutionalized and established political systems, like the party-dominated parliamentary systems in western Europe and North America (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.75). Almost all successful populists are insider-outsiders who have never been members of the political elite, but have some connections to them.

There is a small group of insider populists who come from within the heart of the political elite. They are referred to as insiders. Some have held high-ranking positions in mainstream parties before starting a second career as a populist politician [9].

The boundaries between insider and outsider status become blurred when populist leaders are able to win elections and stay in power for a long period of time. When this occurs, they necessarily become part of the political – and usually also the economic – establishment. There is no better example of this than the case of Chavismo in Venezuela. Fifteen years of governing

the "Bolivarian revolution" has led to an almost wholesale elite change and the rise of a new ruling class, the so-called Boliburguesía. This even changed the status of Chávez, who, after more than ten years in power, transformed from a genuine outsider in the 1999 presidential elections to a true insider in the elections of 2013.

Just as the boundaries between insider and outsider are sometimes blurred, the distinction between populist and nonpopulist politician is not always easy to discern. Some famous mainstream politicians have used populist rhetoric from time to time, including U.S. president Ronald Reagan. In fact, commentators tend to use the term insider populism in reference to this particular type of politician. However, neither these politicians nor their parties were truly populist, as populism was not a core feature of their ideology. These insiders merely used populist rhetoric to set themselves apart from other mainstream politicians and (try to) look authentic. Not by chance, mainstream politicians tend to employ populist discourse mostly during election campaigns, while largely ignoring it in government.

**The populist image**

The success of populist leaders is less dependent upon a universal list of specific personality characteristics than on a carefully constructed image of vox populi,

based on the combination of outsider-status and authenticity. The attractiveness of the specific image of the voice of the people is linked to the political culture of the society in which the populist leader operates. For example, the stereotypical populist strongman is more likely to be attractive to people in societies with a more traditional and machismo culture, while entrepreneur-populists will probably be attractive in more capitalist and materialist societies. Political culture has a particularly interesting effect on female populist leaders. Obviously, all societies are gendered, but they are not always gendered in the same way. Female populists can succeed in both emancipated and traditional societies, but in different ways. Traditional cultures will favor inherited female (and male) populist leaders, while emancipated societies will (also) be open to self-made female leaders.

The construction of the image of vox populi is also dependent upon the host ideology of the populist leader. For example, it is much easier to combine an entrepreneurial image with neoliberal populism than with socialist populism, while ethnic minorities can more easily become leaders of ethnopopulist than of populist radical right movements. Similarly, female leaders will probably construct a more traditional image in right-wing populist parties than in left-wing populist ones. All this notwithstanding, most populist leaders devote so much attention to constructing an image of political outsider in order to hide a long and close relationship to the same elites they so vehemently renounce. Hence, building upon Paul Taggart's original observation, populism can be thought of as politics for ordinary people by extraordinary leaders who construct ordinary profiles.

## Donald Trump within the tradition of populism in the United States

Populism has a long history in America, the term first being used in regards to the People's Party of the 1890s (Kazin 1995). In contemporary populism America follows a framework first introduced by George Wallace in the 1960s (Kazin 1995). The Democrat Governor of Alabama ran three campaigns for President that were based around maintaining segregation. Furthermore, he was the first top civil servant to rely on populist rhetoric and style in an attempt to win votes. The Republicans, beginning with Nixon, have used "the rhetorical defense of hard working Americans against the liberal elite" increasingly since 1968 (Kazin 1995, p. 247). Thus, George Wallace is the starting point for examining right-wing populism in America.

Wallace's definition of the people encompassed "the man in street- your steelworkers, your oil workers, building trades workers, beauticians, little businessmen, and farmers, and your policemen and firemen" (Kazin 1995, p. 395). Wallace supported any citizen who was "harassed by arrogant but inept bureaucrats, slovenly and unpatriotic protesters, and criminal minorities- none

of whom did anything useful for society" and his campaign was "driven by pure resentment, an ability to whip up the hostilities of certain average whites and channel them in his direction" (Kazin 1995, pp. 224-239).

