

# Do Economic and Identity Cleavages Account For the Differences Between Left and Right Populism? Hungary, Venezuela, and the United States (Working Paper)

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## Abstract

Left and right wing populism are widely used concepts, but lack a developed theoretical framework. In this paper I describe a new model of right and left wing populism based on economic and identity cleavages developed by Mukand and Rodrik and give two examples—Fidesz in Hungary and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV)—that fit the model empirically. I use a classic computer generated content analysis of these cases to test the model. Initially I analyze the speeches of left (Hugo Chávez) and right (Victor Orbán) populist leaders and find support for the model. For a comparative scope, I look for evidence of populism in the speeches of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. I find that Obama has no populist leanings but that Donald Trump has clear right populist tendencies. I conclude that the cleavage model shows promising results and present thoughts about how an analysis based on the model advances our understanding of left and right populism.

## Introduction

Judis (2016) divides populist regimes into left-wing and right-wing varieties. The difficulties in defining these tendencies in populism are reflected in the difficulties in conducting empirical research on the phenomena. There have been both qualitative (Aslandis 2016, Bánkuti et al. 2012, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013) and quantitative (Fernandez-Gracia and Leungo 2018, Popping 2018, Hawkins 2009, March 2017, Ernst et al. 2017) efforts to distinguish

right and left populist parties from each other. Most of these studies are descriptive in character, dividing populist movements defined generally by reference to an historical inheritance of populism or to particular aspects of the political history of countries examined. Theoretical explanations for right and left populism are less common.<sup>1</sup>

In recent papers Mukand and Rodrik (2020) and Rodrik (2018, 2019) have presented a new model for how different populist regimes arise in different situations. Their scheme is built around two potential divisions populist movements exploit, economic and identity cleavages. They argue that these cleavages shape the anti-establishment politics Judis identifies in left and right populist movements, but in different ways. The identification of economic and identity cleavages with right and left wing populism would be a theoretical advance if the model works.

Below, I first provide a short overview of Mukand and Rodrik's model. I then look at the two baseline cases: the Fidesz regime in Hungary (right-wing populism) and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) in Venezuela (left-wing populism). Then, applying the cleavage model, I develop dictionaries of abstract terms distinguishing right and left-wing populist movements and use content analysis of speeches by the leaders of the regimes in Hungary (Victor Orbán) and Venezuela (Hugo Chávez) and find their public output tracks the cleavage model. For comparative scope, I look for populism in the speeches of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. I find that Obama has no populist leanings and that Trump shows clear right wing populist tendencies. I conclude that the model shows promising results and present thoughts about how using the cleavage model advances our understanding of right and left populism.

## The Model

Mukand and Rodrik's model begins by dividing society into three main groups: elites distinguished by wealth or status, majorities of the middle class and poor, and minorities

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<sup>1</sup>But see Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) or March (2017).

identified by ethnic, religious, or citizen status differences. This leads to two potential divisions populist movements exploit, economic (income/social class) and identity (ethnic-nationalist/cultural) cleavages. The era of “neo-liberalism” emerging in the 80s is the background leading to the increasing popularity of both kinds of populist regimes (Mukand and Rodrik 2020, Rodrik 2018). Neo-liberalism called for faith in market mechanisms, substantial decreases in regulation of both domestic and international business, and decreasing the role of the state through privatization of social services and lower taxes (Ostrey, Loungani, and Furceri 2016). As might be expected, this disrupted the social fabric in many countries as wages decreased, regulation of the economy turned in favor of foreign intervention, privatization and foreign investment increased, and government services were gutted.

Mobilization against the causes of these problems was easy for any left wing populist movement. The distress of the people is attributed to an uncaring economic and political elite that was both purposefully causing economic hardship by reducing government expenditures and protective regulations and simultaneously opening the economy up for foreign business and financial interests with no democratic accountability. Left populists have targeted domestic elites and their international partners, building a political movement on mobilizing majorities and minorities against existing economic and class structures, restoring economic independence, and establishing political equality (Rodrik 2018). Thus left wing populism can be characterized as

Majorities + Minorities vs. Elites

and will emphasize cleavages built on economic issues.

In advanced capitalist countries, the neo-liberal “Washington consensus” led to the same policies that were forced on the developing countries: ending welfare state supports, deregulation of the economy, reduction of trade and monetary barriers, and ideological shifts toward support for globalization, especially for capital flows (Streeck 2014). Further, the ties between the various secondary organizations—labor unions, local chambers of commerce, “fraternal” organizations—and political parties that had been the backbone of social democratic politics in developed countries became more attenuated (Skocpol 2003, Streeck

2017, 2014).

