

How Populistic were the Populists in 19th Century America?

Analysis by Automated Textual Analysis

Version 1.0

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December 3, 2020.

Abstract:

Populism in American Historical Context: "populism" has been applied to many politicians and social movements in the US history such as Joseph McCarthy, Huey Long, George Wallace, Ronald Regan, Ross Perot, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump. Originally, Populism of the United States began with the People's Party (i.e., the Populists), which was formed early in the 1890s. From 1892 to 1908, the party nominated candidates to run for the US president. However, after the 1896 election, the People's Party limped along and finally collapsed soon after the 1908 election.

Historians have provided excellent qualitative studies of the People's Party. Although there are numerous quantitative researches on Populism in modern America, scholars have not given serious attention to the People's Party using a well-developed scientific methodological apparatus. Therefore, in this paper, the author applied the modern analytical tool of Populism to the People's Party and demonstrated how populist they were.

Multiple approaches toward Populism: there are different approaches to Populism, such as (1) political theoretic, (2) structuralist, (3) economic, (4) strategic/discursive, and (4) ideational approach. Those approaches are not mutually exclusive, and it is essential to choose one from those approaches as a relevant analytic tool. In this article, the author seeks to demonstrate how (and in what way) populist the politicians of the People's Party were. Therefore, the ideational approach with automated textual analysis is adopted in this article.

Data and Method: the author has collected historical documents left by the People's Party's presidential candidates. The amounts of the texts are as follows. (1) James B. Weaver (1892: 11,255 sentences, 229,984 tokens); (2) William Jennings Bryan (1896 and 1900: 6,525 sentences, 185,234 tokens); (3) Wharton Baker (1900: 3,756 sentences, 125,120 tokens); (4) Thomas E. Watson (1904 and 1908: 17,440 sentences, 358,163 tokens). The author conducted a computerized content analysis, such as dictionary-based

sentiment analysis, cosine similarity calculation, word2vec analysis, and a topic model (Latent Dirichlet Allocation: LDA).

Result: first, the author conducted a sentiment analysis with the populist dictionary, which the author created. The result showed that Watson and Weaver scored high in 'people-unity sentiment' and scored low in 'anti-elitism sentiment.' Contrary, Bryan scored lower in 'people-unity sentiment' and scored very high in 'anti-elitism sentiment.' Barker scored low in both sentiments. What is more, the results of the cosine similarity calculation showed considerable overlap between Watson and Weaver's documents. Although Bryan and Watson or Weaver were somewhat similar, Barker was distant from all the other presidential candidates from the People's Party. Concerning LDA, the author found that Watson and Weaver's topics contain words related to people's unity. On the other hand, topics for Bryan contain many anti-elite words.

Conclusion: conventional studies assumed that all the presidential candidates from the People's Party were nearly homogenous. However, the results of this study show that they were different sort of populists. Watson and Weaver stressed more the unity of the people rather than anti-elitism. On the other hand, Bryan emphasized more anti-elitism. Finally, the author suggests room for reconsidering the concept of Populism used in studies of American politics and history.

Keywords: Populism, ideational approach, quantitative textual analysis, dictionary-based sentiment analysis, cosine similarity, topic model (Latent Dirichlet Allocation), word2vec, the People's Party

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Numbers 18K01418; 18H03619; 20KK0026.

1: Populism in American Historical Context

At one time or another, "populism" has been—sometimes carelessly—applied to

many politicians and social movements of the United States such as Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, Ross Perot, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump (Lasch 1991: 217). For example, Laura Grattan defines Populism quite broadly and includes a wide range of social movements into "populism:"

