



TEAM POPULISM – LEADER PROFILE SERIES

Is Joe Biden a Populist? An Analysis of Biden's Campaign Speeches

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WHAT IS TEAM POPULISM?

Team Populism brings together renowned scholars from Europe and the Americas to study the causes and consequences of populism. We seek to answer why some populist parties, leaders or movements are more successful than others.

Our general argument is that populism is best understood as a combination of individual and contextual issues ("demand side") and the availability of successful leaders ("supply side").

We expand on this broad framework by studying multiple levels of analysis, and we draw on different methodological tools, including experiments, surveys, and comparative analysis. To facilitate this work, individual teams are organized around functional tasks.

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Is Joe Biden a Populist? An Analysis of Biden's Campaign Speeches

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Abstract: *In the paper, we use the ideational approach to determine whether Joe Biden's campaign rhetoric is populist. We find that despite some instances of mild populism, Biden's rhetoric is best classified as pluralist rather than populist. Biden speeches consistently give value to democratic norms and make calls for unity despite policy differences. Though Biden identifies an economic elite in his speeches, unlike populists, he does not consider them as morally evil or as conspiring to suppress the will of the people. He reserves his harshest criticism for President Trump. However, Trump as one individual is not representative of a broader elite and thus Biden's critiques of him should not be considered populist. Biden also employs consistent people-centric language; however, the minimal use of anti-elitism results in demoticism (closeness to ordinary people).*

Introduction

On July 10, 2020, an opinion piece ran in the Washington Post entitled “Joe Biden just ate Trump’s populist lunch,” claiming Biden was repeating Trump’s 2016 populist campaign with protectionist economic policies and anti-elite rhetoric (Jennifer 2020). That week, Biden had just announced his “Build Back Better” plan in which he proposed spending 400 billion dollars on U.S. manufacturing to create jobs in that sector. Following Biden’s proposal, several news agencies, including the New York Times, the LA Post, Bloomberg, the Daily Telegraph, the Associated Press, and others associated Biden with populism (Goldmacher and Tankersley 2020; Mason 2020; Strain 2020; Riley-Smith 2020; Barrow and Weissert 2020). This label continued on the campaign trail as Biden described the election as between “Park Avenue and Scranton” and went after Trump’s wealth, portraying him as out of touch with the needs of the people (Kapur 2020; Chait 2020). Given Biden’s economic policies, his attacks on Trump’s wealth, and his romanticizing of the common “folks,” it is easy to see why journalists associated Biden with populism. But is Biden deserving of the label? Did he in fact run a populist campaign?

In this profile, we use the ideational approach to measure the populism in Biden's campaign rhetoric. We find that despite some instances of Biden framing issues as 'the people' versus 'the elite', his rhetoric is best classified as pluralist rather than populist. Biden speeches consistently give value to democratic norms and make calls for unity despite policy differences. Though Biden identifies an economic elite in his speeches, unlike populists, he does not consider them as morally evil or as conspiring to suppress the will of the people. He reserves his harshest criticism for President Trump. However, Trump as one individual is not representative of a broader elite and thus Biden's critiques of him should not be considered populist. Biden also employs consistent people-centric language; however, the minimal use of anti-elitism results in demoticism (closeness to ordinary people).

Theory and Methodology

Perhaps the biggest source of confusion in evaluating Biden's populism is in choosing whether to look at his economic policies or his words. Populism as an economic approach was classically outlined in Dornbusch and Edwards's (1991) edited volume, in which they describe populism in Latin America as an "approach to economics that emphasizes growth and income redistribution and deemphasizes the risks of inflation and deficit finance, external constraints, and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive non market policies" (1991, 9). More recently, Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin have argued that populism is "the implementation of policies receiving support from a significant fraction of the population, but ultimately hurting the economic interests of this majority" (2013, 772). Hawkins and Kaltwasser take issue with these economic definitions because of their focus on leftists and the exclusion of right-wing populists (2017). Economic definitions exclude political movements that a majority of social scientists and the general public consider populist, such as the Tea Party, Trumpism, Brexit, and anti-

immigrant rhetoric in Eastern Europe. For these reasons, we are unwilling to define Biden as populist just because he supports redistributive policies.

Instead, we use the ideational approach to populism (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2017). The ideational approach defines populism as a thin-centered ideology that holds that politics is a moral struggle between an evil, conspiring elite and a pure, righteous people. The people referred to are not simply anyone; they are the ordinary people who embody democratic virtue. Critically, they have been slighted or oppressed by the evil elite and therefore must remove the establishment from power. The policies they hope to implement are not necessarily relevant in determining if they are populist, which is why the term ‘thin-centered’ ideology was used to describe populism. What is critical in determining populism is the “*normative* distinction between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’, not the empirical difference in behavior or attitudes [italics added]” (Mudde 2004). This normative distinction is best observed in the rhetoric of politicians, which is why we decided to use Biden’s political speeches as data to determine if he is a populist.

