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Predicting and Measuring Support for Populism

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JAY RUMAS (Political Science, History)

Predicting and Measuring Support for Populism

Sponsor: Brendan Skip Mark (Political Science)

Through reading the most recent research and case examples, I have discovered that the conventional wisdom on how political actors appeal to voters is rather obsolete. I have done my best to establish a profile of the “populist voter” and predict which parties they may be inclined to support. Cas Mudde, an expert on populist movements, labels populism as the use of a narrative that constructs the struggle of “the people (the majority) vs “the elite” for political purposes. It has neither a positive nor negative connotation. Populist movements often appeal to those among groups that feel as though they have lost previously held power, and which have a deep dissatisfaction with the political status quo. Ultimately, I assert that voters care more about progressive economic issues due to the importance of the economy in fulfilling basic needs like food, housing, and security. Thus, if a voter is indifferent or not particularly passionate about social wedge issues, they are able to be wooed by right-wing or left-wing populism that promises economic change. Popular populist leaders who appeal to these kinds of voters with their rhetoric are politicians like President Donald Trump in the United States, and Marine Le Pen in France. This has dramatic implications for American and world politics, as it means that for a significant portion of the population, the divide is not so much “left-right” but populist-establishment. To back up these assertions, I focus on several case studies, and use research from Bert Bakker et al, Todd Donovan, and Gerard Seijts, as well as many others.