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Navigating Populist Discourse: Trump's Political Communication Strategy and Its Role in Shaping Modern Populist Politics.

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I| Abstract

This thesis investigates the communication practices of Donald Trump through the analytical lens of populism. The study utilizes a methodological framework centred on analysing academic literature and select definitions of populism, alongside diverse scholarly approaches to the subject, in order to qualify the oft-repeated claim that Trump and the political movement that is associated with his name are populist. Trump's communication methods, characterised by nationalist rhetoric and provocative language, have sparked intense political debate, but also academic scrutiny. It has become a common claim in this last kind of literature to state that Trump would be populist, thereby contributing to a reshaping of political dynamics in Western democracies. It is seldom clear however exactly how this would be the case. By focusing on populism as an analytical lens, I aim to highlight how Trump's rhetoric resonates with populist themes, such as 'us versus them' and anti-establishment sentiments. The analysis includes a systematic exploration of specific features of Trump's discourse and their implication for democratic norms and political participation within the context of contemporary political phenomena. Moreover, the thesis engages with scholarly perspectives on whether Trump should be classified as populist, critically assessing arguments both for and against this characterisation by different authors. By synthesising elements from literature in several disciplinary fields, such as political science, political theory, communication and media studies, and social sciences more broadly, as well as several theoretical frameworks, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the communicative strategies of Trump, and the role of populism in shaping political communication strategies, so as to single out in which precise ways it would be justified to characterise Trump's political discourse as populist. By doing so, it also highlights the practical utility of the analytical approach employed. The impacts on the traditional democratic western political landscape of the studied forms of speech are referred in the concluding reflections.

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III | Introduction

2024 marked a decisive year in politics, with governmental elections held all around the world in over sixty-four countries and the European Union. Most pivotal of all was the US presidential election in November: Donald Trump is now serving as the 47th president of the United States since January 2025.

Dominating the Republican primary, the possibility of a second Trump mandate was described as “the biggest danger to the world” by *The Economist* already in November 2023. In the contemporary political landscape, few figures have captured the world’s attention and provoked as much debate as Donald Trump. While recognised for his several business achievements, his mandate as the 45th president of the United States, marked by unconventional communication strategies, polarizing rhetoric, and a divisive approach to governance, would fundamentally reshape the dynamics of politics in the U.S., and—some would claim—in the Western world and beyond. Trump’s ascendancy to power and his subsequent actions have sparked intense scrutiny and analysis, with many seeking to understand the underlying forces and implications of his political behaviour, often identified as “Trump phenomena” (Faizer 2016, Galam 2017)¹. While the study of this phenomena includes Trump’s policies or the fact he is the only US president to seat at the White House without prior public office, or to run for office while being accused of and convicted for criminal offences, this dissertation chooses to focus on his communication strategies and use of social media as a phenomenon challenging established norms of political communication and political participation. His approach to political opponents, provocative language and nationalist rhetoric have established Trump a feared political adversary but it has also facilitated his comparison with populist movements and leaders, as Western political landscapes have witnessed the rise of populist figures and rhetoric in recent years (Moffitt 2016)².

The growing number of political figures described as “populist” has contributed to increasing the ambiguity surrounding the term. A significant body of academic and journalistic articles and research, often through comparative analyses with similarly distinguished, has labelled Donald Trump and his discourse as populist, yet the reasons for making this claim often remain vague or inconsistent. For example, Taraktas, Esen and Uskudarli (2022)³, in a political communications study during the COVID-19 crisis, compare Trump’s rhetoric and governing style with that of several internationally recognised populist leaders, identifying shared strategies on antagonism and emotional appeal. Within the Republican Party itself, this characterisation has also generated significant internal tensions: in a 2023 *New York Times* interview, Mike Pence, former Vice President to Donald Trump during his first mandate, publicly urged Republicans to abandon what he described as Trump’s populist tendencies and return to traditional conservatism, highlighting some uncertainty about the

¹ Faizer, M. Akram. "The Privileges or Immunities Clause: A Potential Cure for the Trump Phenomenon." *Penn St. L. Rev.* 121 (2016): 61.

Galam, Serge. "The Trump phenomenon: An explanation from sociophysics." *International Journal of Modern Physics B* 31, no. 10 (2017): 1742015.

² Moffitt, Benjamin. *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press, 2016.

³ Taraktas, Başak, Berk Esen, and Suzan Uskudarli. "Tweeting through a public health crisis: communication strategies of right-wing populist leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic." *Government and Opposition* 59, no. 1 (2024): 207-228.

party's political identity, as well as throwing some doubt over how populism itself should be understood. More broadly, the application of the populist label to dogmatically opposed figures such as Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, or Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the US, further illustrates the flexibility of the term but also the confusion that surrounds its definition. Historian Charles Postel (from the Organization of American Historians), writing on the historical evolution of populism in the United States, argues that while Sanders would align closely with the ideological tradition of the People's Party of the 1890s, Trump's classification would emerge primarily from media-driven interpretations of political performance, particularly his mastery of spectacle and rhetorical provocation. This articulation suggests that contemporary understandings of populism increasingly privilege an explanation through communicative styles over ideological meaning, which introduces the objective of my study here. Additionally, these examples, put together, show not only the frequency with which Trump is described as populist, but also the confusion over the interpretation of the term, justifying a closer examination of his communication strategies.

Therefore, this study is an attempt to explore Trump's communication strategy through the lens of populism, examining how his communication tactics, approach to political opponents, and stance on democracy and globalization can be labelled populist: what is it about this phenomenon that qualifies as populist, and in which sense? Moreover, by analysing Trump's communicative style and practices within the context of contemporary populism, this study also offers an opportunity to shed light on a number of aspects of the topic that may have relevance for other issues as well, at the thematic crossroad of political participation and societal norms in contemporary politics of democratic societies in the 21st century. One hypothesis that is formulated and discussed is whether it makes sense to speak of a Trumpian "legacy" in political discourse and on social media that influences a novel way of doing and discussing politics, where untraditional political participation is available through the internet by sharing and connecting directly from comments made by politicians, as evoked by Lavrov (2022) and scholars of the media studies (Manucci 2017)⁴. Echo chambers can accentuate one's views on a topic and only present the extreme opposite as objection, rendering discussion impossible, and creating a widening gap between demographic groups identifying with only one side of the debate. A notable rise in conservative and liberal topics (in the way they are understood in the US) as observed on traditional and social media, blurring the political position of moderate or centrist views present in most democracies by deepening the cleavages between extremes—the arguments being reclaimed afterwards by politicians of the corresponding parties.

The aim of the thesis is to address the problem of how Trump's communication practices would be populist. To do so, a number of steps are taken. First, I illustrate some of Trump's communication practices, and what has been claimed about these in relation to populism. Secondly, I specify a number of different conceptions of populism and explain how these could be used to make sense of the practices described in the first part. I then discuss whether, and to which extent, and in reference to which specific features of these communicative practices, it would make sense to label these populist. The research finds that

⁴ Lavrov, Ilya. "Make Trump Great Again: Communication Strategy of Donald Trump on Instagram in 2020." *Interdisc. J. Populism* 3 (2022): 105

Manucci, Luca. "Populism and the Media." *The Oxford handbook of populism* 1 (2017): 467-492.

Trump's communication strategy, especially on social media, and the newly growing dynamics of modern populism in the Western world, are correlated. I argue in favour of the reasons for claiming that certain particular features of Trump's discourse can rightly be labelled populist, in the sense indicated below, while that is not the case for all and any of these features.

The structure of this work is as follows. After the abstract and introduction of the thesis, chapter one briefly presents Donald Trump's communication strategy. Central to Trump's political message is his emphasis on national sentiments, portraying himself as a leader representing the "people" of the United States who would, according to this narrative, have been forgotten in the course of the process of globalization, and basing the fundamental values of his campaign on this sentiment. Chapter one explores his communication practices, characterized by the use of provocative language and rhetoric, often disseminated through social media platforms by supporters. It also examines an essential part of Trump's discourse that undermines and delegitimises his political opponents, whether personified by an actual politician or identified as some otherwise undetermined "them"-group who would oppose his values or ideology, and the scandal factor he employs to do so. The first chapter starts by diving into what lends an air of legitimacy to Donald Trump's aforementioned narrative in the first place, namely his peculiar communication style. Clashing with political communication norms that his predecessors and adversaries at the time of his first campaign in 2016 were still complying with⁵, Trump expresses himself in a way that is perceived to be more free or less constrained than what is considered to be generally appropriate for politicians; his communication style is characterised by his informal vocal and non-vocal qualities (Ahmadian, Azarshahi, and Paulhus 2017, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2024)⁶. His communication style allows him to come across in a way consistent with his narrative and thus be heard of as a legitimate contender for the presidential role. Trump has a way of expressing his rhetoric, which is itself characterised by challenging political communication norms, norms of political correctness (Conway, Repke and Houck 2017)⁷, and norms for expressing antagonism (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2021)⁸. At the heart of the rhetoric lies the pitching of an 'us' vs a 'them' argument, the antagonistic character of his speeches amplifying the moral dilemma of who, and what, define each side (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2021). Against the background of this analytical data, the thesis explores certain mechanisms of the so-called Trump phenomenon, focusing in particular on

⁵ Fletcher, Jane. 2024. "Presidential Communication Breakdowns: Analyzing Trump's Leadership Approach". *Michigan International Journal of Marketing, New Media, and Communication* 12 (2):20-31. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11235622>.

⁶ Ahmadian, Sara, Sara Azarshahi, and Delroy L. Paulhus. "Explaining Donald Trump via communication style: Grandiosity, informality, and dynamism." *Personality and Individual Differences* 107 (2017): 49-53.
Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, Jens. "The voice of the people: Populism and Donald Trump's use of informal voice." *Society* 61, no. 3 (2024): 289-302.

⁷ Conway, Lucian Gideon, Meredith A. Repke, and Shannon C. Houck. "Donald Trump as a cultural revolt against perceived communication restriction: Priming political correctness norms causes more Trump support." *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2017): 244-259.

⁸ Anggraini, Rini, Sawirman, and Rina Marnita. "The Structures of Trump's Political Discourse." *IJOLTL (Indonesian Journal of Language Teaching and Linguistics)* 6, no. 1 (2021): 55-72.

the studies of Conway, Repke and Houck (2017), Newman et al. (2021)⁹, and Galam (2017, 2021)¹⁰. These four studies explain this phenomenon with reference to the activation of what may be called a 'frozen prejudice' of voters, that would—on this reading—itself be the result of thirty years of political correctness norms (Conway, Repke and Houck 2017) which eventually backfire by generating this prejudice that only needed a figure speaking out for it to take over the public debate (Galam 2017). Once the Trumpian practices were introduced, they become part of the scope of arguments in the public debate and therefore cannot be disregarded as irrelevant. The consequences of the activation of the aforementioned frozen prejudice may also have empirical/practical impact on the way people effectively vote, share information, and shape their belief system (Galam 2017, 2021). These practices are combined into a fully-fledged strategy of political communication, in part performed on social media, which gives way for the 'Trump effect' to be applied in full to voters who share enough prejudice to express it or at least consummate such content. On the other side, the informal style of Donald Trump does not stop at written or visual online communication, which he appears to do himself or at least is aware of what is posted on his behalf (Lavrov 2022). It is also applied in public speeches and official discourse, as candidate and (ex)president (Fletcher 2024, Ntontis et al. 2024)¹¹. The chapter outlines the consequences on audiences and voters, with particular emphasis on the events that took place on January 6th, 2021, as well as Trump's leadership and declarations during COVID-19 (Fletcher 2024, Taraktas, Esen and Uskudarli 2022), and social media usage (Glueckstern, Benyacar and Grigri 2020)¹².

The second chapter focuses on establishing a theoretical framework of populism to help me understand Trump's communication style through the lens of populism. It studies various conceptions of populism and examines common traits among populist leaders and movements, by employing Pazé's analysis (2019)¹³ of how the 'people' is qualified in populism. The second chapter prepares the analysis of Trump's communication style through the lens of populism by giving an outline of several conceptions of populism. To do so, I rely on Mudde & Kaltwasser's analysis. I first point out that populism is an ambiguous term that is hard to define: there is a debate over what it means, whether it is a politically connoted notion or a *Kampfsbegriff*, whether it is a form of regime, a style of government, an ideology, a movement. For sure, it is a buzzword mentioned in media to denote remarkably diverse phenomena: e.g. in the European context, populism often refers to anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments based on nationalist ideas, whereas in Latin America it often alludes to clientelism and economic mismanagement. It is commonly said to have emerged

⁹ Newman, Benjamin, Jennifer L. Merolla, Sono Shah, Danielle Casarez Lemi, Loren Collingwood, and S. Karthick Ramakrishnan. "The Trump effect: An experimental investigation of the emboldening effect of racially inflammatory elite communication." *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3 (2021): 1138-1159.

¹⁰ Galam, Serge. "Will Trump win again in the 2020 election? An answer from a sociophysics model." *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and its Applications* 570 (2021): 125835.

¹¹ Ntontis, Evangelos, Klara Jurstakova, Fergus Neville, S. Alexander Haslam, and Stephen Reicher. "A warrant for violence? An analysis of Donald Trump's speech before the US Capitol attack." *British journal of social psychology* 63, no. 1 (2024): 3-19.

¹² Glueckstern, Roy, Alexi Benyacar, and Sacha Grigri. *Social media usage by President Donald Trump before and after the 2016 elections*. 2020.

¹³ Pazé, Valentina. "The construction of the people." In *Multiple Populisms*, pp. 17-30. Routledge, 2019.

as a political phenomenon in the late 19th century in Russia and the United States. Many quite different regimes have been called populist since. It can be argued that the very breadth of the label is not helpful for understanding whether and how Trumpian communication is properly called populist or not. Secondly, with reference to the work of Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017)¹⁴, I distinguish five types of approaches to populism, namely: (1) the critical studies approach (Laclau 2005, 2014, Mouffe 2013)¹⁵, (2) the socioeconomic approach (Dornbusch and Edwards 1990, Sachs 1989)¹⁶, (3) the style of government approach, (4) the media studies approach, and (5) the ideational approach (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017).

The third chapter of this thesis analyses Trump's communication style through the lens of populism, according to the outline made in the second chapter. It highlights the relevance of studying Trump's communication style within the framework of populism, by looking at how the most recurrent features in Trump's communicative practices relate to the different approaches (1)/ (2)/ (3)/ (4) or (5) to populism explored in chapter 2. I highlight as relevant the "us" versus "them" rhetoric found at the heart of much Trumpian discourse and argue that this form of discourse fits the account that Valentina Pazé gives of a typically 'populist' account of the people. I also find that the communicative features of antagonistic polarisation, moral dichotomisation of society, and performative leadership are closely aligned with approaches (3) and (4), while Trump's construction of "the people" as a symbolic identity and the articulation of political conflict through discourse correspond more closely to approach (5), although preliminarily introduced by approach (1). By contrast, I found little to no evidence suggesting that Trump's communicative practices align with approach (2), the analysis of which is also bound by the limitations of my methodological framework.

In the last chapter I draw the conclusions of this study. The last chapter sums up the points made in the previous chapters and reflects on Trump's impact on the political debate. It highlights how Trump's communicative practices can be considered populist in the sense established in the previous chapter.

¹⁴ Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism: A very short introduction*. oxford university Press, 2017.

¹⁵ Laclau, Ernesto. *On populist reason*. Verso, 2005.

Laclau, Ernesto. *The rhetorical foundations of society*. Verso Books, 2014.

Mouffe, Chantal. *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso Books, 2013.

¹⁶ Dornbusch, Rudiger, and Sebastian Edwards. "Macroeconomic populism." *Journal of development economics* 32, no. 2 (1990): 247-277.

Sachs, Jeffrey. "Social conflict and populist policies in Latin America." In *Labour relations and economic performance: Proceedings of a conference held by the International Economic Association in Venice, Italy*, pp. 137-169. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1990.

IV | Chapter 1: Trump's communication practices & the Trump Phenomenon

1. Trump's Distinct Communication

Donald Trump's communication style is a defining characteristic of his public persona and political identity, which has been key to his appeal to a wide swath of voters. In what follows an effort is made to spell out the characteristics of his distinct communication. In particular, attention will be paid to his style of communication and to how rhetoric and polarisation are developed within this communicative strategy.

1.1. Style

Concerning Trump's particular style of communication, in what follows emphasis is laid on describing (1) the verbal and non-verbal elements of his style, (2) how this play out in opponent dynamics, and (3) how this style of communication can eventually be labelled 'unshifting strategies' at work in this communicative approach as far as confrontation and contrast are concerned.

1.1.1. Informal Yet Grandiose: Verbal & Nonverbal Elements

One of the most notable aspects of Trump's communication style is the blend of informality and grandiosity from his practices. Informality qualifies language that is casual and spontaneous, typically employed when communicating with friends or family either in writing or in conversation. The term highlights the inappropriateness of the use of such language in formal or official contexts. The tone of informal language is also often more personal than formal language. Informal speech includes slang, contractions, interjections, and colloquial phrases. The noun grandiosity here qualifies the quality of seeming impressive or important in an artificial or deliberately pompous or pretentious way to the effect of communicating a sense of superiority, uniqueness, or invulnerability that is unrealistic and not based on personal capability. These two elements are not only embodied in Trump's vocal practices, but also in his non-vocal behaviours and visual presentation. Understanding the interplay between informality and grandiosity provides crucial insight into how Trump connects with his audience and projects a larger-than-life image of himself, laying the groundworks for expressing his rhetoric.

Trumpian practices are often characterized by a deliberate informality that defies the traditional expectations of political speech. From his use of colloquial language to his direct, unpolished manner of speaking, Trump rejects the refined, bureaucratic tone commonly associated with politicians. This informality allows him to communicate as if he were speaking to a friend or a crowd in a casual setting, breaking down the distance between elite political figures and the average voter. Although it is already the case for most successful politicians to avoid excessive rhetorical sophistication, as voters typically favour simple rhetoric (Thoemmes & Conway, 2007)¹⁷, Donald Trump's lack of formality and complexity seems to differ from previously recorded political communication strategies. Research at the time of the 2016 campaign and general election by Ahmadian, Azarshahi and Paulhus (2017) already sought to examine the aspects of Trumpian communication that

¹⁷ Thoemmes, Felix J., and Lucian Gideon Conway III. "Integrative complexity of 41 US presidents." *Political Psychology* 28, no. 2 (2007): 193-226.

differed from his peers, focusing on grandiosity, informality, and dynamism, to establish a relation between stylistic factors of communication and political success. Dynamism refers to the energy and enthusiasm exhibited during communication, often enhancing the delivery of a message. It plays a crucial role in effective presentations, as it captures the audience's attention and maintains their interest throughout the speech or performance.

The analysis was conducted over speech segments of 9 top Republican contenders to the primaries as of October 2015, as well as Twitter index use of all 17 candidates. To test for informality, the study examined four variables defined through Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software: analytical thinking, formality, words per sentence and words under 6 letters; additionally, Twitter (now X) usage was coded for total number of tweets in the three months before announcing their candidacy. The experiment eventually found Donald Trump to score significantly higher both on LIWC informality and Twitter usage. Looking at the more stylistic components of the Trumpian practices, the study examined subcategories of the informal LIWC variable: swear words, net-speak (btw, lol, thx), assents (agree, ok, yes), non-fluencies (er, hm, umm) and fillers (I mean, you know), on which Trump also scored highest among the politicians under consideration. Overall, it concludes that Trump's speeches present more use of non-standard, low-complexity words, and that informality and Twitter talk (or T-talk) was associated with success in the primaries across all candidates, eventually suggesting that T-talk, in the case of Trump at least, could serve as a predictor for political success, contrasting with the mixed results of previous research on this correlation (Gaurav et al., 2013; Chung & Mustafaraj, 2011)¹⁸. Moreover, Trump's informality is reinforced by the very fact that he manages his own communication on social media or at least is aware of what is posted for him (Lavrov 2022). His tweets often contain unfiltered thoughts, spontaneous reactions, and informal language, which convey a sense of immediacy and directness. These unscripted moments are a stark contrast to the carefully crafted public statements of more traditional politicians, allowing Trump to present himself as someone who is "real" and unmediated by the political establishment, and to establish a recognisable conversational style of communication between him and his supporters.

In contrast to his informality, Trump's communication also exudes a sense of grandiosity and self-promotion, with a focus on elevating his image as a powerful, exceptional figure. For instance, phrases like "I alone can fix it" or "no one knows more about [insert topic] than I do" are indicative of Trump's constant framing of himself as a unique, almost infallible figure capable of solving complex problems. This grandiosity is not just verbal but also non-verbal. Trump's vocal practices amplify his grandiosity through exaggeration, repetition, and self-centred statements that place him at the centre of every conversation. His speeches often feature a rhythmic, almost theatrical delivery, underscoring his ability to dominate attention and position himself as the central actor, consistently framing himself as the solution to the nation's problems. This characteristic of his communicative efforts can be said to be akin to what populist leaders are often accused of,

¹⁸ Gaurav, Manish, Amit Srivastava, Anoop Kumar, and Scott Miller. "Leveraging candidate popularity on Twitter to predict election outcome." In *Proceedings of the 7th workshop on social network mining and analysis*, pp. 1-8. 2013.

Chung, Jessica, and Eni Mustafaraj. "Can collective sentiment expressed on twitter predict political elections?." In *Proceedings of the AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 1770-1771. 2011.

namely, to suggest that only they would be fit for political office, through the strength and will of a single, charismatic leader, as we shall see in chapter two.

Ahmadian, Azarshahi and Paulhus (2017) coded the speech segments for linguistic markers of grandiosity by observer ratings and LIWC grandiosity variables, mostly evaluating I-talk in the segments, as well as boasting (pride and self-satisfaction over one's own achievements, possessions or abilities). Interestingly, the research on grandiosity was conducted in line with observations on narcissistic behaviour from several previous research articles and theorisation. Although narcissism is generally considered as maladaptive, it has been linked to success in certain areas of public and private discourse and presents adaptative elements in its multidimensional construction as well (Back et al. 2013)¹⁹. For example, Pincus and Roche (2011)²⁰ distinguish vulnerable and grandiose narcissism. Narcissistic grandiosity is most often associated with arrogant, conceited, and domineering attitudes and behaviours, while narcissistic vulnerability is reflected in experiences of anger, envy, aggression, helplessness, emptiness, low self-esteem, shame, and social avoidance, and high levels of grandiose narcissism have been monitored amongst US presidents (Watts et al. 2013)²¹. Like for informality, the study tests for a relationship between the level of grandiosity of each candidate and success in the primaries. While linguistic markers detected by the observers and the LIWC program may give a sense of the grandiose narcissism mentioned by the authors, they specify that the link between I-talk and Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI) scores is weak or probably more complex than what the study can provide (Carey et al. 2015)²². However, the observers may interpret I-talk as a marker of an arrogant but insecure personality (Chung and Pennebaker, 2007)²³, therefore the first-person pronoun count was included in the study for grandiosity. Total number of acts of boasting per candidate were also considered. As expected, Trump's speeches scored highest in grandiosity, and significantly higher than the average of the other candidates; the same results apply to the count for I-talk. Although its link with the NPI is not put forward, I-talk was highly correlated to grandiosity and appeared to be linked to observer-perceived narcissism.

In their conclusions, the authors note that the study supports that person evaluations appear to be strongly associated with indirect non-verbal information, such as communication style, voice quality, etc. Although it is difficult to evaluate whether such factors are the result of habits or a consciously constructed strategy of communication, stylistic factors appear to have the most impact in one's perception of a personality.

¹⁹ Back, Mitja D., Albrecht CP Küfner, Michael Dufner, Tanja M. Gerlach, John F. Rauthmann, and Jaap JA Denissen. "Narcissistic admiration and rivalry: disentangling the bright and dark sides of narcissism." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 105, no. 6 (2013): 1013.

²⁰ Pincus, Aaron L., and Michael J. Roche. "Narcissistic grandiosity and narcissistic vulnerability." *The handbook of narcissism and narcissistic personality disorder: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings, and treatments* (2011): 31-40.

²¹ Watts, Ashley L., Scott O. Lilienfeld, Sarah Francis Smith, Joshua D. Miller, W. Keith Campbell, Irwin D. Waldman, Steven J. Rubenzer, and Thomas J. Faschingbauer. "The double-edged sword of grandiose narcissism: Implications for successful and unsuccessful leadership among US presidents." *Psychological science* 24, no. 12 (2013): 2379-2389.

²² Carey, Angela L., Melanie S. Brucks, Albrecht CP Küfner, Nicholas S. Holtzman, Mitja D. Back, M. Brent Donnellan, James W. Pennebaker, and Matthias R. Mehl. "Narcissism and the use of personal pronouns revisited." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 109, no. 3 (2015): e1.

²³ Chung, Cindy, and James Pennebaker. "The psychological functions of function words." In *Social communication*, pp. 343-359. Psychology Press, 2011.

Trump's grandiosity and informality are also conveyed through his vocal qualities of speech, his body language, and visual presence. In a 2024 study on Trumpian informality, Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen chose to focus on Donald Trump's use of informal voice through his non-verbal vocal practices rather than his words, in evaluating Trump's use of pitch, amplitude, speech rate, rhythm, and how they participate to make his paralanguage counter-normatively informal.

The author qualifies Trump's speech as informal but wishes to isolate the non-verbal elements of Trumpian communication that support his informality. He argues that Trump's voice is informal in two ways: a) his dynamism and spontaneous laxness express a controversial and unmonitored informality, the non-verbal vocal measures conveying a sense of relatable folksiness that voters recognise. However, his communication is also b) specifically politically informal, as Trump often uses aggressive shouting, name-calling, or vocal impressions to amplify political arguments for his own political platform or against his opponent.

The study singles out several non-verbal elements of Trump's communication. His strong New York accent, for one, which does not appear as an advantage in ordinary political communication, actually reinforces Trump's blunt directness and simplicity, clashing with his actual status of a celebrity billionaire.

Audience perception (Bucy et al, 2020)²⁴ finds that Trump's voice in debates is highly expressive of his emotions or expected emotions in line with the subject at hand. Anger, fear, happiness are conveyed by voice quality variation and pitch dynamics. Disorganized, emotive prosodic dynamism is typical of unprepared, informal speech. By definition, formal communication on the other hand tends to be structured and emotionally restricted (Beckman, 1997)²⁵.

Compared to other candidates (Ahmadian, Azarshahi and Paulhus 2017; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2024), Trump's voice pitch is particularly variable, giving the impression of a more dynamic prosody, accentuated by his stressing specific words or repeating them in a different tone. The author notes that Trump's pitch and word stressing is usually enhanced when expressing the absurdity of another candidate's proposition. By contrast, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen notes a specific use of a deep, self-assured voice by Trump in situations where he must convey a feeling of reassurance to the voters, sometimes mid-utterance, and usually to defend himself from accusations he has received.

