

# Rhetoric of reasons and emotions in times of crisis

## Retoryka racji i emocji w czasach kryzysu

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### Anti-pluralist arguments in the Tea Party online discourse: A mixed method analysis of populist rhetoric

#### Antypluralistyczne argumenty w dyskursie internetowym ruchu politycznego Tea Party: analiza retoryki populistycznej metodą mieszaną

### Abstract

Populism can be treated as an ideological attribute of political parties, but in this study, it is operationalized as a feature of argumentation that allows populists to claim to be *the only ones* to represent the interests of the nation. Such anti-pluralist arguments could be observed during US midterm elections in 2018 in online discourses of the right-wing political movement Tea Party. This article reports on a mixed-method study of the Tea Party's official website obtained through scraping the *All News* feed. The quantitative linguistic analysis of keywords, concordances and couplings in the newsfeed sample is complemented with a qualitative rhetorical analysis of some *topoi* and argumentative fallacies. The analyses reveal such strategies as: (1) homogenizing the representation of true patriots, (2) polarizing between "good us" and "evil them," (3) discrediting opponents through analogies, "worst" examples and *ad hominem* attacks (4) conspiracy theorizing, and (5) mobilizing modes of pathos and ethos in relation to mediatized and historicized cultural imaginaries. The study showcases the advantages of a mixed-method approach to the so-called populist rhetoric.

Populizm może być definiowany jako ideologiczny atrybut partii politycznych, jednak w niniejszym badaniu został on zoperacjonalizowany jako cecha argumentacji, pozwalająca populistom twierdzić, że są oni *jedynymi wybrańcami* uprawnionymi do reprezentowania interesu narodu. Antypluralistyczne argumenty tego typu wystąpiły w prawicowym dyskursie amerykańskiego ruchu politycznego Tea Party podczas wyborów do amerykańskiego Kongresu w 2018 r. Niniejsze studium przedstawia wyniki analizy oficjalnej strony internetowej Tea Party (treści z zakładki "All News") przeprowadzonej metodą mieszaną. Wspomagana komputerowo analiza językowa słów kluczowych, konkordancji i sprzężeń (ang. *couplings*) na próbce pozyskanej z ww. kanału informacyjnego została uzupełniona jakościową analizą retoryczną wybranych toposów i błędów argumentacyjnych. Analiza ukazuje dominację takich strategii, jak: (1) homogenizacja pojęcia „prawdziwych patriotów”, (2) polaryzacja reprezentacji „dobrzy my” i „źli oni”, (3) dyskredytowanie przeciwników poprzez analogie, „najgorsze” przykłady i ataki *ad hominem*, (4) odwołania do teorii spiskowych, a także (5) środki perswazji oparte na patosie i etosie, związane ze zmediatyzowanym i uhistorycznionym imaginariem kulturowym. Studium potwierdza zalety metody mieszanej w podejściu do analizy tzw. retoryki populistycznej.

### Key words

populism, rhetoric, argumentation, linguistic coupling, mobilization, anti-pluralism, newsfeed, Tea Party  
populizm, retoryka, argumentacja, sprzężenia wyrazowe, mobilizacja, antypluralizm, kanał informacyjny, Tea Party

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### 1. Introduction

Rather than treating populism as only an *ideological* attribute of political parties, we operationalize it as a *pattern of argumentation*, in the course of which the virtuous populace is juxtaposed with corrupt elites, which, in turn, allows the populists to claim to solely represent “the nation.” As a result, populist rhetoric is by definition anti-pluralist, because it aims to essentialize and homogenize the “true substance” of authentic and pure nationhood (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In a dialectical maneuver, the populists argue that it is *only their party* that speaks for the nation and its actual interests. Populists often discredit opponents by implying that they advance the interests of foreign institutions, privileged elites or morally dubious minorities that “pollute” the nation.

According to Muller (2016, 31), “principled, moralized anti-pluralism and the reliance on a noninstitutionalized notion of ‘the people’ also helps explain why populists so frequently oppose the ‘morally correct’ outcome of a vote to the actual empirical result of an election, when the latter was not in their favor.” This argumentative pattern could be observed at work in how the contested results of US 2018 midterm elections in some states were represented and discussed in online discourses of populists, notably the right-wing political movement calling itself the Tea Party. Although the Tea Party started as a dispersed grassroots movement that advocated stricter adherence to the values of the US Constitution and more limits on federal government, it soon turned into a subsidiary of the Republican Party. From its founding in 2004, the Tea Party claims to represent “the voice of the true owners of the United States: WE THE PEOPLE” (<https://www.teaparty.org/about-us/>). With its libertarian economic values and conservative (e.g., anti-Muslim) attitudes, the party initially mobilized popular discontents

and anti-establishment resistance of inhabitants of mid-sized US towns; however, by 2010 its demands were largely “appropriated by Republicans” (Sustar 2013). Detailed follow-up studies of Tea Party supporters portrayed them as more likely to be anti-democratic, reactionary, extremist or even racist than typical Republican Party supporters (Parker and Barreto 2013).

The assumption underlying this study is that, following the type of “post-truth” political discourse ushered into the American public sphere by Donald Trump, populist rhetoric needs a detailed mapping and critical scrutiny. Although much attention has been paid to populism as a distinct discursive repertoire that appeals to mass publics (Brubaker 2017), relatively little has been said about the typical patterns of argumentation that promote anti-pluralism, in which they directly subvert democratic principles (Mazzoleni 2014). Some recent studies in the European context link populist ruling-party discourses to the rhetoric of crisis and monger anti-refugee attitudes (Krzyżanowska and Krzyżanowski 2018; Cap 2021). Meanwhile, in American studies anti-pluralism is sometimes mentioned in the context of Trumpism, which, even though popular in political commentary, has yet to settle as a legitimate area of political and cultural inquiry (Connolly and Blain 2016).

This article reports on a corpus-assisted study of the Tea Party’s official website materials obtained from the *All News* feed that was available to the public between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> November 2018 (when the contested results of midterms came in and recounts were ordered). Despite the fact that the material is multimodal and relies on various media, only the verbal mode is taken into consideration here, given its primary role in argument construction. This is also because the contents of videos and tweets tend to be summarized in written pieces and rendered through the argumentative affordances of headlines and leads. The corpus that amounts to approximately over 12,000 words was analyzed both manually and quantitatively with the use of WordSmithTools (Scott 2007) to reveal significant frequency, keyness, and concordance parameters which indicate stable couplings of linguistic resources (particularly reference and attitude) because these enable the users to commune behind shared values. Such stable couplings tie the anti-pluralist arguments (logos) to the evaluative dispositions (pathos) of the target public – the Tea Party supporters. In the next stage of analysis, the corpus is sampled using previously identified keywords, for example *Trump*, *Republicans*, *Democrats*, *voters*, *election*, *fraud*. Selected news items are analyzed qualitatively in search of argumentative fallacies known from literature (*ad hominem*, *ad populum* or *pars pro toto*), as well as some *topoi*: opposites, precedent, motive is cause, appearance vs. reality, consequence by analogy, previous mistakes, which constitute a specific set of anti-pluralist strategies in argumentation (van Eemeren, Garssen and Meuffels 2009; Lewiński 2014).