To measure candidate Biden’s populism, we used holistic grading (Hawkins et al., 2009). This method includes selecting speeches from a politician and having trained coders assign a populism score to each speech after reading it in its entirety. Scores across coders are averaged to determine where the politician fits on a 0-2 populism scale. In selecting speeches for Biden, we choose to only look at 2020 campaign speeches, which is a diversion from the norm of other descriptive research on the populism of political leaders. Usually, political leaders are evaluated with four speeches: a campaign speech, a famous speech, a speech to a foreign audience, and a ribbon-cutting or ceremonial speech (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019). However, we chose to evaluate the populism of Biden’s candidacy for president rather than Biden’s populism across his

career as a senator, vice president, and president. This decision was motivated by the desire to provide a response to the press's conception of Biden's campaign as populist. Furthermore, we believe our speech selection strengthens our argument that Biden is not a populist. Politicians tend to produce more populist language when campaigning than when governing (Hawkins et al., 2019, 7). Though Biden's populism scores are likely inflated relative to what they would be if we coded non-campaign speeches, they still do not qualify him as a populist.

We selected six 2020 campaign speeches from a broad range of time and several different campaign settings.¹ Our selection includes prepared speeches, like his speech at the Democratic National Convention, and more extemporaneous speeches, such as the transcript of his NBC town hall. We also included speeches intended for a local rather than nationwide audience, such as the one given at Pittsburgh in which Biden flaunted a Philadelphia Eagles Jacket. To check for consistency in Biden's rhetoric between the Democratic primaries and the general election against Donald Trump, we also coded Biden's Super Tuesday victory speech. Super Tuesday is the biggest night of the primaries, as a number of states vote on the day to elect a party nominee. Biden's victory on the night was a surprise to pollsters and pundits, and it solidified his standing as the dominant Democratic candidate while also providing an opportunity for him to deliver his campaign's central messages. The two other speeches selected include a televised speech given at Gettysburg a month before the election and the transcript of the first general election presidential debate.

¹ Each of the speeches selected is included in the Appendix. Anytime a speech is quoted in this paper, the text will indicate which speech the quote comes from.

Results

Biden's speeches displayed very minor levels of populism. On a scale of 0-2, where 0 is least populist and 2 is most, Biden averaged a 0.4 populism score. Ideational scholars consider a score below 0.5 as "not populist" (Hawkins et al., 2009). The speeches are listed in table 1 along with their respective scores. We found little variation in Biden's level of populism across all speeches which suggests that intercoder reliability was high. The average difference between Coder A and Coder B was 0.2, an insignificant value. We choose not to report Krippendorff's alpha as in this case, with minimal variation between coders and few data points, the statistic is less useful. The average difference and the table both indicate that the final score for Biden is accurate. There was some disagreement between the two coders on the debate transcript, with coder A assigning the speech a 0.9 and coder B assigning a 0.5. This is still a modest disagreement and was the result of an anomaly in Biden's speech. As we will demonstrate in our

Table 1 Biden Populism Scores

Title	Date	Coder A	Coder B	Average/Final Score
Super Tuesday Victory Speech	March 3, 2020	0.4	0.2	0.3
Democratic National Convention Acceptance Speech	August 20, 2020	0.6	0.7	0.7
1st General Election Presidential Debate with Donald Trump	September 29, 2020	0.9	0.5	0.7
NBC Televised Town Hall	October 5, 2020	0.2	0	0.1
Gettysburg Speech	October 6, 2020	0.3	0.2	0.3
Pittsburgh Speech	November 2, 2020	0.3	0.3	0.3
Total Average:		0.45	0.32	0.4

Source: Authors coding; speeches and the coding rubrics are included in the Appendix.

qualitative analysis, Biden made an effort in his other speeches to not attribute blame in any instance to an economic elite or Republican leaders (except President Trump). In the debate, however, Biden included references to other elite groups when attacking Trump. For example, Trump and “his administration” were guilty of not providing masks to teachers. Trump and “his friends look down on people on so many people....on people who don’t have money.” Trump and the “Republicans won’t meet in the Senate” to create a COVID relief bill. Or, “millionaires and billionaires *like him* in the middle of the COVID crisis have done very well [italics added]”. In each of these cases, elite groups were lumped in with Trump. Our coders debated over the significance of this distinction from the other speeches, as Trump seems to be the main subject of Biden’s critique in the debate rather than some elite. But as we will demonstrate below, the norm for Biden is to avoid extending his criticisms of Trump to a broader elite.