The result has been an increasing turn toward status identifications and a disconnect between national political programs and the preferences of mass publics (Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013, Streeck 2014). Increases in poorly integrated migrant minorities brought on by recent migratory pressures provides a ready scapegoat for those disoriented by economic distress and cultural change. Here Rodrik (2017), like Judis, asserts that populist movements connected to factions of political elites have rallied the majority against a minority “other” and foreign influences, building political power by opposing “globalist” economic integration and launching attacks on ethnic and national minorities. Thus right wing populism results from

Populist elites + Majorities vs Minorities  
and tends to emphasize identity cleavages.

## The Cases

As the basis for the following analysis, I have chosen two cases that are generally considered to illustrate the poles of right and left wing populism: the Fidesz regime in Hungary and the PSUV regime in Venezuela. A short overview of the history of these regimes and the research describing them will show that they fit the cleavage model well.

The Alliance of Young Democrats (abbreviated Fidesz) was formed by a leadership group gathered around Viktor Orbán after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. After little success in early elections, Fidesz won the 1994 election with Orbán as Prime Minister. However, the Socialist Party won the 2002 and 2006 elections. And was left to face the depression of 2008 and the collapse of Hungarian state finances on its own. The 2010 elections returned Fidesz a supermajority of National Assembly seats, allowing the party to promulgate a new constitution and pass a variety of new laws cementing the party’s power. Fidesz has maintained its supermajority ever since (Lendvai 2012, 2017, Krekó and Enyedi 2018).

Fidesz fits the model. After 2010, the Fidesz elite supplied a populist alternative targeting outside economic influences from the European Union and international capital, the threat of large-scale immigration to Hungary, and the existence of indigenous minorities (Lendvai 2012, 2017, Krekó and Enyedi 2018). Further, empirical research into the public pronouncements of the Fidesz government has shown it to be solidly populist in character (Popping 2018).

The second case is the PSUV. After the overthrow of the Perez-Jimenez dictatorship in 1954, Venezuela's Fourth Republic was based on the "Pact of Punto Fijo", an agreement on power sharing between the two major political parties, Democratic Action (AD) and the Social Christian Party. By the 1998 election, however, the pact had run its course. Hugo Chávez, a former army officer who had become well known after a 1992 coup attempt, won the presidency. Chávez then engineered a new constitution that was approved convincingly in 1999. There was a subsequent coup attempt against Chávez in 2002, but it failed for lack of either military or civilian support. Chávez was elected president three times by substantial margins. In 2006, he created the PSUV as a coalition of left wing parties (McCoy 1999, Gott 2011).

The PSUV fits the model for left populist movements. Chávez led a movement based on rallying both the majority and (particularly indigenous) minorities to overthrow rule by domestic elites and their foreign partners (Gott 2011). After Chávez died in 2013, his successor, Nicolás Maduro Moro, has followed Chávez's lead though the country's financial problems and international pressure have forced compromises along the way (Smilde 2015). Finally, as with the Fidesz regime, empirical evidence also supports the populist nature of the PSUV regime (Hawkins 2009).

## The Methods

I use a computer assisted quantitative content analysis based on dictionaries and using words in speeches as the unit of analysis to test the model (Alexa 1997). Following Laver, Benoit,

and Garry (2003), I have drawn the dictionaries from reference texts using both theoretical and inductive methods. The reference texts are party programs: the Fidesz manifesto, “A Stronger Hungary” (2007) and the PSUV “Proposal of the Candidate of the Homeland, Commander Hugo Chávez, for the Socialist Bolivarian Government, 2013 - 2019” (2013). Both texts were translated and cleaned using an English “stop word” list (Balet 2017). The cleaned texts were subjected to a preliminary word count generated by two applications, the content analysis program Yoshikoder (Lowe 2015) and the “word cloud” visualizer Wordle (Feinberg 2014). The word counts involved were sorted a priori into right and left wing categories fitting the economic and identity cleavages envisioned by the model. Common terms between the categories were removed, as were those associated with the particular situation of the countries involved. The final dictionary terms can be found in Table 1 below. Those with an asterisk beside them are “stems”, i.e. roots of a multiple number of words. Thus “Capital\*” in the Economy Left category can stand for capital, capitalist, or capitalism.