The strand of right-wing populism that Wallace created was echoed by Republicans during the election that Wallace was running in – in 1968 campaign by Richard Nixon. The people in Nixon's imagination consisted of "labor leaders and people from middle America who still have character and guts and a bit of patriotism" (Kazin 1995, p. 249). Along with the phrase Middle America, Nixon also popularized the term silent majority, which implied that Nixon had the support of the people. Nixon also tended to cater to White America, which was at the expense of African-Americans as a way to define African-Americans as part of an undeserving minority group. Furthermore, he ferociously attacked the media, "believing it had a colder, more sinister sound than the traditional 'press'" and offered "the media" as a "new type of elite".

Ronald Reagan also relied on the rhetoric of populism and claimed to represent "the people" as opposed to the Democrats, who "used to fight for the working families of America, but now only seem to fight for the special interests". Statements like this made it seem like "a bundle of privileged minorities were the problem organized feminists, homosexuals, advocates of affirmative action, public schools, and government unions," though Reagan rarely attacked these groups by name (Kazin 1995, pp. 252-262). What is more, Reagan's argument about cutting back the welfare state rested on the assumption that "elite interests and the black poor were colluding in parasitic embrace", which also included "federal bureaucrats, the mass media, and arrogant academics" (Kazin 1995, pp. 263-266).

The biggest difference between these three politicians – Wallace, Nixon and Reagan – was their political style. Wallace was a charismatic speaker, who appealed to "the people" through his bad manners, while Nixon was a more reserved man, did not display the bad manners that are an important part of the populist style, and followed the mainstream rules that governed the behaviors of politicians during the time. George W. Bush portrayed himself as "a simple man who shared the values and perspectives of the common people rather than those of Washington," and "was often described as adopting a somewhat populist persona" (Brewer 2016, 250, Perry 2014, p. 101). Finally, Sarah Palin used populist rhetoric, complaining about "the so-called academic and cultural elite" as well as "the Left, who is ashamed of saying that America is good" (Larson and Porpora 2011, p. 769).

The line of conservative populists stretched from Reagan to the Tea Party. Rasmussen and Schoen argue that the Tea Party was populist, attributing its rise to "an unprecedented crisis of confidence" in American "economic, political and social systems," because of income inequality, economic dislocation and

globalization. Tea Party supporters believed that "the economic system works only for the elite" and that "the political elite are becoming detached from the nation at large" (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010, pp. 53-55). According to the Tea Party's activists, the people are being hurt by the elites and the undeserving minority groups that the elites favour (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010, 2010, p. 95). Another major issue to members of the Tea Party was immigration: 83 percent of Tea Party supporters saw immigration as a serious problem, significantly more than any other group (Sustar 2013, p. 60). Tea Party supporters were also anti-government, and many "Tea Party candidates," conservative Republicans who vowed to "shake things up" in Washington were elected to the House of Representatives in 2010 (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010, p. 96). The Tea Party showed the appeal of right-wing populism in the years preceding the 2016 campaign.

Donald Trump largely follows this line of populism in US politics and how he defines "the people," "the elites," and the "undeserving minority groups" is highly relevant in the analysis. Right-wing populists in America have traditionally been exclusionary, attacking minority groups as "other," even though minority rights is a cornerstone of the American constitutional system. Furthermore, the groups traditionally targeted by right-wing populists in the United States the vulnerable groups that become further marginalized as the target of right-wing populists. These attacks on socially marginalized groups are in breach of the Western values of openness, tolerance, and diversity. In the next section, we present how we will structure our inquiry of the populism of Donald Trump.

## Nicolas Maduro within the context of populism in Latin America

Latin America boasts the longest in history populist tradition, which is largely accounted for by the fact that socioeconomic inequality combines with long periods of democratic rule on the continent. Populist discourse is particularly appealing in Latin American countries, given that economic and political power was allegedly concentrated in a small minority and there has always been in place a fraudulent oligarchy (oligarquía) that acts against the wishes of the people (el pueblo). At the same time, relatively free and fair elections have been regularly held, whereby voters can channel their discontent with the state of affairs. In other words, populists

in the region have invariably enjoyed electoral success across because of "the combination of democratic politics and extreme inequality" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 28).

Mudde and Kaltwasser identify three waves of populism, based on the specific understanding of who comprises "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite."

