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Presidential Populism: An Historical Overview

Terri Bimes

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CHAPTER 1

Presidential Populism: An Historical Overview

Franklin D. Roosevelt, reflecting on his first six years as president, placed his administration within the context of a two-century long struggle to keep power in the hands of the people and out of the reach of special interest groups. During the nation's history, FDR noted, "the actual control of the government ... passed from time to time from the hands of the voters themselves to various groups of citizens--groups which were not classes, ...but rather aggregations of power concentrated in small percentage of the population." The "soulless decade" of the 1920's had marked such a shift of power -- the "control of government was allowed to slip back, in large degree to the hands of small groups representing big finance and large industry." FDR's task, as he viewed it in 1938, had been to roll back the influence of these special interest groups and return control to the people. His presidency marked another battle for "democratic progress."¹

This familiar narrative in which the interests of the people are pitted in a grand conflict against a self-serving special interest is a potent weapon for actors seeking political change. The idea of a "people," a unified nation pursuing a shared interest, has long occupied an exalted place in political rhetoric. Its rhetorical resonance is rooted in a national commitment to popular sovereignty. But this appeal is not purely consensual because on the other side of the populist jeremiad lay a variety of alleged villains: the "monied aristocracy," the "privileged princes," the "pointy-headed intellectuals," and the "Eastern Establishment." These supposed enemies of the people disturb the unity of the nation, and in order for equilibrium to be restored, these enemies must be vanquished.

Reform activists, mass orators, members of Congress, spokesmen for oppressed classes, and assorted demagogues regularly engage in populist appeals. This dissertation, however, focuses specifically on presidents and their use of populist appeals. As the single

¹Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address at the Jackson Day Dinner," January 8, 1938, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1938 vol. (New York: MacMillan, 1941), 37-45.

public officer elected by the nation as a whole, the president has proven to be uniquely situated to make claims about speaking for the people. As the *Federal Farmer* observed in 1787, “in every large collection of people there must be a visible point serving a common center in the government, toward which to draw their eyes and attachments.”² In the United States, the president serves this function of offering a non-sectional, unifying symbol of the nation and its views.

But not all presidents have made use of populist appeals. In this thesis, I argue that a keystone of Democratic presidential leadership has been the use of populist appeals to attack entrenched elites and to challenge governmental opponents. This tradition goes back in part to Thomas Jefferson, but Andrew Jackson is the main progenitor of the Democratic populist tradition. Jackson’s battle against the Bank of the United States came to represent a populist exemplar on which other Democratic presidents could and did build upon. But from the moment of its founding in the 1830s, the Whig party set itself against Jackson and his populist rhetoric. A Whig-Republican tradition of presidential leadership, which relied heavily on consensual appeals that contrasted sharply with Democratic populism, developed after the first third of the nineteenth century and persisted well into the twentieth century.

Democratic presidents have, over time, lost this populist edge, however. This development reflects a change in the orientation of Democratic presidents toward the institutional status quo in American politics and society. With the New Deal and the creation of an extensive federal bureaucracy, the Democratic party became what it had before attacked—the party of government. As the Democratic party shifted from being the party of opposition to the party of government, Democratic presidents altered their rhetorical and governing strategies. They largely abandoned a populist approach, instead adopting a more consensual approach with many similarities to the earlier Whig-Republican leadership tradition. This consensual model seemed better suited to

²*The Federal Farmer*, quoted in *The Complete Anti-Federalist*, ed. Herbert J. Storing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 310. Stephen Skowronek, [*The Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to George Bush* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 20] also points out the symbolic centrality of the presidential office to American governance.

sustaining the Democratic party's governing coalition and the new instruments of state power. Republicans, in turn, claimed the populist mantle to attack the institutional status quo with which the Democratic party was now so closely identified. Starting with Richard Nixon, Republican presidents have been more likely than Democrats to engage in populist rhetoric at the presidential level, and to use that rhetoric as part of a concerted strategy of promoting political change.

The Democratic Populist Tradition

The Democratic Populist tradition is Democratic in the sense that it originated with the Democratic party and the appeals of Andrew Jackson; it is populist in that it holds out the president as the representative of the people against the special interests; and it is a tradition in that it is a form of rhetorical appeal that is handed down from one generation to another generation of politicians.³

Of all three terms, populism is probably the most ambiguous. There seems to be no consensus on the meaning of populism. George Tindall, in 1972, described the term as being in a "semantic identity crisis,"⁴ a characterization that remains twenty-five years later. A correspondent for *The Ohio Dispatch* in 1892 was the first to use the word "Populist" to describe the People's Party, which was also later to be known as the Populist Party. Since then, populism has taken on a range of different meanings and attributes. Michael Kazin, author of *The Populist Persuasion*, the most recent account of populism in the United States, defines populism as a combination of four factors: an Americanism that stressed the rule of the people, a flexible conception of the people, the notion of a corrupt elite, and the need for mass movements to overcome the elite. Michael Federici, in turn, has collected thirteen characteristics that are common to definitions of populism, though he notes that

³Edward Shils in his book, *Tradition* [(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 12], defines tradition as "anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present." Traditions may be altered over time. Franklin Roosevelt appropriated the Jackson tradition, but altered it to fit his own ends of building a more activist state. Shils observes that "over many generations of recipients, the tradition might have become altered from its earliest forms in many respects but not in those regarded as central by its custodians."

⁴George B. Tindall, "Populism: A Semantic Identity Crisis" *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 48 (Autumn 1972, no. 4): 501-518.

these characteristics “may not all pertain to specific movements or individuals.”⁵ Michael Lind in a 1995 *New Republic* book review, claims that populism has taken on two meanings: one definition consists of “a diffuse but relatively stable collection of principles and prejudices” that draws upon the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian traditions of political thought and the other definition that centers on a vague notion of egalitarianism.⁶ After examining the wide range of meanings of populism, Margaret Canovan contends that what ties together all the different forms and meanings of populism is a common populist rhetoric: a rhetoric that is anti-elitist, exalts ‘the people,’ and stresses the pathos of the ‘little man.’⁷ It is perhaps this core meaning, present also in the definitions of Kazin, Federici, and Lind, that can be taken away from the debate.

In this dissertation, I examine populism as a presidential mode of persuasion. The major features of presidential populism are: a) the legitimization of presidential action through popular authority; b) the conception of politics as a battle between the people and special interests; and c) the use of populist appeals to change the institutional status quo. I will discuss the roots of each in the history of the American presidency and political discourse, along with the features that characterize the competing Whig-Republican consensual leadership tradition.

⁵Michael P. Federici, *The Challenge of Populism: The Rise of Right-Wing Democratism in Postwar America* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 35-36. The list includes: 1. Suspicion of elites, especially business figures, bankers, bureaucrats, intellectuals, plutocrats; 2. Faith in the common sense and virtue of the ordinary people; 3. Suspicion of metropolitan society; 4. Preference for simplicity versus complexity; 5. Idyllic assessment of agricultural life; 6. Reverence for religion; 7. Conspiracy theory; 8. Staunch defense of small property holders versus corporations; 9. Fear of trust and monopolies; 10. Anti-intellectualism; 11. Sectarianism; 12. Mistrust of science and technology; 13. Majoritarian democracy.”

⁶Michael Lind, “Power to the People” *The New Republic*, September 4, 1995, 37-38. Lind’s definition of populism based on the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian tradition comes close to incorporating most of the characteristics listed in Federici’s book. He defines this populist tradition as follows: “Chief among the themes of this populism are a nostalgia for an agrarian society, coupled with a hostility toward urban and industrial civilization; an obsession with economic panaceas, usually involving some scheme for reducing the control of credit by private bankers, an emphasis on equality, substantive as well as formal, among members of “the people,” thought of as a homogeneous moral community, a conspiratorial interpretation of politics, and an enthusiasm for various forms of direct democracy.”

⁷Margaret Canovan, “Two Strategies for the Study of Populism,” *Political Studies* 30 (December 1982): 552.

A. Presidential Popular Authority

The first feature of presidential populism is the act of claiming to be the direct agent of the people, and using the authority conferred by the people to justify presidential action. Presidents from the beginning accepted a modest conception of the chief executive as a popular leader, in the sense that the president through his good character represented the nation as a whole. But Jackson and the Democratic populist tradition took this perspective a step further, by arguing that the president derives his authority from the endorsement given by the people to him and his policy stands.

The republican nature of the executive has been an important part of the American presidency from its inception. James Wilson in the Constitutional Convention put forth the idea of a republican constitutional executive: "He who is to execute the laws will be as much the choice, as much the servant, and therefore as much the friend of the people as he who makes them." He further noted that direct national elections would provide a "chain of connection," keeping the executive attuned to the "interests of the whole."⁸ Gouverneur Morris, a little later in the Constitutional Convention, called for an executive to be the "guardian of all the people, even of the lower classes, against Legislative tyranny." By the end of the Constitutional Convention, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Wilson, and Morris were strong advocates of an executive that was directly elected by the people and hence the representative of the nation.⁹ In the end, their collective proposals went down to defeat, but the idea of an executive responsible to the people persisted.

Even the Federalist Papers, often cited as proof that the Framers opposed presidential popular leadership, contains passages that legitimate executive authority based on its connection to the people. Hamilton, in Paper No. 70, turned to the central republican

⁸Ralph Ketcham. "The Jefferson Presidency and Constitutional Beginnings." In *The Constitution and the American Presidency*, eds. Martin L. Fausold and Alan Shank (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 13.

⁹Charles, Thach, Jr, *The Creation of the Presidency, 1775-1789* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1969), [get page number]. See also David K. Nichols, *The Myth of the Modern Presidency* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994) on how the Founding Fathers supported presidential use of popular authority.

concept of popular accountability to defend an independent, unitary executive over a council of executives. Although he never contended that the executive should follow the popular will, Hamilton had an acute sense of how the creation of an intimate bond between the chief executive and the people could be used to achieve political ends. With the “multiplication of executives,” he wrote, the blame is “shifted from one to another with so much dexterity and under such plausible appearance that the public opinion is left in suspense about the real author.”¹⁰ Concentrating power into one executive would ensure the people would know who to hold responsible. Quoting an ancient writer, Hamilton declared that “the executive power is more easily confined when it is one ... it is far more safe that there should be a single object for the jealousy and watchfulness of the people.” Not only would an unitary executive be more responsible to the public, but it also would be the “best calculated to conciliate the confidence of the people and to secure their privileges and interests.”¹¹ As Corey Robin points out, Hamilton turned the republican maxim that power is safer in the hands of a number of men than of a single man on its head.¹²

From the early days of the Republic, presidents recognized that the strength of their office on building a close connection with the people. There were ceremonies, public messages, and even symbolic tours around the country. George Washington, for example, often declared that government should act in the interests of the people, although like Hamilton, he never meant that the government, especially the presidency, should act on the immediate will of the people. As the first president of the United States, he attempted to republicanize the concept of the presidency by holding regular hours in which anyone that was “respectably dressed” could see the chief executive. Through this action, Washington acknowledged that the appearance of being accessible to the people and hearing their concerns was important in legitimating the presidency as well as drawing support for the

¹⁰This is not to say that Hamilton defended a strong executive on purely republican grounds. He also justified a strong executive on the basis of secrecy and dispatch, two distinctly non-republican attributes.

¹¹*The Federalist Papers*, No. 70, 424.

¹²E. Corey Robin, *Alexander Hamilton and the American Presidency*, unpublished manuscript, December 5, 1990.

national government as a whole. Thomas Jefferson, perhaps more than any of the first six presidents, relied most heavily on his ties to the people of the nation. He asserted, "In a government like ours, it is the duty of the Chief Magistrate ... to unite in himself the confidence of the *whole* people. This alone, in any case where the energy of the nation is required, can produce a union of the powers of the whole, and point them in a single direction, as if all constituted but one body and one mind."¹³ The first presidents of the nation were keenly aware of the pressures of public relations. Hamilton summed up the president's position, when he noted, perhaps sarcastically, that "Good patriots must at all events please the people."¹⁴

Despite the acceptability of a "popular" presidency, Jefferson and the other presidents who preceded Andrew Jackson in general were unwilling to assert their popular authority to influence the legislative process or to support independent presidential action. They were "popular" leaders in the sense of seeking to be symbols for the nation as a whole, but not "populist" leaders vigorously pursuing an agenda authorized by the people. Washington, according to Forrest McDonald, chose to "preside" over his administration, rather than direct or lead it.¹⁵ Jefferson differed from Washington in that he actually took an active hand in the legislative process, but he did this through back-door maneuverings. He did not rely on constitutional authority or popular authority to add weight to his actions; his personal authority was sufficient. The other presidents, not having the force of personality or the political skills of Jefferson, had to abide by the Democratic-Republican orthodoxy of presidential-noninterference in the legislative processes on domestic policy.

It is important to remember that at this time presidents were not popularly elected. The Constitution directed that state legislatures appoint electors who would then elect the President. The state legislature, of course, could defer to the judgment of the electors to the people of the state. In the first presidential election of 1788-89, the electors were chosen

¹³Ralph Ketcham in *Presidents Above Party: The First American Presidency* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 105-106.

¹⁴Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), vol. 4, 99.

¹⁵Forrest McDonald, *Presidency of George Washington* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 114.

by popular vote in only five states, while in the remaining states, the legislature chose the electors.¹⁶ Presidential elections became even more insulated from the public with rise of congressional caucuses at the end of the eighteenth century. Not being directly elected by the people, the early presidents were more constrained in their claim of a popular mandate. In fact, none of the first six presidents claimed a mandate from the people. As Richard Ellis shows in his study of the development of presidential leadership, Andrew Jackson became the first president to employ a mandate following the election of 1832.¹⁷ By that year, all but two states, Delaware and South Carolina, chose their electors by popular vote. The onset of direct elections symbolically narrowed the distance between the president and the people, and made more plausible claims by the president that he represents the policies favored by a popular majority.

Starting with Jackson, Democratic presidents began to claim that they were uniquely situated to represent the interests of the whole people because they were the only government officers to be elected by the whole nation, and they deployed this claim in their efforts to promote favored policies. They were willing to use this popular leadership to initiate (or terminate) government projects, to lead their parties, to challenge Congressional leaders, as well as to defy private institutions. Acting in the name of the people permitted Democratic presidents to establish their own power base, separate from other governmental institutions.

Before Jackson, presidential popular leadership hinged on the idea that voters were endorsing a candidate by virtue of his character and ability to make sound, independent judgments, rather than electing the person who promised to enact the popular will. The Congress was thought to be sufficiently close to the people to represent their immediate demands and interests. It was the president's character that permitted him to discern the

¹⁶Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 33.

¹⁷Richard J. Ellis and Stephen Kirk, "Presidential Mandates in the Nineteenth Century: Conceptual Change and Institutional Development," *Studies in American Political Development*, 9, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 137-151.

long-term common good and rise above the divisive politics of the legislature to provide the unity and stability that the national government needed.

The Whigs continued this way of thinking into the middle years of the nineteenth century. As Whig presidential candidate William Henry Harrison noted in 1840, "a better guarantee for the correct conduct of a Chief Magistrate may be found in his character, the course of his former life, than in pledges or opinions" given during an election.¹⁸ William Henry Harrison, in his 1840 inaugural address, declared that there was no need to "keep up the delusion" that he was elected based on his principles and opinions."¹⁹ In the same address, he put forth the view that Congress, not the president represented a truer picture of the people's will.

... it is preposterous to suppose that a thought could for a moment have been entertained that the President, placed at the capital, in the center of the country, could better understand the wants and wishes of the people than their own immediate representatives, who spend a part of every year among them, living with them, often laboring with them, and bound to them by the triple tie of interest, duty and affection.²⁰

Subsequent Whig presidents, like Zachary Taylor and Milliard Fillmore, followed Harrison's example. Indeed, all Whig presidents rejected the concept of the mandate outright and adhered to the doctrine of Congressional supremacy.

While the Whig presidents offered a distinct alternative to this first tenet of populist leadership in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, the distinction between the Democratic party and the Whig/Republican conceptions of presidential leadership became less stark as the century drew to a close. With the administrations of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, Republican presidents accepted the idea of presidential mandates and the concept of representing the popular will. But even as both parties came to accept the notion of presidential popular authority, GOP presidents still clung to aspects of their Whig heritage. Republican presidents at the turn of the century were still less willing to use popular leadership to establish an independent power base apart from their party and

¹⁸M.J. Heale, *The Presidential Quest: Candidates and Images in American Political Culture, 1787-1852* (New York: Longman, 1982), 118.

¹⁹William Henry Harrison, "Inaugural Address," March 4, 1841, *Messages and Papers*, 1860.

²⁰Harrison, "Inaugural Address," *Messages and Papers*, 1865.

Congress. Instead, they tended to perceive of their mandates as *party* mandates, dependent on their and Congressional Republicans' shared connection to the GOP platform. Only with Nixon, would the differences between Democratic and Republican presidents become almost non-existent on this first tenet, as the 37th president deliberately sought the strongest possible popular endorsement for his personal program, even at the cost of distancing himself from Congressional Republicans.

B. The People vs. the Special Interests

The second tenet of populist presidential leadership is the notion that the interests of the people are threatened by the designs of a powerful special interest. The battle between the people and the "interests" rests at the foundations of the Democratic party. When Democratic leaders have talked about the history of their party, they repeatedly turned to this division of the people and the special interests as the founding principle. They, along with many scholars, trace the roots of the Democratic party to the political thought of the Anti-federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans.²¹ According to this history, which admittedly is simplistic, the struggle between Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian visions spurred the development of the Democratic party, which represented the people, and the Whig party, which represented the "moneyed power."

Van Buren, who is often credited as the theoretical mastermind behind the development of the Democratic party, adopted this lineage in his own history of party development.²² Jackson's successor portrayed Alexander Hamilton as the venal catalyst that split the once homogeneous American people into conflictual classes. Hamilton's most egregious act was the building of a national bank, to which Van Buren attributed the creation of the "moneyed interest in America along the lines of the moneyed class that [had]

²¹See for instance, Wilfred E. Binkley, *American Political Parties: Their Natural History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962). [Add more cites]

²²Martin Van Buren, *Inquiry into the Origin and Course of Political Parties* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867). James W. Ceaser [*Presidential Selection: Theory and Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979)] labels Van Buren as the innovative draftsmen of the Democratic party.

been created in England.”²³ This act placed the commercial and manufacturing interests on Hamilton’s side, while concentrating the people—consisting of farmers, planters, mechanics, and the working classes—on Jefferson’s side. Van Buren charged that the Hamilton’s Federalist party, despite its occasional name changes, has consistently exhibited “the same inclination to strengthen the money power and to increase its political influence,” the “same distrust of the capacity of the people to control the management of public affairs,” and “the same desire also for governmental interference in the private pursuits of men and for influencing them by special advantages to favored individuals and classes.”²⁴ Similar stories of the beginnings of the two-party system can be found in the works of other Democratic presidents such as Woodrow Wilson,²⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt,²⁶ and Harry Truman.²⁷

The identity of the Democratic party thus formed as much in relation to what it did not represent (the monied elite) as to what it did represent (the people). Leaving aside the self-congratulatory aspects of this imagery, scholars have agreed that the Democratic party from the start had a conflictual ideology. Merrill Peterson claims that appeals to economic conflict constituted the theoretical foundations of the Jacksonian Democratic party.²⁸ Discussing the roots of the Democratic party, Douglas Jaenicke describes the Democratic party as a “negative community” whose members were “hostile to any ruling institution or group.”²⁹

²³Van Buren, *Inquiry into the Origin and Course of Political Parties*, 150-154

²⁴Van Buren, *Inquiry into the Origin and Course of Political Parties*, 223-224.

²⁵Woodrow Wilson, *Division and Reunion 1829-1889* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894). Also see Wilson’s more extensive work on American political history, *A History of the American People* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1901, 1902).

²⁶Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Address at the Jackson Day Dinner,” January 8, 1938, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1938 vol. (New York: MacMillan, 1941), 37-45.

²⁷Truman, in a history he was writing for high school students that was never published, notes that there are just as many Federalists in the country now as there were in colonial times, only there are so many more of the other brand of people they don’t have any chance to control the government for very long.” [Truman Archives, Recording No. 47---12].

²⁸Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jeffersonian Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), [get page number].

²⁹Douglas Jaenicke. “The Jacksonian Integration of Parties into the Constitutional System.” *Political Science Quarterly* 101(1986): 89.

This theme of the people opposing a corrupt special interest did not originate with the Democratic party, but had been a part of American political discourse since the Revolutionary War. James Huston in a study of revolutionary leaders' conceptions of wealth finds a coherent set of ideas that center on the "political economy of aristocracy."³⁰ The natural enemy of republicanism, Huston asserts, was an aristocracy founded upon "favoritism, hierarchy, and special privilege." In particular, national leaders in the eighteenth century believed that the aristocracy and its concomitant inequality of wealth was generated through a corrupt control over politics, such as an unfair taxation policy, holding a position in the governmental bureaucracy or being the beneficiary of governmental favoritism. Notice that the revolutionary war leaders' "aristocracy" and Van Buren's "monied elite" attain their privileges in the same way, by manipulating government functions to their advantage. Foreshadowing the arguments that would be made by Anti-Federalists, Jeffersonians, and Democrats, these revolutionary war leaders drew upon the language of a special interest to support their preferred vision of government.

Indeed, the same antagonistic language can also be found in the ratification debates of the Constitution. The Anti-Federalists framed the battle over the Constitution as a struggle between an elite and the mass of the people, accusing the Federalists of wanting to establish an aristocracy. The Federalists on the other hand, were much more skeptical of the masses, calling them the "licentious part" of society. The advocates of a strong central government preferred to keep government in the hands of the "better sort."³¹ Given these two different outlooks, it can be understood why the Democrats appropriated the language of the Anti-Federalist rather than the Federalists.

³⁰James L. Huston. "The American Revolutionaries, The Political Economy of Aristocracy, and the American Concept of the Distribution of Wealth." *American Historical Review* Vol. 98, No. 4, Oct. 1993, pp. 1079-1105. This idea may be traced back even further to the division of parties in England. In fact, Jefferson believed that the clash between the Federalist and the Republicans was reminiscent of the collision of the Tories and Whigs in England. See Gary J. Schmitt, "Thomas Jefferson and the Presidency" in *Inventing the American Presidency*, ed. Thomas E. Cronin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 328.

³¹Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969), 483-499

Although this rhetoric had a place in American discourse in the eighteenth century, it was not the centerpiece of a president's rhetorical appeal until the administration of Andrew Jackson in 1828. One footnote to this argument is the presidency of John Adams. The conflict between the many and the few was pivotal to Adams' understanding of presidential responsibilities. In his three-volume, *A Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America*, he noted that:

In every society where property exists, there will ever be a struggle between rich and poor. Mixed in one assembly, equal laws can never be expected. They will either be made by numbers, to plunder the few who are rich, or by influence, to fleece the many who are poor. Both rich and poor, then, must be made independent, that equal justice may be done, and equal liberty enjoyed by all.³²

Although the theory of social conflict is present, Adams's conception of the presidency does not lay the theoretical foundations of the populist presidency. Instead, Adams believed that the role of the president was to perform the task of a disinterested arbitrator, balancing the interests of the majority with those of the minority. The populist conception of the presidency, in contrast, portrays the president as the direct agent of the people, automatically taking the side of the defenseless many against the powerful few.³³ Adams's conception of the presidency, although not populist, is nevertheless interesting in how it brings the ideas of disinterested statesmanship and populist leadership within range of one another.

Another alternative founding moment for the populist presidency, according to Bruce Ackerman, is Thomas Jefferson. Ackerman points out the populist dynamics characterizing the election of 1800. The Jeffersonians were "casting the governing party as a bunch of normal politicians corrupting the American system, casting themselves as leaders of a popular movement of aroused citizens determined to renew and redefine

³²Noble E. Cunningham, "Election of 1800," in *History of American Presidential Elections 1788-1968*, ed. Arthur H. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971), 102-103.

³³Bruce Miroff, "John Adams' Classical Conception of the Executive," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 17 (1987): 365.

constitutional values in the name of We the People."³⁴ Jefferson, as leader of the new Republican party, however, was much more of a populist leader while challenging the Federalist governing establishment than once he gained control of the highest office in the national government. The transformation from being an outsider to an insider had tremendous effect on his approach to politics. As president, Jefferson engaged in the politics of consensus. His belief that government policy could produce a "concert of interests" separated him from a populist model that pitted the people against a special interest.

Richard Hofstadter explains the discrepancy between Jefferson's reputation as a populist leader and his performance as president by drawing our attention to the fact that Jefferson usually stated the "generous and emancipating thoughts for which his name is so justly praised" in his private letters rather than in public statements.³⁵ Michael Kazin disputes this point, contending that readers of Jefferson's inaugural addresses will find Hofstadter's explanation "an exaggeration."³⁶ On Hofstadter's side, nowhere in Jefferson's inaugural addresses or annual messages did I find any bold examples of Jefferson drawing upon the populist trope of vilifying an elite. On Kazin's side, I did find an example of Jefferson calling for a fair assessment of taxes, one in which the "the farmer," "the mechanic," and "the laborer" would be spared the expense. Despite this caveat, I think it can be fairly concluded that Jefferson's image as a populist leader was not burnished during his presidency.³⁷

³⁴Bruce Ackerman, *We the People: Foundations* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 71.

³⁵Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948), 43.

³⁶Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 290 fn 23.

³⁷Not only were his letters important in promoting his populist persona, but also the very fact that he was the leader of Republican party, whose many pamphleteers and newspapermen were busy portraying Jefferson as the leader of the people against a corrupt Federalist regime even if Jefferson himself did not engage publicly in the debate. Also some of his private writings were published before or during his presidency, contributing to his image as a populist leader.

Much more common in Jefferson's presidential rhetoric were passages that, at least on the surface, tried to defuse political conflicts and instill harmony in the political community. Jefferson's famous proclamation in his first inaugural address--"We are all republicans, we are all federalists"--represents an attempt to submerge party conflict and return the country to a state of consensus politics. Similarly, in his second inaugural, Jefferson extended an invitation to his "doubting brethren" to create a "union of opinion."³⁸ Some scholars contend that these conciliatory gestures were not conciliatory at all, but an effort to absorb the moderate Federalists into the Republican party, further stigmatizing extreme Federalists.³⁹ Regardless of Jefferson's strategic calculations, his language never attacked these die-hard Federalists directly. He believed that all interests could be brought into the fold of the Republican party. This held for the Federalists as well as for the manufacturing interest, the here-to-fore opponent of the Republicans. "It is material to the safety of Republicanism," Jefferson asserted, "to detach the mercantile interest from its enemies and incorporate them into the body of its friends. A merchant is naturally a Republican, and can be otherwise only from a vitiated state of things."⁴⁰

Where Jefferson as president conceived of the political community as a "concert of interests," Jackson alternatively viewed it as full of corrupting influences: the "monied aristocracy," monopolies, corporations, money speculators, and a Congress blinded by local interests. Each of these interests threatened to subvert the popular will, elevating the interests of the few above the many. The task of the president was to restore power to the masses and rein in these special interests. With Jackson, the presidency abandoned the pretense of disinterested statesmanship, adopting a politicized role in the struggles that were taking place in the country.

³⁸Jefferson, "Second Inaugural Address," in Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the President*, I:370.

³⁹Skowronek, *The Politics Presidents Make*, 71; Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 151; James MacGregor Burns. *The Deadlock of Democracy: Four-Party Politics in America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), 39.

⁴⁰Richard Ellis, *The Jeffersonian Crisis: Courts and Politics in the Young Republic* (New York: Norton, 1971), 282.

This conflictual view of politics constitutes the second tenet of presidential populism. For the nineteenth century, Democratic presidents drew far more on this vision than their Whig/Republican counterparts. The Whigs were more likely to frame political issues in consensual terms. Like Jefferson, they portrayed a society in which interests harmoniously existed with one another. Rather than dwelling on the economic conflicts between different interests, they focused on the "mutual dependence" of classes and interests on one another. This party difference would shift as Republicans in the late twentieth century took over the populist mantle.

C. Targets of Institutional Reform

The third feature of presidential populism involves calling upon the power of the people to overcome special interests that have become entrenched in political or economic institutions. Populism is a language of reform. The structure of a populist appeal points to a state of affairs that is inimical to the interests of the people; it identifies a more-or-less specific entity that bears responsibility for current conditions; and it then calls for governmental action to deal with that special interest and to return the country to an equilibrium condition. Populism is often viewed as a conservative strategy of institutional reform, because it tends to harken back to an idealized past. But presidential populism has a potentially radical aspect as well. It calls for the uprooting of existing arrangements so as to create a new status quo that is more democratic.

Targets of institutional reform have shifted over the course of American political history. In the nineteenth century, the idea that special interests were the product of political privilege dominated presidential populist appeals. Andrew Jackson depicted the stockholders of the Second Bank of the United States as a "privileged order, clothed both with great political power and enjoying immense pecuniary advantages from their connection with the Government."⁴¹ This same type of attack on political privilege can be

⁴¹Andrew Jackson, "Bank Veto Message," July 10, 1832, *Messages and Papers*, 1141.

found in Jackson's and Polk's call for the stoppage of a nationwide system of internal improvement projects, because it tended "to give to the favored classes undue control and sway in Government."⁴² Likewise, Cleveland depicted the protective tariff as an illegitimate "partnership" between the Government and manufacturers that unfairly injured the rest of the nation.⁴³

Presidents often charge that the Congress bears responsibility for the granting of unfair political privileges. In this line of reasoning, members of Congress are portrayed as being more prone to serve selfish factions than the president because they represent a particular state or district, instead of the entire nation. In addition, presidents and outside observers have pointed to logrolling and district gerrymandering as other features that prevent members of Congress from being attuned to the popular will.⁴⁴ These kinds of claims date back to Jackson. In his opposition to internal improvements projects, Jackson contended that such legislation was the product of "majorities founded not on identity of conviction, but on combinations of small minorities entered into for the purpose of mutual assistance in measures which resting solely on their own merits, could never be carried."⁴⁵ Just as important as challenging special interests, populist appeals became a way for the president to wage the struggle for increased institutional power vis-a-vis Congress.

The antidote to special interests that thrive on political privilege was a limited government, or in the words of Jackson, "simplicity and economy." In the Democrats' view, if government was kept to its bare essentials, then by definition, no group or class could be favored. Democrats pointed to areas of state activism--the tariff, the Bank, internal improvements--as sources of governmental bias that supposedly harmed the general population. Without such programs, the economic playing field would be left open for all interests to compete with equal opportunity.

⁴²James K. Polk, "Fourth Annual Message," December 5, 1848, *Messages and Papers*, 2511.

⁴³Grover Cleveland, "Fourth Annual Message," December 7, 1896, *Messages and Papers*, 5360.

⁴⁴Samuel Popkin, *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 67.

⁴⁵As quoted in Ellis and Kirk, "Presidential Mandates in the Nineteenth Century," 136. See also Jackson, "Fourth Annual Address," December 4, 1832, *Messages and Papers*, 1165.

“Equal justice for all, special privileges for none,” the banner head of many Democratic newspapers, summed up the desired equilibrium condition held out as an ideal by Democrats.

As the Democratic party shifted from being an anti-statist party to a party in favor of increased governmental activism, there is a distinct shift in the Democrats’ understanding of the relationship between the state and the special interests. Democrats no longer viewed state activism as inevitably a source of special interest domination. Instead, they came to view the state as a tool that potentially could be used by the people to control the special interests. William Jennings Bryan began this transformation in the 1890s.⁴⁶ Bryan argued that governmental policies had been used to benefit business interests, but he did not believe that a cessation of governmental activism would return the U.S. to a desirable equilibrium. Amid the growth of corporate concentration, only the federal government, acting as the agent of the people, could control the excesses of big business. The populist formula was flexible enough to accommodate this change from state-leveling to state-building within the Democratic party.

The construction of the modern administrative state, however, was based more on consensual appeals than on populist ones. Franklin Roosevelt, throughout most of his term, adopted what William Leuchtenberg terms an “all-class alliance” that attempted to make the new administrative state acceptable to a variety of different classes and groups, including major business interests.⁴⁷ A consensual approach that portrayed government programs as benefiting all groups equally was better suited to accomplish his state-building goal of accommodating state activism and capitalism. A consensual approach after all protects established interests instead of singling them out for attack.

In the long-term, as the Democrats became identified as the party of government and as the party seeking to defend the status quo, Democratic presidents were severely limited in their use of populist approaches. Furthermore, in building the state, the Democrats had of necessity established an elite corps of governmental experts, who came to serve as an appealing target for Republicans.

⁴⁶John Gerring. “Party Ideology in America: The National Republican Chapter 1828-1924,” *Studies in American Political Development* 11 (Spring 1997): 44-108.

⁴⁷William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt And the New Deal 1932-1940* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 146-147.

As a result, Republican presidents turned to attack these new alleged recipients of political privilege. Their attack on the government, however, was nothing new. They were simply refurbishing the Democratic tradition of populism and employing it for a Republican agenda. This time, the attack would be not on the collusion of private power with political privilege but on political privilege alone.

Presidential Populism and the Modern-Traditional Divide

Presidential popular leadership then cannot be relegated to either the traditional or the modern period. It was prominent in the leadership practices of nineteenth century presidents, such as Andrew Jackson, James Polk, and Andrew Johnson, just as it marked the rhetoric of twentieth century presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. The sheer fact that presidents held office within the same century or the same decade tells us little about their stance toward politics and presidential leadership. Consider for instance the presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Zachary Taylor. Both were military commanders and both served in the early nineteenth century, but that is where the similarities end. Jackson and Taylor held dramatically different theories about presidential leadership. Jackson exhibited all the traits of populist leadership: he thought of himself as the leader of the people, he regularly challenged Congress's ability to interpret the popular will, and he espoused an agenda of destroying private interests that had entrenched themselves in the government. Taylor, on the other hand, pledged to implement the will of the people as expressed *through* Congress, permitted Congressional leaders to dominate his brief administration, and presented a view of politics in which interests cooperated with each other to produce the common good. Jackson's approach to leadership shares more in common with Ronald Reagan's than with that of his near-contemporary, Taylor. Comparisons that cross the modern-tradition divide shed new light on the dilemmas of presidential leadership.

Such comparative approaches have been remarkably absent from the literature on presidential popular leadership. The most prominent political histories instead tend to be based heavily on a linear analysis of the development of popular leadership practices. Operating within this temporal framework, scholars find that presidential leadership in the nineteenth century and twentieth century share very little in common. They depict nineteenth century presidents as passive clerks constrained from taking on the role of the popular leader. This lack of leadership can be traced to one of two sets of constraints: constitutional doctrines that prohibited popular leadership or the small scope of national government, which accorded presidents few opportunities or resources for aggressive leadership.

Elmer Cornwall, an expert on public opinion leadership, for instance, describes most nineteenth century presidents as "passive and inarticulate."⁴⁸ Similarly, James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph Bessette, among the leading presidential scholars of our day, collectively point out that while nineteenth century presidents were "public" figures in the sense of making ceremonial speeches, inaugural address, and submitting annual messages to Congress, these presidents were not at all "popular" leaders. The pre-modern president, in their view, was a "constitutional officer who would rely for his authority on the formal powers granted by the Constitution and on the informal authority that would flow from the office's strategic position." He was not a popular leader who would "stir mass opinion by rhetoric."⁴⁹ Tulis, in his own work on the rhetorical presidency, declares that "the rhetorical presidency and the understanding of American politics that it signifies are twentieth-century inventions and discoveries. Our pre-twentieth century polity proscribed the rhetorical presidency as ardently as we prescribe it."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Elmer E. Cornwall, *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 7-8.

⁴⁹ James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph Bessette, "The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency," in *Rethinking the Presidency*, ed. Thomas E. Cronin (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1982), 238.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 5.

Within this bifurcated framework, popular presidential leadership did not emerge until the turn of the century with the presidencies of William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt. While each of these presidents is credited with paving the way for the plebiscitary presidency, it is Wilson that is commonly referred to as the author and chief proponent of the popular leadership doctrine. Wilson is recognized for transforming the constitutional executive and setting the mold for twentieth century presidents. For example, Tulis asserts that Wilson's doctrine of popular leadership represented nothing less than "a major shift, indeed a reversal, of the founding perspective."⁵¹ Wilson, in his view, established a second unwritten constitution that stressed presidential reliance on public opinion. It is this second constitution, layered on top of the first, that provides the contours for modern presidential practice. Arthur Link, the nation's leading authority on the 28th president, similarly remarks that Wilson's example made it "inevitable that any future president would be powerful only in so far as he established intimate communication with the people and spoke effectively for them."⁵² Likewise, Ceaser argues that while the Constitution took care to provide "distance or protection for the executive from the immediate pressures of public opinion," Wilson's new doctrine of popular leadership "removed all restraints" on the potential power of the people and "abandoned all institutional devices" for regulating their leaders.⁵³

In order to make Wilson the dividing line between an old way and a new way of leadership, these presidential scholars have flattened nineteenth century presidential history. In this account, Andrew Jackson's charge against the US Bank, Andrew

⁵¹Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 132.

⁵²Arthur Link, "Woodrow Wilson: The Philosophy, Methods, and Impact of Leadership" in *Woodrow Wilson and The World of Today*, ed. Arthur P. Dudden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 9.

⁵³Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*, 51, 183, 208. Yet, Ceaser in his latest work recants this position. In his article entitled, "Doctrine of Presidential-Congressional Relations," [in *Separation of Powers and Good Government*, eds. Bradford P. Wilson and Peter W. Schramm (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994), Ceaser asserts that the idea of presidential popular authority is consistent with the Founding view of the Constitution.

Johnson's rhetorical war with the Radical Republicans, and Grover Cleveland's relentless campaign against the tariff are pushed to the sidelines of presidential history. Presidential populism has no place but in the twentieth century. This adherence to the modern-traditional divide forces scholars either to overlook instances that deviate from what they believe to be the prevailing nineteenth century norms or to label these instances as aberrations.

Take Tulis's handling of Andrew Johnson in his history of the rhetorical presidency. Tulis readily admits that Johnson engaged in acts of popular leadership in his "swing" around the country as he sought public support against his rivals in Congress, violating the prevailing rules of rhetorical practice. Tulis offers Johnson's impeachment as evidence of the binding force that original understandings held during the nineteenth century. The effect of this line of argument is to cut Johnson off from his Jacksonian roots and aspirations and to make him appear the one "great exception" to the rules of nineteenth century practice. Tulis encourages us to view Johnson as a "parody of popular leadership" out of place in his own time rather than a belligerent advocate of an already-available alternative conception.⁵⁴

This flattening of nineteenth century presidential history is in part a function of the methodology employed by Tulis. He focuses specifically on "unofficial rhetoric," speeches that were not part of the official repertoire of inaugural addresses, annual messages, and other forms of official communications, to come to his conclusions about the principles and practices of the traditional presidency.⁵⁵ He sets aside an in-depth

⁵⁴Tulis, *Rhetorical Presidency*, 87-93. In this regard we should not forget that Johnson's full name was Andrew Jackson Johnson. Eric McKittrick described his political lineage in the following way: "From the stump he would conjure up the spirit of Old Hickory; he would revive, in order that he might scourge, the ancient and terrible threats of tyranny and Federalism; he could call forth, as Mencken would later say of Bryan in that same country, all the dread "powers and principalities of the air." *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 87, 90. Wilfred E. Binkley, *President and Congress*, 3rd ed. (New York: Random House, 1962), 166, also suggests that President Andrew Johnson had the same conception of his office as Jackson.

⁵⁵Ironically, most of Tulis's evidence for his claims about nineteenth century *informal* rhetoric come from James B. Richardson's compilation of *formal* addresses and messages for that period. As Gerald Gamm and Renée Smith point out, many of the informal speeches made on presidential tours are missing from the Richardson's volumes. This casts doubt on Tulis's conclusions about informal presidential rhetoric in the nineteenth century.

analysis of official messages, because he believes them to be “consistent with basic doctrinal principles” that constrained presidential popular leadership. The forms of official communication, by which Tulis means the method of delivery, the intended audience, and the rules of content set by presidential precedent, guarded against presidents employing them to appeal directly to the people. Official communications in the nineteenth century, according to Tulis, were used to reinforce the image of the presidency as the protector of the nation’s principles, and not as a tool of political persuasion.

By leaving out official communication, Tulis misses many of the eruptions of presidential popular leadership in the nineteenth century. Inaugural addresses, annual messages, veto messages, and special messages provided a public forum for presidents. They repeatedly were the president’s chosen medium to experiment with claims of popular leadership and to press the boundaries of traditional norms of policy leadership. In a special message to Congress in 1833, Jackson used his recent election victory to legitimize the removal of deposits from the Bank of the United States to several state banks. Jackson used the message to communicate to the people through Congress, while also drawing upon his popular authority to give him added advantage in dealing with a recalcitrant Congress. In modern parlance, Jackson’s interpretation of the 1832 election as a mandate was an instance of the presidency “going over the heads of Congress.”⁵⁶

Other instances of popular leadership within the form of official communication abound. Polk used his inaugural address to claim a mandate for the annexation of Texas, as well as to outline his extensive policy plans; and in his fourth annual message, he expounded on the president’s popular leadership role in his justification of the veto power. Andrew Johnson, although he expressed his ideas about presidential popular leadership in informal speeches, also expressed many of these same themes in his

⁵⁶Cite Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, Dc: CQ Press, 1993).

official orations. In his third annual message, Johnson defended the president's right to remove public officers, asserting that the chief executive represented "the collective majesty" of the electorate and spoke "the will of the people."⁵⁷ In addition, Cleveland used his 1887 annual message to draw the nation's attention to the merits of tariff reduction and later claimed in his 1893 inaugural address that tariff reform was the "emphatic mandate of the people."⁵⁸ Contrary to Tulis, the formalities of the nineteenth century did not provide a very stable set of constraints on the principles of popular leadership pronounced in official presidential communication.

Tulis is careful not to make the claim that nineteenth century presidents never discussed policy matters. Unlike modern presidents who compile laundry lists of policy decisions, nineteenth century presidents, according to Tulis, engaged in an elevated discourse with the people, placing policy issues within a constitutional framework. Alternatively, presidents, especially in the early nineteenth century, may have been more prone to use constitutional arguments because of the existing fluidity between policy and constitutional arguments, not because of a doctrine constraining presidential popular leadership. The meaning of the Constitution on many important matters of policy had not been settled in the early years of the Republic, meaning policy debates quickly turned into disputes over constitutional principles. As one contemporary observer of the Jacksonian period noted, "everything was reduced to a Constitutional question, in those days."⁵⁹ For example, matters such as internal improvements and the existence of a National Bank, leading issues of the Jacksonian era, were clouded by considerable disagreement as to the meaning of the Constitution. But by the time of Cleveland, the main economic issues, such as the tariff and the currency were discussed mostly in terms of their policy merits, not their constitutional implications. Principles of presidential leadership did not provoke this change in content, given that Tulis does not

⁵⁷Andrew Johnson, "Third Annual Message," December 3, 1867, *Messages and Papers*, 3769.

⁵⁸Grover Cleveland, "Fifth Annual Message, December 4, 1893, *Messages and Papers*, 5890.

⁵⁹Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 23.

date the breakpoint until Wilson's presidency; rather, the Constitutionality of these economic management issues had been seemingly resolved.⁶⁰ In any case, even though presidential rhetoric in Jackson's day had a distinct Constitutional flavor, this did not negate the extent to which it addressed the details of competing policies and sought to influence public opinion.

Ceaser's classic work *Presidential Selection*, like Tulis, cordons off the nineteenth century presidency as a time largely bereft of popular presidential leadership. Drawing most prominently on the theoretical works and practice of Martin Van Buren, Ceaser argues that Jackson's successor helped to create a party-based presidency that tamed the dangers posed by the rise of direct election of the president and mass-based politics in the 1820s. Van Buren, according to Ceaser, "defined and promoted a new doctrine for the role of party competition and he took the lead in founding the Democratic party."⁶¹ Comparing Van Buren's principles with the original ones contained in *The Federalist Papers*, Ceaser concludes that the appearance of a party-based presidency was not much of a departure after all. Party selection procedures may have modified the original constitutional design, but they remained, he argues, just another means of accomplishing the same ends. Van Buren, in Ceaser's view, elaborated on the framer's insight, constructing a "new institution," the party system, that would operate within a larger constitutional design to restore the limits on leaders that had been threatened by the popular election of presidential electors and rise of coalitional politics in the 1820's.⁶² In this account, Jackson's role in the formation of the Democratic party is marginalized. The rise of party government appears as Martin Van Buren's "deliberate act" designed to prevent the demagogic antics of

⁶⁰A test for this hypothesis would be whether constitutional appeals resurfaced when the constitutionality of major presidential priorities again became an issue, such as with elements of the New Deal. See Robert E. Lane, *The Regulation of Businessmen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953) for an interesting discussion of how new forms of business regulation were accepted during the New Deal.

⁶¹Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*, 123.

⁶²Arthur Schlesinger [*The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), 51] gives an alternative account of Van Buren in his history of the Jacksonian period. He quotes Van Buren as saying, "Those who have wrought great changes in the world never succeeded by gaining over chiefs, but always by exciting the multitude."

a "popular hero" presidency and to promote a "skilled broker" presidency in its place. The upshot is a view of nineteenth century presidential history not markedly different from the standard one. With the passing of the statesmanlike leaders of the Founding period and with traditional constitutional ideals adapted to a more democratic age, the "strength of the party drill" and the "weakness of individual candidates" became the defining features of the middle period.⁶³

For Theodore Lowi, the lack of strong executive leadership in the nineteenth century resulted not only from established norms or partisan constraints, but also hinged on the size and scope of the national government. Lowi claims that with most activity located at the state level and with the national government "doing nothing but patronage," there was very little pressure on presidents to assume an activist role.⁶⁴ Under these conditions of limited government, strong presidential leadership occurred "infrequently and under special conditions--war, of course, but also in a time of fundamental stress or change in the regime."⁶⁵ But in the twentieth century, the "association between big government, a strong presidency and democracy" was established. The *personal presidency* is "an office of tremendous personal power drawn from the people--directly and through Congress and the Supreme Court--and based on the new democratic theory that the presidency with all powers is the necessary condition for governing a large, democratic nation."⁶⁶ He posits that this association was not natural, but the construction of political scientists, economists, jurists, and journalists who legitimized its existence and brought it to fruition in the twentieth century.

Like the other theories examined in this chapter, Lowi's model fails to grasp that this construction of a strong president based on popular authority had its roots in the nineteenth century, and was not purely a phenomenon of the twentieth century. By linking

⁶³Ceaser, *Presidential Selection*, p. 167.

⁶⁴Theodore J. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism*, 2nd ed. (NY: W.W. Norton, 1979), [get page number].

⁶⁵Theodore J. Lowi, *The Personal President: Power Invested, Promise Unfulfilled* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 34.

⁶⁶Lowi, *The Personal President* 8, 20.

a limited national government to weak presidential leadership, Lowi discounts the leadership of Jackson, Polk, and Johnson, and other popular leaders, cutting them off from modern presidents who would draw upon their exemplars of leadership. More specifically, the attempt to link strong presidential leadership to an activist government misses the drives by Jackson and Reagan to dismantle key governmental programs. Presidential leadership can take the form of state-leveling populism just as it can be linked to efforts to construct a more activist government. Theodore Lowi dismisses Reagan's desire to get the government off our backs" as "completely phony," and his commitment to deregulation as "not genuine."⁶⁷ Still, ten years after the Reagan Revolution this same language dominates political discourse, suggesting the extent to which Reagan exerted critical influence on the direction of American politics.

Research Design

In order to encompass the variations in the development of presidential popular leadership in both the nineteenth and twentieth century, I examine each presidency since 1828. For each president, I conduct a content analysis of all inaugural addresses and annual messages. For presidents from Jackson to Andrew Johnson, I also perform a content analysis of all presidential vetoes. By the 1870s, however, there were too many veto messages to analyze, and these messages no longer were consistently used as a tool for communicating with the public.⁶⁸ Grover Cleveland, for instance, vetoed over 400 pieces of legislation.

Because all presidents from George Washington have given both inaugural addresses and annual messages, these two forms of presidential communication provide a relatively consistent means to trace presidential role conceptions over the course of American history. While the inaugural address has been addressed directly to the people

⁶⁷Lowi, *The Personal President*, 158.

⁶⁸Gregory Harness, *Presidential Vetoes 1789-1988* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992), ix.

since Jefferson's time, the annual message continues to be officially addressed to members of Congress. In addition, for the entire nineteenth century, presidents submitted the annual message to Congress in written format. The fact that annual messages were written and addressed to Congress, however, did not prevent presidents from using these messages to reach a nationwide audience. Allan Nevins, the Pulitzer prize-winning biographer of Grover Cleveland, notes that Cleveland specifically intended his famous third annual message of 1887 for public consumption: "Every important newspaper in the country published it in full, and it was read as no Presidential message since Lincoln's had been." The address "was prepared as an argument for the farmer by his fireside and the shopkeeper by his barrel-stove."⁶⁹ Indeed, Mary Parker Follett, an observer of Congressional behavior in the late nineteenth century, noted that the annual message was "really an address to the country and [had] no direct influence upon Congress."⁷⁰

Gamm and Smith trace a decline in the amount of press coverage of annual messages during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, owing in part probably to the escalating length of annual messages. Roosevelt's annual messages averaged nearly 100 pages in length and took hours for the clerk to read to Congress.⁷¹ Yet, once Wilson started delivering the messages in person, any decline in the attention annual messages received was reversed. These formal messages, now known as the State of the Union address, still have great significance in the rhetoric of presidents in the twentieth century. Commenting on the "going public" practices of twentieth century presidents, Samuell Kernell notes that the "most conspicuous" way "modern" presidents exercise

⁶⁹Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Courage* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1958), 379-380.

⁷⁰M.P. Follett, *The Speaker of the House of Representatives* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), 325.

⁷¹Gerald Gamm and Renée Smith, "Presidents, Parties, and the Public: Evolving Patterns of Interaction," Paper presented at the 53rd annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, 6-8 April 1995.

popular leadership is through their formal speeches, such as the inaugural address and State of the Union message that place “the president prominently before the nation.”⁷²

The content analysis consisted of examining each address or message for claims of popular leadership, especially presidential mandates. It also involved close scrutiny of presidential messages and addresses for conflictual language in accordance with the second tenet of presidential populism and for the consensual appeals that were the hallmark of the Whig-Republican tradition. Finally, for the conflictual passages, I recorded the specific targets of attack in order to trace how conceptions of the “enemy” have shifted over time. In my analysis, I was primarily interested in domestic enemies and how they affected presidential views of the political community. Foreign enemies were excluded, except insofar as presidents linked them to internal enemies. Thus, Reagan’s attacks on the Soviet Union as an “Evil Empire” would not be coded as a populist appeal, unless he drew a connection between the Soviet threat and domestic agents threatening the U.S. from within (as, for example, Joseph McCarthy did when he claimed that communist agents had infiltrated the State Department).

Some critics may contend that an examination of presidential rhetoric is extraneous to real politics and that rhetoric is just the reflection of other political factors that are truly decisive. By contrast, I argue that the study of rhetoric is important for several reasons. Rhetoric is significant for understanding how the president perceives his political position, which groups he chooses to align with and which groups he decides to oppose. This is captured in one observer’s comment on FDR that “we loved him for the enemies he hates.” Rhetoric is also significant in that it shapes our understandings and expectations about how government works. The Whig-Republicans used consensual appeals in order to convince voters that the American political economy consisted of a concert of interests, while Jacksonian Democrats made use of populist language in order to depict a competing construction of reality in which privileged interests manipulated the workings of

⁷²Kernell, *Going Public*, 91.

government for their own ends. The kind of politics we have will differ depending on whether politicians seek to legitimate their favored policies through consensual or conflictual rhetoric.

Outline of the Dissertation

In the chapters that follow, I trace the evolution of presidential populism, drawing upon my content analysis along with an examination of the secondary literature on individual presidents. Chapter two focuses on the beginnings of the Democratic populist tradition, paying particular attention to the administrations of Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, and Andrew Johnson. The chapter also explores the Whig reaction against Jackson's methods and policies, and the resulting establishment of an alternative vision of presidential leadership.

In the third chapter, I investigate presidential populism in the middle years of the Republic, from the 1860s to the 1920s. I show a trend toward convergence between the parties during this era. The Republicans slowly surrender their Whig predecessors' aversion to claims of popular authority. Democratic presidents continue to make extensive use of such claims, but they, particularly with Wilson, begin to temper their antagonistic appeals. Where William Jennings Bryan called on Democrats to follow Jackson and take up the battle against monied elites once again, Wilson sought to steer a middle course, advocating progressive reforms but moderating their potentially radical thrust.

This trend accelerates in the New Deal period, which I analyze in chapter four. Although the second Roosevelt did occasionally engage in populist tactics, for the most part he built the state through consensual appeals. Perhaps more importantly, he left his Democratic successors with the task of defending and elaborating upon a new institutional order. Democrats no longer could position themselves as foes of an elite that had captured the government.

In chapter five, I turn to the contemporary period. Republican presidents starting with Nixon have seized the populist mantle, attacking what they take to be a new entrenched elite made up of bureaucrats and “special interest” groups that receive federal benefits. Presidential populism has come full circle, revived in the hands of the party that initially had been identified with the fight against such modes of leadership. Meanwhile, Democratic presidents now struggle to reconcile the language of efficiency and consensus with their populist heritage.

I conclude with an assessment of the limitations and uses of populist appeals in transforming political institutions. In the course of the nation’s history, presidential populism has been used primarily for destructive purposes, tearing down governmental programs instead of building them. The oppositional language of populism has proven poorly suited to sustaining the project of legitimating activist national government.

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