Table 1: Dictionary Tokens by Category

Economy Right	Economy Left	Identity Right	Identity Left
Balance	Capital*	Border	Consolidation
Competition	Domination	Citizens	Homeland
Establishment	Historical	Co-operation	Human
Financ*	Imperial*	Common	Independence
Free*	Model	Communit*	Indigenous
Interest*	Participatory	Decent	Integration
Jobs	Resources	Foreign	Men
Market	Revolution*	Honest	Military
Tax	Social*	Liberal	Peace
Work		Immigration	Power
		Local	Sovereign*
		Migrant*	System
		Polic*	Women
		Religio*	
		Right*	

The resulting dictionary categories were used to analyze a set of “virgin texts” for each regime (Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003). I selected the speeches of Hugo Chávez and Victor

Orbán as an initial test and, as a comparison, the speeches of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. I divided the speeches into three categories: annual messages , political speeches, and speeches to international bodies or representatives (Choi, Bull, and Reed 2018). One would expect that:

- annual messages would be comprehensive and aimed at a wide domestic audience,
- speeches to political supporters would be informal and reflect direct political appeals by the speakers, and
- speeches to international bodies or representatives would be aimed at creating or cementing relations with other regimes,

The number of speeches for each leader and their sources are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Number of Speeches by Category – Chávez, Orbán, Obama, Trump

	Annual Messages	Political	International
Chávez (Alvarado 2017)	8	130	106
Orbán (Government of Hungary 2024)	8	154	58
Obama (Eidenmuller 2024)	7	129	85
Trump (US Government 2024, Lillelund 2021, Eidenmuller 2024)	3	180	49

Yoshikoder provides reports that compare the likelihood of use of different dictionary categories in texts generated by each leader. The comparisons are based on relative risk ratios (Lowe 2006, Adrade 2015). In the tables below I report the percent increase or decrease in each content category and the level of significance based on the 95% confidence intervals of the risk ratios comparing each collection of speeches. A positive percentage for, say, economy right content in Orbán’s speeches compared to Obama’s would mean it was more likely that economy right content would be found in Orbán’s speeches then Obama’s. A negative reading would mean that it was less likely that economy right content would be found in Orbán’s speeches then in Obama’s.

## The Evidence

Table 3 below presents the initial test for the model; a comparison between the combined speeches of Chávez and Orbán for each type of speech and in each category. As can be seen, on average Chávez's speeches are 147% more likely to contain left populist content than Orbán's and are, on the average, 186% less likely to contain right populist content. The contrasts are especially stark for identity right content, as might be predicted from Fidesz's emphasis on national culture, but all these differences are substantial and statistically significant. Further, the pattern of results is what the model would predict: higher percentages for Chávez on every left category compared to Orbán and even higher negative readings for every right category, especially in right identity content. The analysis contrasting the speeches distinguishes their positions exactly as predicted. Not only does this indicate that the dictionaries perform as expected by the model, but that they could be effective tools to gauge the degree and direction of populism in the content of other collections of speeches.

Table 3: Chávez – Orbán Speech Comparisons  
With Proportions and Significance Readings

Categories	Annual Messages	Political Speeches	International Speeches
Economy Left	141%*	274%*	248%*
Economy Right	-112%*	-88%*	-93%*
Identity Left	49%*	85%*	85%*
Identity Right	-253%*	-270%*	-300%*
* $p < .05$			

In tables below I compare speeches by Barack Obama (Table 4) and Donald Trump (Table 5) with Chávez and Orbán. using the same techniques as above. The differences between the two comparisons of speeches are interesting. First, as can be seen in Table 4, Obama was no populist. Chávez's speeches are, on average, 357% more likely to reflect left populism and, on average, 162% less likely to have right populist content than Obama's. This difference is especially pronounced in the annual messages and political speeches but the contrasts are substantial and statistically significant for all categories. This might be



expected; the United States is a capitalist democracy and Obama was always careful to distance himself from leftist rhetoric (Elwanger and Duncan 2014). This can be seen most clearly in the international speeches; Obama is less likely to show any populist content of any kind in comparison to Chavéz for these speeches.

Across all speech types Orbán's speeches are more likely to reflect Economy Left and Identity Right content than Obama's.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Obama's speeches show less right populist content in the economy right and identity right categories, again across all kinds of speeches. It is worth noting that there are insignificant differences (in **italics**) between Orbán and Obama on left identity (annual messages) and on economy right (international speeches) categories, but no pattern emerges as a result. Again, Obama's famous tendency to present as a moderate might be the explanation. As before, the dictionary categories seem to track the divisions foreseen by the cleavage model.