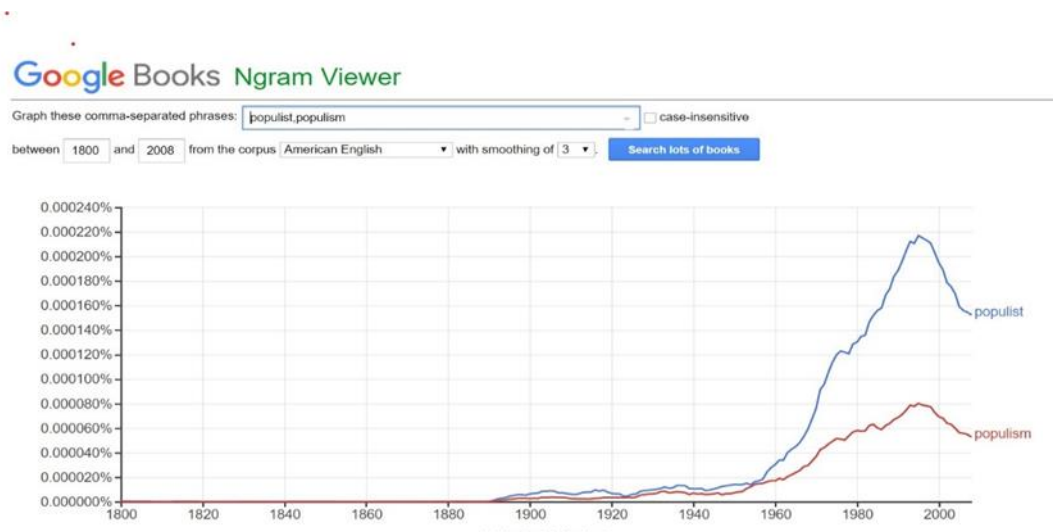
It is argued that grassroots populism has a crucial role in democratizing power and politics in America. Radical democratic actors, from grassroots revolutionaries to insurgent farmers and laborers to agitators for the New Deal, Civil Rights, and the New Left, have historically drawn on the language and practices of Populism. In doing so, they have cultivated people's rebellious aspirations not just to resist power but to share in power, and to do so in pluralistic, egalitarian ways across social and geographic borders. These experiments in democratizing Populism have enacted popular power in ways that open "the people" to contest and redefinition and create spaces for new visions and practices of democracy to emerge (Grattan 2016: 4).

In the *Populist Persuasion*, Michael Kazin defines American Populism as a flexible mode of persuasion and a grand rhetorical optimism form. Populist speakers saw certain Americans were virtuous and more significant than others. They voiced a profound outrage and idealistic discontent against elites who were corrupted and betrayed the core ideal of American democracy: rule by the common people. Therefore, populists adopted traditional kinds of expressions, tropes, themes, and images to convince many Americans to join their sides or to endorse views on particular issues (Kazin 2017: 2-3). Kazin claims that Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders represent two different and often competing traditions of American Populism that long thrived in the United States:

The first type of American Populism directs its ire exclusively upward: at corporate elites and their enablers in government who have allegedly betrayed the interests of the men and women who do the nation's essential work. These populists embrace a conception of "the people" based on economic interests and avoid identifying themselves as supporters or opponents of any particular ethnic group or religion... Sanders advanced this type of Populism in nearly every speech he delivered during his campaign for president. Adherents of the second American populist tradition—the one to which Trump belongs—also blame elites in big business and government for undermining the common folk's well-being and political liberties. Nevertheless, their definition of "the people" is narrower and ethnically restrictive. For most US history, it meant only European heritage citizens (Kazin 2017: xiii).

Kazin includes Ku Klux Klan, Charles Coughlin, Andrew Jackson, George Wallace, and Trump into the former category. On the other hand, he classified the People's Party, the Congress of Industrial Organization, and Sanders into the latter group (Kazin 2017: xiv).

Figure 1. Percentage of Books in Google Books Corpus: A Result from the Google Books Ngram Viewer



Initially, however, 'populism' of the United States began with the People's Party (i.e., 'the populists'), formed in the 1890s. Figure 1 shows the words "populist" and "populism" that began to use in American books in the middle of the 1890s. In this period, the populist emerged as a direct reaction to the adverse agricultural and social conditions of the South and West after the Civil War. In the decades after the Civil War, the nation was transformed from a mostly rural society to one in which the population was more often working in the industry, crowded together in cities as a result of the coming of industrial capitalism (Szasz 1982: 191-193; Judis 2016: 22; Franko and Witko 2018: 25; Slez 2020).

For the old Confederate South, the destruction of the southern economy and the end of slavery meant the plantation system's demise. Soon, small independent farm units dominated the landscape and achieved success in cotton production. Increased output, however, lowered benefit, and by 1890, cotton prices had fallen to the low level that made almost no margin of profit. Also, in the west of the Mississippi River, the farmers had shifted their orientation from family subsistence to wheat and corn production: the American farmers had become businessmen, but they were only dimly aware of this

change. For nimble farmers and entrepreneurs, the larger scale of economic enterprises and expanding national and international markets created the potential for much greater profits and wealth. However, there were downsides for many in society. The bitter winter of 1887 to 1888 and severe water shortages from 1886 to 1891 ended the excellent years for western farmers. By 1890, thousands of farmers abandoned their homes, and near-starvation cases were recorded for those who stayed in their homes. Therefore, in both the South and the west, a thoroughly disillusioned set of farmers had emerged.

On the other hand, both the Democrat and Republican politicians were reveling the American progress and finance. They believed in a self-regulating market and thought the government should be minimal—they remained idle spectators when the economic disaster hit the West and the South. That made the farmers feel isolated from the mainstream of society and believed that they had been "cheated" by unknown forces. The result was a mind-set ready to lash out at existing order. Thus was American Populism born (Szasz 1982: 191-193; Judis 2016: 22; Franko and Witko 2018: 25; Slez 2020).

The People's Party was formed in 1891, in demanding solutions to the downsides of industrialization. In May 1891, members of the Kansas Farmers Alliance, on their way back from the national convention held at Cincinnati, came up with the term "populist" to describe their political views and other alliance groups in the South and the West. The alliance put reformers of all stripes together. Along with impoverished farmers, small businesses were threatened by the giant new corporations. Industrialization created many jobs for workers, but the new production process created dangerous and unhealthy working environments and competition for jobs. Employers had upper hands negotiating a contract with workers, leading to low wages, long working hours, and unsafe working conditions. Industrialization was simultaneously an economic miracle and disaster. Therefore, in 1892, the alliance joined with the Knights of Labor and other groups to form a national People's Party that over the basic principles of the Democrats and the Republicans in Washington (Judis 2016: 22; Franko and Witko 2018: 25).

In the 1892 presidential election, the party nominated James K. Weaver to run for president. Weaver received 8% of the popular vote and carried five states. In the 1894 election, the People's Party won 10% of the vote. The party elected four Congress members, four senators, 21 state executives, and 465 state legislators. However, in the 1896 presidential election, the party endorsed the Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan rather than nominating a candidate. After the 1896 election, the People's Party limped along and finally collapsed soon after the 1908 election (Judis 2016: 26-28).

What did the populists propose? No single answer suffices; however, most of them

supported direct election of Senators, postal saving banks, governmental control of the railroads, federal supervision of corporations, the initiative and referendum, a graduated income tax, women's suffrage, prohibition, and free and unlimited coinage of silver. All of those proposals aimed to curb the power of the corporations and corrupted elites and tried to restore the government to the people (Szasz 1982: 194).

Were they a friend or foe to American democracy? Richard Hofstadter was a vocal critic against American Populism in the 19th century. The People's Party members, especially farmers, thought that they were victimized by modern capitalism. Hofstadter argued that those agrarian populists embraced anti-Semitism, suspicion against foreigners, and conspiratorial fantasy against international bankers. This style of mind was deeply rooted in the "Yeoman myth" derived from their golden age. According to Hofstadter, this "paranoid style" was distinctive to the populists in the 19th century (Hofstadter 1955; Hofstadter 1964; Walker 2014: 10).