This study takes a narrow perspective on the so-called populist rhetoric by attending in detail to those expressions only that the Tea Party news providers repeatedly use to disable debate and discredit political opponents in order to build up their followers' support. The narrow focus of the present study devoted to the populist enactment of anti-pluralism should not be treated as representative of the whole range of political rhetoric or argumentative strategies of this organization (cf. Molek-Kozakowska and Wilk 2021). Neither should there be an equivalence drawn between the uses of specific argumentative fallacies or *topoi* and populism specifically. Last but not least, the idea of rhetoric, even though profiled negatively in this particular case, does not cease to encompass "the art of speaking well" with an intent to aspire to enhance democracy and humanity.

## 2. What is populism

A survey of recent literature that emerged as a result of new political developments in some European countries and in the US with the so-called populist parties winning large margins in national or local elections points to a rather diverse image of what is termed as populism (Muller 2016; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). First and foremost, populism represents a right-wing or left-wing political opposition to elite rule (e.g., with respect to immigration management, austerity measures). However, although any challenger or radical movement might do that, what characterizes populists is a claim to be the sole agent acting in the name of the people and representing the interests of the citizens. In this sense populism borders on anti-institutionalism and is riddled with anti-establishment rhetoric (e.g., Trump's claim that Washington is "a swamp that needs draining"). This often leads to populist discourses representing the people as a fairly uniform *ethnos* (rather than *demos*), with a common cultural heritage ("the true American patriots").

To dramatize the situation to have a stronger claim to power, populists often indulge in fear-mongering (Wodak 2015; Cap 2021) and deploy the so-called rhetoric of crisis, for example by calling for protectionist measures against external economic or political forces, based on constructions of antagonistic and polarizing representations of political reality (us/them; allies/enemies; patriots/traitors). For Wodak (2015) populist rhetoric is contextualized within wider trends towards re-nationalization (a reaction to globalization) and body politics (fear of overpopulation by "the other" taking control of the territory). "The politics of fear" begins with scaremongering with respect to one aspect of existence, but populists transform it into a generalized way of looking at existence. Scapegoating the other (e.g. corrupt elite, political opponent, immigrant, foreign capitalist) is

inherent in legitimizing exclusionary or illiberal policy proposals with an appeal to “the necessity to increase security” to diminish the sense of danger and contain fear or resentment that had been stirred.

As regards expressive features of populism, there are some populists that style themselves as strong and dedicated leaders, who do not mind cultish following. Many of them bypass the mainstream gate-keeping media to promote their message online (Stavrakakis 2014). Although much attention has been paid to populism as a distinct discursive or stylistic repertoire with performative flair that appeals to mass publics through simplification, dramatization, confrontation, negativity, and emotionalization (Brubaker 2017), little analysis has been done on the typical patterns of argumentation that justify anti-pluralism. Yet, warranting anti-pluralism (and cult leadership) motivated by fear directly subverts democratic principles (Mazzoleni 2014; Panizza 2005).

### 3. Operationalizing anti-pluralist argumentation patterns

Anti-pluralism is understood in this study as an argumentative pattern cum rhetorical maneuver that is oriented towards an essentialized representation of nation/people and a consolidated type of party politics (the winner takes all), which drives an elimination (marginalization, demonization) of political alternatives. In this sense it represents a fallacy of *pars pro toto* – one leader for all nation; one morality, value system, policy to be accepted by all. The singularity indexed by such expressions as “silent *majority*,” “a nation *united*,” “*true* patriots,” “*vox populi*,” “*common* interest” is emblematic here. As a result, populists champion the idea of a “symbolic substance of an authentic, pure nationhood” (Muller 2016) that only they have an understanding of. Unlike their opponents, who are seen as subservient to various external interests, populists claim to represent solely the interests of the people. The following sections operationalize the linguistic and rhetorical categories that constitute our lenses to study online anti-pluralist argumentation of populists.

#### 3.1. Linguistic categories

Online political discourse, especially during intense campaigning, tends to be oriented less towards revealing new information and more towards making more people express shared attitudes. One of the main functions of populist party websites and social networks seems to be rallying the supporters to remain loyal, often in view of the counterarguments and attacks from the opposition. With online communication, such as a party-oriented newsfeed studied here, the audience is treated as open to be interpellated as a community of like-minded

individuals. Therefore, texts will feature common projections of what “we” and “our supporters” like. This model of “ambient” target audience that seeks “social alignments” through common affiliations, where online personae do not necessarily interact or debate, but rather release shared emotions (anger, resentment) or create satirical meta-commentary, has been developed by Zappavigna (2018) based on appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005), as well as earlier work of both Zhao (2010) on intersemiotic coupling and Knight (2013) on humorous interaction.

Zappavigna’s (2018) use of linguistic coupling has been demonstrated as having explanatory potential in cases of stable constellations of referential and evaluative language resources. The concept of coupling is used to analyze particular “conjuncts of semiotic resources” that instantiate both an ideation (e.g., political facts about Trump or election) and an **attitude** (e.g., negative appraisal of lack of veracity in reports or Trump’s statements). These two can be coupled in various ways within the wider system of language (and increasingly image) as social semiotic. For example, if we assume that coupling can account for a “combination of meanings across a range of semiotic dimensions” (Zappavigna 2018, 105): metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, textual), systems (attitude, graduation, engagement), and strata (for attitude – affect, judgment or appreciation), then these couplings can be treated as strategically coordinated for the purpose of argumentation, as in:

[**ideational**: election officials + **attitude**: negative appreciation of competence]  
e.g., *incompetent election supervisor Brenda Snipes*

[**interpersonal**: you/true patriot + **engagement**: express complaint or outrage]  
e.g., *call your senator and complain*

Knight’s studies of affiliation and bonding (2013) are based on looking at couplings of ideation (referent) and attitude (valuation) in the process of discursive construction of identities and interpersonal relationships. They project membership categories and instantiate values that are based on shared bonds that ultimately construe communities. An example of this is a bonding slogan “Make America Great Again” that has been iconically represented online as #MAGA. In the real world is inscribed on anything from hats to mugs to t-shirts and bumper stickers. It is the coalescence of certain semiotic resources through repeated instantiations of linguistic signs including not only lexical ones – *America* as a referent, and *great* as evaluator – but also the grammatical choice of the imperative, together with the colors of the American flag or the iconic baseball cap that enable communing behind a common cause (to elect/endorse Donald Trump) (Zappavigna 2018, 110).



