

Populist Features in Non-Populist

Politicians: An Analysis

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award of the degree of BSc in Politics and International Relations**

**I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS
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Dedication

List of Abbreviations

LOTO – Leader Of The Opposition

PM – Prime Minister

PEB – Party Election Broadcast

RNC – Republican National Convention

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States

List of Tables

Table 1 – Features of Populism and Associated Authors

Table 2 - Features of Populism and whether they are present in Tony Blair and George W. Bush

Abstract:

There is a significant body of academic literature centred around defining populism and its features. Many of these approaches include features such as an appeal to “the people” and a personalised leader, which some texts indicate may also apply to non-populists. My study goes into detail on this issue, asking the question “do non-populist politicians have populist features?”. The approach involves introducing seven criteria for populism based on a combination of scholarly works: personalised leadership, appeal to the people, anti-elitism, appearance of an outsider, flaunting of the low, performance of crisis and a shallow ideology. These features are then applied to two non-populist case studies, aiming to determine if any populist features are relevant to them. My case studies are Tony Blair and George W. Bush, specifically their first two general election campaigns in 1997 and 2000 respectively. My data is qualitative, drawing from a combination of primary sources from both campaigns, such as speeches and policy platforms, and subsequent secondary academic analysis. I use qualitative coding to rearrange the dataset and identify if any of the seven populist themes are present, alongside drawing from wider literature on the cases if necessary. The study has found that all the populist characteristics within my criteria are present in the non-populist case studies aside from a shallow ideology. Reasons for this include the nature of political systems and some populist features having strategic electoral advantages. This creates an issue of breadth for present definitions of populism since many aspects unintentionally encompass non-populist politicians. Hence, future conceptions could centre around the feature of a shallow ideology, since this does not appear present in non-populists.

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Title Page | 1 |
| Acknowledgements | 2 |
| Dedications | 3 |
| List of Abbreviations and Tables | 4 |
| Abstract and Word Count | 5 |
| Contents | 6 |
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 8 |
| 1.1: Literature Review | 8 |
| Chapter 2: Defining Populism | 10 |
| 2.1 Personalised Leadership | 10 |
| 2.2 Appeal to the People | 11 |
| 2.3 Anti-Elitism | 11 |
| 2.4 Appearance of an Outsider | 12 |
| 2.5 Flaunting of “the low” | 13 |
| 2.6 Performance of Crisis | 14 |
| 2.7 Ideologically Shallow | 14 |
| Chapter 3: Methodology | 16 |
| 3.1 Application to my Research Question | 16 |
| 3.2 Data | 17 |
| 3.3 Limitations to my Research | 18 |
| Chapter 4: Case Study 1: Tony Blair | 19 |
| 4.1 Personalised Leadership | 19 |
| 4.2 Appeal to the People | 19 |
| 4.3 Anti-Elitism | 20 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 4.4 Appearance of an Outsider | 21 |
| 4.5 Flaunting of “the low” | 22 |
| 4.6 Performance of Crisis | 22 |
| 4.7 Ideologically Shallow | 23 |
| Chapter 5: Case Study 2: George W. Bush | 25 |
| 5.1 Personalised Leadership | 25 |
| 5.2 Appeal to the People | 25 |
| 5.3 Anti-Elitism | 26 |
| 5.4 Appearance of an Outsider | 27 |
| 5.5 Flaunting of “the low” | 28 |
| 5.6 Performance of Crisis | 28 |
| 5.7 Ideologically Shallow | 29 |
| Chapter 6: Findings | 31 |
| 6.1 Answering the Research Question | 31 |
| 6.2 Findings | 32 |
| Chapter 7: Conclusion | 34 |
| Bibliography | 35 |

Chapter 1: Introduction

There is a scholarly consensus that populism has been on the rise in the 21st century within Western politics, leading to academic debate over its precise features (Berman, 2021; Rooduijn, 2013; Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). Yet many of these features, such as personalised leadership and rhetoric focused towards a homogenous people, may also have application in non-populist contexts. This dissertation aims to answer the question “do non-populist politicians have populist features?” through a case-based qualitative study. I believe that analysing this question could raise profound issues with current conceptions of populism. To answer this question, I will first be defining populism by constructing a list of criteria informed by existing literature. My non-populist case studies of Tony Blair and George W. Bush during their general election campaigns of 1997 and 2000 respectively will then be introduced, alongside the body of sources I will conduct qualitative analysis on. I will then display the results according to each feature and whether or not they apply to the cases. Finally I will discuss my findings, providing an answer to my research question and alluding to the implications of this for future academic discourse surrounding populism.