Political psychologists have studied sociocognitive factors that shape public belief in conspiracy theories associated with "paranoid style" (van der Linden et al., 2020: 2; Oliver and Wood 2014). Furthermore, Hart (2020) claims that the paranoid style consists of three elements – "isolation," "affiliation," and "indignation." Hart examined how the presidential candidates used this style in appealing to voters in US presidential campaigns between 1948 and 2016. These prior studies are directly focusing on politicians' use of and people's cognition of the paranoid style. However, this article does not focus on the paranoid style itself.

To put it simply, the American Populism was "merely a heightened expression" of nostalgia: it was a swan song of backward-looking American farmers revolted against the modern world (Hofstadter 1955: 4-5; Hackney 1969; Green 1978; Walker 2014: 10-13). On the other hand, Lawrence Goodwyn argued that intrinsic quality and premises made by the Populism in 19th century America were reputed to be democratic:

In their struggle to build their cooperative commonwealth, in their "joint notes of the brotherhood," in their mass encampments, their rallies, their long wagon trains, their meals for thousands, the people of Populism saw themselves. In their earnest sub alliance meetings—those "unsteeped places of worship"—they saw themselves... In the world they created, they fulfilled the democratic promise—in the only way it can be fulfilled—by people acting in democratic ways in their daily lives... The Populist essence was less abstract: it was an assertion of how people can act in the name of idea of freedom. At root, American Populism was a demonstration of what authentic political life is in a functioning democracy

(Goodwyn 1976: xxv, 543).

Along with Goodwyn, scholars such as Norman Pollack or Charles Postel claim that the populist reflected how Americans responded to technological innovation, expansion of corporate power, and commercial and cultural globalization in the 1880s and 1890s. The populist organized farmers, wage workers, and middle-class activists into a protest movement. They sought to challenge corporate power. They raised their voices against the inequitable distribution of wealth. They demanded a responsive government. They even tried to unite white and black farmers (Postel 2010: vii-7; Pollack 1962; Hicks 1931; Woodward 1938; McMath 1976; Nugent 1963). In this sense, Populism was never merely an outmoded agrarian ideology (Lasch 1996: 7). If anything, it unambiguously committed to the principle of respect and ought to be regarded as "the authentic voice of democracy (Lasch 1996: 105)." Therefore, for Goodwyn and other scholars, the waning of Populism meant a "decline in vitality of public life" rather than the end of political anachronism, which was formed by intractable agrarian radicalism (Goodwyn 1978, viii; Hahn 1983).

Adam Slez wrote that the fundamental problem is that Populism exists not only as a term d'art but as a part of everyday speech, making it difficult to separate the meaning of the concept from the particular context in which it is evoked. As a result, understanding of Populism has continued to evolve in response to the changing landscape of populist movements across time and space (Slez 2020). As shown above, even the historian's disagreement has barely accommodated the quarrels over the American populists, i.e., the People's Party. Historians have never reached an agreement (Turner 1980: 354). Above all else, historians provided excellent qualitative studies of the populist movement in the 19th century. There have been quantitative studies on US populism in the 20th century as well. However, Americanists have not given serious attention to Populism using the well-developed scientific methodological apparatus (Hawkins and Litvay 2019: 2).

Slez (2020) is an exception. In focusing on the qualitative case study of South Dakota, Slez inquired the cause of the historical origin of South Dakota's populist movement. As Slez mentioned populist claim-making, however, his analysis was based upon limited case studies and lacked comparative studies on populist leaders.

Although there have been almost no theoretical and quantitative studies of Populism in 19th century America if we apply a relevant modern analytical tool to the People's Party, can we still say they were populist? In answering this question, the ideational approach with automated textual analysis is adopted in this article.