In yet another type of coupling – which Zappavigna (2018) terms “the discourse about size” – there is a rhetorical potential in systematic deployments of exaggeration and hyperbole as instruments of gradation that aggregate positive or negative attitudes and polarize opponents by upscaling “our” good qualities while demonizing “their” activities (van Dijk 2008; see also Zappavigna 2018, 179-186 for an analysis of sarcastic hashtags “#yuge” and “#bigly”). In the fast cycle of online news feed and election campaigning, these stabilized couplings of referents with their attributes, or attitudes with their gradations, help orient the viewer/user towards the desired evaluations and argumentative conclusions (as will be shown here with *incompetent Democrats, stealing an election or trying to flip the seats* as repeatedly used in the Tea Party newsfeed during midterms). In brief, coupling will be used here as an analytic category that helps explain the argumentative capacity of the keyed combinations of linguistic resources to channel popular support and subtly steer voters to accept anti-pluralist arguments.

### 3.2. Rhetorical categories

The rhetorical overlay in populist discourse has been approached variously in the literature reviewed in section 2. For the purpose of a study of anti-pluralist arguments, it would be most justifiable to operationalize some argumentative fallacies, as well as some *topoi* (e.g., opposites, precedent, consequence by analogy, motive is cause, appearance vs. reality, previous mistakes)<sup>1</sup>, which add to “rhetorical argumentation” fine-tuned to garnering audience’s support (Lewiński 2014, 55). An argumentative fallacy is understood here as a rhetorical maneuver that consists in resorting to some sort of irrelevant or otherwise faulty argumentation, for example based on emotion or on a shortcut in reasoning, with an ultimate intention to win over the public rather than the debate (van Eemeren, Garssen and Meuffels 2009). It is beyond the scope of this article to present an exhaustive typology of such maneuvers, or to confront them with catalogs of eristic moves; instead, it is useful to outline three most salient fallacies that are expected to contribute to realizing anti-pluralist arguments in our sample, namely, *ad populum*, *ad hominem*, and *pars pro toto* (cf. Gula 2002; Paul and Elder 2006).

*Argumentum ad populum* (appeal to the crowd) consists in appealing to the sacred values cherished by the public while simultaneously presenting oneself as part of this community. This usually triggers a strong emotional (bonding) reaction. One of the common linguistic means to realize this tactic is the so-called “inclusive we,” whereby the speaker is established as part of the addressee group. *Ad populum* contributes to producing anti-pluralist arguments in that it invites the audience to commune behind a leader who appears to speak for them and follow

1. Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* Book II, part 23 (2008 version).

the policies suggested by them. *Argumentum ad hominem* rather than *ad rem* (also in the form of *ad personam* – personal attack) shifts the public's attention from the argument to the person who advances/opposes it. For example, rather than focusing on the sound arguments of the opponent with an intention to rebut them, it aims to discredit the rival and ensure that the audience dismisses the opponent's other claims. When considered in terms of anti-pluralist argumentation, personal attacks serve to invalidate rival policies without debating them (sometimes also by misrepresenting them with the aid of strawman/ironman fallacies or *ad absurdum*). The principal operation behind the *pars pro toto* (part for the whole) fallacy is focusing on a specimen and claiming that what is true of this part also holds for the whole. Combined with negative or positive appraisal, it may consist for example in picking a part of an argument that is controversial, and hence on the verge of acceptability, to undermine the whole argument. Alternatively, it can foreground a part of an argument that is sound in order to lend support to a whole argument with rather questionable premises.

As regards the operationalization of selected *topoi* likely to be found in populist texts, it is important to stress that the classical descriptions drawn on below were never intended as advocacy for manipulation, e.g., by Aristotle. They are illustrated here in the current American context of the uses applied to them by the Tea Party's news providers. For *opposites* (1)<sup>2</sup> to become a line of argument, a binary opposition needs to be established between entities (e.g., war and peace) with positive evaluation attributed to one and an imputed negative evaluation to the other (this is possible to construct in the case of linguistic couplings discussed above). It seems that the American two-party system is conducive to such polarized understanding of political and social reality. *Precedent* (11) is an argument built on previous decisions of significance. Some historic statements, judicial verdicts, or constitutional solutions in the US have accrued a high legitimacy (factuality) and tend not to be questioned. That is why the framings of some of the Tea Party's political proposals as compatible with, even originating in, the ideas of the Founding Fathers or the fundamentals of the democratic electoral process tend to be deployed in a biased manner.

When one claims that two results would be the same because their causes or antecedents were similar, one resorts to *consequence by analogy* (17), which is a compelling, albeit misleading, strategy tuned to the human mind's need to organize the complex world of (political) experience along fairly simple rules of causation. Another *topos* is *motives are causes* (20), and, according to Aristotle, it can induce or deter an action basing on self-interest: "we are bound to act if

2. The numbers relate to the subsequent numbers of *topoi* for real (positive) enthymemes, in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* Book II, part 23, not fallacious enthymemes in the following part of the treatise (Rhetoric 1397a – 1400b) (2008 version).



the action is possible, easy, and useful to ourselves or our friends or hurtful to our enemies; this is true even if the action entails loss, provided the loss is outweighed by the solid advantage” (2008: 157). The use of *appearance vs. reality* (23) bases on an apparently logos-driven argumentation that aims to expose the true nature of the situation hidden under false impressions. Populist discourses often claim to expose the real interests of the elites and their power-grabbing maneuvers. The last type is to make *previous mistakes* the grounds of accusation or defense (27), which is particularly common in a context of political pseudo-argumentation where the ultimate aim is not to prove one’s point but to discredit the opponent and win the spectator over.

#### 4. The Tea Party homepage

Since the analysis of the Tea Party newsfeed below is limited in the purposeful choice of the sample in search of anti-pluralist arguments and gathered at one particular moment (midterm election), we precede it by a short rhetorical analysis of the website’s stable columns in order to show what kind of background knowledge/stylistic preference is assumed to be shared by those who subscribe to the newsfeed.

The Tea Party’s official website materials on *About Us* and *Projects* feature its ongoing campaigns, where prioritized issues are presented with the aid of linguistic resources that foreground mobilization: grammar (directive speech acts, imperative clauses, direct address pronouns, strong modality), lexis (negative prosodies), emphasis, and composition (capitalization, exclamation marks): “STOP THE ISLAMIC TAKEOVER OF OUR SCHOOLS! Demand Washington stop putting us in grave danger. Our families are gripped in fear and schools terrorized.” The rhetorical manufacturing of nation-bonding for those who subscribe to the alerts from the site is achieved by references to such commonplaces as *our schools*, *our country*, or *our people*. The emotional load and self-righteousness are made commonsensical through spoken language register, whereas strong modality and highly polarizing evaluation leave no doubt which side (party) one should support. This “homogenizes” the representation of Americans and labels those who are not supporting the Tea Party as un-American and un-patriotic. The topoi that can be spotted here are *opposites*, *precedent*, and *appearance vs. reality*, particularly if we read the implicature that accepting (Islamic) migrants is dangerous rather than beneficial to the American economy.

The *Projects* page can be seen as an instance of anti-pluralist argumentation because its main claim is that only one political mindset should be adopted as other political orientations are *fundamentally* destructive to the country’s well-being.

Democracy is reduced to an act of voting for the only party that represents *true* American values, and that sponsors actions that protect American citizens against evil migrants and corrupt elites. The page vehemently rejects the motives of those who want *the only* deserving American leader – Donald Trump – removed (analogous to *pars pro toto*, one party/leader for the whole nation).