Qualitative Analysis

Joe Biden’s emphasis on American political unity in contrast to the increased divisiveness of American politics identifies him as a pluralist. Populist scholars have identified anti-pluralism as one of the main features of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 7; Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019, 4). Müller even argues that anti-pluralism is the second leading aspect of populism, with anti-elitism as the first (2016). Thus, pluralist language significantly dampens any populist aspects of speech, leading to our conclusion that Biden is not a populist. However, Biden also employs some populist themes, most significantly, people-centric language. Being a man of the people is part of Biden’s history; he was well known as one of the poorest members of the senate and during his first two presidential campaigns, he focused his rhetoric on restoring the middle class (Wallsten 2008). This reputation is reflected in his language during the 2020 campaign. However, his anti-elitism language is minimal, which leads him to receive such low

populism scores. This strong focus on the common man and lack of anti-elitism is best characterized as demoticism (closeness to ordinary people).

Biden's Pluralism

Marc Plattner described pluralism as placing value on “manyness,” meaning many opinions, political groups, and ethnicities all having influence on the political system (2010). This manyness is viewed as a way of sustaining the norms and institutions of democracy, as having strong differences prevents any one group from subjugating the other. Politicians who use pluralist rhetoric directly contradict essential aspects of populism because they are unwilling to label their opponents and their policies as morally evil; instead, policy differences are differences of opinion and the opponent is assumed to be acting in good faith. For these reasons, Biden’s pluralist rhetoric significantly brings down his populism scores.

Unity Theme

Biden’s strongest pluralist theme is unity. He repeatedly states that he will work “as hard for those who didn’t vote for me as for those who did.”² This aspect of pluralism is perhaps enhanced by the contrasting bellicose politics of Biden’s opponents. In contrast to Trump’s divisive style of politics, Biden makes unity a fundamental part of his campaign from the start. This also contrasts with other prominent contenders for the Democratic nomination for whom populist rhetoric of fighting corruption and special interest supersede unity.³ Notice the emphasis on unity and comity Biden adopts in his Super Tuesday victory speech.

Folks, winning means uniting America, not sowing seeds of division and anger and hate. We got to beat Donald Trump, but we will, but we can’t become like him. We can’t have a never ending war between the parties. We need a President who can fight, but make no

² See his speech to the DNC, as well as his speech at Gettysburg.

³ See Elizabeth Warren’s [New York rally on Sept. 16, 2019](#), or Bernie Sander’s [speech on Super Tuesday, March 3, 2020](#).

mistake about it, I could fight, but look, we need this badly, as badly, someone who could heal.

After Biden won the Democratic nomination, he made unity and respect for opponents a central message of his DNC speech, a planned pivotal speech that lays out the direction of the campaign. In the opening lines of the speech, he condemns the division that exists in American politics and states his intent to be a candidate that can unify America.

The current president has cloaked America in darkness for much too long. Too much anger. Too much fear. Too much division. Here and now, I give you my word: If you entrust me with the presidency, I will draw on the best of us not the worst. I will be an ally of the light not of the darkness. It's time for us, for We the People, to come together.

Biden's reference to the people does not carve out certain segments of the population as virtuous, like in populism. Instead, his reference to the people adds to his message of unity. His definition of the people, and the general thrust of his campaign, is one that includes all America. For example, later in the speech, he refers to those who do not support him and states his intent to represent them.

...while I will be a Democratic candidate, I will be an American president. I will work as hard for those who didn't support me as I will for those who did. That's the job of a president. To represent all of us, not just our base or our party. This is not a partisan moment. This must be an American moment.... America isn't just a collection of clashing interests of Red States or Blue States. We're so much bigger than that. We're so much better than that.

This language suggests that Biden wants a broad group, not just of voters but of Americans united by something bigger than their differences. Like populism, this "American moment" of unity is redemptive, though, unlike populism, it is redemptive in its moral stance against division.

On October 6, entering the final month of the campaign, Biden gave a speech at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania focusing on the cost of division. The speech was not located in a large

city, as most speeches are in the final month to drive turnout. The location of Gettysburg was clearly chosen for its historical significance and its symbolism of unity and the cost of division.

Biden highlights these themes in his speech.

There's no more fitting place than here today in Gettysburg, to talk about the cost of division. About how much it has cost America in the past, about how much it is costing us now, and about why I believe in this moment, we must come together as a nation.

Instead of speaking only to his base of supporters, Biden intends this speech for all of America.