2: Data and Method

Analytical Method of Populism: how we analyze Populism? The ideational definition of Populism sees Populism as a set of distinctive ideas.

Many scholars have pointed out that there have been disagreements and contestation on the concept of Populism. A concept of Populism often points to divergent characteristics, and it is usually quite confusing. A discussion on Populism concerns what that is, but whether that even exists (Weyland 2001: 2; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2016: 2). There are many approaches to Populism that are compatible by and large but sometimes discordant. There are multiple studies on Populism as follows: (1) political theoretic approach (Laclau 2005: 117-118, 176; Mouffe 2018: 10-11); (2) structuralist approach (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2018 3; Cardoso and Feletto 1979); (3) economic approach (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2018 6; Dornbush and Edwards 1991; Acemoglu, Egorov, and Sonin 2013); (4) strategic approach (Weyland 2001: 14; Barr 2007). The ideational approach is adopted in this article because it is the most optimal approach for this research.

The ideational definition has four main parts: (1) a Manichean and moral cosmology; (2) the proclamation of 'the pure people' as a homogeneous and virtuous community; and (3) the depiction of 'the corrupted elite' as a self-serving entity; (4) the pure people are in antagonism with the corrupted evil elite. Politics is an expression of the *volonté general* (general will) of the pure people. In other words, when something is defined as a "populist," it should have all four of these conditions in line with the ideational approach (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 5; Hawkins et al., 2018, 3; Geurkink et al., 2019: 3). Most importantly, Populism is defined as a "thin-centered ideology" with a restricted morphology and necessarily appears attached or sometimes assimilated to other ideologies. Populism is, thus, something that can even "travel" across the left and right of the ideological spectrum (Akkerman et al., 2013; Donovan and Redlawsk 2018). Hence, Populism rarely exists in its pure form and usually takes very different shapes (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 5-6).

To explain the success and failure of populist actors, one has to take into both the "demand side" and "supply side" of populist politics. Populist actors can thrive only when elite and mass populism come together (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 97-98). The ideational approach is useful as it can assess a seemingly populist politician's political strategies and ideologies through the lenses of the political-strategic and ideational approaches to Populism ("the supply side of populism"), looking into party manifestos, television programs, and newspaper articles. The ideational approach can also measure populist attitudes, i.e., the "demand side of populism," at the individual level (Hieda et

al., forthcoming; Hawkins et al., 2018). With the rapid expansion of the ideational approach, scholars have tried to devise several different scales for measuring populist attitudes among people (Castanho Silva et al., 2019; Schultz et al., 2017; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Akkerman et al., 2014; Stanley 2011). Recently, scholars discuss whether individuals with strong populist attitudes are more likely to vote for populist politicians or parties or not (Akkerman et al., 2017; Hieda et al., forthcoming; Hawkins et al., 2018; van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018).

It is hard to know what factors of the People's Party's demand side generate support for parties that rely on populist claims as there are limitations of availability of historical data. However, leaders of the People's Party used producerism's language to mobilize agrarian voters brought together as the populist movement (Slez 2020). So, it is possible to measure populist claims-making at the level of individual political speeches or manifestos (Bonikowski and Gidron 2015: 1593; Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2019: 27). For this reason, this article adopts the ideational approach of Populism, exclusively focusing on the supply side of the People's Party.

Content Analysis of Populism: as shown in Figure 2, scholars have adopted different content analysis method to measure Populism in recent years, such as (1) computerized content analysis, which is based on dictionary, (2) human-based classical content analysis, and (3) holistic grading (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011: 1271-1273; Hawkins and Castanho Silva 2019: 28).

