Mapping Varieties of Populism in Political Speeches: The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

This project proposes a novel method for measuring populism in political speeches, a method that maps populist discourse along two dimensions: (i) a vertical dimension that represents the opposition between “the people” and “the elite,” and (ii) a horizontal dimension that represents the opposition between “the people” and ethno-cultural “outsiders.” The proposed method will be used to quantify not only the overall degree (vertical dimension) but also the type (horizontal dimension) of populism employed by major Democratic and Republican contenders during the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle. This will be accomplished through a quantitative content analysis of campaign speeches. Student coders will be first trained to follow a detailed coding protocol derived from the theoretical and empirical literature on populism. Using this protocol, they will then code two samples of campaign speeches (one purposive, the other random) from the 2016 election, generating a speech-by-variable matrix that can be analyzed quantitatively. This matrix will serve both descriptive and theoretical purposes. Descriptively, it will help provide an evidence-based account of populist communication in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, focusing particularly on Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders. Theoretically, it will help address several questions concerning the relational nature of populism, such as whether the candidates were more likely to employ populist discourse in states with a high proportion of White voters without a college degree.

In the first few weeks of the project period, students will complete assigned readings on populism and content analysis, attend a lecture in which the principal investigator will go over the coding protocol, and participate in practical training sessions that seek to attain inter-coder reliability. Students will spend most of the remaining project time coding campaign speeches. They will also check in periodically with the principal investigator, either individually or in groups, to discuss their coding and the larger project.

Per accreditation standards, students are expected to work 45 hours per credit, or an average of 3 hours per credit every week for 15 weeks. For this project, research assistantships are available for 3 credits only. Therefore, students are expected to work a total of 135 hours, or 9 hours per week for 15 weeks. If work starts later in the term, the hours per week will be higher. Grading will be based on points. Each hour worked is worth a point, with a maximum of 135 points to earn. In addition, there are 15 points for staying on pace with the work (i.e., doing a minimum of 9 hours per week every week) and 45 points for doing the work in an efficient and high-quality manner. Students may also earn 5 points for writing a 2-page report summarizing what they have learned in the practicum. For grading purposes, students will be required to keep a work log—in the form of a Google Docs spreadsheet—that gives hours worked each week and tasks accomplished. Time spent reading articles for the project and in team meetings or consulting with the principal investigator counts toward required work hours but must be logged in the time sheet. Failing to maintain the time records every week will result in grade penalty.
Qualifications: This project requires excellent command of English. Diligence and attention to detail are also essential. Students who have taken a basic research methods class in the social sciences or communication studies are preferred.

To apply: Please send an email to Kerem Morgul (morgul@wisc.edu) with the following information: (i) your name; (ii) year in school; (iii) major(s); (iv) whether you have taken a research methods class in the social sciences or communication studies; (v) prior research experience, if any; and (vi) why you are interested in working as a research assistant in this project and how you think it will work into your schedule.

List of readings that will be assigned to students:

