

Take the Trump populist test

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Trump. Brexit. The language of populism is winning historic political victories. Understanding populist discourse can help us spot it more effectively and have more clarity about what we are up against as journalists and citizens; and what it can potentially imply in terms of government openness and accountability.

But what makes a discourse populist? In this article, **Clara Aguirre Hernando** will break down the elements in a “Populist Test”, based on what populist discourse means and what it says about a politician’s worldview. Identifying what makes a discourse populist – or not – essentially comes down unveiling what lies behind the words of a politician: his or her vision of citizenship, society and its actors, its own administration and democracy, its link to citizenship or audience.

The populist test

There are four elements to the populist discourse test:

1. Appealing to the idea of “the people” as a monolithic and unified construction.
2. A Manichean or binary logic of “friend vs. enemy”, “us vs. them” – sometimes including conspiracy theories.
3. A direct, unmediated link between leader and citizens.
4. A ‘re-foundational’ vision of the administration with a “revolutionary” objective, often with reference to a political or economic crisis.

Appealing to the idea of “the people” is of course not enough to classify a discourse as populist. But it is necessary for the next elements, which build on this idea of oversimplifying the social map and erasing pluralities within a society.

For element number 2 – the “friends vs. enemies” logic – one of the most common targets leaders have historically chosen are the media. In Trump’s case we saw frequent references in this sense throughout his campaign, and we have already seen the first signs as President, as we show in the next paragraphs. This vision leads to element number 3 of the populist test: an unmediated link with the citizens. In this case, Trump’s use of Twitter and his justification of it – he simply does not believe that the media are fair to him.



Donald J. Trump 
@realDonaldTrump

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If the press would cover me accurately & honorably, I would have far less reason to "tweet." Sadly, I don't know if that will ever happen!

Trump already confirmed that he will probably not abandon this practice as President: “[The tweeting, I thought I’d do less of it, but I’m covered so dishonestly by the press](#)”. He already used his personal account [@realDonaldTrump](#) – different from the [@POTUS](#) account – to comment on the #WomensMarch, the television ratings of his inauguration

and a meeting with the CIA.



Of course, Trump is not alone when it comes to dismissing traditional media and claiming a direct channel with his people. Former President of Argentina Cristina Kirchner, for example, used to justify the frequent use of the public announcement system (which major radio and TV broadcasters are bound by law to transmit) and refused interviews and press conferences because she considered that big media corporations had a role of “political opposition” and misrepresented her messages.

Another notorious case is that of late former President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, who back in 2000 launched his very own weekly TV show with national reach, *Aló Presidente*, in which he made announcements on public policy setting the agenda for the rest of the media. His close ally in Ecuador, President Rafael Correa, took on a similar tradition with his show *Enlace Ciudadano*, still on the air today.

Something that is also present in President Trump’s speeches is element number 4 of the populist test. His campaign was based on the idea that America needed to be great again, that it needed to be rescued. Although similar arguments can be spotted in political campaigns for the sake of embodying the idea of change, the key idea here is that a President’s populist discourse is focused on painting an image of crisis in order to justify him or herself as an actor of redemption. The grim image that Trump presented on his [inaugural speech](#) of the country he was taking control of showed this clearly.



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump

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Wow, the @nytimes is losing thousands of subscribers because of their very poor and highly inaccurate coverage of the "Trump phenomena"

RETWEETS
35,310

LIKES
128,047



6:16 AM - 13 Nov 2016

The question then is: Why does a populist discourse raise the alarms and why is ‘the populist test’ relevant? When a leader with a populist discourse goes from candidate to President, the implications of his or her discourse become much more tangible as they will potentially enact actual policies, practices and laws. Trump accusing the media on his very first weekend as President – [both himself and through his Press Officer](#) – of false reporting on the number of people at his inauguration cannot be considered a mere trait of character. A sign of continuity with his vision of the media as enemies during his campaign, it also marks what his relationship with journalists, the media, press conferences and interviews will be during his administration.

Singling out journalists for their coverage and refusing to answer their questions by telling them to “[shut \[their\] mouth](#)” during a press conference, deriding media organizations and [questioning their motives while commenting on their economic success](#), and [accusing whole media organizations of being “fake news!”](#) – are all elements that add up to a discourse that places the media as an enemy of the people, justifies the claim of a more direct form of communication that ignores the traditional mediation of journalists, thus breaking free from questions, follow-up questions and the confrontation with citizens through the media. In other words, a populist discourse is constantly striving to break free from a central agent of accountability in democracies around the world.

[Interested on more about Populism? You can read: [LSE Professor Francisco Panizza \(2005\)](#), [Chantal Mouffe \(2016\)](#), [De la Torre \(2013\)](#), [Paul Taggart \(2012\)](#).]

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