- **The first wave** (1929-1960) started with the Great Depression and lasted until the rise of the so-called bureaucratic authoritarian regimes at the end

of the 1960s. During this period of time, the countries in Latin America experienced migration pressure as rural people tended to settle urban areas, on the one hand. On the other, the implemented economic reforms resulted in industrialization and accordingly it increased demands for political and social rights. Hence different leaders and parties advanced political programs pertaining to social issues, as a result of which socialism and communism gained ground. Most successful populists at the time – Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina, and José María Velasco Ibarra in Ecuador became presidents by taking advantage of a political language focused on the people rather than on the working class and reliance on the ideology of Americanismo, in which all Latin American inhabitants have a common identity and the interference of imperial powers is renounced. The pure people was defined as a virtuous community composed of peasants and workers, excluding people of indigenous and African descent. The corrupt elite encompassed a national oligarchy and not the whole establishment in alliance with imperialist forces.

- **The second wave** (early1990s – late1990s) and the most typical examples cases were again Argentina (Carlos Menem) and Brazil (Fernando Collor de Mello), together with Peru (Alberto Fujimori). Following the common economic crisis that hit these countries in the late 1980s, populists won the elections by blaming the elite for the economic depression and by suggesting that the people had been robbed of their sovereignty. The leaders cooperated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to implement harsh neoliberal reforms, which albeit unpopular, stabilized the economy and ruled out hyperinflation. The neoliberal set of ideas articulated a particular understanding of who belongs to the pure people versus the corrupt elite, whereby the struggle was framed as against the political class and the state. The alleged corrupt elite was depicted as those political actors who favored the existence of a strong state and opposed the development of a free market. The ideology of Americanismo and its emphasis on anti-imperialism did not play a role. In consonance with the neoliberal approach, the people were portrayed as a passive mass of individuals, whose ideas could be deduced from opinion polls. Hence the second wave of populism was characterized by the implementation of anti-poverty programs targeted at the extreme poor.

- **The third wave** of populism was initiated by the triumph of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, one that subsequently spread to countries such as Bolivia (Evo Morales), Ecuador (Rafael Correa), and Nicaragua (Daniel Ortega). These leaders resorted to Americanismo and anti-imperialist rhetoric that they combined with socialist ideas [10]. Hence all leaders were seen as radical leftists, who claim to fight the free market and to

construct a new development model that will presumably alleviate the condition of the poor. In other words, the populist leftist discourse "is related to the social grievances stemming from the neoliberal reforms that were implemented in Latin America during the last two decades of the 20th century", which generated macroeconomic stability but failed to reduce the socioeconomic inequality. This merger of socialist and populist ideas gave rise to an "inclusionary concept of the pure people: all those who are excluded and discriminated against". The corrupt elite in turn was a fraudulent establishment that governed in their own favor. As a consequence, the populist leaders of the three countries argued that they would give sovereignty "back to the people" through the formation of a "constituent assembly" in charge of drafting a new constitution, which has to be ratified via a referendum. All three leaders – Chávez, Correa, and Morale – implemented this type of constitutional change. The new constitutions diminished the power of the old elites and restricted the opposition's ability to compete in a free and fair manner against the populist governments, which has been justified by the recent developments in Venezuela (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 31-32).

## Donald Trump's language of populism

In his content analysis of Trump's populist rhetoric his 2016 presidential campaign speeches, Jared Quigley (2018) finds that Trump often mentioned the people and invoked a crisis of representation, which helped him hone his rhetoric in a more populist way. Furthermore, Trump's prolific use of the the people versus the elite dichotomy is further evidence to the fact that populism is more of a performance than an ideology to Trump. Trump often echoed the idea that "the people in this country are tired of being taken advantage of". A main theme of Trump's rhetoric was that he, unlike his opponents, was not a traditional politician and not controlled by lobbyists, donors, and special interests.

In his ties with the elite, Trump represents the typical insider-outsider. In his speeches, Trump often highlighted his connections to the elite by bragging about how rich he was and touting his elite education. The President often mentioned his Ivy League education, as he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Economics from the Wharton School of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania. He has invariably mentioned how rich he was, arguing that no one knew the system as well as he did, which would allow him to fix it. He regularly spoke on how he was connected to politicians, lobbyists, and other donors from his years of donating to politicians and being a rich businessman.

At the same time, Trump attacked elites. In the tradition of US populist leaders, at least in terms of rhetoric, such as Wallace, Nixon and Reagan, Trump attacked

politicians and the media and further expanded the social groups under attack with donors, lobbyists, and special interests, as well as hedge fund managers, Wall Street and big business in general. Trump spent much of his campaign discussing a crisis of representation and attacking politicians and the nation's leaders. The word that Trump used most often to attack politicians was stupid, as he referred to the stupidity of politicians at nearly all of the speeches. Along with moral corruption, incompetence, and stupidity, Trump argued that America's leaders were weak.