1.1: Literature Review

There exists extensive literature revolved around defining populism, yet a precise conception remains the subject of academic debate (Rooduijn, 2013; Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98; Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). Much of this has been written within the past two decades in the context of a rise of populism in Western politics (Berman, 2021). Matthijs Rooduijn takes a case based approach to build a criteria based definition, offering a solid introduction to many key aspects including the focus on a personalistic leader (Rooduijn, 2013). Benjamin Moffit’s conception of populism as a political style is also a prominent work, giving a more detailed discussion of features including the conflict between “the people” and “the elite” and the display of “bad manners”. This idea is elaborated upon in Ostiguy’s article, describing populism as “the flaunting of ‘the low’”, partly due to its rougher, more informal nature (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). Since my research is based on individual politicians, Mudde and Kaltwasser’s work focusing on the populist leader is highly relevant, giving a detailed discussion of traits such as the appearance of an outsider (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 pp. 63-78). Finally, Kurt Weyland’s writing presents populism as political strategy, defining it as a non-ideological movement shaped around connecting a leader to the people (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). Due to disagreement surrounding populism’s precise meaning, I will be combining aspects from these five texts to shape my own definition.

With regard to my research question, some of the literature touches on the suggestion that populist features may be applicable to non-populists without offering further discussion. Moffit notes that mainstream political actors like Tony Blair and John Howard have been accused of being populist and suggested that they may have appropriated populist elements (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). Weyland also picks up on this, noting that some populist definitions are excessively broad and have encompassed non-populist politicians such as George W. Bush (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). Weyland refers to Kirk Hawkins' method of grading politicians' speeches according to populist criteria, which gives Bush a significantly high score, though Hawkins quickly dismisses this as an insignificant false positive (Hawkins, 2010 pp.77-82). All of this suggests that scholars acknowledge that whether non-populists have populist features is a valid question, yet they are reluctant to give it further discussion, potentially due to the implications it may have for their own definitions.

Literature surrounding my non-populist case studies picks up on potential features of their style and image without connection these to populist literature. Bennister's analysis of Tony Blair's oratory notes the personalised nature of his image, whilst also picking up on his use of colloquial language (Bennister, 2015 pp.156-171). In Bush's case, comments on the 2000 presidential campaign have noted his "folksy" manner and grounded projection (Wayne, 2001 pp.161-162). Further analysis of such features is frequent in the extensive body of literature covering the campaigns of Blair and Bush (Johnston et al., 2004; Renshon, 2005; Kranert, 2017; Howells, 1997). Present academic literature scratches the surface of my research question, yet detailed answers and discussion appears to be absent.

Chapter 2: Defining Populism

To answer the question “Do non-populist politicians have populist features?” it is first necessary to establish the features of populism. Through drawing on elements from five academic texts, I have been able to build a criteria based definition with seven characteristics. The scholarly consensus reads that populism itself is not attached to any traditional ideology and can be relevant to politicians irrespective of their political positions (Moffit, 2016 pp. 28-50; Rooduijn, 2013). Instead, it has been defined as a strategy, a style and a socio-cultural relationship, focusing on image rather than specific policies (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72; Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50; Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). That is not to say that policy is irrelevant to populism, but places significance on the packaging of such initiatives. Therefore my approach to populism is based on performance, style and image, with populist leaders following the following seven features.

2.1: Personalised Leadership

Since the focus of my question is on individual politicians, it is logical to begin my definition by focusing on the position of the leader. A common element within populist parties is a centralised leader, who builds an intense and direct bond with their supporters (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). In order for such a personalistic leader to emerge, they are usually a charismatic individual capable of making bold statements. In Matthijs Rooduijn’s study, the significance of the individual leader was found to be a key feature in 5 out of the 6 cases (Rooduijn, 2013). This provides evidence that a personalised leader is a key structural element of modern populist parties. It is important to note that whether or not a leader is charismatic is not quantifiable, but charisma in this context refers to extraordinary personal qualities which inspire popularity and devotion to the leader (Mudde and Kaltwasser, pp.66-67). It can be suggested that anyone capable of building such a bond with supporters is likely to possess charisma. Mudde and Kaltwasser delve further into how populist leaders present themselves, suggesting that the a common image is one of a strongman (Mudde and Kaltwasser, pp.63-78).

