The Performative Edge of Non-Politicians: Populism and Shifting Legitimacy in US Presidential Politics

Julia Peetz, University of Warwick

Abstract

Building on Butler's theorization of legitimacy as performative and dynamic rather than institutionally enshrined, this chapter explores the paradoxical performativity of contemporary populism. It asks how populists should be understood to operate performatively in ways that make them particularly successful in attracting followers. Populist speech acts pose a challenge to traditional theorizations of performativity: they seem to be successful in spite of the fact that they work through the disavowal, not the affirmation, of the authority that would normally be assumed necessary to make a performative speech act felicitous. Drawing on examples of persistent US presidential populism since Watergate, this chapter posits that contemporary populism demands an expanded and revised understanding of the conditions necessary to achieve performative felicity.

Keywords

For more than a decade, scholars have been exploring the performative dimensions of populism. According to Ernesto Laclau's well-known theory, for instance, populism functions as a performative phenomenon brought about when there is widespread dissatisfaction with the political establishment, such that this dissatisfaction itself becomes the marker of identity for the emerging populist movement (2005). More recent work, such as that of Benjamin Moffitt (2016), looks at populism from the other side; here, it is the populist politician's performative evocation of a state of crisis that is in focus, rather than the process of populist identity formation among the electorate. Neither Laclau nor Moffitt, however, devotes sustained attention to theorizing the connection between a populist politician and their supporters, to the strange attraction or the quality of the representative relationship that exists between them. One of the most compelling questions about contemporary populism, concerning how populists operate performatively in ways that make them particularly successful in attracting followers, is thus left open.

This chapter will build on Butler's theory of shifting legitimacy, as articulated in *Excitable Speech* (1997), to investigate how populist speech acts might be seen as working performatively to shift legitimacy in ways that controvert the rules of how performative speech acts are commonly assumed to function. For present purposes, populist speech acts are defined as those that follow the populist style, in that they set up a binary division between "the people" and "the establishment," evoke a sense of crisis, and are performed in a strikingly media-savvy and personalized style (see Moffitt 2016, 43-45).[1] I want to suggest that the successful anti-establishment speech acts of populist politicians are noteworthy for the performative operation, that of lifting a self-styled outsider to (or a maverick within) a political system into a position of significant power. In other words, the performativity of populist speech acts is of interest, because anti-establishment performatives seem to be successful *in spite of* the fact that they work through the disavowal, rather than the affirmation, of the kind of authority that would normally be assumed necessary to make a performative speech act felicitous. Populist speech acts thus enact a kind of *paradoxical performativity* that requires us to expand and revise our understanding of the conditions necessary to achieve performative felicity.

Following the rise of right-wing populists like Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, and Thierry Baudet in Europe and worldwide, anti-establishment and populist rhetoric have become extremely common in contemporary politics, such that newspapers and scholarship are at this moment awash with accounts of the *global* ascendancy of populism (Moffitt 2016; Cox 2018; Rachman 2019). Still, this style of political performance is perhaps nowhere more visible than in performances of the US presidency since Watergate, where it coincides with a sharp decline in political trust (Pew Research Center 2019). Nor is it limited to the period since Watergate: already in 1964, the notable Americanist Richard Hofstadter identified what he called "the paranoid style" as a phenomenon of international politics that had "more scope and force among us [Americans] than it has had in many other countries of the Western world" (2008, 7). However, while Hofstadter argued that the fully-fledged paranoid style with its anti-establishment conspiracy thinking and disregard for facts was performed exclusively by minority movements in the US, my recent research suggests otherwise. The former Democratic and Republican White House speechwriters I interviewed for my research took it as a given that anti-establishmentarianism and the assertion of outsider status have become dominant elements in US national, and especially presidential, politics (Peetz 2019). Speechwriters noted that it has become "fun and successful to run against Washington in national [politics]" and described Washington as obviously "toxic."[2] Moreover, the last two

presidential elections have been all about change: 2008 saw Barack Obama running as someone who, as a first-term senator, could still count as somewhat of a Washington outsider, whilst John McCain presented himself as a long-time maverick in the US Senate.[3] In 2016, Hillary Clinton struggled against the public perception of herself as a figure of the establishment, a perception that was pushed further by her direct opponent Donald Trump.[4] Clinton also faced a significant anti-establishment primary challenge from maverick independent senator Bernie Sanders.