When mocking his opponents, usually with nicknames ('Sleepy Joe,' 'Crazy Bernie'), Trump also makes use of his voice to make vocal impressions, change his tone and mimic the target's behaviour or recognisable characteristics. Most notably, Trump often makes use of these impersonations to relay the impression of the country having stiff, inaccessible career politicians, transforming his pitch and cadence accordingly. Immediately back into his own character, Trump will demonstrate exceptional informality in word-usage and behaviour, contrasting his image with that of his adversaries, and employing an informal, conversational tone that brings him closer to his supporters.

²⁴ Bucy, Erik P., Jordan M. Foley, Josephine Lukito, Larissa Doroshenko, Dhavan V. Shah, Jon CW Pevehouse, and Chris Wells. "Performing populism: Trump's transgressive debate style and the dynamics of Twitter response." *New media & society* 22, no. 4 (2020): 634-658.

²⁵ Beckman, Mary E. "A typology of spontaneous speech." In *Computing prosody: Computational models for processing spontaneous speech*, pp. 7-26. New York, NY: Springer US, 1997.

Trump's recurrent clash with official decorum and political communication norms often goes beyond the scope of his discourse structure or voice amplitude, his use of voice and language downright politically counter-normative. Trump's proclivity for interrupting his opponents during debates for example, or his provocative and discriminatory impersonations demonstrate his willingness to transgress the norm of official decorum rather than comply with it, shaping his position of an outsider compared to the political elites.

Another element of informality and the result of unprepared speeches, as opposed to statesmanlike political communication employed by other candidates, is Trump's error-prone and disfluent speech delivery. Trump frequently mumbles and repeats himself. Kjeldgaard-Christiansen compares a transcription of a speech segment in standardized English, and a quasi-phonetic transcription of the same segment, which shows that Trump often elides the end of his words or sentences, suddenly abandons incomplete utterances, and assimilates speech sounds between separate words. Trump himself commented the accusations of his communication being unsystematic and inadequate during a rally in Anderson, South Carolina by saying he is so energized by his message he will jump from sentence to sentence, trusting his audience will be smart enough to understand the end of the sentence²⁶.

The informal character of his voice and use of discourse eventually gives the impression of someone who is communicating exactly what comes to mind, which presents a real argument to some voters who encourage having a politician that feels like they talk like them (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2024). Conversational discourse adds to this impression, especially when noticing that Trump almost never uses the specific filler words "erm", "uh", "um" that would typically allow the speaker to collect their thoughts and best convey the message they want to, as well as indicate to the audience that the break is needed. The author notes, by only avoiding this type of disfluency in his discourse, Trump delivers his speech with conversational ease, giving a sense of indifference for formal expectations of political communication. Additionally, the author notes Trump's use of discourse markers (well, you know, believe me), signalling conversational informality, is frequent, except for the marker *well*, which signals considered hesitation as do the aforementioned filler words.

In addition to his vocal qualities, Trump also makes use of his physical posture and gestures. Characterised by expansive gestures, forward-leaning postures, and frequent pointing, his physical attitude plays a central role in reinforcing the blend of informality and grandiosity already conveyed through his speech. In their study *The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle*, Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram (2016)²⁷ describe Trump's hands as "central instruments of spectacle," arguing that his exaggerated, rhythmic, and repetitive movements transform his political speech into a form of entertainment, and a "theatrical performance." Trump's gesture, they argue, not only illustrate his discourse but actively structure its meaning, in a way to "command attention" and dramatize the conflict he may express. They note his frequent pointing, arm movements, and open palms, contribute to what they term "politics of spectacle," in which Trump's bodily movements become inseparable from his rhetoric. On his visual presentation during rallies, Hall et al. note that Trump is always placed at the centre of any kind of visual display before large

²⁶ Trump, D. J. (Speaker). (2015g, October 19). Donald Trump rally. LiveNOW from FOX. <https://youtu.be/1ErwDx5xz5Q>

²⁷ Hall, Kira, Donna M. Goldstein, and Matthew Bruce Ingram. "The hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, gesture, spectacle." *HAU: journal of ethnographic theory* 6, no. 2 (2016): 71-100.

crows, often accompanied by impressive technological installations with big screens or some sort of show before or after the speech. This reinforces the impression of charisma and grandiosity, and, according to the authors, produces a carefully orchestrated image of his dominance. Relating to this perspective, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen's analysis (2024) highlights how Trump's pointing gestures are systematically aligned with what he is saying in that moment, and serve to his emphasis of key statements or arguments, reinforcing his self-presentation. Together, these practices help Trump transform his political communication into a highly visual and affective performance, in which Trump's physical presence itself becomes a vehicle for persuasion.

Kjeldgaard-Christiansen notes in his conclusive thoughts that, although Trump cannot legitimately claim to be like the people he addresses in his speeches, he is still able to inspire a deep sense of personal sameness with his supporters through both his verbal and non-verbal communication. His use of voice in particular helps him get to the voter by assimilation, avoiding the information carried by his known public image and giving a sense of personal connection that allows the voter to see beyond his public status, and the same goes for his physical practices.

More broadly, his voice and gestures contribute to the dual dynamic of informality and grandiosity that defines Trump's style of communication. On the one hand, his exaggerated movements, loose posture, and spontaneous bodily expressions cultivate the appearance of accessibility and sympathy to his followers, which dissociates him from more traditional codes of institutional political speech. On the other hand, the scale of the visual presentation, the repetition and theatricality of these gestures further help him build a larger-than-life persona by projecting power and dominance into his discourse. This combination allows Trump to appear both as a relatable outsider to the official political decorum, and as a strong commanding leader, which reinforces his appeal to his electorate.

The blend of informality and grandiosity in Trump's communication practices thus plays a crucial role in both his appeal and his ability to rally support. By speaking in a manner that feels casual and accessible, while simultaneously framing himself as a towering, almost mythical figure capable of transformative change, Trump has successfully captured the attention and loyalty of millions. His style of communication, oral, physical or written, illustrates his masterful use of rhetoric, appealing to his audience's desire for authenticity and authority in a time of political disillusionment. Trump's self-promotional style, complimented by his informal yet grandiose image, helps hinder in voters the impression of a politician who has their interest at heart, and clashes with political elites who do not.

1.1.2. Opponent Dynamics: Confrontation & Contrast

As a way to build up his political image and legitimacy as a candidate and as president, Trump has often used demeaning adjectives and nouns when talking to or about his opponents (Fletcher 2024), in an effort to break down their public image. This behaviour allows us to outline a first impression of what Anggraini et al. call antagonistic discourse and behaviour (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2021). With reference to such antagonism, I suggest that we also consider Trump's opponent dynamics as part and parcel of his communication strategy.

To explain what is meant by opponent dynamics, we can say in general that opposition can manifest in two primary forms: one can either vie for the same objectives, sparking competition, or their goals stand in stark contrast, leading to a sense of threat. In competition, characters competing for the same goal exemplify the spirit of rivalry. Victory for one means defeat for the others, a classic tale of competition. However, in threat forms of opposition, characters pursuing entirely different objectives, whose success would hinder one another, create a sense of threat. For instance, consider a scenario where one character aims to preserve a nature reserve while another seeks to develop a hotel complex. The success of one poses a direct threat to the other's aspirations. Furthermore, one should distinguish cases in which opposition is merely incidental from where it is antagonistic in nature. In their pursuit of personal interests, many inadvertently create "collateral" difficulties for others. Such opposition is merely incidental and does not necessarily involve a conscious or deliberate intent to obstruct others. However, in antagonistic opposition there is a deliberate intent to thwart another's goals. The form of opposition dynamics that are at play in the Trumpian communicative strategy are found to be more similar to the latter, antagonistic form, which is why it contributes to the delegitimising effect on opponents. Hence, I suggest determining this specific form of opposition dynamic as one marked by confrontation and contrast, not simple rivalry which would admit of a certain legitimacy in the rival's objectives.

To show how the opposition dynamics can be said to be marked by confrontation in contrast in the Trumpian case, I refer his frequent name-calling, use of stereotypes and insults which are a recurring element of his communication practices, often supported by his non-verbal practices (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2024).

The 2021 study by Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita *The Structures of Trump's Political Discourse* analyses some of Trump's political speeches directed against candidates of the Democratic Party at the time of the campaign and during his presidency. It finds that Trump's use of noun phrases and clauses contribute to create a political frontier of antagonism, making his opponent look bad, as antagonist of America's politics. In this study, the qualitative analysis of the nouns and adjectives used by Donald Trump is built around Fairclough's critical discourse analytical frameworks (CDA) (Fairclough 1995, 2003)²⁸, mainly evaluating the social, political, and ideological potential of language use. The authors argue in their conclusion that the form of discourse used by Trump represents a political attack against his adversaries. From such studies, I have gathered some of the most persistent and significant examples of nicknames or nouns used. Examples of name-calling, use of stereotypes and insults that embody Trump's antagonistic discourse and behaviour include the following cases.

Trump has repeatedly called Mike Bloomberg "mini-Mike," former mayor of New York City and candidate to the Democratic nomination in 2020, referring to his height (Fletcher 2024). The reference is mocking Bloomberg's short stature, at the same time revealing what Trump thinks of his opponent to the effect of undermining his legitimacy. Among the insults that targeted Joe Biden during his campaign was the nickname "Sleepy Joe", however it is worthy of noting that as soon as Biden became president, the nickname fell into disuse (Fletcher

²⁸ Fairclough, Norman. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. New York: Longman, 1995.
Fairclough, Norman. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge, 2003.

2024). The name-calling sometimes goes over the border of social norms and can be racially discriminatory, like when Donald Trump mocked Elizabeth Warren, US senator and rumoured Democrat candidate at the time, by calling her a “fake Pocahontas” in arguing that Warren lied about her origins to gain public validation. Even conservative figures of politics or the media, between 2016 and 2020, condemned Trump for his excessive mockery (Fletcher 2024). When using qualifying adjectives and nicknames, like calling Bernie Sanders “Crazy Bernie” to insinuate that he is an inconsiderable candidate, Trump not only defines his opponent as antagonists, but sometimes creates a similar image that applies to a larger body of people or institutions. Another example of antagonistic discourse is the phrase “some socialists”, uttered in the context of a discourse on profiling Democrat candidates for the 2020 election. It was not proffered in a context where mention of specific candidates targeted by the phrase was made, but it was pronounced just before going onto claiming about Joe Biden that “*three and a half years ago we go into a war with some socialists; consort of heavy socialist.*” The *war* mentioned is a clause building up historical context. It would construct the meaning of the discourse (Fairclough 2003). In this case, the reference would be to the 2016 general election being a competition that opposed the Republicans and Democrats. What must be understood in this line of antagonism created by Trump is that it does not concern socialism at the semantic, dictionary-defined level, but rather is a shortcut reference to the long-standing fight of the United States against communism, and although the two are different, socialism is generally associated with a sense of threat to the country’s capitalist identity (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2021). In this discourse excerpt, Trump closely says the noun “socialist” three times before talking about Joe Biden. Even if Trump does not clearly associate Biden to socialism in his speech, antagonistic discourse is created by the choice of the noun which creates in prospective voters a cognitive condition for suggesting that Biden is different, an outsider, and therefore not the adequate candidate to lead the United States (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2021).

As far as opposition dynamics are concerned, I found that in the Trumpian case these can be said to be marked by confrontation and contrast, and not simple rivalry. One way in which this opposition dynamic comes to the fore is through the use of what Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita (2021) call antagonistic discourse and behaviour. I gave several examples of how Trump achieves his goal of delegitimising the political opponent. This opposition dynamic directed at his opponents paves the way for an entire structure of antagonism in Trump’s discourse more broadly construed. For Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita for example, the name-calling is only a first set of clear barriers that Trump supporters and anti-Trump supporters are able to read to understand the dynamics brought about by Trumpian rhetoric. Before turning to a more detailed analysis of Trump’s antagonist *rhetoric*, I would like to first look into the claim that Trump’s communication style has remained the same throughout his candidacies and years in office, in order to settle the fact that the stylistic factors do in fact serve the content of the discourse recurrently.

1.1.3. Candidate Vs Leader: Unshifting Strategies

Having outlined the informal yet grandiose features of Trump’s verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as the confrontational opponent dynamics that structure much of his

discourse, I can now assess whether these stylistic traits are contingent upon specific political roles held by Trump and/or defining moments of his political career, or whether they constitute a more stable communicative strategy. This subsection addresses what can be labelled Trump's unshifting strategies: the persistence of a recognisable communicative style across different timeframes, political positions, and media platforms.

Contrary to expectations that institutional constraints would reshape Trump's communicative behaviour, or that his informal style of rhetoric would be a drain on his legitimacy to the presidential role, empirical research on Trump's use of communication tools—specifically social media—supports the hypothesis of stylistic continuity. While presidential roles, campaign goals, and media structures change, a comparative look at pre- and post-2016 social media usage (Glueckstern, Benyacar and Grigri 2020), Instagram communication in 2020 (Lavrov 2022), and 2024 Twitter usage highlighting Trump's campaign rhetoric (Donkor 2025)²⁹, reveals both continuities and adaptations in response to platform configurations or immediate political goals, with the core stylistic features described above in this chapter remaining strikingly consistent, supporting the idea of a strategic persistence in Trump's communication style rather than a transformation. A recurring finding in analyses of Trump's communication is the persistence of a distinct, direct, informal communication style, tending towards simplicity, repetition, and emotionally charged content. Studies of political language like Trump's have found that the simplicity, repetition, and appeals to in-group identity are hallmarks of his communication style, strategies that remain visible across content and media types.

The study *Social Media Usage by President Donald Trump Before and After the 2016 Elections* by Glueckstern, Benyacar and Grigri (2020) demonstrates this continuity particularly clearly. It suggests that Trump's tweet content and style reflected different immediate communicative goals (such as campaigning, engaging supporters, advising followers), but that the underlying strategic functions remained stable: mobilising core supporters, attacking opponents, and bypassing intermediaries in traditional media platforms. In the study, linguistic analyses of his Twitter data between 2008 and 2018 show that, while surface style patterns varied systematically, Trump's account's broader use as a direct, unfiltered channel for political communication remained consistent. The researchers establish four stylistic dimensions of Trump's communication: conversational, campaigning, engaged, and advisory. Although they each serve different political purposes and vary between the role of a candidate to the election to that of the 45th President of the United States, from mobilising supporters and campaigning before the election to advising and agenda-setting during the presidency, the stylistic markers persist. Trump's tweets continue to display low linguistic complexity, high informality, personalisation, and antagonistic framing of his opponents, regardless of his institutional role. The presidency did not moderate his informal tone, nor did it significantly reduce his reliance on direct confrontation and self-referential grandiose discourse. Instead, Twitter remained a space for unmediated communication with his followers, reinforcing the conversational style and oppositional dynamics that characterised his campaign and early years in his political career, as discussed in the first parts of this chapter.

²⁹ Donkor, Andrew. "Investigating the Utility of Social Media and Political Public Relations in Presidential Campaign Discourse: Donald Trump's Rhetorical Strategies in the 2024 US National Elections." Master's thesis, Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, 2025.

This persistence is further corroborated by Lavrov's analysis of Trump's Instagram communication during the 2020 campaign, as President-candidate. In *Make Trump Great Again: Communication Strategy of Donald Trump on Instagram in 2020* (Lavrov 2022), Trump's Instagram presence during his presidency illustrates a similar pattern of communicative strategies. While Instagram's visual orientation encourages a greater emphasis on imagery and symbolic representation, the study shows that Trump's stylistic identity is not transformed but rather translated into a different communication mode: the grandiosity identified in his verbal practices reappears visually through images of strength, leadership, patriotism, and centrality, while informality is conveyed through captions, slogans, and the continued emphasis on personal presence. Lavrov's analysis shows that Trump's posts often combine personal and political imagery, projecting a consistent identity blending nationalist symbolism with a strong leader persona. Whether through images of the American flag, military presence, or patriotic texts, his Instagram content reflects a familiar narrative that he has long used in textual communication on Twitter, which reiterates the hypothesis of unshifting stylistic communication strategies, and that Trump's communicative identity is maintained even when the medium changes.

More recent work on Trump's 2024 campaign communication, such as Donkor's *Investigating the Utility of Social Media and Political Public Relations in Presidential Campaign Discourse* (2024), suggests a similar pattern confirming this hypothesis. Donkor finds rhetorical elements of polarisation, antagonism, and personalised authority in Trump's online communication, as well as the persistence of name-calling, delegitimising discourse, and emotive appeals to supporters, indicating that they constitute durable elements of his communicative style. The study applies a critical discourse approach to Trump's 2024 rhetoric to highlight nationalist and confrontational narratives in Trump's discourse, echoing the previously observed patterns of opposition framing and direct audience addressing in his first two campaigns and the 45th presidency. These elements persist throughout different speech platforms appropriation by Trump. Whereas Twitter/X may foster rapid text bursts and Instagram supports visual self-presentation, both serve Trump's broader communication strategy of antagonistic framing, emotive appeals, and continuous engagement with core supporters. While the specific forms of message delivery differ, the strategic choices reflect consistent priorities in his strategy: delegitimising opponents, reinforcing the in-group identity, and maintaining high visibility across media platforms.

Taken together, these studies support the conclusion that Trump's communication strategies are "unshifting", not in the sense of being rigid and static, but in their stylistic coherence. Trump adapts tactically to different platforms and political circumstances, yet he does so without abandoning the informal, grandiose, and confrontational style that defines his public persona. Variations in style (e.g., conversational vs. campaigning Twitter posts) or medium (text vs. visuals) do not disrupt the persistence of strategic features such as repetition, simplicity, confrontation, and direct audience engagement. This continuity suggests that his communication is less shaped by institutional norms than by a personalised communicative identity that precedes and outlasts any single political role he has held or aspires to. In this respect, Trump's style functions as a unifying thread across his political career, enabling audiences to recognise and interpret his message within a familiar and consistent communicative framework. This stability not only reinforces his authenticity in the eyes of supporters but also amplifies the polarising effect of his rhetoric, which I will

examine more closely in the following section on polarisation. Crucially, the persistence of these stylistic features does not only ensure recognisability or authenticity, but it also established the communicative conditions under which polarisation can occur in Trump's discourse (Donkor 2024). The informal tone makes it easier to reach out for emotional engagement to a broader group, the grandiose self-positioning legitimises claims of authority and his place in an otherwise very coded political sphere, which keeps being divided systematically into antagonistic camps by Trump's confrontational opponent dynamics. In this sense, Trump's unshifting style does more than express political positions: it actively organises political meaning by simplifying complex conflicts into a simple, morally charged, two-sided dynamic. Style thus functions as the enabling infrastructure in Trump's communication for polarisation, shaping not only how political messages are delivered but also how political reality itself is framed and interpreted. Having established its stylistic foundations, I can now turn my analysis of Trump's communication to the rhetorics of polarisation that emerge from, and are sustained by, this distinctive and lasting communicative identity.

1.2. Rhetoric & Polarisation

In this section, the focus switches from the communication style of Trump that we have seen is marked by a blend of informality and grandiosity, his antagonistic opponent dynamics that I found to be marked by confrontation and contrast, and his 'unshifting strategies' of communication, to a more substantial level of discourse, namely his rhetorics. His style of communication, I suggest, illustrates and embodies his rhetoric, appealing to his audience's desire for authenticity and authority in a time of political disillusionment. To see this, an analysis is made of the characterising elements of his rhetorical take. Focus is made in particular on the rhetoric of polarisation as this seems to be a reasonable candidate among other less characterising rhetorical uses of languages for explaining how the 'Trump effect' on politics have come to be. I will start by spelling out how generally antagonism is approached on the literature on Trump's communicative strategies, I then focus on one particular form antagonism takes in Trump's rhetoric, namely the moral divide that opposes 'us' and 'them' in a framing that I believe we can label as 'polarising'. Finally, I refer other forms of rhetorical division in the form of accusations. This section will show that there is a function to the structure of antagonism in Trump's discourse against his opponents: beyond amplifying his image or diminishing that of others, it serves Trump's political purposes.

1.2.1. General Antagonism

Within the broad approach to discourse analysis, which focus on the various levels or dimensions of discourse, such as sounds (intonation, etc.), gestures, syntax, style, rhetoric, speech acts, and other aspects of interaction, its genres, structure and alike, critical discourse analysis (CDA)(Fairclough 1995) approaches language and the study of discourse as a form of social practice, building on post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language as praxis, and builds on explanations of how discourse contributes to social reality. The purpose of CDA, which as such characterizes it in the broad landscape of discourse analysis, is to uncover

hidden meanings embedded in texts and conversations, by analysing the way the language used reinforces power relationships, social hierarchies, and ideologies. It generally argues that non-linguistic social practice and linguistic practice constitute and reinforce one another and focus on investigating how power relations are reinforced through language use. In this sense, CDA is a useful tool for political discourse analysis, i.e. the field of discourse analysis which focuses on discourse in political communication such as debates, speeches, and alike, etc. This may be useful for Trump especially because this chapter seeks to evaluate the dynamics of his discourse in order to later explore how it influences the understanding of social realities for his followers.

In the study conducted by Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita (2021), the theoretical framework used to evaluate the purpose and functioning of antagonistic discourse is formed around theories on “political frontier antagonism” (Howarth 1995, Stravakakis 2017)³⁰, as well as O’Dawyer’s theories on “annihilating dynamics of meaning” (2003)³¹, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1995, 2003, Hart 2010)³² to decode the speeches.

The framework of understanding for the notion of antagonism in the study regroups many definitions, first grounding antagonism as an *annihilating* dynamic of meaning (O’Dawyer 2003), as opposed to an *empowering* one, because of the intended effect of destroying the other’s political image. Trump may use specific adjectives, or modify them through other words and expressions, to turn a simple mocking phrase into one that diminishes the credibility and political legitimacy of his opponent: for example, using the adjective “fake” to modify the meaning of the noun “Pocahontas” to reference Elizabeth Warren is not only obviously negative, but questions the veracity of her claim that she has native heritage to appeal to voters, and eventually, this transformation of meaning destroys her political image. According to O’Dawyer, there is a destructive capacity in meaning which may operate as an annihilating force by redirecting its path, and eventually cause the demise of the opponent. Trump’s attacks on political adversaries may illustrate this dynamic perfectly.

From O’Dawyer’s theorisation of meaning, Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita (2021) understand that antagonism is rooted in the purpose Trump seeks to achieve. This would be so firstly because meaning is often orchestrated by language and communication, and therefore Trump’s discourse helps him craft the understanding of his identity as well as that of others, in most case his opponents, but also any groups or entities he may discriminate over in his speech. According to O’Dawyer, production and understanding of meaning can be controlled through discourse, therefore the antagonism in Trump’s speeches would involve the process of discourse production and consumption. But this would also be the case because, in the case of a negative dynamic like antagonism, meaning involves the operation of power (Wodak and Meyer 2001)³³, cognitive control on the receiver, destructive capacities, and includes negative association and victimization as involvements of the engagements of power. Wodak, along with other scholars like Fairclough, is a prominent figure that

³⁰ Howarth, David. "Discourse theory." *Theory and methods in political science* 1 (1995).

Stravakakis, Yannis. "Discourse theory in populism research: Three challenges and a dilemma." *Journal of language and politics* 16, no. 4 (2017): 523-534.

³¹ O’Dwyer, Ella. *The rising of the moon: the language of power*. Pluto Books, 2003.

³² Hart, Christopher. *Critical discourse analysis and cognitive science: New perspectives on immigration discourse*. Springer, 2010.

³³ Wodak, Ruth, and Michael Meyer, eds. *Methods of critical discourse studies*. sage, 2015.

constructed theories on Critical Discourse Analysis, and she argues that the aspects of antagonism in discourse are one of the manifestations of a “language-related” use of power (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2021). The hypothesis behind Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita’s study is in part to explore whether this phenomenon occurs in Trump’s discourse of antagonism.

Overall, O’Dawyer’s definition supports the idea that for a structure of language and meaning to be organised in an antagonistic way it needs to be based on differences of identity and defined *against* the identity of other subjects. The antagonistic basis lies in a basic binary opposition between, say, people or parties and it is a characteristic of domination in traditional linguistic interpretations. According to Howarth, Norval and Stravakakis (2000)³⁴, the construction of antagonism in political discourse reflects the drawing of politicalized frontiers between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’

These are precisely the structural aspects of antagonism that Donald Trump’s speeches would demonstrate. The 2021 study by Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita analyses the structure of Trump’s speeches to show that Trump uses antagonism in his political speeches to impact his opponent’s political image, to the effect of reinforcing his. In the empirical analysis of the study from the aforementioned examples of name-calling, the authors observe a form of destructive meaning dynamics in the use of words such as “socialist.” The word would not be used in its ordinary semantic meaning but to describe a reference that the audience understands rather than qualifying a person or the actual ideology. The term is employed in order to speak to a cultural understanding of the notion, that is a negative threat on the American spirit. Eventually, in the mind of the prospective voter, the association of, say, Joe Biden or some other non-Republican candidate with a threatening, unclearly defined group is formed. It is this association, however unjustified, that would engage a relationship of power, insinuating control over the belief system of prospective voters. As the authors remark, it is impossible to place a political *frontier of antagonism* if the main structure of meaning for the antagonism cannot be easily and rapidly understood by the voters. Insinuating associations with controversial terms, such as socialist, or by naming his adversaries by name and damaging their authority and image, Trump can suggest that his political opponents are best conceived of as outsiders. Discourse excerpts analysed by the authors show that the more obvious elements of antagonism in speech, such as an insulting turn of phrase or the direct mention of the opponent’s name in contexts that are denigratory, are often supported by secondary structures of antagonism that deepen the context for the people to better understand the frontier, like contextual clauses as mentioned above.

Another important aspect of the observed structure of antagonism in Donald Trump’s speeches is the eventual consequences for the public who understands the dynamics he wants it to. Agha (2007)³⁵ describes language as not only a tool of social conduct, but effective means for the formulation of *models* of social conduct. By violently clashing with his adversaries, and building structures of antagonism in political speeches, and then succeeding in campaigns, Trumps gives the impression that this kind of conduct is an acceptable new form of political discourse.

³⁴ Howarth, David R., Aletta J. Norval, and Yannis Stavrakakis, eds. *Discourse theory and political analysis: Identities, hegemonies and social change*. Manchester University Press, 2000.

³⁵ Agha, Asif. *Language and social relations*. Vol. 24. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Additionally, Carston (2002)³⁶ suggests that, going through the process of understanding, utterance is turned into a kind of 'belief fixation'. By attracting attention with informal speech and a grandiose communication style, Trump gives the impression to a clear message, simple to understand#. This, in turn, would# shape the belief that the line of antagonism between him and his opponents would be somehow self-evident and justified.

Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita (2021) argue that the process of antagonism in discourse would aim at controlling people's understanding and that this would favour Trump, in line with the shaping of political frontiers between the voters (the people) and the antagonists to US politics (the elite).

1.2.2. Moral Divides: 'Us Vs Them' Framing

Through his communication style and rhetoric, Trump draws political frontiers with his adversaries and those who do not agree with him. However, the distinction between the two groups—namely, 'the people,' that Trump purports to represent, and the 'them' namely the 'antagonists,' enemies of US politics—seems to go further than the form of rivalry that one would supposedly find in any presidential campaign or political divergence between candidates. In most of the literature on Trumpian communication, I find that the groups are morally qualified, verbally and non-verbally. This contributes to create cognitive assimilations in the minds of prospective voters about the groups and their negative/positive stance for the preservation of an American way of life (Ntontis et al. 2024, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2024). It is key to understand the difference between the moral division of the groups made by Trump, and the rhetorical division that follows in order to understand the scope of Trumpian communication practices, and the rhetoric that was first supported by stylistic practices of differentiation.

It is argued that Trump's leadership approach based on a social identity model (Ntontis et al. 2024, Turner et al. 1987, Turner 1991)³⁷. In social psychology, people present multiple identities based on individual and social characteristics, creating both a personal identity and a social identity, which constitute together a 'self-system' unique to everyone. Distinctive characteristics will prevail depending on the context, and when a social identity is salient enough to serve as a basis for self-definition, then individuals will tune their behaviour to the norms and values of the group. According to Turner (1991) the approach carries a social influence model, in which an individual seeking to belong to a group identity will be influenced by those who are in position to define that identity, such as celebrities, cultural elites or like in this case, controversially divisive politicians. Additionally, the approach contains an implicit model of leadership (Turner 1991), later explored as identity leadership (Hogg 2001, Haslam, Reicher and Platow 2011)³⁸, in which the leader is not just a member

³⁶ Carston, Robyn. *Thoughts and utterances: The pragmatics of explicit communication*. John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

³⁷ Turner, J. C., M. A. Hogg, P. J. Oakes, S. D. Reicher, and M. S. Wetherell. "Rediscovering the social group: a self-categorization theory Blackwell." *New York* (1987).

Turner, John C. *Social Influence*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991

³⁸ Hogg, Michael A. "A social identity theory of leadership." *Personality and social psychology review* 5, no. 3 (2001): 184-200.

but a prototypical representation of the group, and it is the leader's position that defines who the group is and what they do. The leader must be perceived to not just act accordingly to the beliefs and norms of the group, but to do so in the group's interest and against those who threaten said interests.

Social identity based toxic leadership has been analysed at two levels: a) intragroup (Haslam and Reicher 2016)³⁹ and b) intergroup (Reicher, Haslam and Rath 2008)⁴⁰. As far as the first category is concerned, when influence comes from group identity, authority comes from who is able to define that identity, to gather the group around it, and to exclude who does not belong to it. This often shifts democratic leadership towards hierarchical or authoritarian leadership once the leader is seen as the embodiment of the group's will and opponents as the enemies of the group. As far as the second category is concerned, the definition of an ingroup necessitates the understanding of outgroups that threaten the ingroup. As Portice and Reicher (2018)⁴¹ show, leaders of far-right parties will often demonise an outgroup as a way to reinforce the ingroup's identity, and claims made against an outgroup such as anti-immigration policies often reveal an intergroup claim that the leader is uniquely qualified to deal with the threat and therefore must conserve authority.

On this understanding, migrants can be portrayed as a common outgroup that threaten the integrity of a nation economically, culturally, or existentially (e.g. grand replacement theory, Obaidi et al. 2022)⁴². This creates an environment in which use of violence may develop, especially when the norms of the group do not condemn such use. Additionally, the priming for violence and actual actions from the group can eventually be defined as moral since it defends the interests of the 'good' group versus the 'evil' one (Obaidi et al. 2022).

Looking at Trump's leadership approach, his divisionary discourse is central to his rhetoric. The 'us' group, representing the American people, is contrasted by both internal and external enemies, that is the establishment, and those it protects at the cost of the people's freedoms. He positions himself, his ingroup and the outgroups in a way that is compatible with the theoretical framework of identity leadership.

A separation is made between the honest, working people and the dishonest, ineffectual official elite that would be focusing on other interests than the ones brought about by the grievances of this "people". Political elites targeted by Trump are viewed as perpetrators of discriminations on the 'true' American people at the profit of minorities and outsiders (Ntontis et al. 2024). Trump positioning himself as the perfect candidate for the American people, and elevating his image compared to his opponents, speaks towards such an understanding of the matter. The division is first built up through elements of his communication style, informality, and word usage. For example, in his 2015 campaign

Haslam, S. Alexander, Stephen Reicher, and Michael J. Platow. *The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power*. Routledge, 2020.

³⁹ Haslam, S. Alexander, and Stephen D. Reicher. "Rethinking the psychology of leadership: From personal identity to social identity." *Daedalus* 145, no. 3 (2016): 21-34.

⁴⁰ Reicher, Stephen, S. Alexander Haslam, and Rakshi Rath. "Making a virtue of evil: A five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2, no. 3 (2008): 1313-1344.

⁴¹ Portice, Jennie, and Stephen Reicher. "Arguments for European disintegration: A mobilization analysis of anti-immigration speeches by UK political leaders." *Political Psychology* 39, no. 6 (2018): 1357-1372.

⁴² Obaidi, Milan, Jonas Kunst, Simon Ozer, and Sasha Y. Kimel. "The "Great Replacement" conspiracy: How the perceived ousting of Whites can evoke violent extremism and Islamophobia." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 25, no. 7 (2022): 1675-1695.

manifesto, *Crippled America* (Trump 2015)⁴³, Trump defines his political practices to go against that of the “career diplomats” and “insiders within the Washington ruling class”. Other political elites are thus depicted as part of the ‘them’ group: by insulting them, denigrating their image and denouncing their formality, Trump aspires to be seen as the figure that is needed to save the people from the corruption of the establishment. Additionally, it is relevant to notice that the moral character of the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in this form of rhetorics would not tolerate change of groups or positions. This intolerability of the political opponent is at the root of the phenomenon observed according to which the Trump supporters are stubbornly opposed to anti-Trump supporters, and only grows from the fact they can either be one or the other (Galam 2016). The first impression of understanding of the groups for the people, which does not point out precise facts nor clearly identifies the ‘enemies,’ resonates with the voters who were seeking out a sense of belonging (Galam 2016, Conway, Repke and Houck 2017).

There is a particular appeal to Trump in his moralization of the groups, one virtuous, one corrupt, that lies within his organized communication since the campaign, under the MAGA (Make America Great Again) construction. It calls out precisely the idea that America has fallen from its past greatness and that this greatness must be reinstated through Trump’s movement. This conception of America as fallen from a great past is common in the United States and was described by Bercovitch as ‘the American Jeremiad’ (1978)⁴⁴, a form of political rhetoric that laments a degenerate present as compared to a virtuous past and calls the nation to reform and renewal. It refers to a set of ideas concerning the privileges that the nation would enjoy in order to ensure its exceptionality and its prevalence over other nations, and that in order to restore America to its initial greatness citizens themselves must take action, playing on the same elements that allow this greatness. However, Trump does not generally build on the rhetorical *topos* of the American Jeremiad, but rather the reference to this idea is different in two main aspects (Ntontis et al. 2024), 1) the ascription of the downfall of the American model to external “enemies” rather than the model itself, and 2) the emphasis on the inability of taking action by the American citizens to restore the model, and therefore the need of a “champion” (himself) to save them from this decline.

1.2.3. Accusations & Rhetorical Division

In their study, Ntontis et al (2024) observe this distinction made by Trump’s arguments in one of his most known speeches through the lens of social identity and toxic leadership theories (Turner et al. 1987, Turner 1991, Haslam and Reicher 2016), during the ‘Save America’ rally that took place just a few hours before the January 6 Capitol assaults. When associating Trump’s communication with the ‘American Jeremiad’ rhetorical form (Bercovitch 1978), the authors find that the distinction of the two groups is not just made from a moral point of view for voters to cognitively associate characteristics and members of the group as threats to the integrity of the American society. Rather, the employment of this rhetorical form would allow Trump to create a personalised version of the rhetorical form

⁴³ Trump, Donald. *Great again: How to fix our crippled America*. Simon and Schuster, 2016. Previously published under the title *Crippled America*, 2015.

⁴⁴ Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

and set it in his supporters' minds through antagonistic rhetoric. The antagonism is Trump's communication plays a crucial role in defining the political frontier between the 'us' and the 'them.' By antagonistically framing "other," namely, political elites, political opponents, external "enemies" of the nation, against the "true" Americans, working class people who would have been lied to by the previously mentioned enemies, Trump constantly creates a moral division in which different actors get classified between the two groups. Beyond the frame of moral positioning, Trumpian communication also includes arguments and accusations against the outgroups, supporting the sense of threat they represent for the ingroup, and enabling violent actions to appear as morally justifiable for the purpose of saving the nation (Ntontis et al. 2024).

The Trumpian version of the rhetorical form of the 'American Jeremiad' is described in the aforementioned study by stressing two main differences with the classical *topos*. The authors first note that the rhetorical form of the American Jeremiad is originally progressive in encouraging tolerance and reduction of conflicts: America is usually presented as the land of the free, a characterisation that carries with it the responsibility to do good in the world. The nation's unique position must be constantly reinterrogated to live up to this standard and therefore also change whenever its mission fails (Bercovitch 1978). Whereas the decline of the ingroup is commonly attributed to its members' moral failure, Trump flips this accusation around ascribing it to its enemies, both internal and external. Also, where the original message conveyed by the American Jeremiad is that renewal must come from the members of the nation changing their ways, Trump sees the solution in fighting and defeating these enemies. Moreover, Trump would be positioning himself as the champion needed to defend the ingroup, suggesting it would be incapable to do so on its own, whereas the original Jeremiad attributes to the American people the power to adjust their moral values. Trump's communication creates the idea that renewal is only possible in uniting under his MAGA movement? The twist on the rhetorical Jeremiad *topos* allows for the possibility that individuals who do not adhere to this movement must then belong to the outgroup, as they renounce to fight for the interest of the nation in the way it is understood in Trumpian rhetoric.

Ntontis et al. go further in describing Trump's interpretation of the concept as a 'twisted Jeremiad,' where the original arguments are found within concepts of enemyship displayed by Trump in his communication, observed in his antagonistic rhetoric and informal style. It results in high moralisation of the group, with one side "virtuous" and the other "corrupted," as well as a specific characterisation of the relations between the two sides. As described by the analytical study, the construction of the categories that define the sides necessarily entail the appeal to action, whether it is implicit or explicit in Trump's speech and language use. In defining category relations by power dynamics, Trump sets the precedent of a violent action taken against the people, and therefore defending their interests legitimises the use of violence by the ingroup.

Specific details of Trump's speech allow to convey the distinction of the groups, the sense of threat and need for a fight on the American people's side. Through adjectives, generalisations of the opponent's parties, a vocabulary referring to war and oppression, Trump installs a dynamic of antagonism, violence, conservative rhetoric, and fight against collective norms of behaviour and communication.

Overall, Trumpian communication practices, both stylistic and rhetorical, are key to explain Trump's appeal to voters. His message calls for a social and cultural revolt. It defines new groups and social identities in opposition. In light of such a correlation between Trump's communication and the breakthrough of an entire group's collective identity in supporting him, let us now turn to what has been called the 'Trump effect' that would be impacting contemporary social communicative dynamics. This effect would explain the supportiveness of Trump's followers, as well as why the dynamics of antagonistic discourse present in his rhetoric eventually reshape the political public discussion, eventually favouring his growing influence on disrupting political communication norms.

2. The 'Trump Effect'

The notion of "Trump phenomenon" or "Trump effect" is not new, in fact it appeared almost instantly after Donald Trump started acting on his longing political aspirations in 2015 and during the Republican primaries of 2016 (Galam 2016).

This part of my study examines three main articles and subsequent revisions to determine a theoretical and sociological framework to the phenomena: (1) *The Trump Effect: An Experimental Investigation of the Emboldening Effect of Racially Inflammatory Elite Communication* (Newman et al. 2021), (2) *Donald Trump as a Cultural Revolt Against Perceived Communication Restriction: Priming Political Correctness Norms Causes More Trump Support* (Conway, Reke and Houck 2017), and (3) *The Trump Phenomenon: An Explanation From Sociophysics* (Galam, 2016), as well as the 2020 Galam model revision (Galam, 2020): *Will Trump win again in the 2020 election? An answer from a sociophysics model* (4). The articles were chosen for their common social and political grounds to establish the reason for the existence of the effect, that is the causality between hidden or frozen racial prejudice created through the priming of political correctness norms on voters and Trump's highly informal communication, as well as their differences in the theoretical approach of each author or author group, the dates of publication, and focus of the empirical studies.

The goal of analysing jointly these scholarly works is to understand the dynamics at work behind the Trump effect, describe the functioning of the effect and the impacts on the voting system, before observing how it is applied by Trump on various communication platforms.

I will start by referring in section 2.1 the method and findings of each study, and outline the various phases in the political phenomenon that is said to jumpstart the 'Trump effect' in section 2.2, discuss the electoral outcomes this has led to in section 2.3 as well as prospects for speaking about a counter-effect in section 2.4.

2.1. Analytical Framework

Before collecting the process of the phenomenon from the analyses, I must first examine the methods and findings of each study.

Article (1), *The Trump Effect: An Experimental Investigation of the Emboldening Effect of Racially Inflammatory Elite Communication* (Newman et al. 2021), explores the effect of

racially inflammatory communication by political elites on citizens, “in a societal context where equality norms are widespread and generally heeded yet a subset of citizens nonetheless possess deeply ingrained racial prejudices,” by examining Trump’s campaign for president in 2016. Specifically, they explore his rhetoric against Latino immigrants during the campaign⁴⁵. The findings referred in the article concern an experiment consisting of an online survey held during the primary election period. The findings confirmed the hypothesis that those with high levels of prejudice are more likely to perceive engagement in prejudiced behaviour as socially acceptable when exposed to Trump’s inflammatory statements. Following additional steps to the experiment in a second wave of the survey, the authors also find evidence that referencing Trump alone without mentioning immigration or his inflammatory communication was sufficient to embolden the expression of prejudice, and that condoning from other political elites can reinforce the effect.

Article (2), *Donald Trump as a Cultural Revolt Against Perceived Communication Restriction: Priming Political Correctness Norms Causes More Trump Support* (Conway, Repke and Houck 2017), observes that Trump support during the 2016 election was not just based on ideological preference or conservatism but was the result of the integration of norms restricting communication, or political correctness norms, which backfired eventually according to the authors, creating the effect of a cultural revolt against perceived communication restriction. The hypothesis tests for a relation between priming political correctness norms and support for Donald Trump, and chronic emotional reactance to restrictive communication norms. The study is framed within social psychological theories of deviance and cultural norms, and the method of the experiment draws out prime and control conditions where participants were exposed to a “PC-prime” (PC=Political correctness) task, as for the researchers to evaluate dependent measures for voting intent and trait positivity, restrictive communication concern and political ideology. The findings of the study established a significant relation between chronic reactance to restrictive norms and voting for Donald Trump, especially when the tested group was primed to think about those norms. Importantly enough, the research showed that priming PC norms increased support for Trump, even when controlling for political ideology when assessing their participants, suggesting that the “Trump phenomenon” functions independently from the pre-existence of traditional conservatism. Participants who presented aspects of chronic reactance also were more likely to express their support and to respond to the prime by increasing their support. The results were not reversed nor equivalent for supporting Hillary Clinton.

Articles (3) and (4), respectively *The Trump Phenomenon: An Explanation from Sociophysics* (Galam, 2017) and *Will Trump Win Again in the 2020 Election? An answer from a sociophysics model* (Galam, 2021), present the Galam model of opinion dynamics from sociophysics, applied to the study of the “Trump phenomenon”. The author argues, in discussion of the results of his model, that Trump’s success obeys counter-intuitive rules, and is therefore

⁴⁵ Newman et al. write: “From the outset, Trump bucked conventional wisdom – among both practitioners and the academy – by using explicitly racial language, especially with regard to Mexican immigrants. During his presidential announcement speech, he made the now infamous remarks about Mexican immigrants: ‘When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best ... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with them. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists’. This is but one example of his explicitly racial rhetoric.”

predictable. The model was used first in 2016 before the general election and successfully predicted the Trump win; it was again tested by Galam in 2020 prior to the election, however this time the prediction was wrong. The author chose to publish the 2020 paper with a revision of the model. Using local majority rule arguments, the model obeys a threshold dynamic and helps describe the state of the public debate based on collective beliefs, cognitive biases and racial prejudice. The author uses it to describe the success of the campaign unfolding in two steps: first, Trump's inflammatory statement produces a majority of voters against him, however the tipping points associated with belief and prejudice within the public debate are modified by the shocking character of the statement and reset the prejudice balance. After presenting the LMR model, the author establishes tipping points and counter-intuitive dynamics to explain the Trump phenomenon and eventually predict Trump wins. While the first two papers focus on the psychological and cultural factors contributing to Trump's support, Galam's papers delve into the underlying dynamics of social systems and how small groups can have large-scale political effects, providing a different, more quantitative approach to understanding the phenomenon, focusing on the dynamics of group behaviour and opinion spread. The first two papers rely on experimental or survey-based research methods to study how rhetoric and cultural perceptions influence behaviour. The Galam papers, by contrast, employ computational and mathematical modelling, offering a more abstract and systemic perspective.

2.2. Phases of the Trump Phenomenon

All three articles agree that Donald Trump's rise is deeply connected to cultural and social dynamics, that is the backlash against political correctness, race relations, and identity politics. Each article presents a similar observation of the state of communication norms in the United States, which creates social context in which the Trump phenomenon can take effect. According to Mendelberg (2001)⁴⁶, there has long been tension in the US and elsewhere regarding free speech and opinions on societal norms, especially concerning speech targeted at minority groups. While hate speech laws do define a boundary between expressing an opinion and inciting violence, inflammatory speech often does not clearly state hate, therefore the speech can only be constrained by social and communication norms. To preserve the 'norm environment' that helps maintain the dynamics of tolerance and equality, the norm must constantly be reinforced, especially by authoritative social actors such as politicians.

In article (1), the authors ground their analysis of racial equality norms on the observation that, although they are understood to be widely held, these norms are not deeply internalized. When facing social desirability pressure (Berinsky 2002)⁴⁷ or explicit racial cues (Gilens 1996, 1999)⁴⁸, prejudiced people are less likely to express their negative racial

⁴⁶ Mendelberg, Tali. *The race card: Campaign strategy, implicit messages, and the norm of equality*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

⁴⁷ Berinsky, Adam J. "Political context and the survey response: The dynamics of racial policy opinion." *Journal of Politics* 64, no. 2 (2002): 567-584.

⁴⁸ Gilens, Martin. "Race and poverty in America: Public misperceptions and the American news media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1996): 515-541.

attitudes. However, unobtrusive techniques for surveys, or implicit mentions of race, will often show the prejudiced are more comfortable expressing their negative attitude. At some point, the language and symbols became enough to spark the emboldening effect, without explicit mentions of race, and sometimes with no mention of immigration or inequalities. This is a trait commonly described as *réactionnaire* in French. Since the Civil Rights Era in the United States, politicians and policy makers have gradually started making an implicit use of race in their communication as a way to activate racial resentment and increase support for more conservative candidates (Mendelberg 2001); racially prejudiced voters gradually joined the Republican party (Carmines and Stimson 1989)⁴⁹. Therefore, the study establishes that the prevailing norm environment is sustained by the internalization of the norm by one part of the elite and the public, and the compliance of all those who abide by the norm, even those who hold negative racial attitudes; eventually, the existence of this undercurrent of prejudice under the surface of norm compliance is an opportunity for entrepreneurial political elites to exploit (Newman et al. 2021).

An entrepreneurial elite may seek to gain power or advantage by challenging or violating the norm environment in an attempt to appeal to those who harbour racial prejudice, especially when the norm has not been broadly internalized or there is conflict over it. This not only has consequences for racially prejudiced voters, but it may also affect the state of public behaviour as well, as elites often have authority and influence over public opinion.

Article (2) notes that the results of the post-Civil Rights Era changes in the use of restrictive communication norms are the opposite of the original positive intention they propose (Conway and Schaller, 2005, 2007)⁵⁰. While top-down cultural norms may produce short-term compliance, heavy-handed norms sometimes simultaneously backfire and produce long-term deviance, especially when a sense of forced artificiality is perceived from the norm. Conway, Repke and Houck suggest two different reasons for this backfiring: a) emotional reactance: as it is a valued psychological commodity, freedom of choice is often preserved and re-asserted by individuals by deviating from other's expectations, and while a political correctness norm might be followed in the short-term regardless of this feeling to appear socially acceptable, the long-running sense of restriction may draw the feeling out, in the presence of a political elite who violates it for example; and b) informational contamination: heavy handed norms also cognitively undermine the informational value of the norm that could create a positive consensus, because individuals will associate the consensus with coercion induced by the norm (Conway and Schaller 2005). This last reaction is also close to the idea of *réactionnaire*.

Tapping into cultural frustrations, support for a political elite who uses negative language explicitly violating the norm can be fuelled by perceived restrictions on free speech imposed by political correctness norms.

Gilens, Martin. *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media, and the politics of antipoverty policy*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.

⁴⁹ Carmines, Edward G., and James A. Stimson. *Issue evolution: Race and the transformation of American politics*. Princeton University Press, 1989.

⁵⁰ Conway III, Lucian Gideon, and Mark Schaller. "When authorities' commands backfire: Attributions about consensus and effects on deviant decision making." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 89, no. 3 (2005): 311.

Conway, Lucian Gideon, and Mark Schaller. "How communication shapes culture." In *Social communication*, pp. 107-127. Psychology Press, 2011.

Galam's 2016 election study departs from the observation that Trump's success was wrongfully dismissed by sound analyses, and that although polls predicted the opposite, Donald Trump's inflammatory communication actually convinced more voters. Contrary to the first two papers, article (3) directly studies this effect in relation to Trump. Although Galam agrees that the roots of the effect lie within the priming of cultural norms which allowed the prejudice to lie underneath the cover of general compliance, he designates and discusses the Trump effect as a process of its own. After Trump has made a shocking statement, a majority of Republican voters will turn against him, leaving only a small minority of openly prejudiced people. At the same time, it activates frozen prejudice among voters. To prove to themselves and their peers that they do not agree with the statement, those voters will get into public debate and discussion, upsetting the balance of shared prejudice and common belief of the social group, at the benefit of the new 'belief' expressed in the statement. Opinion dynamics are then launched according to the new leading prejudice, which voters are departing from on a rational basis. A first conclusion can be made that once the balance is adjusted, realities of what each opinion entail change according to the new prejudice, and that eventually, part of the voters who were infuriated by the statement at first end up back on Trump's side unconsciously, as he represents the figure who "talked about it".

Although articles (1) and (2)'s results emphasize psychological and cultural explanations to a Trump effect, both provide empirical support for its existence. The fact that any norm could backfire within this understanding supports the idea that salience of those norms hinders support for a political figure such as Donald Trump who appears to violate them. Eventually, as results of article (1)'s experiment show, the sole mention of Trump becomes sufficient to activate the prejudice, and emotional reactance and informational contamination (2) are similar phenomena in the immediacy of their effect on the voter's mind.

The consequences of the effect could be explained as simply as that Donald Trump's rhetoric is shifting social norms and amplifies political polarization. Although the process of the phenomenon is paradoxical and relies on individual, social and elite communication aspects, it seems quite theoretically expected.

From these first observations, I note that the Trump phenomenon takes its roots in an unstable norm environment. Trump's language, particularly racially inflammatory or anti-political correctness rhetoric, plays a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes. Individuals who feel marginalised by political correctness and restrictive communication norms feel emboldened by inflammatory rhetoric, making them more vocal in expressing controversial views (1). The priming of PC norms can directly be correlated to support for Trump, as well as chronic emotional reactance to restriction (2). The variable "feeling voiceless" is predictable of Trump support. Trump's rise is then seen an opportunity for those who feel alienated by cultural and social norms that limit open expression, and Trump positions himself as a champion of free speech and a voice for supporters who were disillusioned by the constraints of these perceived restrictions.

2.3. Intervention & Stubbornness: A Counter-Effect

All three papers discuss the role of external actors in shaping the Trump phenomenon, focusing on the intervention or non-intervention related to the communication strategies that help fuel or hinder the effect.

Much of the experiment of article (1) is dedicated to exploring the roles of each actor in the phenomenon process, external actors here are political elites, media figures, and others in positions of influence who either intentionally or unintentionally amplify divisive rhetoric. According to the author group, the emboldening effect occurs because these elites provide a sense of validation for extremist ideas. Non-intervention, or tacit support from these actors allow the effect to intensify, pushing the public towards more extreme attitudes. In the discussion of the results, the authors argue that intervention from the more influential external actors could have the power to counteract the normalization of racially inflammatory language, and that their failure to challenge or condemn this communication practices contributes to the amplification of the Trump phenomenon, suggesting there can be measures taken to that effect.

In article (2)'s framework, external agents include cultural influencers, media, and other entities who either impose or reinforce the norms of political correctness. Intervention in this case would involve external actors condemning or supporting these norms, which directly affects the political climate as shown through the experimental study. The authors suggest that non-intervention, or even the implicit endorsement of PC norms, can increase the perceived need for a figure like Trump who resists these constraints. On the other hand, when elites and media figureheads step back from these cultural norms or downplay them, they inadvertently amplify the appeal of Trump's message. Hence the role of external actors here is critical in either enabling or constraining the Trump phenomenon based on whether they align with or challenge political correctness.

For Galam (2017), external actors are less directly influential than in the previous two papers, his sociophysics model suggesting that the spread of Trump's ideas is more a product of social dynamics and group behaviour than of direct interventions by elites or media. However, he acknowledges that social media in particular plays a crucial role in the amplification of rhetoric, even if it is not necessarily a result of coordinated elite action. The non-intervention of traditional media, who often provide platforms for Trump's statements without overtly challenging them, allows the phenomenon to grow. Additionally, elites' failure to intervene in the normalization of Trump's rhetoric can lead to the idea gaining more mainstream acceptance. While Galam's 2016 election analysis does not focus heavily on individual actors, it highlights that external actors create the ecosystem in which the Trump effect flourishes, either by amplifying or remaining neutral towards the rhetoric.