He states that he will "work with Democrats and Republicans," and then repeats the line from his DNC speech: "I'll work as hard for those who don't support me, as those who do." He then addresses Republican voters directly, saying "You don't have to agree with me on everything, or even on most things, to see that [what] we're experiencing today is neither good nor normal."

Instead, he offers a return to pluralist politics, where differences are respected and defended by enforcing respectful treatment of opponents.

If I'm elected president, I will marshall the ingenuity and goodwill of this nation to turn division into unity and bring us together because I think people are looking for that. We can disagree about how as we move forward, we must take the first steps. It starts with how we treat one another. How we talk to one another. How we respect one another.

By giving a speech directly aimed at all of America, including members of the other party, Biden solidifies his pluralist rhetoric. Contrasting him with other candidates again helps illustrate the point. Biden's main competitors for the Democratic nomination and his competitor for the presidency employed an electoral strategy of rallying their base. Senator Bernie Sanders frequently suggested that the only way to win the general election was by a massive voter turnout of young people who, if they were to vote, would vote Democratic. His primary campaign mimicked this strategy as well. President Trump also focused on his base; his preferred campaign technique was to visit swing states and hold massive rallies with his supporters. In

both cases, the electoral strategy was not conducive to talk of unity. Biden's electoral strategy was arguably not much different from either of these, as he mostly visited swing states and championed liberal policies. Yet regardless of his electoral intention, by stating that he would work with and respect republicans, Biden set himself apart from his competitors.

Biden's Weak Populism

Aspects of Biden's speech are mildly populist. He often frames issues by comparing the state of the elite—Fortune 500 companies, millionaires, and Wall Street—to the state of the common people, such as teachers, nurses, firefighters, small business owners, and grocery store workers. However, Biden makes a significant effort to not demonize or even blame the elite for this situation. His anti-elitism is minimal and outweighed by pluralist language.

Biden's Economic Elite

According to the ideational approach to populism, populist rhetoric will always define an evil enemy constituted by a societal elite (Mudde 2004). Though Biden portrays an ill-defined economic elite in his speeches, he stops short of demonizing them, hating them, or blaming them for the country's problems. For example, he adopts a conciliatory approach to the wealthy in his speech to the Democratic National Committee.

And we can pay for these investments by ending loopholes and the president's \$1.3 trillion tax giveaway to the wealthiest 1 percent and the biggest, most profitable corporations, some of which pay no tax at all. Because we don't need a tax code that rewards wealth more than it rewards work. I'm not looking to punish anyone. Far from it. But it's long past time the wealthiest people and the biggest corporations in this country paid their fair share.

The phrase "I'm not looking to punish anyone. Far from it," is antithetical to how populism describes the elite. Blame is not attributed to the wealthy and the biggest corporations, but rather

to the president and his tax cuts. Biden makes several jabs at the president, but he does not describe Trump as part of a systemic elite. When Biden does discuss the rich, he is conciliatory. Unlike Democratic candidates such as Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders, he does not use words like “greed” or “corrupt” to describe the wealthy.⁴

Instead of blaming the rich, Biden identifies them in his speeches in order to highlight the absurdity of inequality in America. This framing does have a populist feel to it, but notice in his Pittsburgh speech how he references billionaire wealth as unjust while avoiding attribution of blame.

Folks, I believe we should be rewarding work not wealth in this country. Do you all realize that just as the pandemic started, the listed billionaires in America made another \$300 billion? Not a joke, \$300 billion they made in the middle of the pandemic. What’s going on here, folks? Well I’ve got a plan, and under my plan I commit to you no one making less than \$400 grand is going to see a penny in taxes raised.

Biden does not dwell on the point of billionaire wealth, but instantly transitions to his economic plan to benefit the middle class. His plan also includes higher taxes for the upper class, but the policy is not framed as a punishment for corruption or a combating of the elite. Rather it is a matter of fairness, as this quote from his Pittsburgh speech demonstrates.

But for a change, the wealthiest and the biggest corporations, 91 of the Fortune 500 companies pay zero in taxes after making billions of dollars. Well, guess what? Under a Biden administration, they’re going to start paying their fair share.

Unlike other Democratic candidates who demanded these corporations pay for the damage they caused, Biden frames it as them paying their “fair share.”

Instead of blaming the elite, Biden takes issue with an inhumane system of inequality that needs to be fixed. In his DNC speech, Biden frames inequality as the result of an “economic

⁴ Ibid.

equation,” a vague concept that is not attributed to a knowing elite.