## 5. Analysis of newsfeed

This section reports on a corpus-assisted study of the Tea Party's *All News* feed that was available to the public between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> November 2018 when the contested midterm congressional and local election results came in and recounts were ordered in some states and counties. The corpus, which was cleared of article metadata, hyperlinks, and commercial information, amounted to 12,092 tokens and was analyzed quantitatively with the use of WordSmithTools to reveal salient frequency, keyness, and concordance parameters.

The most frequent content words (baseline set at 50 occurrences) indicate that the sample texts are clearly about American (local) elections. As a result, it is more useful to turn to the parameter that measures linguistic resources that dominate the sample, namely keyness. Keyness indicates the relative prominence of a word in a given sample when compared to general usage, here measured against the largest English language reference corpus (RC) – the British National Corpus. The algorithmic formula for keyness consists in comparing the frequency of each word in the corpus wordlist with the frequency of the same word in the reference corpus wordlist with a chi-square test of significance with Yates correction for a 2X2 table and Ted Dunning's Log Likelihood test. In WordSmith words are classified as positive or negative keywords and, unlike a frequency wordlist, positive keywords allow the analysis of linguistic saliency rather than simple frequency (Baker 2006). Table 1 presents keyness results after removing most proper names (names of US politicians and officials, except Trump, states and cities, names/titles of media services/outlets) with baseline set at +40.

**Table 1:** Keyness in the Tea Party newsfeed sample (10th-12th November 2018)

N	Key word	Frequency	Reference corp. frequency	Keyness (+)
1	TRUMP	89	183	1241,6
3	BALLOTS	68	146	943,69
5	ELECTION	117	9684	818,29
8	DEMOCRATS	53	1979	453,39
9	VOTES	57	3119	444,8

11	COUNTY	62	10972	341,12
12	RECOUNT	24	94	308,24
<b>18</b>	<b>DEMOCRAT</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>982</b>	<b>253,59</b>
21	VOTER	21	282	221,44
24	SENATE	26	1268	208,72
<b>25</b>	<b>REPUBLICANS</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>523</b>	<b>207,6</b>
26	VOTE	37	7052	198,17
29	BALLOT	23	987	190,42
30	ELECTIONS	34	5924	188,03
<b>32</b>	<b>GOP</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>181,34</b>
36	NOVEMBER	35	9320	164,81
38	PRESIDENT	41	15747	164,41
40	#	422	2E+06	152,43
41	VIDEO	30	6615	152,18
42	SUPERVISOR	18	736	150,72
43	PROVISIONAL	19	983	150,31
47	COUNTED	19	1234	141,81
49	GOVERNOR	20	2159	129,31
58	ILLEGAL	18	2391	109,06
59	FLAG	16	1506	107,74
60	CAMPAIGN	26	9381	107,31
61	RECUSE	6	0	106,85
62	TWEETED	6	0	106,85
65	FRAUD	16	1794	102,25
66	SEATS	20	4612	99,709
69	MIDTERM	6	3	95,389
70	SHERIFF	13	936	94,385
<b>72</b>	<b>REPUBLICAN</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>1802</b>	<b>93,829</b>
76	ANTIFA	5	0	89,037
77	VOTING	15	2201	87,96
83	TUESDAY	15	3295	76,186
84	VOTERS	13	1956	75,593
86	COUNTIES	12	1563	73,161
91	ILLEGALLY	9	514	69,443
92	STEAL	10	870	68,882
95	CANVASSING	7	190	64,234
97	POLLING	8	514	59,872
98	REPORTED	19	11927	58,768
99	OFFICIALS	15	6116	58,428
102	SATURDAY	16	7624	57,641
103	SOROS	5	42	57,193
105	POLLS	9	1063	56,593
106	ABSENTEE	6	148	56,18
107	MURAL	6	161	55,192
108	POSTED	8	710	54,791
109	COMPLAINED	10	1825	54,384
110	PROBE	9	1210	54,311
116	POLITICS	15	7387	53,115

117	AMERICAN	20	16100	52,883
119	RACE	15	7861	51,38
121	THOUSANDS	13	5367	50,33
122	FRAUDULENT	6	262	49,461
124	FELONS	4	21	49,252
125	TWEETS	3	1	48,923
126	AFTER	50	114062	48,178
127	LAWSUIT	5	116	47,415
<b>128</b>	<b>TEAPARTY</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>46,692</b>
131	ANTI	6	378	45,135
132	SCHOOLER	3	3	45,105
134	EMAIL	4	43	43,881
136	MARGIN	8	1447	43,645
137	CALL	19	18778	43,391
138	VETERANS	6	440	43,343
139	ATTACKS	10	3348	42,687
141	CERTIFICATIONS	3	6	41,966
142	OFFICE	21	24679	41,756

As keyness analysis results presented in Table 1 show, the corpus is saturated with lexical items pertaining to the “leading political forces” in the US (*Trump, Democrat(s), Republican(s)*), and the electoral process (*ballots, election, votes, recount, voter(s), absentee*), together with its authorization (*supervisor, certification(s), office, probe, margin, call*). This is expected, since the sample has been compiled on the topic of the 2018 US midterm elections. Otherwise, keywords include terms associated with “dissemination of information” (*video, #, tweet(s) tweet(ed), reported, posted, email*); however, these refer to channels outside of mainstream media outlets and imply that it is through social platforms that the “true voice of the people” can be heard. Characteristically, there is a high number of modifiers (as well as nouns or verbs) with negative evaluation related to crime, conflict, or stupidity (*illegal(ly), fraudulent, felon, attack(s), anti, electioneering, fool*).

Even keyness may not offer a full insight into the argumentation that exists in a corpus, as it leaves out co-text. Collocation analysis can show that important aspects of the meaning of a word are not contained within the word in isolation, but in associations that the word is part of (Baker 2006). The next step of this analysis has been to generate concordance lines with selected keywords for political parties and the electoral process to identify their co-texts and tease out any characteristic patterns. Figure 1 shows a fragment of keyword-in-context (KWIC) results with 10-left and 10-right accompanying words for *Democrat\**