In his revised 2020 model, Galam emphasises how the continuous feedback between media, social groups, and elites leads to the resilience of Trump's movement, even in the face of criticism or condemnation, suggesting that the phenomenon persists because of the growing polarization in society. The author refines his consideration of the role of external actors, highlighting the duality of outcome for both intervention and non-intervention by elites or the media. On one hand, non-intervention can allow Trump's messages to spread unconstrained, reinforcing the narrative and drawing in more supporters. On the other hand, external actors who challenge or actively work against Trump's rhetoric might inadvertently

fuel the 'us' vs 'them' mentality behind the movement. Article (4) as well as article (2), suggest that the more elites try to counter Trump, the more they contribute to reinforcing the normative divide, making Trump's appeal stronger as a form of cultural and ideological revolt.

In further testing their results, article (1) authors note that while there is evidence that prejudiced elite speech in a political environment that tacitly condones such speech can embolden the prejudiced, their experiment gave little to no evidence of the condemn signal having a decreasing effect on the expression of prejudice. The study puts in perspective the levels of self-monitoring of the respondents to the survey, that is whether they are likely to refrain from expressing their prejudice according to the situation, in the presence of condemning or condoning signals especially. The author group thus evaluated the levels of self-monitoring of the prejudiced subjects in observing their response to the condemn signal and determining norm attentiveness and norm compliance of the respondents. The results of this additional experiment show that prejudice signals have consequences on low-self-monitoring people, especially when coupled with a condoning signal, but is unaltered in its results when coupled with a condemning signal, as the high-self-monitors, who are the most concerned with norm compliance, will not see their prejudice activated when given a signal of condemnation by other elites. Overall, these results validate the interpretation of prejudiced elite speech by the authors, and highlight the fact that lower-self-monitors, once the prejudice is activated, are less likely to go back to constraining their prejudice, therefore condemnation by other elites once Trump's statement has been made is quasi-null in effect on the expression of prejudice.

In evaluating the state of the polarized society Trump left behind him after his first presidency, Galam (2021) identifies two inflexible types of actors in the phenomenon, narrow-minded pro-Trump and narrow-minded anti-Trump voters, who drive the dynamics of choices in the model. Depending on the combination of prejudices and inflexibles per state, the outcomes of the election will differ, and the opinion dynamics of the ensemble shift accordingly. As part of the three types of agents considered by Galam based on psychological traits that influence their voting behaviour, inflexibles are considered to never shift their opinion, even when they represent only a minority of the group. Hence in the case of ties of opinions, inflexibles play a decisive role on both sides. Additionally, the author notes that the stubbornness of the inflexible voters does not necessarily mean that a stubborn anti-Trump voter is a stubborn pro-Biden voter, and might prefer other candidates such as Bernie Sanders, creating a gap between democrat voters, which eventually strengthens the pro-Trump side.

Intervention by external actors has a critical impact and from these observations is fostering Trump's rhetoric and support in the elections, whether they intervene to condone or condemn, or do not intervene at all. Additionally, it has impact on the deepening polarization of society that inevitably drives voters toward more extreme ideas to defeat the other group. Galam's model of opinion dynamics, although not relating the same grievances of 'the people' observed in papers (1) and (2) regarding norm compliance, still ground the norm environment according to the same observations and theoretical framework of understanding for language and reactance and develops a model that can establish rules to

the phenomenon, as well as observe empirical changes and consequences brought to the voting system.

2.4. The LMR Model & Its Electoral Impact

In the 2016 election, Donald Trump's candidacy was widely considered an underdog campaign. Initially, his views were seen as controversial or extreme by much of the political establishment and mainstream media. Despite this, he gained a significant following, which led to his victory. Galam (2017, 2021) sought to understand how Trump's minority supporters, a relatively small group at the start, could influence the broader population and alter the political landscape.

The key insight of the Local Majority Rule model is that small, consistent minorities can have a disproportionate influence on public opinions, especially in a system where individuals are interacting locally (such as within social networks) and are influenced by their counterparts' opinions. How was the LMR model applied to Trump's case? At the beginning of Trump's campaign, his support base was a minority of the population. However, these supporters were particularly committed and vocal about their political preferences. Galam suggests that political opinion dynamics, including Trump's popularity, can be explained by the local majority rule. In this case, individuals in social networks, whether friend groups, families or coworkers, often discuss politics, and people are likely to be influenced by the opinion of those they interact with regularly. For Trump initially had the potential to be supported only by a small, openly prejudiced group that responded positively to his infuriating comments, a large majority of Republican voters were struck by the statement and at first wish to dissociate from Trump. However, their frozen prejudice is activated at the same time, and while turning to local majority groups of discussion, the newly balanced 'acceptable' limits of the discussion refocus the individual's prejudiced opinion towards Trump. Galam defines network influence in the case of Trump for individuals who might have shifted their opinion to align with the local majority, adopting Trump's views in response to the prevailing attitudes within their social circles, as well as for those who initially rejected Trump's inappropriate declaration. This leads to the spread of Trump's influence even among those who might have not initially supported him. Overall, the model demonstrates minority influence, as a small, vocal group could influence the larger majority through persistent and consistent interactions. Over time, the minority group helped to shift public opinion, particularly by capitalising on frustrations with the political establishment or appealing to specific social issues.

The LMR model also helps explain how polarisation occurred during the first campaign, (Galam 2017), and remained the determinant of social and opinion dynamics during and after his presidency. The more the people interacted with others who held strong views about Trump, the more likely they were to adopt these views themselves. Over time, this contributed to a reinforcement of existing beliefs and deepened divisions in the electorate, with Trump's supporters becoming increasingly vocal, confident, and committed to their candidate.

As described above, the LMR model helps to understand how the Trump base remained cohesive and influential throughout his term and into the 2020 election. Even though his

position was highly controversial and his policies often divisive, the local interactions among his supporters ensured that his influence remained strong and resilient, enabling him to maintain a substantial level of support in the face of national opposition.

Key insights from the LMR model applied to Trump's rise are found in observing the transition from a minority to a majority dynamic of Trump's influence, not through large-scale persuasion but because of a process of local influence and interaction among individuals in social networks, as well as understanding minority influence in a polarized political environment: in Trump's case, his ability to appeal to specific grievances, coupled with the local majority rule dynamics, helped him secure the support of a broader electorate, particularly in swing states. Comparing this analysis with the dynamics described by articles (1) and (2), I understand the Trump phenomenon can unfold only in the presence of prejudiced people for Trump's prejudiced speech to take effect. How voters interact is the determining element that allows the phenomena to exist and perpetuate.

Interestingly, Galam specifically describes inflexible voters as 'stubborn' agents, whether pro- or anti-Trump. As seen through his use of political frontiers of antagonism for example, Trump's communication has an undeniable impact on the widening polarization that drives the political landscape in the United States today. Although the minority became majority, its practice has always been to actively undermine opponents and increasingly react to opposition or condemnation by other groups, which is an annihilating dynamic rather than an empowering one in social dynamics, eventually driving the opposition to act in the same chronically reactive way.

Galam's analysis shows that social networks—which are key in the LMR model—played a crucial role in spreading Trump's political message. His supporters were not just passive recipients of media messages but were active participants in spreading the message within their social circles. By employing the same means of communication, stubbornness, and emotional reactance Trump uses in his public communication through local interactions, Trump's ideas and political stances spread, leading to his unexpected political success. The model provides insight into how polarization, opinion formation, and minority influence can shape large-scale political outcomes, such as elections. Additionally, Trump's communication style and rhetoric intensify the influential character of the phenomenon, especially on Trump's preferred platforms to express his rhetoric: social media, and large-scale organised rallies and public interventions that are destined to his audience and supporters only. After studying the Trump effect through articles (1), (2), (3), and (4), and determining the polarised social setting in which it develops as well as the different actors involved in the dynamics at hand, I wish to observe elements of this phenomena applied by Trump and/or his supporters on speech platforms, in particular Twitter (now X), and organised public deliveries (Ntontis et al. 2024), as they both represent a form of communication that can be anticipated by the deliverer.

3. Trump's Speech Platforms & Influence

3.1. Social Media & Rally Communication

The 'Trump phenomenon,' as examined in the second part of this chapter, refers to the distinctive ways in which Donald Trump utilised communication platforms to enhance his political base and manipulate public discourse (Newman et al. 2024, Conway, Repke and

Houck 2017, Galam 2017, 2021). Central to the phenomena is Trump's mastery of social media, particularly Twitter, where he engaged in direct, unfiltered communication with millions of followers. His tweets, often provocative and controversial, disrupted traditional media norms and established a new model for political messaging—one that is less reliant on fact-checking or traditional journalistic decorum. This form of communication allowed him to rapidly mobilise support, shape public opinion (Galam 2016), and attack opponents without the mediating influence of the press or other elites (Newman et al. 2021).

Different aspects of Trump's social media usage have been examined by the literature, whether looking at his punctuation on Twitter or his illustrated communication on Instagram. In the various studies I examine, the most notable aspect is that Trump's social media communication is essentially self-referential (Taraktas, Esen and Uskudarli 2022), and campaign-oriented (Taraktas, Esen and Uskudarli 2022, Glueckstern, Benyacar and Grigri 2020, Lavrov 2022).

The 2022 study by Taraktas, Esen and Uskudarli examines the communication of three world leaders on Twitter, Donald Trump for the United States, Boris Johnson as PM in the United Kingdom and Narendra Modi in India, during the COVID-19 pandemic. After analysing said social media communication between June 2019 and December 2020, the authors question whether the communicative practices of these leaders change when confronted with a pandemic or other world crisis. They find that Trump's most central 'nodes' in his tweets (i.e. the most frequent subjects or frequent entities of words) before the pandemic are the impeachment, the Democratic Party, articles of the impeachment, the Us and 'hoax', the most represented 'edges' (i.e. the most represented couples of two nodes in the same tweet) are impeachment-Democratic Party, impeachment-hoax, impeachment-Fox News, impeachment-Republican Party, and impeachment-witch hunt. The authors conclude these findings highlight the self-referential character of Trumpian communication on Twitter. After looking at the same data during the pandemic, the authors find the most repeated nodes are the Second Amendment, the US, Republican Party, Democratic Party and the coronavirus, the most weighted edges are Sleepy Joe-Joe Biden, China-virus, Democratic Party-Republican Party, Joe Biden-far left politics, and US-Fox News. These findings correspond with many of the characteristics of Trump's rhetoric prior described in this study, the authors further conclude that elections, not the pandemic, shape Donald Trump's social media discourse, and underline Trump's quick blame shift strategy when mentioning the coronavirus mostly in relation to China. Overall, the study comments on Trump's unchanged communication on Twitter, as well as the lack of unity he represented as a leader, during a global pandemic. In comparison with Johnson and Mori, who have used the crisis to their political advantage but still presented with more compassion and provided scientific findings, Trump is argued to have blatantly set aside the pandemic as a secondary matter and accordingly preserved his communication practices "to meet with the expectations of his voters" (Taraktas, Esen and Uskudarli 2022). Although the authors assume Trumpian rhetoric has not changed before and during the COVID-19 crisis, they find that its influence on Trump's social media communication has significantly improved during the pandemic, as shown by the increase of his Twitter usage as well as the more negative tone and accusations observed in the tweets. On the other hand, the 2022 study by Ilya Lavrov, which focused on the communication strategy of Trump on Instagram for the year 2020, concludes that Donald Trump has changed his communication practices between the 2016 campaign era and the year 2020, his last year

as president. The interest of studying the results found by Lavrov is to examine Trumpian social media communication on a visual platform like Instagram, as opposed to written communication on Twitter, to evaluate the scope of Trump's practices on his public image and therefore his appeal to the voters. After analysing Trump's publication on Instagram both in 2016 and in 2020, Lavrov finds several differences in the meaning conveyed by Trump's posts, as well as the objectives they represent. At the time of the campaign and during the first hundred days of his presidency, Donald Trump mainly posted "unprofessional" photos (Chun, 2018)⁵¹, using a lot of text on the pictures such as quotes or simply posting screenshots of his tweets. Additionally, most of the pictures either represented himself or showed him as a central figure when with other people and was particularly oriented at legitimising his position as president once elected. Trump's digital rhetoric, meaning the captions to his posts and reposted tweets, was essentially focused on criticising globalization, establishment policies, attacking migrants and fellow candidates, while the imagery of his Instagram pictures was centered around nationalist and patriotic symbolic. In discussing the results of the empirical experiment of her study, Lavrov notes the roles Trump wishes to portray, as well as the orchestrated scenery of the posts, show intent of appearing like a powerful president, an American patriot, and a family man. Lavrov discards the possibility of a strategy of ordinariness, adopted by many presidents (Gordillo-Rodriguez and Bellido-Perez 2021)⁵², as all the elements of communication eventually point to Trump or emphasise how great he is. The content observed in 2020 shows outdoor activities, Trump running for re-election, crowds of supporters, or his family, mostly content that abides by formal political communication in appearance. Lavrov observes distinct visual communication strategies through the roles portrayed by Trump, such as the formation of a statesmanship attitude, the formation of a compassionate image and the emphasis on mass appeal. This type of public image seems counter-intuitive to a figure like Trump, still his communication strategy on social media is informal (Chun 2018), highly emotional yet dismissive of the human crisis at hand (Taraktas, Esen and Uskudarli 2022) and centered around fake news and soundbites (Nithyanand, Schaffner and Gill 2017)⁵³. According to Lavrov, the visual and written elements of Trump's posts on social media in general are representative of his emotional rhetoric and informal and grandiose stylistic practices, because they are campaign-oriented, even if they evolved before and after his presidency. Even when his posts on platforms like Instagram or Twitter became more polished or attempted a more "professional" tone, they still adhered to the broader strategy that defines the Trump phenomenon—self-promotion, immediate audience engagement, and a focus on rallying supporters to eventually support his rhetoric. This shift does not negate the campaign-driven nature of his communication; it merely adapts it to different contexts. This raises the question of how these same campaign-driven strategies manifest when Trump shifts to more traditional political settings, where the expectation of political decorum is higher.

⁵¹ Chun, Russell Scott. "Visual rhetoric of the Presidency: an analysis of the Trump and Obama White House messaging in their first 100 days in Flickr images." *Journal of Visual Literacy* 37, no. 1 (2018): 18-39.

⁵² Gordillo Rodríguez, María Teresa, and Elena Bellido-Pérez. "Politicians self-representation on Instagram: the professional and the humanized candidate during 2019 Spanish elections." (2021).

⁵³ Nithyanand, Rishab, Brian Schaffner, and Phillipa Gill. "Online political discourse in the Trump era." *arXiv preprint arXiv:1711.05303* (2017).

Trump's rallies for example, further amplified his appeal by creating an in-person, high energy environment that rather reinforce the sense of an 'us vs them' (Ntontis et al. 2024). These events became platforms for reinforcing loyalty, building collective identity, and energising his supporters (Ntontis et al. 2024). The rhetoric on display at rallies often mirrored his social media style—aggressive, combative, and highly emotional (Lavrov 2022)—fostering an intense, nationalist connection with his base (Bercovitch 1978, Ntontis et al. 2024). Scholars like Galam (2017, 2021) and Ntontis et al (2024) argue that these practices played a crucial role in creating a feedback loop where social media and rallies worked synergistically, reinforcing Trump's messages and escalating his political presence. The combination of social media's immediacy and the rallies' collective identity atmosphere became a powerful engine driving the Trump phenomenon, feeding on the fight against political correctness norms and his supporters' high proclivity for emotional reactance as established in the aforementioned analysis. The (MAGA) construction behind the organisation of these rallies supports the antagonistic and reactionary rhetoric alongside his followers.

Ntontis et al. (2024) note that Trump advances his arguments of a 'twisted Jeremiad' performatively as well as rhetorically. The authors argue that Trump's rallies play a key part in mobilizing support for his elections, and previous studies show that they function as 'morality plays,' shaping the belief of the 'people vs the enemies.' The in-depth analysis of the speech made by Trump on January 6th, 2021, serves the present study in its comparison of toxic and identity-lead leaderships to establish the violent character of the speech, and the moral distinction made between the American 'people' and the 'enemies' to the nation examined by the authors.

As their analysis suggests, the authors remark Trump's explicit obligation to his followers to act in order to stop the certification of Biden's election, asking them to discard their customary constraints in the face of such threat to the integrity of the nation. He does propose to march on Congress in his 70-minute long speech; however, he is never explicit about what actions to take once there, both using words like '*fight like hell*' and insisting the voters act '*peacefully*' at the same time. Trump does not give instructions to be violent, instead the notions of identity, morality and existential threat remove the restraints on action, confirming the hypothesis that a 'greater good' (in this case the survival of the American republic as it is portrayed by Trump) can be used to provide a warrant for toxic—or even violent—behaviour.

When elections and Trump's hand on the public opinion are at stake, the rhetoric blows over, as observed at the January 6th Capitol attacks (Ntontis et al. 2024). Looking at the norm-defiant environment and rhetoric, and the public's reaction online and at rallies where they are in 'direct' contact with Donald Trump, the effect Trumpian communication practices have on polarizing society is undeniable and confirms the dynamics observed in a 'Trump phenomenon.' However, the phenomenon includes the mobilisation of supporters on their own in its process (Newman et al. 2021, Conway, Repke and Houck 2017, Galam 2017), and their individual appropriation of the rhetoric at display, thus I must examine what can be said of the effect of Trumpian rhetoric on the public when given the ability to interact live.

3.2. Public Response & the Trump Effect

Amongst the previously mentioned studies, some have examined likes and comments under Donald Trump's posts, as well as retweets and reached themes of note. Although it is difficult to establish direct consequences on the public's actions (Ntontis et al. 2024), engagement on social media, as well as groups who openly foster propaganda working for Trump on social media (Glueckstern, Benyacar and Grigri 2020) show the practices employed by Trump in his communication can be found among the voters as well.

In her empirical study on Trump's Instagram posts in 2020, Lavrov (2022) observes what posts get the most comments or likes, as well as the tone of the message that is shared through these posts and whether it is correlated to engagement.

When looking at likes, the authors finds that portraits of Trump or posts referring to Trump are most likely to get a high number of likes. She notes 'positive' engagement (e.g. likes and positive comments) for posts with unifying, nation-wide messages, or personal content.

On the contrary, negative engagement considers the number of comments under a post and lack of likes thereof, as people are most likely to use the comment section as the missing 'dislike' button. On Trump's account, negative engagement will occur on pictures that have text or a caption under it and are often press pictures or political content. While both positive- and negative-toned posts regularly obtain the same count for likes, only positive-oriented posts score record numbers. As for comments under the posts, Lavrov notes they are highly negative under political or controversial posts, and the more negative the sentiment of the post itself is, the more comments it will get. In general, political discourse, both from the caption or post sentiment and from followers, will embolden negativity, which leads to think Trump himself emboldens negativity.

In determining trends of online political discourse by looking at Reddit discussions (or subreddits) between 2007 and 2017, Nithyanand, Schaffner and Gill (2017) observe a general decline in the quality of political discourse and investigate the factors hypothetically contributing to this decline. The authors first observe a rise of incivility, even in non-partisan forums, and the decline of the linguistic complexity of users. At the time of the 2016 election, the results of the high tendency to polarisation between the two main parties in the US effectively gave way to a 'non-establishment' candidate that was the logical culmination of 'partisan polarisation' (i.e. persistent and durable repulsion from a political party) (Caruana 2014)⁵⁴ driven by negative sentiments toward the opposition. The study mentions political anger as a common feature of American voters when discussing or thinking about politics, as the result of negative partisanship. Just like with the comments under his Instagram posts (Lavrov 2022), Donald Trump's opening statement (his caption or public declaration) emboldens the negative rhetoric within the public discourse, which eventually has influence on political communication altogether (Newman et al. 2021).

Among the periods of increased difference between the share of offensive discourse in non-political and political forums, which are usually equally frequent, Nithyanand, Schaffner and Gill (2017) find that between July 2016 and May 2017 over 80% of negative and/or offensive posts were targeted at the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, or Donald Trump. The results show that political discourse in this time range has

⁵⁴ Caruana, Nicholas J. "Negative partisanship is real, measurable, and affects political behaviour." *USApp—American Politics and Policy Blog* (2014).

been more offensive and uncivil than any other 12-month period in Reddit's history. Although they note a peak in the number of offensive comment authors in Democratic subreddits at the end of 2016, the increase rate of offensive political discourse overall was significantly higher in Republican subreddits as of May 2017, with comments 55% more likely to be offensive than in Democratic discussion groups. Additionally, the complexity of discourse was at its all-time lowest during the 2016 primaries and the election, and while it has slowly recovered since 2017 in Democratic forums, it has continually declined in Republican forums.

Explanations as to why negative partisanship and offensive political discourse online have mostly grown in Republican discussion groups can be attributed to previous research that Republicans generally express higher negativity than Democrats (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016)⁵⁵, however the perennial effect of the growth—as of the time of the study—is attributed to Trump's peculiar leadership style and presidency. Specifically, the hypothetical sentiment of illegitimacy Republican voters may still have felt after the election, since Trump did not win by popular vote, as well as the dynamics of antagonism and violent rhetoric that shape his political communication (Newman et al. 2021, Conway, Reke and Houck 2017).

The study frames its result in relation with the dynamics of the 'Trump effect' and examines Trump's reported popularity at key moments of the campaign to establish a correlation with offensive online political discourse. In testing for the effect of negative partisanship on voting, which defines Trumpian communication and has been established as one of the influential dynamics of the Trump phenomenon and of Trump's rhetoric (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2022), Nithyanand, Schaffner and Gill (2017) first establish that anger increases when the opposing party is doing well in polls. Rather than affecting his campaign, Donald Trump's rhetoric about opponents has normalised 'fringe groups,' and extreme partisan forums into the open. Nithyanand, Schaffner and Gill find a high correlation between the widening discourse participation—and visibility—from extremists and the rise of offensive discourse across all discussions on Reddit. Because of the free-speech culture that developed on the platform, supported by the regulation policies and algorithm, extremist subreddits dedicated to politics and/or violent actions have always existed on the platforms, however the rise in incivility and offensive comments have seen these groups increasingly take part in the debate, and are much more represented today.

After drawing out 274 'hate' subreddits from those examined in the study, as well as identifying redditors who are active in at least one hate forum and one political forum, Nithyanand, Schaffner and Gill observe a 200% increase of the number of posts by extremist authors on Democratic mainstream forums (political and non-political), and a 6600% increase for the same data on Republican mainstream forums, in the year before the election. The hate subreddits examined are associated with racism (*r/nazi*), sexism (*r/TheRedPill*, *r/killingwomen*), violence and hate crimes (*r/beatingtrannies*, *r/blackcrime*), and conspiracies and fake news (*r/conspiracy*); they were either banned, quarantined, or still open. Activity by fringe authors goes back to pre-election levels on Democratic subreddits as of May 2017, but at the time of the study the Republican groups still observe 3900% more posting compared to December 2015. Among the fringe subreddits contributing the most to Republican subreddits, the authors identify *r/conspiracy*, *r/TheRedPill*, *r/KotakuInAction*,

⁵⁵ Grossmann, Matt, and David A. Hopkins. *Asymmetric politics: Ideological Republicans and group interest Democrats*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

and *r/mensrights*. The subreddits with a significant proportion of 40% of authors simultaneously active on *r/The_Donald* were identified as *r/metacanada*, *r/whiterights*, *r/physical_removal* (banned because it was promoting violence against “liberals”), and *r/new_right*. The authors further conclude that the infiltration of fringe authors on mainstream subreddits is positively correlated with the rise of offensiveness in political discourse. They remark that extremist group action has also risen in the mainstream political discourse, notably through groups like Unite the Right or The Proud Boys, operating in violent protests in real life.

Finally, the authors conclude that online political discourse in the Trump era is marked by historically low linguistic complexity and high negativity, and question whether Trump’s disappearance from the mediatic sphere may cut back this effect. The growing presence of extremist groups on the other hand, has been directly correlated to Trump’s communication, after the Capitol attacks occurred only hours after the ‘Save America’ rally in which Trump delivered a 70-minute-long speech analysed by Ntontis et al. (2024).

Although their study of Trump’s speech on the day of the attack cannot conclude that Trump gave the specific directions for it, Ntontis et al. (2024) make several remarks on the events leading to January 6th, 2021, as well as Trump’s rhetoric during the speech. The ‘Save America’ rally was part of the different protestations over the results of the 2020 Presidential elections. The authors note that Trump’s constant questioning of the authenticity of the voting process in the months before the election quickly hindered the ‘Stop the Steal’ movement on social media, which eventually gathered protestors to disturb the election counts across the country, then take part in violent riots after Joe Biden’s election, alongside groups such as The Proud Boys. Trump justified the acts of violence against counter-protestors at the ‘Million Maga’ march that took place on November 14th, 2020, in Washington D.C., labelling them as ‘antifa’ and asking the police to ‘do your job’ (Ntontis et al. 2024).

As described in the analysis of the ‘twisted Jeremiad’ Donald Trump’s rhetoric demonstrates in his ‘Save America’ speech (Ntontis et al. 2024), Trump emphasises the need to act against the ‘enemies’—and the certification that was to occur—by presenting them as a threat to the existence of the nation, not just the cause of its diminution. Additionally, the authors note the moral division, which is a common feature of Trumpian rhetoric, is brought up along elements of violence, even though Trump does not actively instruct his supporters to be violent. Thus, Trump’s speech and the platforms for official communication he employs do enable violence within the voters’ cognition. While enabling may seem less instructive and thus a less dangerous effect political communication, it does not mean it does not have consequences on the public’s actions. As perhaps proved by the Capitol attacks occurring only hours after the rally, the authors advance a comparison with Kershaw’s process of ‘working towards the Führer’ (1993)⁵⁶ which describes a process of influence on radicalisation. The process was observed in the Nazi state system run by Hitler, in which the leader sets broad objectives of his ideology without specific directions of how to achieve it, eventually driving his subordinates to fill in the blanks and become even more radical. With different ends and means, Trump’s setting the general goal of stopping the election and then the certification through his discourse and leaving it up to his supporters to fight for the

⁵⁶ Kershaw, Ian. “‘Working Towards the Führer.’ Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship.” *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 2 (1993): 103-118.

group, can be discussed within the same theoretical frame of identity leadership that is used by Kershaw.

Overall, I observe the influence of Donald Trump's practices concerns more the adoption of these practices than the information they contain, although the latter is eventually found in partisan communications as well. First through the building of his persona as an informal yet grandiose anti-conformist leader, then by naming and antagonising outgroups as the threat to the American identity, Trump becomes the uniting reference for the fight of the ingroup and sets the rules of its unfolding. However, the process is quickly taken over by his supporters, and other factors, such as echo chambers and algorithms on social media, the growing corruption of traditional media, or the counterstrategies of his political adversaries, perpetuate the newly instilled practices of his strategy.

4. Key Takeaways

Chapter 1 has provided an in-depth analysis of Trumpian communication practices, focusing on how these strategies contribute to Donald Trump's broader influence on the political frontier of meaning (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2022). Through the examination of Trump's visual communication, style, rhetoric, the Trump phenomenon, and his use of speech platforms, I can clearly identify the key elements that define his approach and how they serve to further elaborate his political position.