A contemporary example of personalised leadership is Nigel Farage’s fundamental importance to the UK’s right-wing populist Reform Party (Zulianello, 2019 p.332). Farage founded the party in 2018 as the Brexit Party, with his control being evident through its frequent description as “Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party” (*BBC News*, 2021). Data suggests that the party’s success is contingent on his involvement, with polling displaying an instant 3% increase in support after Farage returned as leader in 2024 (James, 2024). For a historical example, Rooduijn cites Juan Peron in Argentina, the archetypal populist “strongman” who emphasised his military background and underinstitutionalised his party to allow himself complete control (Rooduijn, 2013). The evident

significance of the leader within populism means that my other six populist characteristics are applicable to individual politicians and their leadership styles and rhetoric.

2.2: Appeal to the People

The feature most prevalent across the academic texts is the significance of appealing to “the people”. Moffit summarises that populist discourse and rhetoric fundamentally aims to appeal to the uncharacterised masses (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). He articulates that the people are the central audience of populism and are portrayed as the rightful holders of sovereignty, displaying the importance of empowerment to the rhetoric. Rooduijn also argues that populists place people at the centre of politics, whilst highlighting how flexible the term the people is, as it can apply to the electorate, the nation or any group the populists decide (Rooduijn, 2013). He also suggests that this group is a homogenous entity, therefore populist rhetoric has a distinct lack of class consciousness. A conspicuous example of populist rhetoric appealing to this group is in the name of Denmark’s leading right-wing populist party, which translates to the “Danish People’s Party” (Kosiara-Pedersen, 2020). Additionally, Weyland presents the example of Hugo Chavez, who’s rhetoric sought to embody the Venezuelan people’s struggle against US imperialism, uniting them against a common enemy (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72).

The relationship between the populist leader and the people is one of particular note. Weyland suggests that the populist conception of the people as a homogenous entity means that it is a group unable to act on its own (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). In many cases, the true bond between these people is between them and the populist leader, meaning the leader can justify their actions as “the will of the people”. A key part of the populist appeal to the people is a direct, unmediated channel of communication to strengthen the bond, with examples including mass rallies and television. These methods have been notably used by Narendra Modi, who has his own TV channel in India and regularly holds public rallies (Jafflerot and Tillin, 2017 pp.179-194). In the present day, social media can be added to this list of direct communication methods, as leaders’ posts are presented as unmediated and personal. Donald Trump’s regular use of Twitter typifies this, opting to continue using his personal account when in office instead of his official government profile (Gounari, 2018 p.214). Populist leaders aim to appeal to the people both through rhetoric and direct methods of communication.

2.3: Anti-Elitism

An effective methods populists use to build support from the people is the depiction of a common enemy. Rooduijn argues that the people-centric element of populism is contingent on

a promotion of anti-elitism (Rooduijn, 2013). Whilst the people are presented as the rightful holders of sovereignty, the elite are characterised as being out of touch and motivated by cynical self-interest. Moffit presents the conflict between the people and “the elite” as the fundamental division, articulating that populists frame the elite as the source of crisis and bad government, whilst the people suffer as a result (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). Trump made constant reference to the “Washington elite” as a group he would take power from during his 2017 inauguration (Trump, 2017). In this case, the elite group depicted is the central government, which is a particularly effective antagonist to choose at a time where public trust in the US government was just 20% (Pew Research Center, 2024). Much of the portrayed conflict between the people and the elite is surrounding who has power, linking to the idea that the people are the rightful holders of sovereignty.

What is notable about the elite is that it is a stretchable concept applicable to whichever group the populist chooses to target. Ostiguy lists numerous examples of groups who different populists have framed as elites, including colonisers, the liberal elite and Europe (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). The only essential qualifier for an elite appears to be that they are either distant or a powerful minority, with the two not being mutually exclusive. Both these features of an elite present them as out of touch and ill-suited to deal with the people’s concerns. This is crucial to the narrative that the elite have no moral right to hold the power they have over the people. Trump’s rhetoric surrounding the Washington elite serves as an example of the elite being defined as a powerful minority (Trump, 2017). There are examples of opposition to a distant elite within British euroscepticism, perhaps most notably the Leave campaign’s slogan during the EU referendum of “Take Back Control”, inferring that a vote to leave would restore sovereignty. (Watt, 2016). Populism therefore relies on the people to be pitted against a powerful or distant elite group who hold power without moral authority to do so.