In light of the ubiquity of contemporary populism and, in particular, its strong persistence in US presidential politics for the last four decades, this chapter aims to show that its successful performers achieve a complex and noteworthy performative gesture. This gesture further brings into focus how populism functions within a system of institutional politics. Although Butler's work does not usually feature in populism scholarship, I argue that her ideas around performativity and legitimacy can illuminate the paradoxical performativity of populism. While other scholars working on performativity, such as J. L. Austin and Pierre Bourdieu, highlight the importance of a speaker's pre-existing authority to the felicitousness of his/her utterance, Butler is keen to introduce an element of dynamism into the thinking around performativity and legitimacy. As I aim to show here, the decoupling of legitimacy from institutional authority is fundamental to populism. For this reason, Butler's ideas about shifting legitimacy are helpful in thinking through the otherwise confounding split between the performative edge of the anti-institutional outsider and what appears to be the growing performative ineffectiveness of political institutions.

The Paradoxical Performativity of Populism

To understand the paradoxical performativity of populism, it first needs to be clarified how political representation works as a performative practice. According to the influential theory of the "representative claim" (Saward 2006; 2010; 2014), politicians' public performances are constitutive of the representative relationship between them and their constituents. Politicians making claims to represent must perform their ability to tap into the prevailing political concerns and aspirations of the intended audience in a way that appears credible to that audience. Through their performances, they will then propose solutions to the audience's concerns and ways of working towards the realization of their aspirations. If a representative

claim is successful, then the politician becomes the representative of a particular constituency, for instance through electoral success.

If we follow the thinking of J. L. Austin and Pierre Bourdieu, we would need to posit that a politician's ability to make credible representative claims is closely tied to their pre-existing authority or at least their ability to perform their connection to and eligibility to hold institutional authority. For Austin, the felicitousness of performative utterances is typically determined by pre-established conventions and the acceptance of the authority of the speaker by all parties. Thus, a performative utterance depends on "some previous procedure, tacit or verbal" that must "have first constituted the person who is to do the ordering an authority" (Austin 1962, 29). In this view, those who operate outside of the boundaries of ritual, convention, and pre-established authority are not able to make the kinds of felicitous utterances that may be performed by authorities. Bourdieu's *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), which Butler critiques in *Excitable Speech* (1997), separates the felicitousness of performative utterances even more definitively from the speech act itself and instead ties felicitousness specifically to *institutional* authority. For Bourdieu, language cannot precede authority; it merely expresses it, and thus it is "the participation in the authority of the institution, which makes *all* the difference" (1991, 109, emphasis in original). "Language at most *represents* this authority, manifests and symbolizes it" (ibid.), he argues, stressing that an authorized spokesperson depends on his "accumulated symbolic capital," here taken to mean his prior legitimacy, rather than anything inherent in the speech act itself (1991, 111, emphasis in original).

Following Austin's and especially Bourdieu's logic, politicians seeking election (i.e. entry into a system that confers institutional authority) would naturally attempt to court institutional affiliation and authority, for instance by emphasizing how well connected they are. Indeed, at least in the United States, figures of incumbent re-elections have historically been notably high,[5] as one would expect if pre-established authority implied performative advantage. In short, we would have to assume that political audiences find incumbents and well-connected candidates with strong institutional ties to be more credible as possible future representatives than outsiders who lack the social power conferred by "an authority whose limits are identical with the extent of delegation by the institution" (Bourdieu 1991, 109).

But if we consider the fact that, in 2016, Hillary Clinton's claim to a high degree of prior institutional authority fell largely flat, then this configuration becomes rather more complex. Being a presidential candidate who had previously been a first lady, a senator, and a secretary of state did not strengthen Clinton's representative claim. A former Democratic

White House speechwriter I interviewed admitted that "people are not very open to the Hillary Clinton argument [which is]: 'I understand, I've been around a long time, I understand how it works, and so you need me to help sort it out'." In addition to this, some of the (illegally leaked) emails of Hillary Clinton campaign staff members reveal the campaign struggling with Clinton's status as part of the political establishment, which, far from being a major asset, was apparently considered to be somewhat of a liability.[6] In contrast to this, Donald Trump's performances of outsiderness, manifested in promises to "drain the swamp" (see Donald J. Trump for President 2016), resonated much more strongly. Trump's campaign launch announcement on 16 June 2015, for instance, was based on nationalistic, anti-immigrant appeals to the white working classes about beating Japan at manufacturing cars, and beating Mexico "at the border," because Mexico, just like China, was portrayed in the speech as "killing us economically." This simplistic and openly racist nationalism was complemented by Trump's repeated claim that "all of these politicians that I'm running against now" were stupid, dissociating, and "don't have a clue" about leadership, whereas Trump presented himself as a business leader who had done "an amazing job" amassing his own "net worth" while watching the politicians from afar and coming to the conclusion that "[t]hey will never make America great again" (Time Staff 2015). The performativity of this sort of presidential anti-establishment rhetoric might then be seen to operate in the opposite direction from Austin's standard model of performative felicity: not through the enforcement, but through the disavowal of the kind of authoritative backing with which one might assume such speakers would be seen, and would wish to be seen, to be invested.

In other words, anti-establishment rhetoric by political outsiders or mavericks turns out to be performatively effective precisely because it enables and perpetuates a performative shift that moves legitimacy away from incumbent and previous officeholders as well as from established institutions. Instead, it bestows legitimacy on outsider or maverick politicians. It is thus precisely these politicians' perceived *lack* of previous affiliation with the maligned institutional establishment and *not* their pre-existing institutional authority that makes the performative operation felicitous. It may be tempting to suggest that performative success in the case of Trump simply becomes tied to another kind of authority (economic, financial, etc.), as in his performances of his economic successes, but the case is not so clear-cut. While Trump might indeed have appealed to a specific kind of American anti-political entrepreneurialism (see Brown 1997),[7] Sanders's appeal during the 2016 campaign was not tied to any kind of business acumen and was instead largely due to his maverick position within the US Senate, which made him a (relative) outsider to the party system. Social power

5

in this case therefore does not stem from "an authority whose limits are identical with the extent of delegation by the institution" (Bourdieu 1991, 109), but on a speaker's (credible performance of her/his) lack of delegated institutional authority. This is where Butler's thinking around legitimacy becomes pertinent.

Anti-Establishment Rhetoric and Dynamic Legitimacy

In contradistinction to Austin and Bourdieu, *Excitable Speech* (1997) envisions performative utterances as dynamic vis-à-vis established power structures. Drawing on Derrida's reading of Austin (1988), Butler seeks to overturn Bourdieu's emphasis on the primacy of social power, which reduces the power ascribed to the performative utterance itself, making it appear epiphenomenal at best. She charges Bourdieu with failing to "theorize the particular force produced by the utterance as it breaks with prior context" and failing "to take account of the way in which a performative can break with existing context and assume new contexts, refiguring the terms of legitimate utterance themselves" (1997, 148, 150). In Butler's view, performative utterances themselves can, by rehearsing "the conventional formulae in non-conventional ways," provoke a shift in the terms of legitimacy so that "an invocation that has no prior legitimacy can have the effect of challenging existing forms of legitimacy, breaking open the possibility of future [social institutional] forms" (147). This way of theorizing performativity, I posit, is particularly pertinent when thinking through the seemingly paradoxical performative edge of the non-politician or political outsider and the systemic effects of populist rhetoric.

If politicians employ anti-establishment rhetoric and present themselves as outsiders in making a representative claim, we can assume that they are doing so in an attempt to mobilize anti-establishment aspirations and political distrust that they suppose are prevalent political concerns among their audiences. What the populist speech act is doing, then, is making use of existing dissatisfaction with the political establishment to boost the social power of the outsider or maverick politician. Here, the populist movement, defined by its dissatisfaction with the political establishment (as in Laclau's theory of performative populism), and the populist politician, defined by its anti-establishment stance and its performative evocation of a sense of political crisis (as in Moffitt's theory of the populist style), connect. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, it is this connection between

populist politicians and their supporters that is thus far significantly undertheorized in scholarship of performativity and populism.

Butler's ideas about shifting legitimacy allow us to think through the remarkable performative operation at work in populist speech acts: by deploying anti-establishment rhetoric, populists access and mobilize existing anti-establishment sentiment, thus building on and further stoking the suspiciousness with which the audience already regard the institutional structures and the political system.[8] The populist binary division of society, with the dissatisfied people on one side and the unsatisfactory establishment on the other, is thus both tapped into and co-authored by these politicians–and then used for their own political benefit. In doing so, populists must performatively constitute themselves as individuals who can credibly represent "the people," since the electorate must come to view them as outsiders who intend to penetrate into the contaminated system with the goal of eliminating corruption. "The people" are then defined by their distrust of and disillusionment with the political establishment while the politician's pledge to act in their direct interest as a decontaminator of the system becomes the source of populist authority. In other words, in this paradoxical performativity, the very *lack* of previous authority and institutional affiliation is elevated into the source of the speaker's perceived legitimacy as a political representative. If populist representative claims are felicitous–that is, if the politician succeeds in being perceived as a genuine outsider or maverick who will act on behalf of the people–that individual becomes the anti-establishment representative of the people and, hence, the leader of the populist movement. The development of this movement has to prefigure the politician's performative intervention, but, although it does not entirely depend on the politician's speech act, it is further strengthened and consolidated by it.

The Populist Slope in Political Discourse

The populist courting and shifting of legitimacy away from established institutions and towards self-styled outsiders is not without risk. The most significant risk is the possibility of portraying the political system as so corrupt that it is beyond redemption. Continued exposure to populist anti-establishmentarianism might lead to something of a "populist slope" in political discourse. That is, audiences who are continually exposed to representative claims that speak to their dissatisfaction with the political establishment come to expect the disavowal of institutional authority as a necessary element of any potentially credible

representative claim. Forcefully articulated opposition to the political establishment then becomes the norm. In other words, performing opposition to "Washington," "the government," or "the system" might become not just paradoxically effective as a performative act, but a prerequisite for performative success.

One of the former Democratic White House speechwriters I interviewed sketched this possibility in a way that highlights the complexity of the reception work political audiences have to do when presented with populist speech acts. The speechwriter stressed, firstly, that Republicans and Democrats made different kinds of anti-establishment arguments, such that, while Republicans had for a long time portrayed government "as being inherently inimicable to liberty, to freedom, to individual rights," Democrats tended to emphasize the need to "bring a new perspective into Washington and make government work because government has to work." However, when pressed to clarify whether the differences between these arguments came across in a political environment where everyone runs against Washington, the speechwriter conceded that Obama's argument about Washington being dominated by special interests and Trump's argument about the system being rigged were "the same argument used to different ends." Especially when Bernie Sanders's forcefully articulated anti-establishmentarianism came into play on the Democratic side, the speechwriter suggested that political discourse might end up in "a dangerous place," one where the government was seen as fundamentally corrupt and irredeemable by default. The performative edge of the self-styled "non-politician," in short, can have profound effects on a system of institutional politics. Through their paradoxical performativity, populist anti-establishment performances restructure the terms of legitimacy in a way that not only separates institutional authority from legitimacy, but that, in time, can call the system's very existence into question.

References

Abramowitz, Alan I., Brad Alexander, and Matthew Gunning. 2006. "Incumbency, Redistricting, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections." *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 1: 75-88.

Arditi, Benjamin. 2007. *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things With Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barr, Robert. 2009. "Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics." *Party Politics* 15, no. 1: 29-48.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John B. Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brown, Gwen. 1997. "Deliberation and Its Discontents: H. Ross Perot's Antipolitical Populism." In *The End of Politics? Explorations into Modern Antipolitics*, edited by Andreas Schedler, 115-148. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Brown, Wendy. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.

Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.

Cox, Michael. 2018. "Understanding the Global Rise of Populism." *Medium*, February 12, 2018. https://medium.com/@lseideas/understanding-the-global-rise-of-populism-27305a1c5355.

Derrida, Jacques. 1988. "Signature Event Context." In *Limited Inc*, edited by Gerald Graff, translated by Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber, 1-23. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Donald J. Trump for President. 2016. "Trump Pledges to Drain the Swamp and Impose Congressional Term Limits." Press release, October 18, 2016. https://web.archive.org/web/20170429203039/https://www.donaldjtrump.com/pres s-releases/trump-pledges-to-drain-the-swamp.

Gidron, Noam, and Bart Bonikowski. 2013. "Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda." *Weatherhead Working Paper Series*, no. 13-004. Cambridge: Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

Greenberg, Stan. 2016. "Money." E-mail Message to John Podesta, sent February 4, 2016 at 20:09. WikiLeaks. https://www.wikileaks.com/podesta-emails/emailid/17478.

Heilemann, John, and Mark Halperin. 2010. *Race of a Lifetime*. London: Penguin.

Hofstadter, Richard. [1964] 2008. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, 3-40. New York: Vintage.

Laclau, Ernesto. 2005. *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso Books.

Mayhew, David R. 1974. "Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals." *Polity* 6, no. 3: 295-317.