Trump was also the first to include Muslims and refugees in his populist rhetoric. "Populists who ideologically believe what they are saying, instead of using populism as a performance, are more likely to push for populist policy outcomes. This is especially true in Trump's case, as Trump's policies since becoming President have seemingly done little to help his white working-class base" (Quigley, 2018, p. 14). Trump's failure to deliver for this group could lead to their already low faith in government dropping even further. Trump's exclusionary, performative populism is dangerous, as it is largely disconnected from policy and attacks valuable institutions and norms. Trumpian populism is a disturbing development in recent American politics, and is dangerous to the health of American democracy. He also demonstrated bad manners.

In much the same vein, Trump attacks Venezuelan socialism and Maduro's alleged dictatorship. It comes as no surprize that Donald Trump's posts on Twitter are of special research interest. Trump was the first presidential runner and incumbent President to use Twitter to personally communicate with the public (something that the other candidates were afraid of doing). Twitter was one of the many social network tools Obama used in his campaign in 2008. Obama's campaign used Twitter to announce the location of the candidate at any moment and to promote the campaign website. He personally tweeted throughout his campaign. His unfiltered, off-the-cuff posts maintained the connection with his supporters and drew attention to him which in turn gained him free publicity on television and newspapers.

While social media microblogging platforms like Twitter did play a role in the previous election, media critics have pointed out the possibility that Twitter hadn't yet reached its full potential in 2012, claiming 2016 has been the "Twitter" election (Kantrowitz, 2012).

In the analysis of Trump's tweets on Venezuela over the past three years (2017-2019), it has been established that Donald Trump posted 27 tweets on Venezuela/ Cuba in the period between 2016 and 2019. It comes as no surprise that their biggest number (16) was in 2019 with the outbreak of the tension in Venezuela which escalated into a full-blown humanitarian crisis. The interesting thing about his language is that the President unequivocally states that the United States stands with the people of Venezuela and Cuba in their quest for freedom, democracy and

prosperity. He further calls on the Cuban regime to end their repression of Cubans and Venezuelans. "I ask every member of the Maduro regime: End this nightmare of poverty, hunger and death. Let your people go."

## Nicolas Maduro's language of populism

Unlike Trump, Maduro is part of the people, as his biography shows. In this respect he is rather the typical outsider. Maduro grew up in a family of moderate means in Caracas, where his father was engaged in leftist politics and the labour movement. His own early interest in left-wing politics led Maduro to pursue training as an organizer in Cuba rather than a university education. He worked as a bus driver in Caracas and became a representative in the transit workers' union and was promoted through its ranks.

Maduro's statements on Telesur state television dismiss Trump's attempts "to manufacture a non-existent reality in Venezuela", and to describe the country as "a threat to peace and regional or international security". On the contrary, today Venezuela "is at peace and calm", boasting normally functioning institutions in accordance with the state's constitution. The attempts of the US administration are blatantly described as a war of recolonization. The US interference in Venezuela's internal affairs is further characterized as imposing Guaido as a "puppet dictator" and a coup d'état. Overall, **Trump and Europe try "to loot the riches of the Venezuelan People"** (Moncada, 2019).

## Conclusion

Despite the divergence in terms of political culture and ideological assumptions, the two populist leaders show strong similarities with regard to linguistic devices and discursive strategies. They are both involved in an anti-establishment discourse, where the status quo is rendered as a crisis situation that certainly needs immediate rectification and emergency measures. The discourse of the two presidents is an anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign people. Such ideas are suggested through the use of coarse language and straightforward and vulgar vocabulary. The populist leader is presumably the mouthpiece of the moral and sovereign people and reportedly tends to speak the truth, which is suggested through the recurrent use of the modal verbs and rare use of any hedging devices to take off the edge of their statements. Their insistence on their version of the truth is fortified by the use of highly modal verbs such as shall and will. Furthermore, neither transitivity nor nominalizations are used. Instead the two world leaders make unequivocal assumptions about one another as the root of evil in a democratic world, that is, they directly state that the other is to blame

for misleading the people, while they themselves represent the voice of the same people.