**Figure 1:** A sample of KWIC list for *Democrat*\*

But Snipes hasn't just been accused of malfeasance from Republicans. A 2016 Democratic Congressional candidate, Tim Canova, challenged the results of his primary acts. In 2016 Snipes admitted in an interview she illegally destroyed the Democrat primary election ballots. Here is #BrendaSnipes admitting that she Governor Scott commanded the state police to immediately investigate the Democrat ballot generation operations. Broward County Elections Supervisor s after the election. Marco Rubio warned about the election fraud in these two Democrat counties earlier today. On Thursday night Governor Scott commanded d County, notorious for voter fraud, continues to produce ballots and votes for Democrats two days after the election. Marco Rubio warned about the election fr g "respectability" and going "to war on the White electorate." "Respectability Democrats, Black and White, are worthless," he added. And these psychotic – A video posted to Twitter on Tuesday appears to show "VOTE STRAIGHT DEMOCRAT" signs posted on the doors of a poll location — which is illegal Republicans credit for holding on to the Senate, then I think you have to give Democrats credit for actually flipping the House. Even after two years of amazi e replied. "That's a complete mischaracterization." "Laura, if you look at the Democrats who are winning across—" Wallace began. "They're liberal," Ingraham that's going to be a tough sell." "I don't think that's fair to say about the Democrats," Wallace replied. "That's a complete mischaracterization." "Laura, i tone necessarily, but his policies—you're not going anywhere. By contrast, the Democrats are going home to more of an [Alexandria] Ocasio-Cortez party which s FOX News? Viewers were outraged last night when they called the House for Democrats while polls were still open on the West Coast. And their panel last n e the oath of office on a Quran. Far-left progressives like those running the Democratic party right now are bad enough. A woman who pledges allegiance to inian terrorist Rasmea Odeh, who is a convicted murderer. During the Michigan Democratic primary, Jewish outlet The Algemeiner dug up even more dirt on think her oxymoronic system is actually feasible. 25. Alert: The Newly Elected DEMOCRAT Rep. Who Wants To Blow Israel Off The Map November 10, 2018 6:37 . That in itself tells you everything you need to know about "the future of the Democratic party." "People often say: 'how are you gonna pay for it?'" she say now say 717,000 votes were cast in the midterm election. Broward County Democrats have mysteriously found 83,000 votes in the past two days! And red 83,000 Fraudulent Votes! November 10, 2018 6:43 pm (Gateway Pundit) – Democrats are stealing the US Senate and Governor Races in Florida in violation ties is in full swing, with the liberal mainstream media taking the side of the Democrat cause and the American people scrambling to preserve our Republic lots November 10, 2018 6:56 pm (Big League Politics) – The blatant push by Democrats to extend voting after Election Day in certain counties is in full swi uestion-fraudulent-and-suspicious-activities-reported-nation-wide-and-always-to-democrats-benefit/ 22. Stacey Abrams Campaign Is Phone Banking And Chicago, Los Angeles, St. Louis and more. These are the only strongholds for Democrats. Are they all fraudulent? Republicans have to wake up and smell the where they lose (see 2016 Presidential election for example). In tight races, Democrats are always the party who magically (fraudulently) obtain thousands of e voting. But only Democrats are allowed to vote in the after election ballots. Democrats complain but only in situations where they lose (see 2016 Bongino commented that in Florida there is early and now late voting. But only Democrats are allowed to vote in the after election ballots. Democrats complain blicans holding the lead on election night and then just like that, days later, Democrats miraculously pull out victories. Dan Bongino commented that in nd loaded on a rental van during the election. Every day new votes are added to Democrat candidates in close races nationwide. Florida, Arizona and Montana uires review and repairs. Yesterday we found out that voter ballots in Florida's Democrat led Broward County were being transferred between vehicles and Fraudulent And Suspicious Activities Reported Nation-Wide – And Always To Democrat's Benefit November 10, 2018 6:44 pm (Gateway Pundit) – With voter e emoluments clause (which prohibits taking gifts from foreign leaders). While Democrats pursue their investigation into voter suppression, we wonder...will that

This reveals a relatively stable semantic prosody, whereby Democrats (as a party and as individual candidates) consistently receive negative appraisal.<sup>3</sup> Such relatively stable pairings of an evaluative parameter with the referential function of lexical items can be analyzed by means of the category of coupling (see section 3.1.), which can work rhetorically. As far as the negative prosody ascribed to Democrats is concerned, a coupling with the highest frequency in the corpus is *election/voter fraud*.<sup>4</sup>

(1) Marco Rubio warned about the *election fraud* in these two Democrat counties earlier today.<sup>5</sup>

This nominal-type coupling (understood here as a coupling whose attitudinal value derives from the nominal constituent of the linguistic construction) is an instance of an ideation-attitude coupling whose function is to fuse the referential function (here of the nouns *election/voter*) with the attitudinal value (here of the noun *fraud*). It can be diagrammatically represented in the following way: [**ideation**: election, voter + **attitude**: negative judgment on propriety and veracity].

The second most frequent coupling in the corpus is the adjective-type coupling (understood here as a coupling whose attitudinal value derives from the adjectival

3. Importantly, although contrary to expectations, there is almost no straightforward evidence from the concordance analysis that the Republican Party is positively evaluated (except some positive appraisal of Donald Trump); rhetorical analysis proves otherwise (see section 6).

4. A semantically related variant of this coupling is *fraudulent votes/actions*.

5. thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/in-her-own-words-brenda-snipes-admits-she-destroyed-ballots-in-interview-video



constituent of the linguistic construction) *corrupt elections supervisor/actions/Democrat senator*: [**ideation**: elections supervisor, actions, Democrat senator + **attitude**: negative judgment on propriety].

- (2) Numerous *corrupt* and *criminal* actions have already been reported this election cycle and this is not new for these Democrat led strongholds.<sup>6</sup>

A predicate-type coupling (understood here as a coupling whose attitudinal value derives from the verbal constituent) with the highest frequency in the corpus is *steal the election*<sup>7</sup>, or its metonymic extension *steal the seats*, with some grammatical variants of the verb (e.g., *stole*, *had stolen*):

- (3) Hillary Clinton released a memo via her PAC Onward Together Monday begging for money to help Democrats *steal the Senatorial election* in Florida.<sup>8</sup>

The evaluative overtone of this ideation+attitude coupling consists in pairing the referential parameter of the noun *election* with the attitudinal value of the verb *steal* [**ideation**: election + **attitude**: negative judgment on propriety]. Another predicate-type coupling identified is *manufactur(e)/(ing)/(ed) votes/ballots*<sup>9</sup>: [**ideation**: votes, ballots + **attitude**: negative judgment on propriety and veracity].

- (4) Earlier today Stacey Abrams filed a lawsuit to delay vote certifications until Democrats *manufacture enough new votes*.<sup>10</sup>

What *vote/ballot manufacturing* entails is some dishonest motives underlying the process aimed at fabricating the results. Therefore, it should be observed that although the attitudinal parameter of this coupling is the same as previously, negative judgment is located in the verb *manufacture*, through the sub-parameter of “propriety” that is concerned with ethics, as well as the sub-parameter of “veracity,” as votes which have been manufactured are not only fake and phony, but also used to illegally subvert the ballot.

What should be noted is that the conceptual complexity of couplings realized linguistically by means of predicates seems to be greater than the adjective-type or nominal-type ones, because, on the conceptual level, a predicate construction profiles the whole process with its all salient participants. This claim has its

6. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/there-are-still-7-house-seats-too-close-to-call-all-republican-will-gop-leaders-allow-democrats-to-steal-these-seats-too](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/there-are-still-7-house-seats-too-close-to-call-all-republican-will-gop-leaders-allow-democrats-to-steal-these-seats-too)

7. There are also alternate expressions in the corpus instantiating this coupling such as, *steal the US Senate/Governor races*, *steal the Senate*, *flip the House/flip from red to blue*

8. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/hillary-clinton-stakes-claim-in-florida-begs-voters-for-money-to-fund-democrat-bill-nelsons-recount-efforts](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/hillary-clinton-stakes-claim-in-florida-begs-voters-for-money-to-fund-democrat-bill-nelsons-recount-efforts)

9. Some alternative wordings of this coupling are the following: *ballots mysteriously materialized*, *a vote finding mission*.

10. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/shocker-1282-out-of-1762-new-votes-that-magically-appeared-this-weekend-in-georgia-went-to-stacey-abrams/](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/shocker-1282-out-of-1762-new-votes-that-magically-appeared-this-weekend-in-georgia-went-to-stacey-abrams/)



grounds in how cognitive grammarians define the noun and verb. Langacker (2008, 104) argues that one of the defining features of the archetype for nouns is that they are autonomous, which means that a noun can be conceptualized independently of any action it partakes in. A nominal construes an abstract thing which has been derived by means of conceptual reification. The verb, on the other hand, is conceptually dependent, that is, “it cannot be conceptualized without conceptualizing the participants who interact to constitute it.” Hence, especially in the context of populist discourse, predicate constructions would allow the text producer to highlight not only the process, but also indicate the ones responsible for the actions (here the Democrats stealing or manufacturing votes).

This contributes to anti-pluralist argumentation by means of *ad hominem* fallacies (see section 6). It might be concluded then that predicate-type couplings have more rhetorical potential, as they can be used to discredit the opponent through a direct accusation of crime, not just by stating that crime existed. Obviously, to prove it as a populist pattern of argumentation, this preliminary finding should be verified against a larger corpus of data.

The positive semantic prosody of the Republican Party is less conspicuous, unless seen via positive appraisal of Donald Trump, as evidenced in the concordance analysis of one coupling, namely, *Trump magic*<sup>11</sup>: [**ideation**: Trump + **attitude**: positive judgment]. The positive evaluation of President Trump consists in offering a hyperbolic image of him as a superhero with some magic powers to garner votes in spite of being continually exposed to mainstream media criticism (see example (7) below). As explained in the following section, references to Donald Trump as a leader of true American patriots work rhetorically by means of instantiating *ad populum* and *pars pro toto* fallacies.

## 6. Rhetorical argumentation in context: interpretative analysis

As the previous section demonstrates, concordance analysis of keywords reveals consistent negative semantic prosody ascribed to the Democratic Party, but not much evidence of positive semantic prosody of the Republican Party, with the exception of positive appraisal of Donald Trump. However, in a close reading of the rhetorical structure of the sample, positive evaluation of Republicans is indeed projected through the *topos* of *opposition*. Binary opposition is a regularity to be expected of populist discourse, anti-pluralist argumentation in particular, since a clear-cut divide of a political landscape into “good us” and “bad them” enables effective reproduction of populism. Examples below illustrate ideological polarity between the two political parties and their representatives.

11. This coupling is also evident in: *Trump is the magic man and Trump has magic about him*.

The propositions concerning Democrats as referents expressed throughout the corpus are invariably severely negative in attitude; there is not a single positive appraisal to be found. Evidently, such a systematic coupling corresponds with the basic assumptions of anti-pluralism. Negative presentation of the Democratic Party is realized by showing how it is trying to steal the election by means of fraudulent actions<sup>12</sup> (see section 5 for the discussion of various couplings on this topic). As far as rhetorical layout is concerned, we also see the *topos* of *appearance vs. reality*, whereby the text producers allegedly demonstrate what things look like “in reality”:

- (5) In New Mexico, a GOP Representative was declared the winner on election night. Within 24 hours after 8,000 votes appeared out of nowhere, the Democrat had stolen the election and was declared the winner. Whenever there are close elections, they almost always go to the Democrats who will do all they can to win.<sup>13</sup>

What is claimed is that the Democratic Party will go to any lengths to win the election, even if it takes fraud and swindle. In a similar fashion Democrats’ power-grabbing maneuvers are elaborated on across the corpus (“A Gallup Poll that was reportedly correct since 1946 predicted Republicans to win the House. This year, after 80 years of being spot on, it is suddenly incorrect.”<sup>14</sup>). Invoking and authenticating conspiracy can have a strong cultivating impact on the audience. Being exposed to such propositions, one can see that what might look like a fair midterm election, in reality is a Democrat-led big scale scam, where “in tight races, Democrats are always the party who magically (fraudulently) obtain thousands of late votes.”<sup>15</sup> Importantly, this thematic focus of the corpus enforces a *consequence-by-analogy* implication that if Democrats win the elections, America under their rule will inevitably suffer from a number of other frauds. This argument is aimed at persuading the audience to vote for Republicans as only they can remove the *immoral* and *incompetent* Democrats.

Another strategy that is widely deployed in the corpus texts consists in resorting to a number of *ad hominem* attacks in order to discredit representatives of what populists often term “the establishment.” While there are a number of rather isolated references to various prominent Democrats, such as Barack Obama in the context of an alleged spy campaign on Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential

12. Reference to either stealing the election or fraudulent ballots is part and parcel of almost any text in the corpus; a number of them concern this topic exclusively.

13. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/there-are-still-7-house-seats-too-close-to-call-all-republican-will-gop-leaders-allow-democrats-to-steal-these-seats-too](http://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/there-are-still-7-house-seats-too-close-to-call-all-republican-will-gop-leaders-allow-democrats-to-steal-these-seats-too)

14. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/entire-us-election-system-in-question-fraudulent-and-suspicious-activities-reported-nation-wide-and-always-to-democrats-benefit](http://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/entire-us-election-system-in-question-fraudulent-and-suspicious-activities-reported-nation-wide-and-always-to-democrats-benefit)

15. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/entire-us-election-system-in-question-fraudulent-and-suspicious-activities-reported-nation-wide-and-always-to-democrats-benefit](http://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/entire-us-election-system-in-question-fraudulent-and-suspicious-activities-reported-nation-wide-and-always-to-democrats-benefit)

election,<sup>16</sup> or Hillary Clinton and her role in the campaign aimed at “begging for money to help Democrats steal the Senatorial election in Florida,”<sup>17</sup> the name of Brenda Snipes, an election supervisor, recurs in six different texts through the corpus, out of which four are devoted exclusively to her wrongdoings. Example (6) is an excerpt from one of these:

- (6) Broward County Elections Supervisor Brenda Snipes has a long history of incompetence and criminal acts. (...) Why is this woman not behind bars? And why is Brenda Snipes STILL in charge of Broward County elections?<sup>18</sup>

The *ad hominem* attack on Snipes clearly shows how logical fallacies work to undermine a (political) opponent’s integrity and credibility. What should be noticed here is the reliance on *previous mistakes*, thanks to which the negative appraisal of the elections supervisor is particularly emphasized. Importantly, the quote above is supplanted with a list of as many as fourteen different fraudulent actions Snipes had been accused of, ranging from illegally destroying ballots to allowing non-citizens to vote in the election. Another *topos* that is deployed is *consequence by analogy*, which gives grounds to the final rhetorical question in (6), as it is implied that the ongoing Broward County elections will no longer be transparent and democratic since Snipes “has an extensive record of corruption and criminal activity.”<sup>19</sup>

In general, the one-sided and polarizing fallacious argumentation illustrated in the above examples conjures up a rather murky vision of America, if Democrats would win the election and regain power in Congress. The general strategy adopted in the corpus texts builds on individual examples to smear the political identity of the party as a whole (a fallacy of *overgeneralization*). This paves the way for constructing a positive identity of the Republican Party as an opposing force on the American political stage. To enact *oppositions*, the Tea Party newsfeed adopts a presentation strategy to project an overall positive political identity of the Republican Party. Indeed, the corpus does not contain instances of negative collocations with *Republican(s)*, except, obviously, to quote (and condemn) those that attack them/Trump.