Figure 2. Comparing Contents Analysis used to Measure Populist Discourse			
Analytical Method	Coder	Unit of Measurement	Cost
Classic Human-Based	Trained Human Coder	Paragraphs	High
Holistic Grading	Trained Human Coder	Entire Text	Relatively High
Computerized Dictionary-Based	Dictionary-Based	Words	Low

Bonikowski and Gidron analyzed 2,406 speeches made by the United States' presidential candidates from 1952 to 1996, employing dictionary-based automated text-analysis methods. Here, the unit of measurement are words. This approach searches the documents for the occurrence of a predetermined list of terms and assigns a prevalence score for each term to each document (Bonikowski and Gidron 2015: 1594, 1600). They

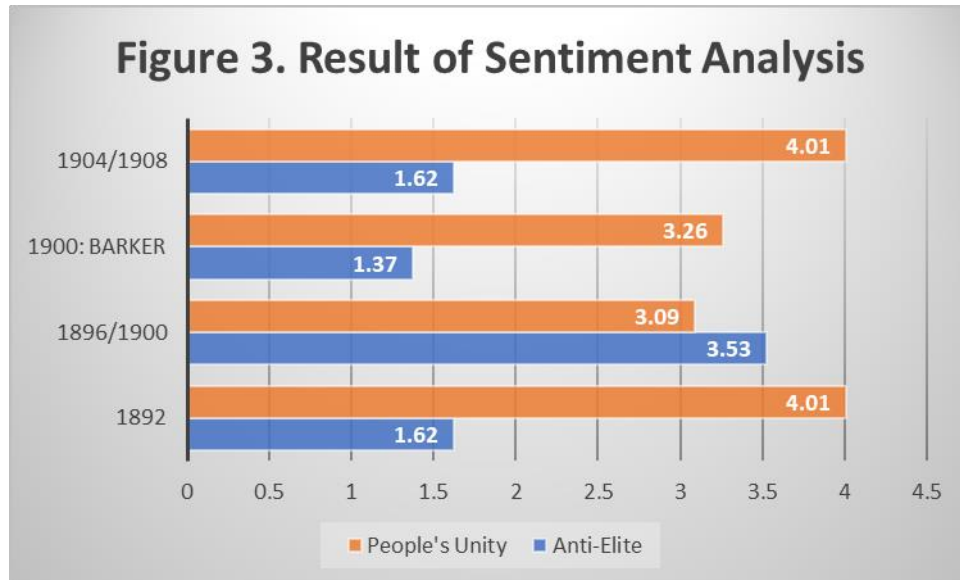
showed that populist discourse is an essential common feature of presidential politics among Democratic and Republican presidential candidates. Also, they indicated that their position in the political field determines candidates' reliance on Populism: political challengers and outsiders are mostly in need of offering an alternative narrative to success stories presented by incumbents (Bonikowski and Gidron 2015: 1615). Their theoretical implications indicate that candidates who run from third parties must make a populist claim more than those who run from major political parties. However, their analysis focuses only upon candidates who ran from the Democratic party and the Republican party from 1952 to 1996.

The author conceived of creating a populist dictionary for the People's Party (see Appendix for more information), which consists of "anti-elite words group" and "unity of people words group." The author originated this idea by referring to the ideational approach, and Bonikowski and Gidron (2015). Using this original dictionary, the author conducted sentiment analysis, along with ~.

Data: the author collected speeches, manifestos, and other campaign-related archival materials of the presidential candidates of the People's Party from 1892 to 1908 (on the total amount of the textual documents, see Figure 3). At the Outset, in using these presidential candidates' textual data, the author will conduct an exploratory textual analysis.