Table 4: Obama – Chavéz and Orbán Speech Comparisons  
With Proportions and Significance Readings

Categories	Annual Messages	Political Speeches	International Speeches
Chavéz — Obama			
Economy Left	548%*	1006%*	562%*
Economy Right	-210%*	-114*	-78%*
Identity Left	27%*	36%*	-36%*
Identity Right	-188%*	-160%*	-219%*
Orbán — Obama			
Economy Left	168%*	196%*	90%*
Economy Right	-46%*	-14%*	<b>8.4%</b>
Identity Left	<b>-18%</b>	-36%*	-152%*
Identity Right	27%*	42%*	26%*
*p < .05			

Table 5 shows a different picture. First, the results comparing Chavéz and Trump are what might be expected. Chavéz is more likely to use economy left rhetoric (on average

<sup>2</sup>Higher readings on economy left content in Orbán's speeches is probably due to his emphasis on national communities. A key word in context (KWIC) examination of content in Orbán's speeches using the economy left dictionary supports this interpretation. The main word stem showing similarities to economy left content (social\*) showed a strong emphasis on supporting communities in context. Again, this analysis was done in Yoshikoder.

702%) and his speeches are less likely to hold economy right content (on average -101%). Readings in the remaining categories across speeches are more interesting. Chávez's speeches are less likely to hold economy right content than Trump's, again as might be expected. On identity issues, however, Chávez's speeches have less content than Trump's. Notice that, as might be anticipated, the readings for identity right content are much less—an average of -179%—than for identity left, but Chávez appears to emphasize identity content less than Trump across all kinds of speeches, a suspicious precursor of right populist leanings. Further, all these differences are substantial and significant.

Results for the comparison of Orbán and Trump show much less difference. Trump's state of the union addresses show no substantial or significant difference from the content of Orbán speeches in the economy right or identity right categories (in *italics*). Again, Orbán is more likely to use left populist rhetoric—102% on average—on economic issues, but Trump clearly does not differentiate himself from Orbán on the very content that would distinguish him from right populist stances. In political speeches Trump shows no difference from Orbán on identity left issues. The reading for identity right is interesting. Since the 95% confidence interval of the risk ratio for the category (1.03 – 1.13) does not contain 1, the reading is statistically significant, albeit with little leeway (Lowe 2006). But there is no substantive difference between Trump and Orbán on identity left or right content in their political speeches. Finally, as with Obama, there is no significant or substantial difference in economy right content in international speeches. In short, there is evidence that Trump shows identifiable right populist tendencies, albeit unsystematic ones.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The findings above indicate that the cleavage model shows promise. The content analysis has revealed stark differences between the leaders of the Fidesz and PSUV movements tied directly to the economic and identity cleavages in their rhetoric. When applied to out-of-sample comparisons with Barack Obama and Donald Trump, interesting findings

Table 5: Trump – Chávez and Orbán Speech Comparisons  
With Proportions and Significance Readings

Categories	Annual Messages	Political Speeches	International Speeches
Chávez — Trump			
Economy Left	401%*	943%*	764%*
Economy Right	-86%*	-113%*	-103%*
Identity Left	-43%*	-17%*	-19%*
Identity Right	-187%*	-179%*	-172%*
Orbán — Trump			
Economy Left	88%*	174%*	44%*
Economy Right	<b>11%</b>	19%*	<b>-5%</b>
Identity Left	-43%*	<b>7%</b>	-121%*
Identity Right	<b>14%</b>	8%*	47%*
* p < .05			

emerge. Obama cannot be identified as a populist of either variety, given the evidence here. Indeed, he seems to avoid populist rhetoric, especially on economic issues.. On the other hand, Trump’s speeches show an affinity for right populism. He is no left populist as the results show. Chávez’s speeches are on average less right populist—140%—than Trump’s. The comparison to Orbán, however, reveals a pattern of no substantial differences between speeches of the two men, especially in annual messages. The patterns are not sufficiently regular for any general conclusions, but Trump is shown to the right-wing populist tendencies he has long been suspected of , differing little from Orbán in many categories.

The evidence suggests that Mukand and Rodrik’s model has shown the way to a better theoretical framework for examining right and left populism. There is clear evidence that the economic and identity cleavages identified by Mukand and Rodrik usefully distinguish left and right populism, both in comparisons between representatives of the tendencies and between them and other leaders. Further, using the cleavage model allows us to be more specific about how and in what context leaders show populist tendencies and by how much. The comparisons made here are still limited in scope. There is a lot more work to do, but the evidence indicates there now is a signpost showing the way to a more complete understanding of right and left populism.

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