Trump's communication style, characterised by informality and grandiosity, is a significant tool in achieving his political goals. His vocal and non-vocal qualities, including his often combative and mocking tone, serve to build a strong, undefeated personality. This style allows Trump to stand apart from traditional politicians, presenting himself as a relatable and unfiltered figure who speaks directly to the people. As both a candidate and an elected leader, these features help to reinforce an "us vs them" divide, making his rhetoric more accessible and persuasive to voters all the while distancing himself from the political elite and established norms.

Rhetorically, Trump employs a narrative of strong antagonism that goes beyond simple political opposition. His "us vs them" rhetoric creates a moral division between the "people" (the "true" Americans), and a range of groups perceived as threats. This antagonism is especially evident in his attacks on political opponents, the media, and various institutions. Trump casts himself as the sole protector of the American people and their shared understanding of an American way of life, defending his supporters from what he frames as existential threats to their nation. This approach not only emboldens his base but also cultivates a sense of unity among them against common enemies.

The studies reviewed in this chapter confirm that Trump's inflammatory speeches and practices have a direct impact on the public, particularly his supporters. Whether through social media or public speeches, Trump's rhetoric fuels the Trump phenomenon, where his statements influence voting behaviour and public opinion. Trump's use of social media, especially platforms like Twitter and Instagram, is a key part of his strategy to maintain and amplify his message. Inflammatory posts often spark high engagement, further amplifying the political frontier between the ingroup and the outgroups (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2022, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2024) and reinforcing his followers' sense of loyalty.

Even when he is not directly participating, the actions of his supporters, emboldened by this narrative, continue to spread his message across different online spaces, such as extremist subreddits or in the trends leading to the January 6th Capitol attack for example. Moreover, external interventions—whether from political opponents or the media—often play into Trump’s hands by validating his claims of victimhood. Trump’s inflammatory statements only push further the boundaries and midpoint of political correctness and the norms for political communication. His practices are then reappropriated by both his supporters and anti-supporters, which anchors those practices into political communication norms. Rather than diminishing the power of his controversial informality, external reactions amplify it, solidifying the dynamics of opinion the public sphere has embraced in the last few years. This dynamic is particularly evident when Trump’s rhetoric is condemned, as the backlash only serves to strengthen the perception among his supporters that the elite is against them, confirming the narrative of popular resistance against restrictive communication norms (Conway, Repke and Houck 2017). Donald Trump’s disregard for political correctness, his use of inflammatory language, and his ability to cultivate a strong media self-coverage have redefined what is acceptable in political communication. The consequences of these shifts are notable in social media engagement, where the most offensive and provocative posts often receive the most attention and amplification, creating echo chambers and reinforcing divisive rhetoric. These practices have emboldened prejudiced and extremist behaviour, a phenomenon that can be seen not only in the behaviour of his supporters but also in the wider political—and non-political—discourse.

In conclusion, Chapter 1 established that Trump’s communication practices are integral to his political objectives, serving both to rally his base and to undermine established political norms. These practices align with the rhetoric Donald Trump displays to build the narrative of moral division, adversarial rhetoric, and, through the power of communication, presents as a leader who claims to represent the “true” people against a corrupt elite, and strongly aspires to its leadership.

A significant part of the academic studies and theoretical frameworks I have analysed thus far have been categorising of Trump as a populist leader, either as the purpose of the authors’ research or as a pre-established fact for the framework of the research. Additionally, both the traditional and social media have mentioned populism to describe Trump, either in relation to the features I mentioned, or as a *Kampfbegriff*. However, populism has been plurally defined in political theory and can embrace many definitions and different characteristics depending on the culture, political system, popular grievances, and history of the different geographical areas and time periods in which it has previously been observed. In order to identify whether Trumpian communication practices align with at least one approach to populism, I must search for the elements of its definition to compare them with, before I can establish a comparative analysis in Chapter 3. As I move into Chapter 2, where I will explore the different theoretical approaches to populism more explicitly, it is clear that his style and rhetoric are key tools in the broader populist framework. The next chapters eventually further the understanding of how Trump’s communication has reshaped political discourse and how it fits within the populist narrative, driving further questioning on the nature of his leadership and its implications for democracy.

V | Chapter 2: Theoretical Lens on Populism

1. Context & Foundations

1.1. Populism as a *Kampfbegriff*: A Contested Concept

Defining populism is difficult, as it is a term used by many and in different contexts. The debate surrounding the notion is not only about what it describes but also if it even exists. Across the years populism has been categorised an ideology, a movement, a syndrome... Additionally it describes quite different political phenomena depending on the region or the epoch, where the late 1800s US Populist Party has almost nothing to do with 1980s Latin America electoral revolutions for example. Today, populism in Europe often refers to anti-immigration and a xenophobic response to liberalism, whereas in Latin America it is associated with clientelism, economic mismanagement, and neoliberalism.

Beyond the lack of scholarly agreement on populist features, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) make the claim that all forms of populism include some kind of appeal to “the people” and a denunciation of “the elite.” Accordingly, in their opinion, populism always involves a critique of the establishment and an adulation of the common people, hence the term “populist.” They note that the term is most often negatively correlated and is never claimed by the leaders or organisations it describes, fostering the confusion of who—and what—is populist. Without any self-proclaimed definition, academics and journalists use the term in quite different ways. In their analysis of the term and its main actors, Mudde and Kaltwasser wish to address two of the main critiques of populism, namely the claim that it is too vague and therefore applies to any leader, and that it is used as a *Kampfbegriff* (i.e. battle term), an inherently divisive concept which describes a term used as an instrument of political opinion struggle, often in ideological battles. Populism in this context serves as a highly charged and contentious term, one that can be employed to either justify or denounce political actions depending on the user’s perspective. By labelling someone or something as “populist,” the speaker often aligns themselves with a specific set of values while simultaneously creating a clear opposition. When mentioning such leaders and/or organisations as populist, journalists or political individuals actually serve the argument of victimhood and wrongful categorisation from the establishment that populists claim.

1.2. Theoretical Framework for Analysis

In relation to Donald Trump, populism has become a central term used to define his political style and rhetoric, but is it accurate? Or is the term being employed in an oversimplified manner, as a *Kampfbegriff*, without attention to the nuances of his actual practices? This is the critical question that the following two chapters seek to explore. To understand whether Trump’s communication truly fits within the populist framework, it is necessary to deconstruct the different interpretations of populism (Chapter 2) before analysing how Trump’s rhetoric and style align with, or diverge from, these definitions (Chapter 3).

Dr Lone Sorensen, professor of Political Communication at the University of Leeds, argues that the strands taken on political communication norms in populist rhetoric are central to

the evaluation of the phenomena⁵⁷. In her view, the *performance* of populist ideology interacts with the framework of meaning, as the formation of the “us vs them” divide necessarily involves the relationship of political communication between representatives and citizens, and results in the creation of meaning within the popular debate.

Populism has been previously described as a communication phenomenon (Waisbord 2018a, 2018b)⁵⁸, moving away from actor-centric approaches towards content-centric approaches, which identify typical elements of content (people, anti-elitism, outgroups exclusion) and of style (evoking fear, antagonization of the outgroups, oversimplification) (Block and Negrine 2017)⁵⁹. To fully understand Trump’s communication through the lens of populism, both actor-centric and content-centric approaches must be integrated, as they often mutually explain one another. The content of Trump’s messages is shaped by his personal style and behaviour as an actor, and the emotional intensity and directness of Trump’s delivery are inseparable from the messages he communicates. The appeal of the content is amplified through his persona, which in turn feeds on the emotional and ideological power of his rhetoric. Without the personal characteristics of the actor, the content would lack the emotional and personal application that makes Trump’s rhetoric effective. To understand it the other way around, without the substance of the content, Trump’s persona would simply be that of another controversial celebrity.

To approach the question of whether Trumpian communication can be labelled populist, I must first establish a theoretical framework that allows for a nuanced understanding of the notion. This framework draws from various currents of populist theory, each offering a distinct perspective on the role of rhetoric, political ideology, and social context in defining populism. These approaches will later guide my analysis of Trump’s communication practices, helping to determine whether or not they align with populist principles and strategies.

1.3. The “People” of Populism

Before turning to different ideological frameworks through which populism has been interpreted however, it is essential to engage with the foundational, and, as seen above, deeply contested feature that anchors most populist discourses: the “people”. As Valentina Pazé argues in her analysis of Italian populism “The Construction of the People” (2019), there can be “no populism without a people,” but the definition of this people is far from self-evident. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism as the logic of collective subject formation, Pazé emphasizes that the “people” is not a sociologically fixed or naturally occurring entity; rather, it is a discursive construction, describing a collective subject distinct from the individuals that make it up. The idea of a discursive construction matches

⁵⁷ Sorensen, Lone. “Populism in communications perspective: Concepts, issues, evidence.” (2021): 383-398.

⁵⁸ a) Waisbord, Silvio. “Why populism is troubling for democratic communication.” *Communication Culture & Critique* 11, no. 1 (2018): 21-34.

b) Waisbord, Silvio. “Populism as media and communication phenomenon.” In *Routledge handbook of global populism*, pp. 217-234. Routledge, 2018.

⁵⁹ Block, Elena, and Ralph Negrine. “The populist communication style: Toward a critical framework.” *International journal of communication* 11 (2017): 20-20.

Sorensen's argument of the creation of meaning through the defining of the "people" within a communicative process.

Pazé argues that populist rhetoric constructs the "people" through a synecdochic manoeuvre: a specific, recognisable part of people is elevated to stand for the whole, usually non-elites or marginalised groups. This allows for the creation of a moralised and unified subject, who rises through the exclusion of an equally constructed "other," typically described as the elites, traitors of the nation, and/or outsiders. As Pazé puts it, drawing on Laclau, "a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality." This binary vision, which divides the political space into "the people" and "the non-people," aligns closely with what Laclau describes as the drawing of an "antagonistic frontier", which I will explore in the next section of this chapter.

Unlike movements like Berlusconism, which Pazé suggests lacked "an active element of mobilisation from below," true populist movements such as Togliatti's Communist Party in Italy are defined by their ability to articulate disparate demands through a unifying figure or logic, creating homogeneity within the group. This unification, however, comes with a cost: it flattens internal differences and prevents the pluralistic negotiation demanded by representative constitutional democracy. The populist construction of the people resists the kind of political conflict that can be resolved through institutional rules and compromises. Pazé notes, this is a vision of politics in which the "people" and its enemies will "forever be antagonists," leaving little room for democratic contestation among competing interests from co-legitimate groups. This antagonistic structure allows for a direct, emotionally charged relationship between a singular leader (or unifier) and an undifferentiated people.

Ultimately, Pazé's reading not only clarifies what populism means when it invokes the "people," but also underlines the tension between this conception and the foundations of constitutional democracy. Populism, then, is not only an ideological deviation but a mode of political articulation that redefines the boundaries of democratic legitimacy for power and change. What Pazé's analysis makes clear is that any attempt to understand populism must begin with understanding the "people" not as a demographic value but as the product of a specific political logic. The centrality of this concept not only lies in the fact that it is common to nearly all populist movements, but because it is highly flexible: it can bring together a wide range of social grievances to present them as the concerns of a single collective subject. This flexibility helps explain why populism can take shape across both left-wing and right-wing politics for example. At the same time, it raises important interpretative questions: who exactly is being called "the people," how is this collective identity created, and what consequences does this have for democratic practices? Pazé's chapter lays the grounds for answering these questions by showing that the populist idea of the people should not be understood in a static form common to all theoretical interpretations of populism, but rather as a contested and politically constructed concept that plays a central role in shaping political imagination, which ultimately serves the populist leader seeking power. The theoretical frameworks that follow do not provide definitive answers to *who* the people are; rather, they offer different perspectives on *how* the claim to represent the "people" is constructed, legitimised, and used within competing models of politics and democracy.

2. Competing Perspectives on Populism

2.1. Critical Studies Approach

Critical theory is a social, historical, and political school of thought that critically examines systemic power relationships. It emphasizes how knowledge, truth, and social structures are shaped by power dynamics between dominant and marginalised groups (Horkheimer 1972, Bohman 2021)⁶⁰. Beyond critique, it explicitly aims to transform society through collective action with sociological purpose (Marcuse 1964, Habermas 1985)⁶¹.

Within this framework, populism is understood not as an ideology in itself but as a mode of political articulation that constructs a collective identity around “the people” in opposition to “the elite” (Laclau 2005). Laclau argues that populist movements emerge when isolated democratic demands—initially expressed as grievances towards the State or ruling institutions—are linked together into a “chain of equivalence,” where at least one demand comes to assume the role of an “empty signifier” in representing the collective grievances of a broader group (Laclau 2005). This process creates a political frontier that divides the political space into antagonistic camps—on one side, the popular movement claiming to represent the people, on the other, an elite establishment perceived as corrupt or out of touch (Laclau 2005, Thomassen 2022)⁶².

Laclau’s discursive approach reframes populism as a fundamental and inherent logic of politics, rather than a deviation from democracy, as it is often argued to be. Instead of viewing populism as an anomaly or a threat, Laclau argues that it is an essential component of political representation, giving meaning to the political community by constructing a collective “will.” This perspective is further developed by Mouffe in [The Democratic Paradox \(2000\)](#)⁶³, who understands that populism, rather than undermining democracy, is a necessary response to the limitations of liberal democracy. According to Mouffe, contemporary liberal democracy represses political antagonism in favour of a consensus-driven kind of governance, excluding alternative political voices. Populism in this view strengthens democracy by challenging the hegemony of the liberal order and reintroduces ideological conflict into the public sphere, as rhetoric, antagonism, and passions, are inherent to politics (Thomassen 2016)⁶⁴. Mouffe sees this as particularly important for left-wing populism, as it can serve as an emancipatory force by unifying diverse social groups under the label of “the people” against neoliberal elites. Thomassen (2016) builds on this argument and notes that, because identities are contingent and subject to rearticulation, a progressive collective will does not automatically need to be based on class struggle but can be framed around broader social demands corresponding to a variety of non-dominant (i.e. non-governing) classes. As such, within the framework of critical theory, left-wing populism has

⁶⁰ Horkheimer, Max. "Traditional and critical theory." *Critical theory: Selected essays* 188, no. 243 (1972): 1-11.

Bohman, James. "Critical theory as metaphilosophy." *Metaphilosophy* 21, no. 3 (1990): 239-252.

⁶¹ Marcuse, Herbert. *One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society*. Routledge, 2013.
Habermas, Jürgen. *The theory of communicative action: Volume 1: Reason and the rationalization of society*. Vol. 1. Beacon press, 1985.

⁶² Thomassen, Lars. "The 'Populist' Foundation of Liberal Democracy: Jan-Werner Müller, Chantal Mouffe, and Post-Foundationalism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 48, no. 7 (2022): 992–1013.

⁶³ Mouffe, Chantal. *The democratic paradox*. verso, 2000.

⁶⁴ Thomassen, L. A. "Hegemony, populism and democracy: Laclau and Mouffe today." *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* (2016).

the potential to deepen democracy by expanding participation and contesting the exclusions of the status quo.

However, while Laclau and Mouffe emphasize on populism's democratizing potential, critics argue that its discursive structure contains risks. Mansbridge and Macedo, in *Populism and Democratic Theory* (2019)⁶⁵ reframe Laclau's approach by highlighting the tension between populism and pluralism. Although Laclau insists that populism operates through relations of equivalence rather than identity and therefore can embrace the pluralist construction of the society, Mansbridge and Macedo argue that the populist rhetoric of "the people" in opposition to "the elite" ultimately undermines pluralism by creating a binary political space. This concern is also expressed by Judis in *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (2016)⁶⁶, in which he distinguishes between left-wing and right-wing populism. Judis argues left-wing populism maintains a dyadic structure that opposes only the people to the elite, while right-wing populism includes a third element—typically an excluded or marginalised group, that the elite is accused of favouring over the people. Roughly, whereas left-wing populism represents the bottom and middle groups against the top, right-wing populism is articulated around the middle group revindicating its grievances both against the top and bottom groups. This triadic structure often results in exclusionary politics, as seen in nationalist and extreme movements that claim to defend the "real" people against both elite and minority groups (Judis 2016).

Moreover, while populism can enhance participation and activism (Laclau 2005, Mouffe 2000), it can also transform into a form of passive support for charismatic leaders: Mansbridge and Macedo (2019) note that right-wing populist movements often depend on strong, centralised leadership rather than activism by the people, reducing democratic engagement and allowing only for the reliance on a singular figure. Even left-wing populisms, which emphasise popular mobilisation, can become overly dependent on leadership and representation rather than sustained democratic engagement. This last argument aligns with the view that populism can be a threat to deliberative democracy, relying more on emotional appeals and symbolic antagonism than on critical debate (Mansbridge and Macedo 2019, Habermas 1985).

Contrary to Laclau's view that because populism is a relation of equivalence, "internal" pluralism is ensured, Mouffe acknowledges that pluralism, in any political system, is inherently limited, arguing that no democratic order can accommodate all perspectives equally, as a nation must conserve certain borders of its construction of collective identity. However, liberal critics argue that populism's antagonistic framing amplify political polarization and fosters an exclusionary conception of democracy that can become authoritarian in practice (Mansbridge and Macedo 2019).

While Laclau and Mouffe may view populism as a mean of dynamizing democratic contestation, its tendency to simplify complex political issues into a struggle between "the people" and "the elite" raises concern about its long-term effects on democratic institutions. Ultimately, the critical theory perspective views populism as an ambivalent force: while it can challenge power structures and fuel democratic participation, it also risks undermining

⁶⁵ Mansbridge, Jane, and Stephen Macedo. "Populism and democratic theory." *Annual review of law and social science* 15, no. 1 (2019): 59-77.

⁶⁶ Judis, John B. *The populist explosion: How the great recession transformed American and European politics*. Vol. 10. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016.

pluralism, encourage authoritarian tendencies, and reduce politics to a spectacle of antagonism rather than a deliberative popular process.

2.2. Socioeconomic Approach

The socioeconomic approach to populism, as discussed by economists such as Rüdiger Dornbusch and Jeffrey Sachs, focuses on the economic conditions and inequalities that often precede populist movements. This perspective links the rise of populism to economic crises, social disenfranchisement, and the growing inequality between elites and ordinary citizens. The research in this field is primarily rooted in economic analysis and macroeconomic policy evaluations, relying on empirical case studies from different countries and governments, statistical data, and historical economic trends, to assess how populist policies impact national economies.

Studies such as *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America* by Dornbusch and Edwards (1990), and *Social Conflict and Populist Policies in Latin America* by Sachs (1990) employ a comparative historical approach to analyse instances of populist economic management in response to recurring patterns and structural causes of economic instability. The research is deeply influenced by classical economic theory, focusing in particular on risks of inflation, fiscal responsibility, and the long-term sustainability of different economic interventions. Unlike political theory approaches that emphasise the role of discourse and ideology, these studies focus on material consequences of populist policies, and how economic mismanagement can lead to severe crises of the political order.

In *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*, Dornbusch and Edwards (1990) define “macroeconomic populism” as an economic strategy that prioritises rapid growth and income redistribution, while neglecting inflation risks, fiscal sustainability, and international market constraints. Their study defines a four-phase cycle, common to several Latin American populist regimes: (1) an initial phase of expansionary policies, focused on stimulating demand by maintain low interest rates and improve social welfare by increasing public spending; (2) an overheating phase with emerging inflationary pressures and supply shortages as domestic demand increases, leading to a rise in prices and budget and trade deficits; (3) a crisis phase marked by hyperinflation, the depreciation of the national currency, capital flight, and economic stagnation; and (4) a painful but inevitable adjustment phase in which austerity measures and structural reforms are implemented, often including drastic reductions in public spending, the increase of interest rates, and the liberalisation of markets. This framework is applied to case studies such as Chile under Salvador Allende (1970-1973) and Peru under Allan García (1985-1990), both of which exemplify the patterns of short-term populist economic gains followed by long-term crises (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990).

In Chile, Allende’s government pursued aggressive nationalisation policies, expanding state control over key industries, especially mining companies, which increased wages, and significantly boosted public spending. However, as inflation rose, and foreign exchange eroded, the government had to resort to printing money, eventually leading to hyperinflation (meaning an uncontrollable rise of prices on all goods and services), shortages in both supply and demand, and economic collapse. The situation resulted in a military coup in 1973,

showing again how economic mismanagement can lead to political instability. Similarly, in Peru, García's first administration implemented redistributive policies, price controls, and heavy public spending while refusing to comply with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recommendations of austerity. Although these policies initially increased economic growth, and improved living conditions for the lower classes, they eventually triggered hyperinflation that exceeded 6.000% annually, capital flight, and a severe debt crisis, forcing the country into painful economic restructuring (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990).

Sachs (1990), in *Social Conflict and Populist Policies in Latin America*, further explores how income inequality in Latin America created political pressure for redistributive policies, which in turn weakened economic performance from a capitalist point of view. Sachs identifies a recurring "populist policy cycle," where governments respond to popular social grievances by implementing unsustainable expansionary policies that ultimately create inflation and fiscal crises. The author positions populism as a symptom of deeper structural inequalities: more than just being the product of opportunistic leadership, populist economic policies rise in response to the exclusionary nature of Latin American economies where major parts of the population lack access to wealth and economic opportunity. His work suggests that populism should be understood not only as a cause of economic instability, but also as a response to long-standing socioeconomic divisions.

Mudde and Kaltwasser, in *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (2017), note that the socioeconomic approach to populism views the phenomenon as primarily economic. While this interpretation has lost influence in political science—especially as Latin American populists later adopted neoliberal economic policies after the 1990s—it remains influential in economic and media publishing and is often used to describe government policies analysed as irresponsible due to excessive redistribution and deficit spending.

Although the socioeconomic approach provides insight into the economic roots of populism, it has been criticised for oversimplifying populist movements, reducing them to irresponsible economic management. Critics argue that the approach overlooks the broader political and ideological dimensions of populism, including its appeal to the people beyond economic concerns. Moreover, while cases like Allende's Chile and García's Peru illustrate the risks of populist economic policies, other cases, such as Bolivia under Evo Morales, demonstrate that populist government can maintain redistributive policies without ending in the collapse of the country's economy. As discussed in *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left* (Levitsky and Roberts 2011)⁶⁷, Morales (2006-2019) implemented a mix of governmental economic policies and social welfare programs, while maintaining macroeconomic stability. His administration nationalised industries and increased social spending in redistributing wages, and reduced poverty, yet managed to avoid hyperinflation by maintaining strict fiscal policies. This case suggests that economic populism can succeed under certain conditions, in particular the application of macroeconomic policies that respect foreign exchange and remain aware of the risks of inflation.

Thus, while the socioeconomic approach remains a useful framework for understanding certain populist movements, or others' preconditions, it does not fully explain the complexity of populism as a political phenomenon. By focusing primarily on economic mismanagement, it fails to observe the political and social grievances that drive populist

⁶⁷ Levitsky, Steven, and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds. *The resurgence of the Latin American left*. jhu Press, 2011.

engagement among the people, and the structural inequalities that make populist economic policies appealing in the first place.

2.3. Style of Government Approach

The style of government approach to populism examines the political practices and governance styles of populist leaders, particularly their use of direct and charismatic communication to engage with their supporters. This approach highlights the informal, combative, and personalised nature of populist governance, which contrasts with the more institutionalised practices of other political elites. Populist leaders often rely on direct communication, including through social media, to avoid institutional norms, and create a connection with “the people.” This approach determines several political dynamics, such as the centralisation of power and challenges to traditional party structures. Centralisation of power by populists means that as they often consolidate authority into their own hands, they help weaken other political institutions such as the legislative, judiciary, or independent agents of the political sphere. This allows them to better control decision-making processes, and reduce opposition, weakening adversary power centres.

Within this approach’s framework, populists may challenge institutional balance by antagonising the role of institutions that are intended to avoid abuses of power. These leaders may seek to control or influence the judiciary, reduce the independence of the media, or dismantle the activities of civil social organisations, all in an effort to consolidate their own power and prevent challenges to their order. Populists thus would diverge from the traditional relationship between the people and their political representatives established through political communication (Sorensen 2021) in communicating directly with their supporters and actively taking part in the popular debate as non-elites (Judis 2016). This can mean using social media to communicate their rhetoric directly to the public, or creating personalised, populist movements that operate outside the established party system, reinforcing the idea that they offer a tailored solution to problems created by formal political communication. In this way, populist leaders distance themselves from traditional political elites, presenting themselves as the true representative of “the people.”

While scholars like Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser do not focus specifically on governance style, their work on populism as a political logic helps understand how populist leaders use governance to reinforce their positions and maintain public support, even once elected. In *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (2017), Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that populist leaders will often adopt a “folkloric style of politics”, characterised by unprofessional and amateurish behaviour in term of political norms, as to maximise media attention and their popular support. In this way, populist figures present themselves as distinct from political elites and emphasise their belonging to the group of “the people” even more.

This idea is further explored by Kenny in his *Strategic Approach to Populism* (2023)⁶⁸, in which he describes populism as a political strategy based on the unmediated relation between charismatic populist leaders and their followers in their pursuit of power. Kenny’s approach, framed around Weber’s concept of charismatic leadership, conceptualises

⁶⁸ Kenny, Paul D. "The strategic approach to populism." In *The Routledge Handbook of Populism in the Asia Pacific*, pp. 37-48. Routledge India, 2023.

populism as a series of strategic actions rather than a consistent set of beliefs. From this perspective, populism is not defined by a particular set of values or policies but is better understood as a strategy for gaining and maintaining political power. The “populist strategy” consists of leaders using populist rhetoric to create mass mobilisation and establish themselves as the voice of “the people” in opposition to the corrupt elite. As Kenny (2023) explains, populism becomes a “political strategy” because it is more concerned with action—specifically how populists build and consolidate power—than with ideological logic and consistency, or long-term policy goals.

Additionally, in the study of *Populism as a Conceptual Problem* (2024)⁶⁹, Dominguez Lopez, Thielicke-Witt, and Arya argue that populism should not be understood as a static ideology but as a dynamic political logic that allows for the centralisation of power and avoiding traditional political norms through direct modes of governance. In this dynamic view, populism acts as a flexible tool that leaders use to adapt their strategies to the political context and undermine the opposition, thus creating an environment where the leader’s will is prioritised over institutional norms and democratic processes under the impression that it is a result of popular democratic demands (grievances).

Populism, in this sense, can be seen as a pragmatic and opportunistic strategy that populist leaders use to maintain control over their political environments, playing on the social grievances brought about by national crisis moments, economic instability, or general dissatisfaction with traditional elites. This flexibility allows populist strategies to evolve based on the political climate, which highlights the malleable character of populism.