With regard to the theoretical framework within which the language of populism should be explored, we have arrived at the following conclusion. It should be examined as a discursive frame with which the current political state of affairs, regardless of whether it is the domestic political landscape or the arena of international relations, is seen as rapidly deteriorating that requires immediate action on the part of the populist leader, so that the acute crisis of people's representation be adequately resolved.

## Notes

[1] While all populists share a common discourse, populism is an extremely heterogeneous political phenomenon. Individual populist actors can be left or right, conservative or progressive, religious or secular (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 21).

[2] Common among historians in the United States and among researchers on the original North American populists of the late 19th century; populism is generally seen as a positive force for the mobilization of the ordinary people and for the development of a communitarian model of democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 3).

[3] Based on the pioneering work of the late Argentinian political theorist Ernesto Laclau and his Belgian wife Chantal Mouffe, in which populism is considered not only as the essence of politics, but also as an emancipatory force; liberal democracy is the problem and radical democracy is the solution; the latter can presumably be achieved by reintroducing conflict into politics and fostering the mobilization of excluded sectors of society with the aim of changing the status quo (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4).

[4] For instance, climate change can be framed as an economic problem or as a moral issue.

[5] Consisting of the characteristics of the audience, the speaker's own political background and career aspirations, and the political position of the speaker and his or her party.

[6] The original populist caudillo, who is, for many, still the personification of Latin American populism; as an army colonel turned civil politician, Péron served in both authoritarian and democratic governments.

[7] Examples include former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and former Slovak prime minister Vladimir Meciar (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 63)

[8] Morales is the first indigenous president of Bolivia, a country with a majority of indigenous people who have been systematically discriminated against. He has often used his ethnicity as proof of both his separation from the elite (outsider

status) and his connection to the common people (authenticity). For instance, he usually argues that he descends from those who have inhabited the Americas for forty thousand years, whereas most members of the elite are of more recent European origin. Moreover, Morales often claims authenticity on the basis of his ethnicity, since he is a member of the Aymara, one of the two largest indigenous groups in Bolivia. One of his most famous statements is: "We Indians are Latin America's moral reserve." But, unlike ethnic populists in Europe, Morales and MAS are not exclusionary. In fact, the party has reached out not only to the Aymara and the Quechua – two largest indigenous groups of the country – but also to mestizos and whites. As Morales once declared, "the most important thing is the indigenous people are not vindictive by nature. We are not here to oppress anybody – but to join together and build Bolivia, with justice and equality."

[9] An example in this respect is Sarah Palin who was promoted in public by Republican senator John McCain. Similarly, Berlusconi built his media empire through his special connection with the former prime minister of Italy and leader of the Italian Socialist Party Bettino Craxi. In post-communist eastern Europe most prominent populists of the 1990s had been closely connected to the communist regime. Ironically, often it is these connections to the (former) elite that separate the successful populists from the unsuccessful populists.

[10] Evo Morales' party is called Movement toward Socialism (MAS), Hugo Chávez's – United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

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# THE LANGUAGE OF POPULISM: DONALD TRUMP AND NICOLAS MADURO

## Abstract

The paper carries out a comparative analysis of the populist rhetoric and style of US populism and Venezuelan populism with the major aim to possibly identify commonalities and differences. Thus it has set the goal to outline the specific features of populism as a language and the possible theoretical and methodological framework within which it can be examined. The empirical material that has been subject to analysis comprises US President Trump's tweets on Venezuela and Venezuelan President Maduro's TV statements on the United in the period January – March 2019, at the height of Venezuela's humanitarian crisis. The findings suggest that, despite the divergence in terms of political culture and ideological assumptions, the two populist leaders show strong similarities with regard to linguistic devices and discursive strategies. They are both involved in an anti-establishment discourse, where the status quo is rendered as a crisis situation that certainly needs immediate rectification and emergency measures. Such ideas are suggested through the use of coarse language and straightforward and vulgar vocabulary. The populist leader is presumably the mouthpiece of the moral and sovereign people and reportedly tends to speak the truth, which is suggested through the recurrent use of the modal verbs and rare use of any hedging devices. Their insistence on their version of the truth is fortified by the use of highly modal verbs such as *shall* and *will*. Furthermore, neither transitivity nor nominalizations are used. Instead the two world leaders make unequivocal assumptions about one another as the root of evil in a democratic world.

**Key words:** Populism, social media, framing, critical discourse analysis

**JEL:** Z13, Z18