Moffitt, Benjamin. 2016. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Mudde, Cas. 2004. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4: 541-563.

Peetz, Julia. 2019. "Semi-Structured Elite Interviews With U.S. Presidential Speechwriters in Interdisciplinary Research on Politics and Performance." *SAGE Research Methods Cases.* DOI:10.4135/9781526477569.

Pew Research Center. 2019. "Public Trust in Government, 1958–2019." April 11, 2019. https://www.people-press.org/2019/04/11/public-trust-in-government-1958-2019/.

Politico Staff. 2016a. "Full Transcript: First 2016 Presidential Debate." *Politico*, September 27, 2016. https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/full-transcript-first-2016-presidential-debate-228761.

––––. 2016b. "Full Transcript: Second 2016 Presidential Debate." *Politico*, October 10, 2016. https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/2016-presidential-debate-transcript-229519.

––––. 2016c. "Full Transcript: Third 2016 Presidential Debate." *Politico*, October 20, 2016. https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/full-transcript-third-2016-presidential-debate-230063.

Rachman, Gideon. 2019. "Populism Faces its Darkest Hour." *Financial Times*, January 7, 2019. https://www.ft.com/content/2350acc2-125c-11e9-a581-4ff78404524e.

Rooduijn, Mattijs, Sarah L. de Lange, and Wouter van der Brug. 2014. "A Populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic Contagion by Populist Parties in Western Europe." *Party Politics* 20, no. 4: 563-575.

Saward, Michael. 2014. "Shape-Shifting Representation." *American Political Science Review* 108, no.4: 723-736.

––––. 2010. *The Representative Claim*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

––––. 2006. "The Representative Claim." *Contemporary Political Theory* 5, no. 3: 297-318.

Schwerin, Dan. 2015. "DRAFT: TPP Statement." E-mail from "speechdrafts@hillaryclinton.com" on behalf of Dan Schwerin to "Speech Drafts," sent October 6, 2015 at 17:50. WikiLeaks. https://wikileaks.org/podesta-emails/emailid/17724.

Time Staff. 2015. "Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech." *Time*, June 16, 2015. https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/.

Wolin, Sheldon. 2008. *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Notes

[1] While populism is notoriously difficult to define, the consideration of *populist-style performances* (rather than "populism" as a more diffuse phenomenon) captures a number of significant characteristics of contemporary populism, as identified in leading scholarship. Populism has increasingly become a mainstream feature of democratic politics in the West (Mudde 2004; Arditi 2007; Moffitt 2016) and exists on a continuum (Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug, 2014; Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013), such that populists can express only some elements of populism and can do so more or less forcefully. This also justifies the joint discussion of outsider appeals made by Obama, Trump, and Sanders, politicians who otherwise differ markedly in their performance styles.

[2] For ethical reasons, the data are anonymized. For a detailed account of my interviewing method, see Peetz 2019.

[3] An outsider is someone who stands outside of and professes to lack links to the institutional system. A maverick, by contrast, is someone who is affiliated with a political party and/or occupies political office, but frequently votes against the party line, works to reshape the party, or becomes an independent (Barr 2009, 34). Before running for president, Obama was advised by senior Democrats, including Harry Reid, then Senate Majority Leader, and former Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, on the political potential of the outsiderness he could still claim for himself (Heilemann and Halperin 2010, 33-4, 70).

[4] Trump stressed or alluded to Clinton's "bad experience" in all three presidential debates (Politico Staff 2016a; 2016b; 2016c).

[5] Increased incumbency advantage in congressional elections since the 1970s is a widely studied phenomenon (see, Mayhew 1974; Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006).

[6] The leaked emails of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign manager in 2016, show Clinton-Kaine campaign staff members struggling with Clinton's status as "part of the system," stressing the need to show that Clinton knows "how much has to change" (Greenberg 2016) as well as the need to criticize the incumbent Obama administration (Schwerin 2015).

[7] The relative success of the businessman and independent candidate Ross Perot in the 1992 presidential election, for instance, points to the persistence of this kind of business-driven anti-politics in US political life.

[8] In the contemporary United States, there are a number of reasons for widespread political dissatisfaction, such as the increasing de-democratization of US politics under neoconservative neoliberalism, which has arguably toxified political life even while moving towards an

increasingly consensual and managerial politics (Brown 2015), and the increasing securitization of US politics since September 11, 2001 (see Wolin 2008).