One of the conspicuous ways to build this positive image that recurs throughout the corpus is glorifying the most prominent Republican, Donald Trump (the surname is also the top keyword in the corpus, Table 1). Example (7) contains a highly hyperbolic representation of him, attributed to an esteemed commentator:

16. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/trump-warns-obama-something-big-is-about-to-drop-ill-never-forgive-him-for-something-that-is-about-to-be-revealed-video](http://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/trump-warns-obama-something-big-is-about-to-drop-ill-never-forgive-him-for-something-that-is-about-to-be-revealed-video)

17. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/hillary-clinton-stakes-claim-in-florida-begs-voters-for-money-to-fund-democrat-bill-nelsons-recount-efforts](http://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/hillary-clinton-stakes-claim-in-florida-begs-voters-for-money-to-fund-democrat-bill-nelsons-recount-efforts)

18. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/in-her-own-words-brenda-snipes-admits-she-destroyed-ballots-in-interview-video](http://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/in-her-own-words-brenda-snipes-admits-she-destroyed-ballots-in-interview-video)

19. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/rep-matt-gaetz-calls-on-governor-rick-scott-to-remove-corrupt-elections-supervisor-brenda-snipes](http://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/rep-matt-gaetz-calls-on-governor-rick-scott-to-remove-corrupt-elections-supervisor-brenda-snipes)

- (7) “There’s only been 5 times in the last 105 years that an incumbent President has won seats in the Senate in the off year election. Mr. Trump has magic about him. (...) He is an astonishing vote getter & campaigner. The Republicans are unbelievably lucky to have him and I’m just awed at how well they’ve done. It’s all the Trump magic – Trump is the magic man. Incredible, he’s got the entire media against him, attacking him every day, and he pulls out these enormous wins.”<sup>20</sup>

It is shown that the president is given some superhuman qualities or metaphysical forces (cf. some couplings in section 5). He is presented as a powerful, determined leader, who is able to defy any odds, such as the heavy criticism leveled at him by the mainstream media, on his way to rallying votes for the Republicans. The fact that it is him, not the Senate and House candidates, that is winning votes can be classified as an instance of *pars pro toto*. Also, Donald Trump is labeled the only leader truly representing the values dear to Americans, and hence should stand not only for the Republican Party (“The party is coming home to Trump. The party is unified.”<sup>21</sup>), but also for the whole nation. Extract (8) shows how strong an example to follow Trump is in the conservative milieu:

- (8) Hazel, who ran his campaign on a platform of peace, individual liberty, the Constitution and free markets managed to pull nearly 30% of Republican primary votes without taking a single dollar from any SuperPAC. (...) He attributes his success to establishing a set of principles, and a willingness to “be a fighter,” similar to President Donald J. Trump. Hazel said that though he does not agree with Trump on everything, Trump has earned his respect.<sup>22</sup>

Another rhetorical feature that is pervasive in the corpus is the articulation of moral outrage (moral panic, which in rhetorical terms would be a specific coupling of ethos and pathos) at the evil forces and illegal actions resorted to by Democrats in the context of their dishonest election practices:

- (9) In one recent election, Philadelphia had more votes than electors in a district. In Detroit in 2016 some votes were so over-stated in the inner city they could not be recounted which meant the original and fraudulent vote totals were used. God only knows what goes on in big cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, St. Louis and more.<sup>23</sup>
- (10) The Democrats stole the Arizona Senate race and they’re trying to steal both top ticket races in Florida while the Republicans sit back and allow the lawlessness to continue in Broward County. Where is the GOP?? Where is the law and order??<sup>24</sup>

20. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/trump-makes-history-by-adding-seats-to-gop-senate-majority-in-his-first-midterm-election](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/trump-makes-history-by-adding-seats-to-gop-senate-majority-in-his-first-midterm-election)

21. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/fireworks-chris-wallace-attacks-laura-ingraham-after-she-praises-trump-for-adding-senate-seats-video](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/fireworks-chris-wallace-attacks-laura-ingraham-after-she-praises-trump-for-adding-senate-seats-video)

22. [bigleaguepolitics.com/georgias-7th-district-now-in-danger-of-flipping-voting-machines-can-be-hacked-by-middle-schooler-says-former-candidate](https://bigleaguepolitics.com/georgias-7th-district-now-in-danger-of-flipping-voting-machines-can-be-hacked-by-middle-schooler-says-former-candidate)

23. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/entire-us-election-system-in-question-fraudulent-and-suspicious-activities-reported-nation-wide-and-always-to-democrats-benefit](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/entire-us-election-system-in-question-fraudulent-and-suspicious-activities-reported-nation-wide-and-always-to-democrats-benefit)

24. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/georgia-democrat-abrams-files-lawsuit-after-thousands-of-new-absentee-early-and-election-day-votes-discovered-in-several-counties](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/georgia-democrat-abrams-files-lawsuit-after-thousands-of-new-absentee-early-and-election-day-votes-discovered-in-several-counties)

Examples (9) and (10) spotlight the illegal activities of the Democratic Party which may have or have already had some serious bearing on the ongoing elections. It is in the final lines of the two excerpts that we witness a warning and a call for mobilization on the part of the “good forces” of the Republican Party. Hence, by calling for mobilization, the above passages are capable of instilling in the audience a conviction that something has to be done to stop this ongoing *lawlessness* and it is Republicans who should take action. It can be claimed that presenting the Republican Party as defying and challenging Democrats’ wrongdoings solidifies the positive identity of the former and, therefore, seems to have a considerable *ad populum* appeal. It is logical to trust and follow the ones who want to put an end to “political injustice.”

To inspire trust, the texts take on a particular stylistic repertoire: authoritative legal jargon to refer to Democrats’ activities (*suing, certify, federal lawsuit, concede*),<sup>25</sup> interspaced with colloquial insider vocabulary that shows contempt (*swamp dweller* and *Clinton fixer* – labels that evoke the previous presidential campaign).<sup>26</sup> The conversational, ironic, and emphatic style is effective in the articulation of outrage (here at an antifacist organization):

(11) So, what’s a good antifa to do? Well, attack something with an American flag on it, of course. After all, the American flag is a political symbol.<sup>27</sup>

The sense of outrage at the elites that pollute the society and derail the true American values can be seen in the rhetorical framing of some headlines that purport to bring information: *Minnesota Elects First Anti-ICE Homosexual Sheriff or Unhinged Liberal Teacher’s Aide Calls For White Church To Be Destroyed*. However, the conclusions of such articles moralize on behalf of the silent majority:

Such recurring linguistic choices and selective presentations might be indicative of a systematic attempt to show the absurdities of the elite-led social policy through sarcastic tone or fear appeal (pathos) and speculations (e.g., *consequence by analogy*), which cannot be verified because they relate to the future: a future, where, unless something is done, the true American values and lifestyles will be marginalized, if not annihilated.