2.4. Media Studies Approach

The media studies approach to populism focuses on the significant role that media, especially social media, plays in the rise and sustenance of populist movements. In this approach, populism is considered not as a political ideology or a form of discourse, but rather a strategic use of the media to shape public opinion and mobilise support. It understands populist leaders to exploit media platforms to create an unmediated conversational relationship with their followers, usually keeping out from traditional media like newspaper or television. The media, in this context, is seen as a crucial tool for populist leaders to increase their visibility, engage directly with their base, and construct the illusion of the relationship between “the people” and their sole representative, all the while framing traditional platforms as biased or against them, thus belonging to the enemy outgroup that is threatening the ingroup (Ntontis et al. 2024). Scholars such as Sarah Oates and Luca Manucci have explored how populist rhetoric succeeds in a media environment that favours sensationalism and emotional appeals to polarisation, elements that, in this approach, are central to populist communication.

Oates, in her *Introduction to Media and Politics* (2008)⁷⁰, explores the power dynamics between populist leaders and the media, noting how these leaders strategically use media platforms to prioritise their message over a more neutral source of information, framing

⁶⁹ Domínguez López, Ernesto, Valerian Thielicke-Witt, and Nitin Arya. "Populism as a Conceptual Problem: Disciplinary Differentiation, Specialization, and the Complex Approach." *Societies* 14, no. 12 (2024): 245.

⁷⁰ Oates, Sarah. "Introduction to media and politics." (2008): 1-240.

these as necessarily biased against themselves. These leaders craft their message in a way that appears authentic, making the informal delivery more important to the audience—creating a sense of trust in their relationship to the people—than the informational content of the message. Oates' work contributes to understanding how populists may manipulate media structures to mobilise and sustain their base in taking advantage of the fragmented media landscape and the increased reliance on social media for political communication and, importantly enough, information.

Manucci's work (2017)⁷¹ expands on this by observing that the relationship between populists and the media is not a simple opposition but actually reveals an integrated process. Manucci argues that populists that actively participate in the creation of political content align themselves with the commercial logic of the media, which thrives on sensational stories. Populist messages—provocative, emotional, and simplified—fit the media's demand for content, creating a "circular relationship" in which populist discourse fuels media exposure, and media exposure in turn strengthens the populists' public visibility. This loop enables populist rhetoric to become an active element of the public discourse, obviously reinforcing the message's (and the leaders'!) legitimacy.

Manucci's analysis further develops the argument that the symbiotic relationship between populists and the media is not just about the content they produce, but also about the structure of communication itself. He argues this integrated system has transformed the nature of political communication at its base, as the media and political spheres are now so intertwined that they can no longer be seen as separate entities: blurring the distinction between "political actors" and "media actors" eventually creates a system in which both spheres mutually reinforce each other, on one hand making political communication more accessible, immediate and personalised, on the other interfering with the neutral quality of journalism and the perception of the populist leader in relation to his or her peers. This implies a profound change in how political messages are created, consumed, and disseminated in society.

Additionally, the media studies approach examines the effects of populist messages on the "imagined community," a term coined by Benedict Anderson in 1983⁷² to describe the sense of collective identity shared by a group of people or nation. Populist leaders exploit media platforms to create (or deepen) a shared sense of belonging among their followers, framing "the people" as a united, often homogeneous group (especially in right-wing populism) that stands in opposition to "the elite." This narrative creates a strong emotional connection among the group, and between the group and its leader, helping to solidify the populist movement's base much like the way "empty signifiers" do (Laclau 2005).

Other scholars like danah boyd, researcher for Microsoft Research, and Alice Marwick, both communication scholars introduce the concept of "context collapse" to explain how the dynamic nature of media (especially social media) has shifted the way information is communicated and consumed⁷³. "Context collapse" refers to the flattening of various

⁷¹ Manucci, Luca. "Populism and the Media." *The Oxford handbook of populism* 1 (2017): 467-492.

⁷² Anderson, Benedict Richard O'Gorman. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1991. (Revised edition, the original first came out in 1983).

⁷³ Marwick, Alice E., and Danah Boyd. "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience." *New media & society* 13, no. 1 (2011): 114-133.

audience groups into one, where messages intended for a specific group may simultaneously reach others with different values or expectations, meaning the populist leader must define a way in which they present themselves. For populists, this phenomenon can be advantageous as it allows them to avoid traditional normative barriers and engage directly with a broad audience, making their message more easily accessible and, as a consequence, more impactful. This collapse of context allows populist leaders to shape their message so as to reach multiple demographics, eventually amplifying their reach and, subsequently, their results.

Moreover, the large expansion of social media and big data analytics has given populist leaders the tools to tailor their message more precisely to individuals or specific groups, taking advantage of the unmediated relationship these platforms allow between follower and followed. Thanks to data collection and analysis, populists can adapt their message and delivery to resonate with particular grievances or desires; additionally, echo chambers, a feature of social media algorithms that create “filter bubbles” of content for users to only view content that aligns with their opinions, or on the contrary show radically opposed ideological-based content, centre the user’s attention on minimal and inflammatory topics, often fuelled by the populist leader’s communication and their interaction with the media, and subtly redefining the limits of political communication norms (Marwick and Boyd 2011). This data-driven approach maximises their ability to gather support and maintain it in the public consciousness, where populists may easily manipulate the components of the imagined community to their polarising views.

In conclusion, the media studies approach offers a valuable understanding of the symbiotic relationship between populist leaders and media platforms, showing how the media is strategically used to inform populist messaging, gather support, and challenge the position of the established political structures by getting straight to the root; a strategy that is arguably anti-democratic in the deliberative sense. This approach highlights the critical role of the media in facilitating the rise of populism, not just by being a vector of the communicative relationship between the leader and the movement, but by creating a fertile ground for populist rhetoric to flourish, with the depreciation of the public’s reliance on traditional media to ground the components of its imagined community. The integration of media and political spheres thus has redefined the landscape of political communication, influencing not only how populist messages are created and shared but also how they contribute to the formation of collective identities and the manipulation of public sentiment by populists.

2.5. Ideational Approach

Finally, the ideational approach to populism, developed by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), is one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the core ideology of populism. Mudde and Kaltwasser critique other approaches to populism, particularly those that either overemphasise its negative aspects or view it solely as a strategic tool. While they acknowledge the value of these perspectives, they conclude that they do not adequately capture the ideological substance of populism. By defining populism

through an ideational approach, Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that we can better understand its appeal and its role in political discourse.

The core of populism, common to all previous approaches, lies in its divisive view of society. Populists define the political landscape into two antagonistic groups: “the people,” who are seen as virtuous, pure, and deserving of political power, and “the elite,” who are perceived as corrupt, self-serving, and disconnected from the needs of ordinary citizens. This division serves as the foundation for populist discourse, framing political struggles as the battle between the two groups. In this sense, populism is always understood as a response to the alienation from society that many people feel within the current political system (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

What sets the ideational approach apart from other frameworks, such as the media studies approach or the style of government approach, is its focus on the ideological content of populist *discourse* rather than its practical manifestations and subsequent dynamics with other political entities.

Mudde and Kaltwasser’s approach presents populism as a “thin-centered” ideology. This term signifies that populism, unlike more comprehensive ideologies like liberalism or socialism, does not offer a fully developed worldview or a comprehensive political program. Instead, populism provides a set of ideas that are flexible and adaptable, allowing it to be combined with other ideologies to form a more coherent platform. As described earlier in other approaches, left-wing populism may focus on social justice and redistribution, while right-wing populism may embrace nationalism and anti-immigration sentiments. Populism as a “thin-centered” ideology must necessarily be understood in relation to other, more fully developed ideologies such as liberalism, socialism or even fascism; while distinct in its core principles, it is most often affiliated and expressed through these other “thick-centered” ideologies. Populism can then better be explained as a framework that can be filled with content from other ideologies, either evolving into something more stable or dissolving into more developed ideologies once it gains significant power in the political discourse and subsequent worldviews.

The “thinness” of populism is what allows it to be so malleable and relevant across various political contexts, but it also means that populism alone cannot provide all the answers to complex political and social issues. In the ideational approach, populist movements interpret political reality and formulate their policies based on their particular understanding of the antagonistic division between the groups, explaining why populism can appear in various forms and contexts, and appeal to a broad range of political constituencies. In Mudde and Kaltwasser’s view (2017), populism’s “thin” nature is both a strength and a limitation: it allows populist movements to appeal to broad sections of the population, but it also means that populism cannot sustain itself in the long term without integrating other ideological elements. The authors go further in developing populism as a “mental map” that people use to understand the world, which is eventually integrated into policies with ideas from other ideologies.

This ideological flexibility means that populism is almost never found in its “pure” form. However, the authors parallelly develop what can be understood as non-populist, in order to better identify the principles attached to the phenomenon. In their seminal work, Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that certain political movements or ideologies are often mistakenly categorised as populist, when, in fact, they do not adhere to the essential features of

populism. A critical distinction is made between pluralism and elitism, and their incompatibility with populism. Movements that are committed to pluralism—the idea that society should be represented by multiple competing interests based off the social, cultural and ethnical plurality present in the population—do not qualify as populist, as populism fundamentally rejects the pluralist conception of politics, instead reducing political society to a homogeneous “people” that must battle “the corrupt elites”. Although scholars like Laclau (2005), and left-wing populism theorists, may consider the group of “the people” as united not through identity but social grievances in a “chain of equivalence”, Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that more nationalist conceptions of identity are inevitably implemented in the dichotomous perception of the groups, especially when it comes to right-wing populist movements.

Moreover, Mudde and Kaltwasser also stress that populism should not be confused with elitism. While it can be argued that populism undermining certain groups for governing the “true people” could be ruled elitist, the authors remark that populism does not advocate for the maintenance or reinforcement of elite rule, contrasting with movements that advocate for preservation or reinforcement of elite control such as authoritarian or technocratic forms of governance. Therefore, while populism may overlap with these ideologies in practice, it diverges in its ideological core.

By comparing this approach with others, I get a more comprehensive picture of populism. The media studies approach for example, is concerned with how populist leaders use the media to amplify their messages, creating a direct link between leaders and the people. However, the ideational approach shifts the focus back to the content of those messages and the rhetoric behind them, making it clear that the appeal of populism lies in its ability to frame political struggles in terms of moral division. The style of government approach, on the other hand, focuses on how populists may centralise power and challenge institutional norms, but for Mudde and Kaltwasser, the ideological foundation of populism is what enables such political actors to position themselves as the true representatives of “the people.” These other frameworks help explain the mechanisms through which populism operates, both in general and depending on the side of the political spectrum it aligns with in practice, while the ideational approach anchors my understanding of the core ideological principles common to all populist movements.

Thus, while the ideational approach does not offer a specific political program or policy set, it provides a crucial framework for defining the ideological foundations of populism, allowing me to better understand why populists seek to avoid traditional democratic structures and embrace direct forms of governance.

3. Conclusions

This chapter, focused on theory, has demonstrated that populism resists any singular or stable definition: rather than constituting a unified ideology, a movement, or a policy programme, populism emerges as a multifaceted political phenomenon that can only be understood as a whole through the analysis of several theoretical perspectives. The diversity of approaches reviewed here—critical theory, socioeconomics, style of government, media studies, and ideational—confirm that populism is best described not as a fixed political

category but as a flexible political logic, which adapts to different historical, social, and institutional contexts.

Across the very different frameworks reviewed, a common denominator nonetheless emerges. All approaches, despite their differences, converge around the central opposition between “the people” and “the elite.” Whether understood as a discursive construction (Laclau, Mouffe, Pazé), a wannabe ideology (Mudde, Kaltwasser), a strategic resource (Kenny), or a communicative performance amplified by media systems (Oates, Manucci), populism consistently frames politics as a moral struggle between a virtuous, homogeneous people and a corrupt establishment, serving itself and/or an outside group. This antagonistic division is not merely rhetorical but constitutes the very foundation upon which populist legitimacy is built. Populism, therefore, is less defined by what policies its leaders may advocate than by how it constructs political meaning, authority, and representation.

Chapter 2 has also highlighted how the concept of “the people” is neither sociologically given, nor is it politically neutral. Following Laclau and Pazé’s conceptions, the people must be understood as a discursive and symbolic construction. This construction enables populist actors to unify diverse grievances belonging to different groups of interest in the political sphere into a single collective identity, but it also flattens internal plurality and redefines democratic conflicts as antagonisms rather than as a negotiable competition between democratically legitimate interests. There lies one of populism’s central tensions, described in several of the approaches: its capacity to mobilise and politicise excluded voices can deepen democratic participation, yet its binary (or trinary! when associated with right-wing politics) logic puts pluralism, deliberation, and institutional mediation, at risk. I can therefore conclude that although the production of the discursive construction of populism is first established through a political articulation of society that vows to include the left-out “people” that make the society, it later must be sustained by exclusion in order to legitimate the same group of “the people”.

The comparative analysis of approaches further shows that populism cannot be reduced to any single dimension. The socioeconomic approach for example, demonstrates that material inequalities, economic crises, and structural exclusion often create fertile ground for populist mobilisations, but economic explanations alone fail to account for populism ideological flexibility, nor does it offer a precise account of how the symbolic division of society is constructed by populist leaders before acting on economic policies. Similarly, the style of government and media studies approaches highlight how populism operates in practice, through charismatic leadership, direct communication, institutional bypassing, and the knowledge of media devices; yet these perspectives describe the mechanisms of populism rather than defining its ethos. The ideational approach, in contrast, provides a more anchored definition by identifying populism as a “thin-centred” ideology that is structured around popular sovereignty and moral dualism; however, it still requires the takeaways of other frameworks to capture populism’s empirical expression in political attitudes.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that populism should be understood as a relational and communicative phenomenon of politics: it is shaped by context, activated through communication, and sustained by political performance. Populism exists not only in what its political actors claim, but also in how they speak, how they position themselves and their followers towards institutions and opponents, and how they shape collective identities through media and rhetoric. This insight is particularly relevant when evaluating

contemporary political figures, for whom populism may function less as a coherent ideology than as a communicative and strategic set of actions.

These conclusions directly frame the analytical task of my next chapter. If populism is not a label that can be applied only to a specific set of policies or ideological alignment, then I may assess whether Donald Trump can be considered a populist by looking at his communicative practices. The next chapter therefore shifts from theory to empirical analysis, examining Trump's rhetoric, style, and media use through the theoretical lenses developed here. By analysing how Trump constructs "the people," defines elites and outgroups, creates moral antagonism, and customises political communicative norms to his image, chapter 3 seeks to determine not whether Trump is called a populist, but whether his communication genuinely aligns with the core logic and characteristics of populism as defined across the competing approaches discussed in chapter 2.

VI | Chapter 3: The Relevance of Labelling Trump a Populist

1. Revisiting Trump's Communication Through Populist Theory

This chapter revisits Donald Trump's communication through the main theoretical approaches to populism discussed in chapters 1 and 2, with the aim of assessing whether the label "populist" is analytically correct and, if so, under what conceptual condition, to verify whether I can categorise Trump's communication strategy as such. Rather than presuming populism is a description of communication style, or a normative judgement, this chapter will adopt a communication-centred perspective in which populism is treated as a way of constructing political reality through discourse, media practices, leadership performance, and strategic interactions with institutions and opponents.

Chapter 1 demonstrated that Trump's communication is characterised by persistent antagonism, moral polarisation, a strong personalisation of political authority, and the systematic delegation of mediating institutions (such as the press, political parties, judicial courts, and electoral process). Trump's rhetoric, as explored in the first chapter of my analysis, consistently frames politics as an existential struggle between a virtuous "us" and a corrupt and outsider "them"; additionally, his communicative practices in terms of style and recurring features establish a direct and emotionally charged relationship with his supporters, which supposedly fit the "us" group. Chapter 2 showed that these features recur across several theoretical approaches to populism, although with different causes and consequences throughout the different frameworks.

The following, bridging analysis of the previous chapters is structured into two main sections. The first revisits Trump's communication through populist theory, distinguishing between elements that are comparable with the populist conception of "the people," as described by Pazé, elements that do not fully align with the previously described approaches to populism, and elements that most clearly confirm Trump's populist profile. The second section evaluates the relevance of labelling Trump a populist and reflects on this label's broader implications for democratic norms, political communication, and the study of populism; I will eventually develop the consequences and impacts of Trumpian communication on democracy and on the western political world, in the final concluding chapter of this thesis.

1.1. Parallels with Valentina Pazé's Conception of the People

Valentina Pazé conception of "the people" is particularly useful for studying populism, and in this instance, Trump's communication, as it sets the symbolic and discursive dimensions of political identity. In Pazé's work, "the people" are not a sociological collection of individuals or an empirical majority, but a political subject that is constructed through discourse.

Trump's communication aligns closely with this discursive logic. As detailed in the earlier analysis of his campaign rhetoric, Trump does not simply address an existing demographic: he actively constructs an identity for this "people," that is honest, hard-working, patriotic, family-oriented, and until he comes into power, feels as unfairly marginalised by the elite, the

liberals and/or Democrats, and the outsiders (notably immigrant groups), which would be actively hostile to national interests. This construction appears across various platforms of communication: in rally speeches where he invokes “forgotten Americans,” in social media posts attacking “the swamp,” or in interviews where he positions himself as a tribune rather than a conventional politician. This construction resonates with Ernesto Laclau’s theory of “chains of equivalence,” in which Trump himself appears as an empty signifier, voicing matters such as the economic downfall of the United States, resentment toward immigration, distrust of the media, hostility toward political correctness, and suspicion of electoral institutions; supposedly grievances that are shared by the typical American citizen, Trump articulates them as equivalent expressions of a single antagonism between “the people” and “the system.”

As Lasse Thomassen explains in his discussion of Laclau’s work, the political efficacy of such articulation lies in its capacity to simplify complex social realities into morally intelligible narratives. Trump’s communication exemplifies this simplification. He provides a “mental map” of political reality where responsibility for the national decline is clearly assigned to the “out-group”, while redemption is promised to the “in-group” through his personal leadership.

From this perspective, Trump’s communication does not just reflect social alienation. It actively produces a political subject, the supporter, who understand themselves as excluded and betrayed, although morally superior. This confirms Pazé’s view that populism operates less through empirical representation and facts, than through symbolic construction, and that “the people” which is central to populism is in fact the product of a specific “political logic.” On top of my using the different theoretical approaches to populism to analyse how “the people” is constructed in Trump’s discourse, I can touch on what the political imagination shaped by Trump looks like through the layering foundations of Pazé’s analysis, both in terms of its main defining features and what consequences it may have for democratic change.

1.2. Elements That Don’t Align

Several theoretical approaches to populism, while informative in their respective domains, provide limited insight when it comes to studying the communicative strategies of Donald Trump. The socioeconomic approach to populism for example, which links economic inequality and conditions to the rise of populist movements mostly in Latin America, is largely unsuitable to study Trump’s communication.

First, the approach conceptualises populism as a reaction to economic inequality that produces macroeconomic policies: Dornbusch and Edwards (1990) and Sachs (1990) identify recurring patterns of economic inequality in Latin American countries that precede macroeconomic populist policies, determining a “populist policy cycle”. Dornbusch and Edwards (1990) argue that different populist experiences share common economic conditions, stating: “The purpose of our paper is to show that policy experiences in different countries and periods share common features, from the initial conditions, the motivation for policies, the argument that the country’s conditions are different, to the ultimate collapse” ;

“A central thesis we advance is that the macroeconomics of various experiences is very much the same, even if the politics differed greatly.” (Dornbusch and Edwards 1990).

The approach does identify the “us versus them” theme in the discourse of economic populists as a strategy serving political objectives (Dornbusch and Edwards 1990), common to all approaches and central to the definition of populism, which, as observed in the first chapter’s analysis, is sizeable component of Trump’s rhetoric. In socioeconomic approaches to Latin American populism, the ‘us versus them’ rhetoric is applied to further political objectives that aim at restructuring the economy.

About Allende’s program in Chile for example, Dornbusch and Edwards (1990) note: “An important, indeed crucial, objective of the economic program was to broaden the UP’s⁷⁴ political base of support very quickly. The UP leaders thought that it was necessary to obtain the support of the middle classes and, more specifically, to draw a large number of voters that had, until then, supported the Christian Democrats into the UP in order to move towards a socialist system. This political objective plays a significant role in explaining the heavily populist content of the short run program.” This shows that the objectives of populist leaders include the strategy of appealing to socioeconomic demands of several different groups, to broaden the reach of their program. Moreover, it shows that in the case of the socioeconomic approach, populism is used to further a broader political agenda, in this case “moving towards a socialist system,” by appealing to the socioeconomic grievances of the people. Therefore, to study Trump through the socioeconomic approach involves researching what his political objectives are, whether they are facilitated by the “us versus them” rhetoric, and what pre-existing grievances he appeals to as a leader of “the people.”

This poses a first limit for an analysis of Trump’s communication through a socioeconomic approach: the study of populism here entails the study of pre-existing social and economic grievances to which populist leaders bring a solution via macroeconomic policies and the restructuring of national economy, rather than looking at the content of the leaders’ speeches or their communicative strategies. These means of analysis are not relevant to the discourse-based focus of my study, which does not engage with the macroeconomic and policy aspects of Trump’s governance.

One of the isolated examples of Trump’s communication offering a solution to pre-existing grievances lies in the study of the ‘Trump Effect,’ or ‘Trump phenomenon,’ which links Trump’s highly informal and often inflammatory statements that go against political correctness norms. Scholars like Ntontis et al. (2024) explain Trump’s appeal to cultural grievances by identifying the theory of the American Jeremiad (Bercovitch 1978), a cultural understanding of what the United States stand for and against, and of an American ‘way of life,’ which Trump relates to facilitate an identification process for his followers. However, Trump rarely engages with technical macroeconomic policy, economic solutions or redistributive policy. His appeal to socioeconomic grievances is often more of an argument that helps pass through the identification of, and accusations on, the “out-group,” to appeal to voters (Ntontis et al. 2024), rather than a programmatic restructuring of the economy. Trump’s division of the ‘us versus them’ is usually established more by a process of identification to a crafted understanding of society, than a contrast of current social and economic issues in need of policy reformation.

⁷⁴ Unidad Popular

While scholars of the socioeconomic approach emphasise structural economic and social factors to explain the emergence of populist rhetoric, my analysis of Trumpian communication practices indicates that his rhetoric is not driven by factual economic grievances, nor do his speeches focus on addressing macroeconomic inequalities in the way the approach suggests. His discourse rather emphasises nationalism, immigration control, and the protection of American cultural values. While economic issues such as trade, jobs, and immigration may be part of his rhetoric, they are largely rooted in cultural and identity-based concerns.

Moreover, socioeconomic approaches focus on populism as a macroeconomic phenomenon that exists mostly in Latin America, as Sachs (1990) notes of Latin American economies that they “demonstrate a continuing inability to moderate social conflict, in stark contrast to the corporatist economies of Northern Europe. In the corporatist welfare states, labour militancy is low, and a broad-based consensus exists on the distribution of income and the redistributive role of the public sector. In Latin America, by contrast, bitter economic conflict is one of the central phenomena of economic life.” By contrast, Judis frames the same economic dynamics to explain the rise of populism in the U.S and in Europe: “Judis views the resurgence of populism in the past few decades primarily as an expression of discontent with neo-liberal policies. So, during periods when neo-liberalism seemed to function well, such as the late 1990s, populism lost support. At other times—most notably in the wake of the 2008 crisis—left and right-wing populist movements exploded in Europe and the U.S.” (Abromeit, 2017)⁷⁵.

Although pre-existing socioeconomic factors are often observed when trying to explain the emergence of populism (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1990, Sachs, 1990, Judis 2016), the very different observations made between various regions and epochs clash with Dornbusch & Edwards initial statement, showing it is impossible to find a single pattern of populist governance and policy appeal. Additionally, the argument of pre-existing socioeconomic conditions explaining the rise of populism has been vividly criticised by scholars such as Wodak (2015)⁷⁶ or Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), who provide different explanations as to what conditions facilitate populism, “such as perception of threat or crisis, economic downturn, systematic corruption, a weak state unable to collect taxes or redistributive wealth, and an increasingly diversified and competitive media market that focuses more on the sensational issues favoured by populists” (Abromeit, 2017).

Thus, the socioeconomic approach presents a framework of analysis that is incompatible with the communicative aspect of my approach, as it frames populism as strategic solution and appeal to culturally shared grievances.

The critical theory approach on the other hand provides a more sophisticated framework for understanding the discursive construction of populism in defining it as a political articulation of identity. However, its analytical focus eventually presents limitations

⁷⁵ Judis departs from a political theory approach, however he points out pre-existing socioeconomic conditions to explain the rise of populism in Europe and the U.S.

Abromeit, John. "A critical review of recent literature on populism." *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (2017): 177-186.

⁷⁶ Wodak, Ruth. *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Sage, 2015.

when applied to my study of Donald Trump's specific communication strategy and rhetoric in practice.

From one point of view, critical theory may offer a valuable conception of identity formation, antagonism, and affect beside Trump's followers: Laclau and Mouffe argue that political identities are formed through "chains of equivalence," a process in which different social groups, despite their differences, unite around a common antagonistic opposition. This process is central to populist *rhetoric*. Thomassen (2016) explains this by using Laclau's rhetorical categories⁷⁷: "Each moment in the chain of equivalence can substitute for the others because they are all equally opposed to a common enemy; and meaning travels by contiguity from one moment to another in the chain so that the meaning of one moment contaminates the others." Meaning, here, is central to the discursive understanding of populism: it travels from one moment or element to another in the chain so that the meaning of one moment contaminates the others. Because it can link together the interests and grievances of different groups together by giving them a unified meaning, the chain constructs a new political identity.

This dynamic is further reinforced through the operation of the "empty signifier": one of the elements of the chain of equivalence will come to take the position of an "empty signifier," functioning as a point of identification for groups with different interests, often a term, a symbol, or the leader of the populist movement. Importantly, this process is performative: the collective identity does not pre-exist its representation but is produced through discursive articulation, and the process is necessary precisely because this collective identity does not exist yet (Laclau 1996, Thomassen 2016). Moreover, this identification process is deeply affective, as it involves emotional investment and desire by both the leader and their followers. The enjoyment derived does not come from the fulfilment of the political promises of the movement but from the very act of identification with the populist project (Thomassen 2019)⁷⁸. According to Ntontis et al. in their analysis of Trump's identity-based discourse, leaders are therefore "actively involved in the definition of social identity ('creating a sense of us') both in word and deed. This operates at various levels, including defining people as belonging to a common group, defining the boundaries of inclusion, defining the content (norms, values, etc.) and defining the prototypes of the category. In this way, leaders are able to construct themselves, their policies and their accomplishments as instantiations of the group identity. That is, effective leaders are accomplished entrepreneurs of identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001)"⁷⁹ (Ntontis et al. 2024).