Figure 3. Lists of the Presidential Candidates from the People's Party and Quantity of the Textual Data			
Year	Candidates' Name	Party	Quantity of the Textual Documents
1892	James B. Weaver	People's Party	Sentences 11,255 Tokens 229,984
1896	William Jennings Bryan	Democratic (fusion with People's Party)	Sentences 6,525 Tokens 185,234
1900	William Jennings Bryan	Democratic (fusion with a faction of People's Party)	
	Wharton Baker	People's Party ("Middle-of-the-Road" Faction)	Sentences 3,756 Tokens 125,120
1904	Thomas E. Watson	People's Party	Sentences 17,440 Tokens 358,163

Analysis and Method



First, the author created a populist dictionary (see Appendix for more information), which consists of "anti-elite words group" and "unity of people words group." Using this dictionary, the author conducted a sentiment analysis. The result in Figure 3 showed that Tom Watson (1904 and 1908) and James Weaver (1892) both scored high in 'people-unity sentiment' and scored low in 'anti-elitism sentiment.' They were precisely similar. Contrary, William Jennings Bryan (1896 and 1900) scored lower in 'people-unity sentiment' and scored very high in 'anti-elitism sentiment.' Bryan was more anti-elitist than other candidates from the People's Party. Wharton Barker (1900) scored low in both sentiments.

Second, the author calculated cosine similarity (see Figure 4). The results of the cosine similarity calculation showed considerable overlap between the documents of Watson and Weaver. Although Bryan and Watson or Weaver were somewhat similar, Barker was distant from all the other presidential candidates from the People's Party.

Figure 4. Cosine Similarity between the Documents			
	1896/1900 (Bryan)	1900 (Barker)	1904/1908 (Watson)
1892 (Weaver)	0.828	0.756	0.885
1896/1900 (Bryan)		0.77	0.844

1900 (Barker)			0.752
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In the third place, the author conducted a topic model with Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). About LDA, the author found that the topics of Watson and Weaver contain topics related to the unity of the people, including words such as "peopl," "us," "govern," and "power." On the other hand, topics for Bryan contain many anti-elite words such as "bank," "gold," "money," and "silver." The result for Baker is unique. It contains anti-elite words like "railroad" or "tax" and contains words that stressed people's unity, such as "labor" and "peopl" at the same time.

Figure 5. Result of Topic Model with Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) by 5 Topics					
Topic Year	1	2	3	4	5
1892 (Weaver)	state, peopl, law, made, nation	peopl, land, law, t, public	state, power, year, one, upon	state, govern, year, compani, land	state, call, land, money, unit
1896/1900 (Bryan)	govern, bank, bryan, made, men	can, state, gold, now, bank	govern, upon, money, state, peopl	one, money, can, peopl, men	upon can, bryan, law, silver
1900 (Barker)	may, tax, railroad, give, can	people, tax can must, may	men labor, make, t, trade	people, labor, tax, make, state	great, railroad, e, peopl, thus
1904/1908 (Watson)	state, can, govern, one, us	state, govern, polit, year, life	state, say, law, nation, parti	state, law, peopl, one, money	peope, watson, one, polit, man

Conclusion and Discussion

Conventional studies assumed all the presidential candidates from the People's Party were nearly homogenous. However, the results of this study show that they were different sort of populists. Watson and Weaver stressed more the unity of the people rather than anti-elitism. On the other hand, Bryan emphasized more anti-elitism. Finally, the author suggests room for reconsidering the concept of Populism used in studies of

American politics and history.

Appendix: Dictionary Terms

The following terms were used as the dictionary words to identify the presidential candidates' populist discourse from 1892 to 1908.

Unigrams

(Anti-Elites)

bond-holder, railroad, capitalist, despotism, millionaire, bank, rings, trust, usurer, corporation, corruption, intimidation, bribery, subsidized, robbery, injustice, monopolized

(Unity of People)

Initiative, referendum, pension, farmer, silver, muzzled, impoverished, silenced, prostrated, self-protection, pauperized, unrecognized, degenerating, stolen, tramp, poverty, telephone, telegram

Bigrams

(Anti-Elite)

entrenched interest, moral ruin, political ruin, material ruin, colossal fortune, governmental injustice

(Unity of People)

common folk, australian ballot, secret ballot, constitutional provision, free silver

Trigrams

(Anti-Elites)

politicians in league

(Unity of People)

hireling standing army, fruit of toil, graduated income tax, postal savings bank

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