25. [bigleaguepolitics.com/palm-beach-ballot-processing-hidden-from-election-observers-for-hours/](https://bigleaguepolitics.com/palm-beach-ballot-processing-hidden-from-election-observers-for-hours/) AND [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/georgia-democrat-abrams-files-lawsuit-after-thousands-of-new-absentee-early-and-election-day-votes-discovered-in-several-counties/](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/georgia-democrat-abrams-files-lawsuit-after-thousands-of-new-absentee-early-and-election-day-votes-discovered-in-several-counties/)

26. [thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/hillary-clinton-stakes-claim-in-florida-begs-voters-for-money-to-fund-democrat-bill-nelsons-recount-efforts/](https://thegatewaypundit.com/2018/11/hillary-clinton-stakes-claim-in-florida-begs-voters-for-money-to-fund-democrat-bill-nelsons-recount-efforts/)

27. [westernjournal.com/ct/antifa-attacks-restaurants-american-flag-mural-asks-proud/](https://westernjournal.com/ct/antifa-attacks-restaurants-american-flag-mural-asks-proud/)

## 7. Conclusion

This study has applied a combination of methodological procedures drawn from quantitative linguistic analysis and qualitative rhetorical analysis, and channeled it towards identifying, illustrating, and explaining the mechanisms of anti-pluralist argumentation. The main aim has been to expose how, at the level of word-choice, structural composition and propositional content, the anti-pluralist arguments can be enacted with specific *topoi* and occasional fallacies. According to literature, such strategies that disable the debate and discredit the opponent are a distinguishing property of populist style that manages to mobilize political supporters in unethical ways (Muller 2016).

The linguistic analysis reveals keyness and concordance patterns related to the questions of semantic fields that dominate, namely the electoral process marked by two-party rivalry, grass-roots reporting and criminal activities. It also shows how positive or negative prosody can be evidenced through stable collocations for negative other-presentation (van Dijk 2008; Wodak 2015). Additionally, we have shown the notion of coupling (Zhao 2010; Zappavigna 2018) to be instrumental in explaining the rhetorical force of engineered collocations such as *manufacture ballots* or *steal the election*. Another finding that would require a larger corpus to confirm is that predicate-type couplings seem to have more rhetorical potential: they offer a greater number of rhetorical affordances than nominal or adjectival ones. This is because, in terms of its conceptual content, the verb affords access to not only the process itself but also its salient participants.

Despite these findings, we conclude that the quantitative linguistic analysis has a limited potential, thus ought to be used after a manual selection of data in order to inform the selection of foci for a more detailed qualitative analysis of populist rhetoric. The advantage of applying a mixed-method approach lies in providing systematicity on the one hand, and interpretive insight on the other. Without a more interpretive look at larger stretches of text (that were pointed at through concordance analysis) we would not have been likely to capture the incidental, yet persuasive, stylistic features of rhetorical argumentation. Since this specific combination of analytical tools proved to be useful in this pilot study, it can also prove useful in studies involving larger corpora.

Apart from the methodological aspects, this study contributes to the understanding of anti-pluralist argumentation patterns. It reveals the pre-eminence of such rhetorical strategies as: (1) homogenizing the representation of true patriots, (2) polarization between “good us” and “evil them,” (3) discrediting of the opponents through analogies, “worst” examples and *ad hominem* attacks, (4) conspiracy theorizing, and (5) mobilization of modes of pathos and ethos related to mediatized, historicized, and moralized cultural imaginaries.



In particular, with respect to the American context, the analysis shows strong polarization. For one, there are “us” – the true American patriots (implied to be the core Tea Party supporters) – united under Donald Trump’s leadership around traditional conservative values. For another, there are evil “them” – variously projected as Washington elites (with derogatory labels as *swamp dwellers* and *fixers*) – Democratic candidates, Soros-funded organizations, Antifa, Hollywood celebrities, liberal media, Trump attackers, or corrupt election supervisors (but only if the recounts were in favor of Democrats). Apart from the attempts to discredit the statements and motivations of Democratic contenders, frequent *ad hominem* attacks were identified, many of which attributed immoral motivations or ignorance to: Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, Nancy Pelosi, Adam Schiff (House Intelligence Committee Chair) and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez among others.

As regards anti-pluralist *ad populum* arguments, one can note a recurrent theme, bordering on a conspiracy theory, on how elites (through their proxy campaigning organizations) are hijacking the election process, with all recounts that brought Democratic victories claimed to be fraudulent, in contrast to Republicans’ victories. Frequent accusations of illegality (concerning Democratic candidates, election committees or supervisors) are made with proficient use of legal jargon. Also, to discredit liberals and progressives, some texts show them as fascists, terrorists, and felons, or traitors subverting American values, or protecting immigrants at the expense of deserving US citizens. Individual cases (of one election supervisor, one sheriff, one junior university staff, one protester) are extrapolated into wider trends and used as fear appeals or conspiracy theories.

Not surprisingly, much of the populist “coverage” of midterm elections is highly pathos-oriented. The recurrent patterns of stable referent/attitude couplings (e.g., *ballot manufacturing*, *to flip/steal the election*, *corrupt supervisor*, *fraudulent recount*) overlay the argument with outrage at how individuals and voters (“us”) are cheated by powerful elites (“them”). The identified linguistic/semiotic resources to achieve heightened emotional and evaluative potential include: rhetorical questions, exclamations, capitalization, imperatives, colloquialisms, hyperbolic statements, and repetitions.

Anti-pluralist argumentation is enabled by *topoi* that reduce the complex political world into a two-side argument (*opposites*) driven by self-interest (*motive is cause*) or that invoke either glorious American imaginaries (*precedent*) or leadership failures (*previous mistakes*) to frame the argument. They are used to expose the elite conspiracy (*appearance vs. reality*) and classify the possible outcomes of the contested election positively, if the conservatives have won, and negatively, if the liberals dominated (*consequence by analogy*).

One re-surfacing anti-pluralist *ad populum* line of argument is that only Donald Trump represents American values. He is shown to be a strong leader who is able to ensure success and national unity, a true statesman at the international scene and a charismatic campaigner. Arguing that only one politician can stand for the nation (*pars pro toto*), whereas all other political actors are corrupt and destructive, is contrary to the pluralist principles of democracy as consensus-building and deliberation. Such argumentation endorses anti-pluralist notions of the authority and legitimacy for the (slight) election winners to impose their ways and openly ignore public opinion.

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