As Laclau exemplifies with Juan Domingo Perón, ex-president of Argentina (1946-1955 and between 1973 and 1974), the populist leader can—and usually does—take the role of the signifier representing the collective grievances. Within the rhetoric of "us versus them," and the objective of populist movements to act on the socioeconomic grievances that "the elite" is accused of perpetrating, the leader comes to represent the indignation of "the people." Thomassen (2019) draws the case of Pablo Iglesias as secretary general of the Podemos party in Spain (2014-2021): "When he first emerged into the Spanish media, Pablo Iglesias channelled the indignation that was circulating in Spanish society. People identified with the

⁷⁷ Thomassen cites Laclau, Ernesto. "Paul de Man and the Politics of Rhetoric." *Pretexts* 7, no. 2 (1998): 153-170.

⁷⁸ Thomassen, Lasse. "Representing the people: Laclau as a theorist of representation." *New Political Science* 41, no. 2 (2019): 329-344.

⁷⁹ Reicher, Steve, and Nick Hopkins. "Self and Nation: Categorization, Contestation and Mobilization." (2001).

indignation that he represented, and they identified Podemos with him to the extent that Podemos used his image on the ballot papers for the May 2014 elections to the EU Parliament.”

From this perspective, critical theory provides a convincing account of how political leaders may construct collective identities and mobilise the passion of their base, and therefore it is an interesting mean to understand the identity creation of “the people” in Trump’s discourse, as it correctly frames communication as a tool to create identity. Trump’s communication style heavily relies on antagonism, emotional appeal, and symbolic confrontation. His recurrent use of the “us versus them” narrative, his performative rhetoric, and his mobilisation of resentment and indignation align with Laclau and Mouffe’s understanding of populism as an affective and discursive process. Empirical studies of chapter 1 of this thesis confirm that Trump actively engages in the creation of identity and meaning, defining the boundaries of morally constructed groups, and political communication norms, in order to establish himself as the empty signifier of the chain of equivalence (Ntontis et al., 2024, Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

However, critical theory remains only partially aligned with a study based solely on political style, rhetoric, and mediatic performance such as mine. First because Laclau and Mouffe’s framework is deeply contextualised within a broader political project that is aimed at democratic radicalisation, and progressive transformation: in terms of populist discourse, Laclau’s formal definition actually does not refer to any specific content being set within it: in Laclau’s definition, each side of the antagonistic barrier drawn between the “us” and the “them” can be occupied by any identity (e.g., “the underdog,” “the people,” “the little man,” “the system,” “the establishment,” “the elites”). “What defines a discourse as populist is the degree of equivalence, emptiness, and antagonism, and this definition can be used to account for different populisms, either right- and left-wing populisms” Thomassen states about Laclau’s view (2019). At first, it may seem that this description is relevant to the study of Trump’s discourse, however, Mouffe further describes populism as normatively valuable in contributing to the expansion of democratic participation and challenges that lie in power structures, through the mobilisation of different group’s demands that are analogous in democratic politics. This idealised objective is hard to align with my analysis of Trump’s nationalist, exclusionary, and authoritarian rhetoric. Trump’s discourse does not seek to broader democratic institutions, rather it undermines them as part of the out-group threatening the “us,” and therefore restricts the boundaries of political belonging and identification for citizens.

More broadly, the critical theory perspective’s nature, independently from Laclau and Mouffe’s visions, emphasises the challenges to structural inequalities in power through populism, wherein Trump’s rhetoric also falls short. Early critical theorists view populist rhetoric as a way to confront the broader societal systems that perpetuate inequality, such as neoliberalism, capitalism, and the political and economic elites that uphold these systems, but Trump’s rhetoric largely avoids addressing these systemic issues in a constructed manner, it rather focuses on attacking specific elites (such as political figures, media, corporate entities) that do not agree with him, without offering a deeper critique of the sustaining forces behind these inequalities. The latter conclusion also matches my rejection of the socioeconomic approach to study Trump’s discourse, which does not seem motivated by addressing political or economic issues; rather, insisting on these issues seems to be more

of a stylistic factor that sustains antagonism, than a political theory base for the “us versus them” rhetoric.

Although Laclau insists that populism operates through relations of equivalence rather than identity, and can therefore embrace the pluralist construction of society, Mouffe acknowledges that pluralism, in any political system, is inherently limited, arguing that no democratic order can accommodate all perspectives equally, as a nation must conserve certain borders of its construction of collective identity. Overall, liberal critics such as Mansbridge and Macedo (2019) argue that populism’s antagonistic framing of society amplify political polarisation and fosters an exclusionary conception of democracy that can become authoritarian in practice, undermining pluralism by creating a binary political space. This concern is also expressed by Judis in *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (2016), in which he distinguishes the impacts of populism between left- and right-wing populist movements. Judis argues left-wing populism maintains a dyadic structure that opposes only a unified “people” to the elite, while right-wing populism includes a third element, typically an excluded or marginalised group, that the elite is accused of favouring over “the ‘true’ people.” Roughly: whereas left-wing populism represents the bottom and middle groups against the top, right-wing populism is articulated around the middle group revindicating its grievances both against the top and bottom groups. This *triadic* structure often results in exclusionary politics, as seen in nationalist and extreme movements that claim to defend the “real” people against both elite and minority groups (Judis 2016). This echoes Trump’s constant attacks not only on the elite, but also on minorities or immigrants as an “out-group,” or even on an entire cast of American people such as Democrat voters, who, although undeniably part of the country, Trump argues would be part of that third, bottom group and are not included when he addresses “the people.” (Ntontis et al. 2024, Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2022)

Critical theory, focused on populism as an emancipatory force, struggles to account for the demobilising dimensions of right-wing populism. As critics of this approach such as Müller (2016)⁸⁰ and Abromeit (2017) describe, populist leaders frequently claim exclusive moral representation of a “‘real’ people,” thereby depoliticising their followers and reducing democratic participation to a form of passive support of the leader. Trump’s communication perfectly embodies this dynamic: his rhetorical strategy often transforms political engagement into the performative loyalty of his followers, and privileges emotional identification over debate and participation. Rather than supplying democratic conflict in Mouffe’s sense of *agonism*⁸¹, Trump’s *antagonism* feeds polarisation and consolidates personalistic authority.

⁸⁰ Müller, Jan-Werner. *What Is Populism?*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

⁸¹ Thomassen 2016: “Antagonism is an essential part of Mouffe’s agonistic democracy (Mouffe, 2000; 2013: chapter 1; Martin, 2013: chapter 12), which is the direction in which she has developed the idea of a “radical and plural democracy” from Hegemony and Socialist Strategy (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: chapter 4). It is important to stress that Mouffe does not celebrate antagonism. Although she draws on Carl Schmitt and his friend/enemy distinction (Martin, 2013, chapter 10; Mouffe, 1999), the argument is not that friend-enemy relations are positive, or that we should have more of them. The argument is that antagonism is an inherent part of politics, and therefore democratic theory must take it into account. Agonism is an attempt to do so: “the task of democratic politics is to provide the institutions and practices that will allow for those [antagonistic] conflicts to take an agonistic form in which the opponents are not treated as enemies to be eradicated but as adversaries” (Mouffe in Martin, Hegemony, populism and democracy: Laclau and Mouffe today (review article) 169 *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*. Núm. 40. Marzo 2016, pp. 161-176 2013: 231). While antagonistic friend/enemy relations are an ever present possibility, agonistic democracy seeks to transform relations into agonistic relations among adversaries who share a commitment to liberty and equality for all. In such an agonistic political space, anything

What it means is that Laclau and Mouffe's framing of populism is essentially a theory of how the hegemony of the political sphere can work together (Thomassen 2016), whereas Trump's discourse emphasises only the division. His reintroduction of ideological conflict in his discourse is not aimed at better representing what is not the elite, but to undermine the elite and the third group. Therefore, while Laclau and Mouffe provide a useful framework for understanding populism as the discursive construction of a collective "people" in opposition to elites, the critical theory approach fails to examine a non-political theory objective of populism and therefore insists too much on democratic enhancement as the purpose of populism. As mentioned earlier, Trump's rhetoric, although driven by antagonism as Laclau and Mouffe theorise, does not engage with a restructuration of the social or economic order, but rather a structuration of the cultural order. And as per this latter analysis, it fails to engage with a radicalisation of democracy, seemingly undermining it instead. Applied to Trump, the critical theory approach therefore risks flattening the specificity of his communication strategy, which prioritises spectacle, emotional provocation, and media domination to ideology or policy reform to appeal to and unite "the people" and create the line of antagonism.

Trump's alleged populism would be inseparable from his mastery of performance and his mediatic adaptation. And these elements seem to exceed the scope of explanation of critical theory, which privileges a possible macro-political articulation of populist leaders over micro-level communicative practices and leadership performances. So, while critical theory provides a valuable insight into the discursive construction of identity in populist rhetoric, and helps me understand *how* Trump constructs political identities and the purpose of his antagonistic discourse, it is less effective in explaining *why* his communication strategy operates primarily through cultural polarisation, symbolic (over ideological) conflict, and performance.

Both the socioeconomic approach and the critical theory approach present limitations to my study, either by prioritising structural factors (and I do not analyse the context of US politics neither before nor during Trump's presidencies), or normative evaluations of political dynamics (which seem not apply when it comes to Trump's specific discourse content), to explain why populism is brought about by its leaders. They do not provide the sufficient tools to analyse how populist discourse is crafted, expressed, and received, three key aspects of my analysis of Trump's communication practices in the first chapter of this thesis. They do offer contextual insight, but cannot fully apply to the explanation of the communicative practices central to Trump's specific discourse. Therefore, I must look into more communication-centred approaches to populism, to offer additional elements of analysis for populist rhetorical style, and better define my analytical lens for understanding Trump's populist communication strategy.

1.3. Elements That Fit the Profile

Unlike the socioeconomic approach and critical theory, the ideational, media-studies, and style of government approaches seem to ground their analysis of populism more on

approaching a constitutional consensus à la Habermas or Rawls is impossible. Any consensus will be a conflictual one, and conflict —or agonism— is an inherent part of democratic politics."

discourse, symbolic construction, performance, and strategic communication, all of which lie at the core of Trump's political identity and rhetoric, as shown in chapter 1. At first view, they seem to offer more analytical tools for a thesis based on evaluating communicative aspects and define their underlying political strategy. Let us dive into the specific aspects of each one of these frameworks that may better qualify Trump's discourse and stylistic factors of communication.

The ideational approach offers a useful, generalising framework for the study of Trump's communication as it defines populism primarily through discourse and symbolic construction, while offer interesting insights to the flexible dynamic of ideology behind the term. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) conceptualise populism as a thin-centred ideology built around a moral and antagonistic division of society into two homogeneous camps: the pure, virtuous "people" and the corrupt, self-serving "elite." This binary division constitutes the core of populist discourse, framing politics as a moral struggle between the opposing groups, rather than a policy contest between political representatives.

Populism, in this perspective, is first and foremost a "set of ideas," or a "worldview," that structures political meaning and identity. As Abromeit (2017) puts it, this more concise definition allows scholars to identify common features of populism across time and space, while avoiding the vagueness often associated with the term (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). This distinguishes the ideational approach from others, by putting the focus on the ideological framework behind populist discourse rather than its performative application, although Mudde and Kaltwasser draw on the latter to build the theory of populist *strategy*. The ideational approach is therefore a central tool to my analysis of Donald Trump's communication, having already established populism is a communicative phenomenon (Lorensen 2021 Laclau 2005 Pazé 2019), and to understand the underlying dynamics of this phenomenon. Moreover, it will allow a deeper understanding of the consequences on democracy I will explore later.

Central to Mudde and Kaltwasser's definition is the concept of thin-centredness, which refers to the limited ideological scope of populism: unlike more "thick"-centred ideologies such as socialism or liberalism, populism would lack a fully developed normative or programme-based system. It must therefore attach itself these other ideologies (which might be nationalism, conservatism, socialism or authoritarianism for example) to become "politically effective" (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). This feature is essential to understanding Trump, whose discourse is deeply intertwined with Usonian nationalism, cultural conservatism, the protection of the economy, and a form of authoritarian political symbolism (Newman et al. 2021), and very much dissociates itself from socialism or liberalism as he often associates them with the elite.

Mudde and Kaltwasser identify three core concepts that define populism: "the people," "the elite," and the "general will." From Laclau and Pazé's conceptions of populism, I have already identified the first two as "empty signifiers," meaning that their concrete meaning is determined through the discourse and context of the populist leader's structuration of society (Laclau 2005, Pazé 2019). In Trump's discourse, "the people" are repeatedly constructed as the "real Americans," which implicitly refers to white, Christian, working- or middle-class, patriotic, and culturally conservative citizens (Ntontis et al. 2024), whereas "the elite" refers to political insiders, liberal intellectuals, journalists, bureaucrats, globalists,

and corporate media. As identified in the previous section, Trump can be classified as a right-wing populist, as per Judis's conception (2016), first for his closeness to conservative ideology but mostly for his identification of a third group in the antagonistic dynamic of his discourse, namely the outsiders, the immigrants, the Democrat voters, constituting the "out-group" which would betray the "true" nation, and therefore belong with "the elite" in opposition to "the people." This antagonistic frontier is constantly reinforced through explicit rhetorical attacks, demeaning nicknames, and moral delegitimisation (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2022), which eventually serve the positioning of Trump as the sole authentic representative of the "popular" will.

The concept of the "general will," which the authors base on Rousseau's political philosophy, introduces what Mudde and Kaltwasser describe as the "monist core of populism" (2017, p. 18). This *monism* (doctrine opposite of *dualism*) implies that only one legitimate collective will exists, and that political pluralism is therefore inherently suspect. Populism, in this sense, privileges the moral unity of a "people" over the diversity of democratic demands and propositions, where contradiction eventually becomes betrayal. In Trump's rhetoric, this manifests in repeated claims that he alone represents the "true" people," while political opponents are not simply adversaries but existential threats to the nation's existence (Ntontis et al. 2024). His frequent claim that he lost the election of 2020 only because of fraud from the institutions exemplifies this logic, as it denies the legitimacy of having plural political outcomes.

The discursive construction of antagonism specific to populism also reflects what Mudde and Kaltwasser identify as an "alienation from society," where populism would grow as a response to the perception of political exclusion from the "in-group" and a sense of being set aside culturally. Trump's communication consistently refers to feelings of economic decline and demographic "replacement" or transformation, which would be the consequence of the disregard for "the people" by "the elite," and/or the growth of the "out-group" (e.g. migrants) replacing the people. The rhetoric of national decline is embodied by the very slogan "Make America Great Again," which also serves as an empty signifier in mobilising grievances linked to globalisation, immigration, and liberal policies, which helps build the moral narrative of loss, corruption, and the necessity for change and restauration of the "American way of life," which echoes the theory of the American Jeremiad theorised by Bercovitch in 1978. This longstanding tradition portrays the nation as morally exceptional yet perpetually in danger of decline, but as Ntontis et al. demonstrate (2024), Trump's MAGA narrative redirects this tradition of self-examination described by Bercovitch into a populist framework by identifying both the corrupt elite, and internal as well as external enemies, as responsible for the US's fall, and positioning himself as the leader capable of stopping this decline. Whereas the traditional concept of the Jeremiad emphasises introspection by US citizens to restore the lost grandiosity of the country, Trump's version externalises the blame and transforms the moral critique into a very clear line of political antagonism (Anggraini, Sawirman and Marnita 2022).

Moffitt (2016) deepens Mudde and Kaltwasser's analysis by emphasising the performative dimension of populism, arguing that populism is less about stable ideological content than about how the politics of it are performed, yet agrees that this process eventually creates an "ideational mental map." Trump's communicative style illustrates Moffitt's claim that populism relies on performing politics rather than referring to a coherent ideology;

according to Moffitt, populist leaders rely on three key stylistic features: 1) appeals to “the people” against “the elite,” 2) the flaunting of bad manners, and 3) the constant invocation of crisis. In this sense, Trump’s populism would primarily translate to a discursive worldview, or “ideational mental map,” through which the political reality may be interpreted and communicated, both for the leader and their followers to reinterpret (Newman et al. 2021, Conway, Repke and Houck 2017, Galam 2017, 2021). This worldview, over an ideology, is the structuring factor of Trump’s representation of society, power, conflict, and leadership, and offers a simple-to-follow moral narrative that transforms complex political dynamics into an easily read existential struggle.

The central role of the leader in this worldview further reinforces the suitability of the ideational framework for this thesis. Moffitt (2016) argues that the leader does not just assume the role of representing the people but becomes the embodiment of the people, as a symbolic concentration of the collective identity. By consistently centring his communication on his personal strength and self-representation, and by positioning himself as the only protector of the national integrity, Trump shows the fusion of his personal identity and that of the collective group. Charisma, here, functions through the performance of ordinariness, which facilitates the process of identification for his base (Moffitt 2016, Abromeit 2017). Trump’s charisma strategically oscillates between grandiosity and informality, as shown in the first parts of my analysis in chapter 1, which allows supporters to perceive him as both exceptional and familiar, successful while an ordinary American, and creates a dual identification process.

Moffitt shows here that the position of the populist leader challenges the Eurocentric model that usually puts the emphasis on party organisation rather than leadership, which highlights the personalistic nature of populist authority. The ideational approach thus may also help describe the anti-pluralist tendencies of populism, mentioned by critics of the critical theory approach as seen earlier in the previous section of this chapter. As Müller (2016) argues, populism is characterised by a moral claim to exclusive representation, and as I have just demonstrated, Trump’s discourse consistently reflects this logic through the rhetorical exclusion of the outgroups, which not only intensifies polarisation but also transforms democratic contestation into a moral conflict, reducing political participation to simplified support of symbols against others rather than democratic deliberation, all through the monist perception of reality that frames his discourse.

The ideational approach may allow for a nuanced evaluation of Trump’s relationship to democracy, through communication at least. While Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) offer a definition that is adaptable to the context of the populist movement that is reviewed, suggesting that populism may both enhance and undermine democracy, Trump’s communication systematically chips away at liberal-democratic norms through the discursive delegitimization of institutions, electoral process, and political opposition.

Overall, the ideational approach provides a most comprehensive framework for Trump’s communication in explaining the symbolic, moral, and identity-based dimensions of his discourse, based on the definition of populism that it operates as a worldview that structures the political meaning and mobilises collective identity. While the approach does not focus on the specifics of populist governance or media usage by the populist leader, it helps explain *why* the rhetoric is persuasive, fixing my understanding of the underlying strategy to the existence of a populist discourse. As this communication-based approach only

confirms the basic strategy at play in Trump's discourse, I must look into more strategy-based approaches to understand the specificity of how Trump personalises and what he actually does, by finding some complementing insights to the ideational approach through the style of government and media studies approaches.

The style of government approach resonates with a strategy-based study of populism, and in the case of Donald Trump's communication strategy, it may offer valuable insights on how populist leaders govern through a direct and disruptive communication strategy (Kenny 2023). This framework considers populism as a political strategy rather than an ideology, which echoes the results of the ideational study in that populism is not a fixed ideology but a strategic logic that adapts to different ideologies. It focuses on charismatic leadership and institutional disruption, two concepts already highlighted within the ideational approach, as well as the organisational dynamics behind populist discourse and leadership.

However, I must first point out that one key element of my study is missing to fully embrace the style of government approach, that is the study of governance structures and policy making, as I only analyse Trump's *communication* on these matters, but not his direct policy making and decisions for his government. It does not sufficiently theorise how discourse itself constitutes populism, and it also does not link the ideological content of populist discourse, i.e. its moral and symbolic elements, to the broader implication of its underlying strategy like the ideational approach does. Nevertheless, this approach helps centre the analysis on Trump's use of antagonism, charismatic leadership, and direct mobilisation of his supporters, as it treats communication primarily as an instrument for strategically gaining power. Although I can neither confirm nor discard the claim that this is why Trump has adopted such communicative manners, this approach still highlights the importance of considering communication as such instrument, and therefore that it is relevant to the study of any political leader nowadays, especially one who uses the practices the style of government approach mentions to explain how populism is brought about by its leaders.

According to Kenny (2023), populist leaders rely on direct and unmediated communication, mass rallies, and personalised authority rather than traditional party structures. Trump's campaign and presidencies seemingly relied on this model: Trump's campaign rallies and social media engagement helped him bypass the traditional norms of political communication and offered him an unmediated relationship with his followers.

Populism, in the style of government approach, also strategically undermines the institutional constraints that ensure fairness and democratic process, not necessarily through policy measures but through "discursive delegitimation." By repeatedly attacking the judiciary, the electoral process, and the press, Trump transformed communication in a tool for institutional disruption. As Bowler, Carreras, and Merolla (2023)⁸² demonstrate in their study Trump tweets and democratic attitudes: Evidence from a survey experiment, while Trump's rhetoric had limited direct effects on the authoritarian attitudes among the Republican party, it intensified political polarisation; specifically, it reinforced an antagonistic perception of democratic institutions in the popular debate. This helped

⁸² Bowler, Shaun, Miguel Carreras, and Jennifer L. Merolla. "Trump tweets and democratic attitudes: Evidence from a survey experiment." *Political Research Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2023): 1325-1339.

legitimise him as a representative of “the people” but also pushed forward his direct and unmediated relationship with voters, who could only trust in the leader that would be strong enough to denounce the institutional biases, and ensure that he, as an elected leader, would not apply the same practices. The more Trump attacks the institutions and the media, the more he reinforces his own legitimacy beside his followers.

This dynamic must be further explored through media- and language-based analyses of populism: as defensive as he is about traditional journalism and the media, Trump is a keen user of more modern platforms, sometimes creating his own, e.g. rallies, his own social media platform Truth Social, etc. As introduced by the style of government approach, Trump’s bypassing of traditional channels of communication is a key element of the consolidation of his influence and would be a central element to determining whether his communication can be labelled populist.

Complementing the ideational and style of government approaches, media studies provide critical insights into how populist discourse is communicated, received, and eventually how it reshapes public spaces for political discussion, especially in digital media. Scholars such as Wodak (2015), Manucci (2017), and Oates (2008) demonstrate how contemporary populism would be inseparable from the logics of media, which emphasise emotions, spectacle, and polarisation.

Wodak’s analysis, specifically of right-wing populist rhetoric, insists that charismatic authority (which, as seen with the ideational approach, is inherent to populist leaders), is also constructed through discursive performance and emotional manipulation rather than personal attributes. Wodak’s linguistic analysis reveals a systematic use of fear, threat, and scapegoating of the outgroups, in populist communication (Wodak 2015, Abromeit 2017). Trump’s rhetoric is particularly keen on these features: he frequently references the invasion, crime, betrayal, and national decline which would be the consequence of “the elite’s” favouring of the migrants, liberal, and others constituting the “outgroup.” These invocations help create a constant sense of crisis, which mobilises the emotional reactions from his base and adds to the moral divide between the groups by creating a moral urgency towards his base (Ntontis et al. 2024).

Central to the media studies framework is the concept of “unmediated” communication between the politician and their supporters, where the populist leader would bypass the traditional means of communications, whether institutional or journalistic, to establish a direct relationship with their audience. Trump’s extensive use of Twitter (now X) and his own platform Truth Social, combined with mass rallies, helped him create an entire personal media “ecosystem” in which political communication became conversational, immediate, and emotionally charged (Lavrov 2022). This unmediated style of communication not only boosted his visibility but also reinforced his anti-elite narrative, positioning mainstream media as part of the corrupt institutions that would be against him and the people.

Understanding the phenomenon of context collapse, mentioned by Marwick and boyd (2011), and the circular relationship of media explained by Manucci (2017), in their analyses, which are inherent to social media platforms, may be useful in a study of Trump’s communication strategy on social media. The context collapse allowed Trump to address multiple audiences at the same time, as well as eliminating the boundaries between private

expression, political communication, entertainment, and provocation, which Marwick argues transforms political discourse into a continuous spectacle, rewatchable and accessible at all times, and with less formal context. It also gives a platform for more direct and unregulated popular political discussions (in the comments, as reactions to Trump's posts, in the hashtags, in the creation of memes and popularising some subjects which are then re-referenced on other accounts...). This dynamic intensified polarisation, as emotionally charged content would circulate quickly across ideologically isolated networks (echo chambers effect), reinforcing collective identities all the while fuelling the polarisation between these identities.

Manucci's (2017) concept of integrated media processes is important to consider in this context and allows a better understanding of the consequences at hand. Trump's provocative statements consistently generate cycles of outrage, amplifying negative sentiments, while ensuring Trump a continuous media visibility even when negative. His communication would then function as a self-sustaining "media engine," reshaping public discourse (with how it is made and what it mentions), and shifting the boundaries of political legitimacy beside voters. This process notably contributed to a (forced) opening of the Overton window (Lehman 2010, Jensen & Lennø 2020)⁸³, where previously unacceptable ideas and expressions become normalised through the repetition and spectacle that Trump's communicative style allows. As Jensen and Lennø describe about Trump's impeachment "victory speech": "the President is well known for using aggressive language to convey his opinions and promotes his agendas, which have thus over time come to be regarded as the norm in terms of how President Trump expresses his personal and political ideology. By using these tactics in terms of his discourse, the President has thus been successful in moving the Overton window in his desired direction [...] and thus [has] changed what kind of actions and discourse is publicly and lawfully approved for a president in America." They further explain that Trump's speech itself becomes "a proof of the fact that discourse is not merely the result of a string of words, which carry no deeper meaning. Rather, it is an example of how unequal power structures coupled with the power within spoken discourse can result in change in the bigger picture."

This particularly resonates with the analysis of the Trump phenomenon mentioned in chapter 1, as it reflects the dynamic of the opening of the public sphere of discussion, and the dynamic that although most voters will first be shocked by Trump's statement, a large portion will eventually agree with him or align themselves on his side since the balance of acceptable discourse has shifted (Galam 2017, 2021).

The MAGA narrative can further illustrate how Trump's media strategies may reshape collective identity. Drawing on a "twisted" American Jeremiad tradition (Bercovitch 1978, Ntontis et al. 2024), Trump would have reconfigured a national tale into a populist framework of decline and redemption, all the while framing political struggles as a moral crusade, as mentioned above. Through social media, this narrative was constantly reinforced,

⁸³ Lehman, Joseph G. "An introduction to the Overton window of political possibility." *Mackinac Center for Public Policy* 8 (2010).

Jensen, Ninna, and Carina Hjort Lennø. "An Emotional, Erratic Rant or a Display of Clever Linguistic Tactics? A CDA Analysis of President Trump's 2020 Impeachment Victory Speech." (2020).

emotionally intensified, and transformed into an interactive spectacle in which followers may participate by reproducing and circulating its symbolic contents.