There’s another enduring division in America that we must end, the division in our economic life. That gives opportunity only to the privileged few. America has to be about mobility. It has to be the kind of country where an Abraham Lincoln, a child of the distant frontier, can rise to the highest office in the land. America has to be about possibilities. We cannot and will not accept an economic equation that only favors those who have already got it made; everybody deserves a shot at prosperity.

Notice how it is the *equation* that favors the wealthy, rather than the elite favoring themselves.

Instead of blaming the people at the top, Biden’s criticism is focused on a system of equality that simply exists. What is more important is that the system is unfair and absurd, and needs to be dealt with.

Demoticism

Biden’s people-centric language is a centerpiece of many of his speeches. Because he mostly refrains from criticizing the elite but puts such an emphasis on the people, or the “folks,” his speeches are best characterized as demotic. Demoticism is a term coined by March to help correct scholars who inaccurately identify people-centric language as populist (2017). Populist language requires both people-centric and anti-elite language. Demotic language emphasizes the importance and virtue of the common man but does not condemn the elite. Without an antagonistic view of the elite, Biden’s people-centric language is not enough to be classified as populist.

Biden relies heavily on his working-class roots to position himself close to middle-class America, as the counterweight to the very wealthy Donald Trump. Frequently Biden uses the phrase, “He sees the world from Park Avenue. I see it from Scranton.”⁵ Biden often references

⁵ See both presidential debates, the NBC Town Hall, the Pittsburgh speech, and Joe Biden’s Twitter.

the middle-class steel town of Scranton, Pennsylvania where he was born, suggesting that he knows what life is like for the common people. In his DNC speech, he told the following story about his father that extols middle-class values of community and family.

You know, my Dad was an honorable, decent man. He got knocked down a few times pretty hard, but always got up. He worked hard and built a great middle-class life for our family. He used to say, 'Joey, I don't expect the government to solve my problems, but I expect it to understand them.' And then he would say: 'Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity. It's about respect. It's about your place in your community. It's about looking your kids in the eye and say, honey, it's going to be okay.'

This language posits Biden as a man of the people, someone who understands and values the hopes of working-class people.

Biden demonstrates people-centrism by name-calling different groups of people who are symbolic of the middle class and then contrasting them to the wealthy. In doing so, he is attributing value to the middle class and also condemning the inequality they face. Consider the three quotes below and how they each reference some middle-class profession and point to the injustice of their economic situation.

Why should a firefighter, an educator, a nurse, a steelworker pay a higher tax rate, and this is the God's truth, a higher tax rate than the super wealthy? - Pittsburgh Speech

Look, the ironworkers, the steel workers, the boilermakers, the plumbers, the electrical work. These are the people that have been forgotten.... Folks, that's where we need an economy that rewards work, not just wealth. - Super Tuesday Speech

The middle class is getting clobbered. Too many people in the neighborhoods that Jill and Val and I grew up in are getting hurt. They're badly hurt, and guess what? They're the place where we come from. Many of you come from. It's where we're raised. The people. They're the reason why I'm running. These are people that build our bridges, repair our roads, keep our water safe, who teach our kids, look, who race into burning buildings to protect other people, who grow our food, build our cars, pick up our garbage, our streets, veterans, dreamers, single moms... - Super Tuesday speech

These quotes display a populist framing, but they lack the essential aspect of blaming the elite or referring to them as evil. Instead, the focus of these quotes is the virtue of the people and the issue of inequality. His referencing of the elite is to give leverage in emphasizing the value of the people rather than to vilify the elite, as would be the case in populist language. Consider his oft-repeated phrase, “*Wall Street didn’t build this country – the middle class did.*” While the phrase is a criticism of corporate America, it is more clearly a sign of reverence for the middle class. Thus, Biden’s language is demotic rather than populist.

Conclusion

Biden admittedly gives a populist framing to economic issues. He highlights the wealth inequality that exists between Wall Street, large corporations, and the middle class. The virtue of the common people is a central tenet of his political character. However, we have identified how Biden makes an effort to not demonize or even blame the elite as a populist would. His issue is with a system of inequality that was not inherently created by a conspiring elite; rather, it just exists. Antagonism toward the elite is a critical component of populism that is lacking in Biden’s rhetoric. He certainly displays antagonism for President Trump, however, Trump is just an individual and does not represent a border elite in Biden’s speeches.

Pluralist rhetoric is much more apparent in Biden’s speeches. In a political context of personal attacks and expression of hatred for the other side, Biden spoke about unity. He prioritized democratic values over his victory. Such a position revealed pluralist principles at the core of Biden’s rhetoric. While populism still plays a role in American politics, both on the left and the right, we can expect to see less of it coming from the executive branch during the Biden administration if Biden’s campaign is any indication for his presidency.

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