In this sense, the media studies approach reveals how Trump's populism would not operate simply as an ideological discourse but as a strategic media performance, transforming political communication into a continuous spectacle and reinforcing the target identity???. The approach tackles the technological, affective, and symbolic mechanisms through which Trump would construct the political reality and sustain his base's political engagement in the moral fight between the groups, making this approach a useful tool to complement the ideational and style of government approaches to better qualify Trump's communication as strategically populist.

Toward an integrated communicative framework

The comparative analysis I have conducted in this chapter demonstrates that Trump's populist communication would be better understood through an ideational and communicative lens rather than socioeconomic or purely institutional frameworks, both because of the limitations of the scope of my study as well as the featured elements of each approach, of which the ideational, media-studies, and style of government strategic approaches better reflect what I am looking for to explain how Trump's political communication strategy is populist. The ideational approach provides a conceptual foundation for analysing populism as a discursive worldview, structured around moral antagonism, symbolic identity construction, and a monist political logic. Although the critical theory approach managed to line out some of these elements at first, the ideational approach gives a more simply put definition that embraces the anti-pluralistic aspect of populism that critical theory, at least in the view of Laclau and Mouffe, could only frame as a tool for bettering democratic practices through the active implication of the people, whereas empirical examples of populism (especially right-wing populism), more often demonstrate how the movement eventually fails this aspect. The style of government approach, although it does not conceptualise communication as constitutive of populism itself, still offers a valuable insight into how populist leadership defies the institutional norms of political communication. Media studies finally complement these perspectives by underlining how the technological, strategic, and affective mechanisms of populist discourse might reshape the public space when appropriated by a charismatic (in the populist sense) leader.

Together, these approaches allow for a comprehensive analysis of Trump's communication practices in relation to theories of populism, showing his communication embraces both ideological and strategic factors, and help me understand how performative populist discourse may function simultaneously as a tool for creating a worldview and a collective identity, and as a political weapon against opponents.

Overall, this framework justifies the methodological orientation of this thesis: to analyse Trump's populism—in which ideological elements, performance, and media strategies converge to construct the political meaning—primarily as a communicative phenomenon, both in the contents of Trumpian communication as well as in the effects it has on the public, and, more broadly, on democratic political communication in general.

Before turning to the final conclusion of this thesis, and now looking at the findings of this comparative analysis so far, I would like to assess the legitimacy of labelling Trump a communist as well as to raise questions on the possible impacts of his communication strategy on democratic norms in Western politics.

2. Discussion of the Findings & Broader Implications

The comparative analysis conducted in this third chapter demonstrates that Donald Trump's communication strategy aligns strongly with several features of what can be labelled contemporary populist theory⁸⁴, while simultaneously challenging others. By confronting Trump's discourse with multiple theoretical frameworks, my aim in this chapter was first to interrogate the conditions under which the term populist may be meaningful for the study of communicative practices, as well as seeking to assess whether the label may be fitting for Trump's communication. Broadly, the findings suggest that Trump's communication may be considered populist in a strictly discursive and performative form, less grounded in socioeconomic grievances or ideological coherence than in the symbolic construction of society and the moral polarization of an "us" versus a "them," through a media-centred performance of political speech. However, in doing so, this analysis raises fundamental questions about the nature of Trump's global political identity, as well as about the analytical limits of the academic study of populism.

A first major finding concerns the central role of identity construction in Trump's political communication. Whether in his speeches, social media posts, interviews, and rallies, Trump consistently frames his rhetoric within the scope of a moral divide between an "ingroup" (the people) and an "outgroup" (the elite, the outsiders, the betrayers). I note that these categories are carefully crafted and produce a political meaning that allows the voters to comprehend their belonging, or exclusion, from the collective identity created through this division. The groups are defined not simply through sociological markers alone but through symbolic, moral, and cultural boundaries and identification processes, which, according to Pazé's conception of "the people" as well as the ideational approach, are not pre-existing groups and categories: they are actively constructed from the ideational "mental map" that Trump provides in his communication, both in his style and his rhetoric.

This raises an important question regarding the nature of both political representation and democratic legitimacy in contemporary populism. If "the people" emerge not as sociological entity but as a discursive construct, as Pazé argues, then the populist leader's claim to representation would be performative rather than representative. From the theoretical frameworks introduced so far, I understand that in populism, political authority is not grounded in institutional norms or mediation, but rather in symbolic identification and emotional appeals. This raises some crucial normative and analytical questions: if "the people" are discursively produced rather than empirically represented, to what extent does populist communication redefine democratic representation itself? Can we consider it transforms citizens from active agents of democracy into affective followers? Trump's

⁸⁴ Excluding the socioeconomic and critical theory approaches, which generally theorise populism through empirical examples of political, social, and economic cases of Latin America that date back to the 20th century for the most part.

rhetoric, by focusing more on speaking out elements that would serve the identification process than an elaborate political program, suggests that there is a shift from a model of participatory democracy toward a model of political legitimacy that would be based on perceived authenticity and how much the citizen aligns themselves with, or against, one group or another, eventually undermining traditional democratic conceptions of representation based on deliberation, mediation, and *pluralism*.

A second important finding concerns the predominance of performance, spectacle and high mediatization in Trump's communication strategy. As observed through the media studies and style of government approaches, Trump's political communication exists and operates within a mediatic ecosystem that regards provocation, emotional intensity, and favours polarization, both because of the nature of the media platforms he uses, whether social media (which involves the key features of echo chambers and the context collapse) or his public rallies (which address Republican voters and his loyal followers exclusively), as well as a result of the effect of his communication (Galam 2017, 2021, Conway, Repke and Houck 2017, Ntontis et al. 2024). Through these platforms, Trump manages to create a continuous political spectacle in which outrage, conflict, and identity affirmation become central modes of political engagement. Communication thus stops being a simple vector for political ideas and instead becomes the principal place and instrument of political conflict. This shift invites to a reconsideration of the relationship between communication, power, and legitimacy in contemporary democracies. If political leadership and authority increasingly depend on communicative performance and visibility rather than institutional governance and the effectiveness of the leader's policies, does populism represent a transformation of democratic politics itself? Trump's case suggests that authority can be sustained through the (symbolic) domination of the public sphere rather than deliberative competences. This transformation raises additional theoretical questions: does mediated populism signify a broader structural risk for democratic communication? Are democratic systems structurally equipped to resist such communicative strategies? To what extent may digital platform and algorithms favour identity-focused populist communication over democratic deliberation? And crucially (although I can already state this is outside my scope of research): if populism thrives under such conditions, can it still be meaningfully considered as a distinct political phenomenon, or does it reflect a deeper systemic change of democratic politics?

Moving back to the current analysis, although this will be relevant of an evaluation on the impacts of populism on traditional liberal democracy, another major finding is the anti-pluralist aspect of Trump's rhetoric, which strongly aligns with the ideational understanding of populism as a moralised political worldview. The ideational approach, as well as Mouffe (2000) in her analysis partially based on critical theory, highlight how populism's moral division between "the people" and "the elite" introduces a *monist* conception of political legitimacy, where only one authentic collective will would be valid, which delegitimises opposition and reduces democratic contestation to a moral antagonistic view of society. In Trump's discourse, as well as his political attitude, opponents are never legitimate adversaries but rather are portrayed as existential threats, traitors, or enemies of the nation, which allows their classification into the "them" group along minorities for example. This moralisation of political conflict between political figures accentuates the polarisation and undermines democratic pluralism as well.

This observation intensifies the question of compatibility of populist communication with liberal-democratic norms. If political contestation is reframed as a moral struggle, and populist communication systematically undermines pluralism, can democratic disagreement still function as a legitimate mechanism of governance? Does the populist rejection of pluralistic demands simply expose latent issues within liberal democracy, or does it actively hurt democratic norms? Trump's rhetoric may suggest that populism, at least in its right-wing form, may not simply challenge liberal democracy from the outside in critically evaluating its functioning but rather actively attack it from within, as loyalty progressively replaces discussion and identity replaces citizenship. This raises additional conceptual questions; should populism be considered a collaborative movement that revitalises democratic engagement by simply question the status quo, as scholars of the critical theory argue, or is it a structurally destabilising logic that undermines the existence of democracy as a whole? Trump's discourse, solely from its anti-institutional arguments and the delegitimisation of democratic processes and opponents, may support the latter interpretation.

At the same time, my analysis has shown that the basis of Trump's rhetoric cannot be explained through socioeconomic frameworks alone. First because identifying the social and economic context of the US does not fall within the scope of my communicative study, but also because from the perspective I have chosen, Trump's discourse does not seem to be articulating coherent critiques of economic inequality or redistributive solutions; rather, Trump reframes these anchored grievances through cultural and symbolic elements of rhetoric, capitalising more on cultural resentment (political correctness, the sense of loss of the "American" identity," etc.) and the narrative of national decline with no specific facts or umbers to base it on. This discursive transformation suggests that contemporary populism may operate primarily through cultural and affective mobilisation of the voters' sentiments, rather than through material or class-based conflict, as the socioeconomic or critical theory approaches suggested was the base for the rise of populist movements and reformation. This raises a question concerning the evolution of populism in post-industrial societies. Has populism shifted from an economic logic to a cultural one? From a class-based mobilisation to an identity-based polarisation? And if so, does this transformation call for a reconceptualization of populism itself? At this point, I can identify Trump's alleged populism as belonging to right-wing populism (Judis 2016), but does the left-wing populist rhetoric, supposedly theorised as a logic for democratic mobilisation by Laclau and Mouffe especially, still follow this order? Looking at the example of France, with both Marine Le Pen (right-wing) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (left-wing), being considered populists within the media and political criticism, some scholars will argue that both, together with their parties, align more with an identity-based view of moral conflict, and capitalise on the identification process it creates beside the followers to undermine each other, as well as the general centrist political sphere of the country. Trump's discourse, and an increasing body of research on populism in Western democracies, suggest that cultural identity may now function as the principle setting of political mobilisations.

Thus, this chapter highlights the indeterminacy of the definition of populism itself. The comparative analysis reveals that whether ideological, strategic, discursive, or institutional, populism cannot be understood through only one definitional approach. Trump's communication functions simultaneously as ideology, performance, strategy, and

identity construction, which blurs the line between these categories. Thanks to the multi-faceted definition of populism provided through different approaches, I am at least able to correctly identify populism as a flexible communicative strategy, although other definitions are still relevant, either when studying populism as a popular movement rather than through its leader(s), and I must also recognise the limitations of my studying only the communication of Trump, and not his policies, governing decisions, or international politics. Therefore, I can conclude that populism can also be understood as a fluid political logic, capable of adapting to diverse contexts and rhetorical lines of antagonism, in order to apply it to my study of Trumpian communication practices.

This observation leads to the central theoretical challenge of this thesis: under what conditions can Donald Trump meaningfully be labelled a populist? The findings suggest that such a label is only valid if populism is understood primarily as a mode of political communication and symbolic articulation, rather than as a fixed ideology or a movement responding to grounded socioeconomic grievances. I therefore approach the conclusion that Trump exemplifies a form of communicative populism, in which political identity, antagonism, performance, and high mediatization converge to produce a distinct style of political communication.

This would indicate that labelling Trump a populist is analytically justified, but only under a communication-centred and ideational definition of populism. This conception allows for a nuanced understanding of how Trump constructs the political reality, capitalises on identity, and reshapes democratic discussion. Eventually, it raises questions for the future of democratic communication, institutional legitimacy, and political pluralism in Western societies.

The theoretical and conceptual questions raised in this discussion will be further addressed in the final conclusion of my thesis, where I will critically evaluate the broader implications of Trumpian populism for democratic theory, political communication, and contemporary political identity.

VII | Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to examine whether, and in which sense, Donald Trump's political communication can meaningfully be labelled populist. Departing from the observation that the term "populism" is increasingly being applied to very different political figures, movements, and rhetorical styles, both in the media and in politics, and often in a vague or contradictory way, I aimed to provide a more rigorous analytical framework in order to clarify what exactly is meant when Trump's discourse is described as populist. By combining an analysis of empirical research on Trump's communication practices with theoretical definitions of populism, my goal was to move beyond superficial labels and to contribute to a more precise understanding of populism as a communicative political phenomenon, in order to understand Trump's populist communication in a more precise way.

The return of Donald Trump to the presidency in January 2025, following one of the most contested political periods in modern US history, brought back out the relevance of what many scholars have termed the "Trump phenomenon." Rather than approaching this phenomenon through an institutional, legal, or policy-oriented lens, I deliberately focused my dissertation on Trump's political communication practices, grounding my analysis on the hypothesis that political communication itself has become a central scene of political struggle.

My introduction raised a number of interconnected questions: what does it mean to label Trump's communication as populist? Which features of his style as well as his rhetoric align with academic definitions of populism, and which do not? And which theoretical frameworks can serve as useful tools for studying this particular communicative strategy? Finally, does Trump represent a passing anomaly within American politics, or is his communication a sign that broader structural changes affecting political norms, democratic participation, and public discussion are to be observed in the US and elsewhere?

Across the three chapters, this thesis has sought to address these questions by combining an academic research-based empirical investigation (chapter 1) with an attempted definition of populism through different theoretical approaches (chapter 2), in order to provide a comparative interpretative analysis of the relevance of labelling Trump's communication as populist (chapter 3). The following conclusion now returns to these initial problems in order to assess the overall findings, try to identify the theoretical contributions as well as the limitations of my study, and reflect on the broader implications for contemporary Western politics and democratic communication.

The central conclusion to this thesis, and the one I can assert with most certainty, is that Donald Trump can meaningfully be labelled a populist only under a communication-centred, ideational, and performative understanding of populism, rather than under a strictly ideological, socioeconomic, or policy-driven definition. Trump's populism does not manifest in a coherent ideological doctrine, a redistributive economic agenda, or a critique of capitalism and the status quo (according to critical theory), but instead takes shape in a highly personalised style of political communication that is centred on symbolic and moral antagonism, identity construction, and polarisation.

One of the strongest findings that support this conclusion is Trump's discursive construction of "the people" as a symbolic category, resonating with Valentina Pazé's analysis of populism. As Pazé argues, the "people" in populist discourse are not a pre-existing sociological entity

but a symbolic collective whole that is actively constructed through political language. This conception, as seen in chapters 2 and 3, aligns with the ideational approach to populism theorised by Mudde and Kaltwasser, according to which populism relies on a moral distinction between the virtuous “people” and the corrupt “elite.”

Chapter 1 showed how Trump’s rhetoric articulates this political frontier through a narrative that portrays ordinary American citizens as betrayed, silenced, and humiliated by political elites, traditional media, and institutions, often at the benefit of other, “less meriting” groups such as immigrants, socialists, or “woke”-minded Democrat voters. This antagonistic framing does not only simplify complex social realities, but it also provides powerful emotional appeals for Americans to identify with “the people” he describes. By constantly reinforcing the “us versus them” worldview, Trump produces what Ernesto Laclau terms a “chain of equivalence,” where heterogeneous grievances of various political views and parties become unified under a single antagonistic logic.

This process of symbolic construction of identity is further intensified through Trump’s leadership style. As Moffitt argues in *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, populist leaders do not simply represent “the people,” they embody them through a performative identification process. Trump’s claim of authenticity, ordinariness, and outsidership (despite his billionaire status) lay the base for this mechanism. His informal language, provocative insults, and theatrical rallies, as well as his rejection of political correctness, function as symbolic tools through which voters may recognise themselves and their frustrations, all at the same time being struck by Trump’s grandiosity, which eventually legitimises his claim to represent the people.

Trump’s communication style is the basis to his antagonistic rhetoric, but also to his high mediatisation. Performance and spectacle hold a central role in his communication strategy: as Chapter 3 demonstrated, Trump’s political authority is sustained by his continuous domination of the media ecosystem more than through institutional compliance with norms of political communication.

Trump’s presence on social media platforms, particularly Twitter/X, combined with his spectacular public rallies, create a constant political spectacle that is characterised by outrage, conflict, emotional appeals, and polarisation. Communication thus becomes the primary sphere in which political power can be exercised and helps delegitimise other political opponents. As Moffitt argues, populism thrives on crisis performance, and Trump’s constant framing of American politics as being in a state of emergency, whether concerning immigration, electoral processes, globalisation, or the state of the nation’s identity, supports this claim.

This transformation of political communication raises questions about the nature of leadership in contemporary democracies—contemporary because of the use of new technological tools such as social media which are now inseparable from political communication strategies, democracies because the pluralistic process of democratic institutional conflict between the representatives of different parties is compromised by this communication practice. If political authority increasingly depends on performance rather than institutional governance or policy-based programmes, democratic legitimacy itself may be undergoing a structural reconfiguration. Trump’s success at making this the common way of doing politics (by delegitimising opponents and critics that still favoured more institutional political norms of communication and conflict), suggests that the domination of

the public sphere may now matter more than deliberative competence for leaders. This evolution challenges classical democratic theory, which traditionally associates legitimacy with rational debate and the mediation of institutions.

While Trump's communication strongly aligns with ideational and performative definitions of populism, chapters 2 and 3 have also helped me identify several points of divergence. These misalignments show the limits of applying the populist label too broadly and highlight the importance of labelling Trump's *communication* as populist rather than his whole governance.

Unlike classical 20th century populist movements, which would often be articulated through more coherent ideologies (see Laclau and Mouffe's theories, or the socioeconomic approach) such as agrarian socialism in the late nineteenth-century American People's Party in the US, nationalism in Argentina during Peron's third mandate⁸⁵, or socialism in Bolivia under Hugo Chavez⁸⁶, Trump's discourse remains incoherent in ideological terms. His rhetoric frequently shifts between different views of problems and solutions, making it difficult to identify a clear political theory logic behind his claims. This finding makes it difficult to classify Trump as a populist in a traditional sense. As Mudde and Kaltwasser explain, populism is a "thin-centred ideology," that requires to associate with broader, more comprehensible ideological frameworks, making populism a tool for supporting these ideologies or a passing transitional period before an entire shift in ideological structures. In Trump's case, this association remains unstable, as Trump's ideological arguments appear opportunistic and (strategically) flexible. His populism thus seems less a coherent (in the sense of political theory) worldview, than as a discursive tool that is (strategically, still) deployed to mobilise support.

This ideological incoherence also highlights the lack of socioeconomic arguments to ground Trump's discourse and rhetoric. Chapter 2 showed that the socioeconomic approach to populism, which interprets populist movements primarily as responses to economic inequality and redistributive policy making, has little relevance for studying Trump. While he frequently references economic grievances to make his arguments, his campaigns and overall discourse rarely present redistributive programs or structural economic critiques. Instead, Trump consistently reframes these sentiments of socioeconomic anxiety and marginalisation into cultural and symbolic reasons to support his narrative of American decline and existential threat: globalisation therefore becomes identity loss, economic insecurity becomes national humiliation, unemployment becomes cultural invasion. As demonstrated in chapter 1, Trump's discourse relies more heavily on symbolic resentment and cultural threats than on material class conflict, as suggested by scholars of the socioeconomic and critical theory approaches.

Norris and Inglehart, in *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (2019)⁸⁷, describe the rising importance of cultural anxiety over economic instability in the arguments of contemporary right-wing populists. This shift raises questions on the nature of

⁸⁵ Goldwert, Marvin. *Democracy, militarism, and nationalism in Argentina, 1930–1966: An interpretation*. University of Texas Press, 2014.

⁸⁶ Manwaring, Max G. *Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, Bolivarian socialism, and asymmetric warfare*. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2005.

⁸⁷ Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Vol. 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

populism itself: has populism, in post-industrial democracies, transitioned from an economic and class conflict logic to a cultural one? Does this call for a redefinition and reconceptualization of populism itself? The study of Trump's case at least suggests that contemporary populism would operate more and more on identity politics, and therefore this would be an element to consider in the study of other populist leaders or movements, at least in the Western world.

The findings of this thesis could then extend beyond the study of Donald Trump's communication or governance, as his style appears to be emblematic of broader transformations that would reshape political discourse across Western democracies.

A comparative analysis of other political leaders' communication with that of Trump's may reveal some striking parallels, and, in a study consecrated to this matter of research, perhaps reveal some elements showing a form of influence from Trump's style on these leaders and their countries' politics in the last 10 years.

In France, Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, despite their ideological opposition, both use antagonistic discursive strategies that polarise the political debate into moralised camps of "the people" versus "the elite," to rally "the people" under either a right-wing logic against both liberal elites and outsider groups (like Le Pen), or a left-wing logic against technocratic elites and the rise of fascist capitalism (like Mélenchon) (Judis 2016, Thomassen 2016).⁸⁸

In Italy, Matteo Salvini's extensive use of social media mirrors Trump's emphasis on immediacy, authenticity, and an identity-based mobilisation of symbols and discussion groups (Berti and Loner 2023)⁸⁹. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro's confrontational style, his rejection of institutional mediation, and (again) his use of digital platforms could closely resemble Trump's communicative populism (Feres Jr and Gagliardi 2021)⁹⁰. The same goes for Viktor Orbán in Hungary, who has normalised a form of media-centred populism that combines elements of nationalist ideology, cultural resentment of LGBTQIA+ groups as well as feminists, and a sense of polarisation that departs from and is crystallised on his accounts on social media (Griffen 2020, Benedek 2024)⁹¹.

These examples suggest that Trump is not an isolated anomaly but is part of a broader global change in political communication, partly facilitated by the generalisation of social media usage. A dedicated, separate study would be needed to affirm whether these changes in other Western countries occurred because of a Trumpian communication's influence, and to therefore establish a theory of the institutionalisation, or normalisation, of his communication practices. For now, I can only note that although some of these politicians'

⁸⁸ Thomassen (2016): "One of Mouffe's examples is the contrast between the Le Pens' right-wing xenophobic and exclusive populism and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing and inclusive populism. Both discourses are articulated around 'the people', but the Front National discourse takes the people to be the nation understood in an ethnic or racial way, whereas the Front de Gauche discourse articulates the people as the underdog, including immigrant communities (Mouffe, 2013: 121-123)."

⁸⁹ Berti, Carlo, and Enzo Loner. "Character assassination as a right-wing populist communication tactic on social media: The case of Matteo Salvini in Italy." *New Media & Society* 25, no. 11 (2023): 2939-2960.

⁹⁰ Feres Júnior, João, and Juliana Gagliardi. "Populism and the media in Brazil: The case of Jair Bolsonaro." In *The politics of authenticity and populist discourses: Media and education in Brazil, India and Ukraine*, pp. 83-104. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021.

⁹¹ Griffen, Scott. "Hungary: a lesson in media control." *British Journalism Review* 31, no. 1 (2020): 57-62.

Benedek, István. "Transforming the political public sphere: the media system of the Orbán regime in Hungary." (2024).

careers and popularity precede that of Trump's, their shift in social media communication only occurred after Trump's rise to power in the US for the most part.

Trump's communicative populism also seemingly contributes to reshaping political participation itself. Chapter 1 showed that his digital rhetoric helps him mobilise his supporters through emotional engagement and performative loyalty. Participation thus becomes less about deliberation and collective decision-making and more about identity affirmation and an affective sense of belonging, with followers that become used to the unmediated relationship they may entertain through social media with political leaders, as well as the facilitation of engagement through comments and likes on posts (Lavrov 2022). As Paolo Gerbaudo argues in *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (2018)⁹², digital platforms enable leaders to bypass the traditional mediating institutions to establish direct emotional relationships with their followers. This unmediated communication facilitates identity-driven political mobilisation while weakening democratic norms of political debate.

This transformation raises some normative concerns for political engagement: if it starts revolving more around emotional identification than rational deliberation, then democratic discourse may turn into permanent polarisation. The rise of the effects of echo chambers and of algorithms on these platforms adds fuel to online outrage which would intensify the fragmentation of identities between two (or three, in this case we are discussing more right-wing politics (Judis 2016)) antagonistic groups.

Trump's communication practices would therefore showcase a broader structural vulnerability of contemporary democracies: with the erosion of frameworks necessary for deliberative political discussion, both between political representatives and between citizens, truth itself may become politically contested, and democratic consensus would become less and less fact-based and increasingly subjective.

Limits of the thesis and directions for future research

Finally, while this thesis provides a comprehensive framework for the analysis of Trump's *communicative populism*, there are several limitations I must acknowledge, from which I can identify important directions for future research.

First, my thesis focuses exclusively on communication over policy, institutional governance, or international relations. While this focus allowed me to analyse Trump's discourse in depth, it necessarily excluded other dimensions of Trump's campaigns and presidencies that made me discard certain approaches, such as the socioeconomic one, which means I must nuance the result of my findings of Trump's populism being communicative as part of this limitation. Second, my analysis is centred on Trump as an individual leader: I am not looking at the broader social movements, media ecosystems, and partisanship (other than the results on the public of the Trump phenomenon and the impacts of social media usage on his audience) that sustain Trump's political power. Future research should thus consider a systematic investigation of voter reception of these practices, as well as the mechanisms of algorithm specific to each platform he uses.

⁹² Gerbaudo, Paolo. *The digital party: Political organisation and online democracy*. Pluto books, 2018.

Third, while I have introduced some comparative examples of other leaders and movements labelled as populist, either through communicative or policy lenses, this thesis remains anchored in the context of the US on a period of about ten years (2015-2025). A more in-depth study considering multiple national cases would allow for a larger understanding of the structural conditions that enable communicative populism across different political systems. Moreover, the empirical analysis of chapter 1 is essentially based on a synthesis of academic research restricted to the same period of time (2015-2025), as academic research takes time to build once an event worth analysing has passed unlike journalism, and my thesis does not introduce a methodology of my own to evaluate Trump's communication. My choice for the studies I have analysed was thus also limited by publication time and could not cover more recent communication practices and outbursts from President Donald Trump since he has gone back in office in January 2025. Future, more thorough empirical analyses could fill the research gap more efficiently by drawing on a methodological framework of analysis that has not yet been explored for Trump's practices, and by observing what his communication has transformed into since the last election, in a renewed geopolitical context.

Trump, populism, and the future of democratic communication

Going back to my initial research questions laid out in the introduction, this thesis ultimately demonstrates that Donald Trump's communication practices can indeed be labelled populist, but only within a specific theoretical framework that focuses on discourse, performance, and symbolic politics rather than ideology and socioeconomic grievances. Trump's communicative populism is characterised by 1) the symbolic construction of "the people," 2) a moral polarisation of social conflicts, 3) performative leadership, 4) high mediatisation, and 5) identity politics through the emotional mobilisation of his followers. This form of populism does not exactly reflect some political grievances expressed by US citizens, rather it actively produces a political "reality" through discourse, and in doing so, may reshape democratic participation and transform the nature of political legitimacy. If so, the broader implications of this transformation would extend far beyond Trump: as Western democracies growingly exist within (social) media driven communication environments, the conditions that allowed Trump's rise to power may become increasingly common, raising urgent questions about the resilience of democratic norms of communication and political conflict, and eventually the sustainability of pluralism in their governance.

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