2.4: Appearance of an Outsider

Mudde and Kaltwasser note that since populism’s success is due to it being presented as the voice of the people, a group which has been disenfranchised, populist parties and leaders must ensure they are viewed as authentic and different from the out of touch political elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 p.63). This makes it necessary for them to build an “outsider image” which presents them as mavericks who are not members of the elite (Rooduijn, 2013). In many cases, populists are not truly political outsiders or are extremely wealthy, yet they still present themselves as disadvantaged underdogs. One method populist leaders use to convey this is claiming to hold a lack of political experience, meaning that they are not associated with the

political class. This was clearly illustrated when Donald Trump won the 2016 US presidential election having never previously held political office (Worthy and Bennister, 2017). Yet in other cases, populist leaders have had lengthy involvements in politics despite the image they present, in some cases they have even inherited their positions, such as Marine Le Pen in France (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 p.74). Others may have begun as outsiders, but have since become a part of the political scene having run in numerous elections, such as Nigel Farage (Quinn, 2024).

Mudde and Kaltwasser suggest that the most successful populists are those who have never themselves been part of the political elite but have connections to it, describing this group as insider-outsiders (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 p.75). Sarah Palin is an example, owing much of her notoriety to John McCain, an obvious political insider, whilst Silvio Berlusconi had a strong connection to former Italian PM Bettino Craxi. What is clear is that very few populists are entirely separate from elites, yet it would be detrimental to their message for them to publicly admit this, hence the appearance of an outsider is a prominent strategy.

2.5: Flaunting of “the low”

Pierre Ostiguy’s socio-cultural definition of populism gives it the description of “the flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). He also notes the antagonistic nature of populism, further emphasised by the term “flaunting”, which infers a very deliberate provocative performance. This antagonism is significant within populism due to the prominence of conflict between the people and the elite. The high to low axis is described as a measure of how politicians relate to people, with high politicians tending to be cosmopolitan and polite and favouring institutions and legal structures (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). By comparison, low politicians are more nativist and coarse and favour structures which boost their own personal authority, whilst displaying culturally popular tastes. The similarity between high politicians and what populists would frame as the political elite is clear, as they adopt a professional style compared to the emotional image of low politics. As examples, Al Gore would be described as an archetypal high politician whilst Sarah Palin displays the attributes of a low politician (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50).

The idea of high politicians being well behaved is also touched upon by Moffit, who includes “bad manners” as one of his features of populism (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). This is viewed as the coarsening of political rhetoric, which includes using slang and informal language, alongside a tendency to be less polite to opponents. Such “bad manners” is exemplified by Donald Trump, who regularly uses informal language and insults political opponents with nicknames such as “crooked Hilary” (Rowland, 2019). Narendra Modi is also a politician who displays the low

through his speech, using language “grounded in a common idiom” (Vittorini, 2022). There are clear benefits to populists performing “the low”, the clearest being to further an outsider image and separate themselves from establishment politicians by not performing the same formal rhetoric and actions. Another reason is that their antagonistic actions towards political elites could be viewed as justified, particularly by supporters who believe that regular politicians are corrupt and out of touch. Fundamentally, “the low” on Ostiguy’s axis exhibits qualities and characteristics that populists present in order to further their appeal to the people.

2.6: Performance of crisis

A feature which almost all academics accept is part of populism is the performance and presentation of some form of crisis. They generally present the crisis as a serious threat to the people at the fault of the elite (Rooduijn, 2013). Such crisis can be completely invented or overexaggerated, but what is relevant is that populists present it as significant. Moffit emphasises the performative nature of the crisis, suggesting that populists must dramatise the crisis to give impetus to their message and portray a sense of urgency (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). In all 6 of Rooduijn’s case studies, the proclamation of a crisis is found to be a major feature, such as Berlusconi stating that he had no belief in the “old political class” (Rooduijn, 2013). This is an example of a populist claiming that the elite’s distance and lack of understanding of the people is a political crisis in itself. In other cases, populists proclaim that a specific policy issue is resulting in a crisis, an example being immigration. Nigel Farage has routinely claimed that the UK is “broken” and in cultural crisis due to immigration (McKiernan, 2024). Crisis, similar to the elite, has a stretchable definition which populists can use to fit their message.

Yet I would caveat this feature by remarking that any opposition politician in electoral politics is likely to argue that there are issues with the present situation. This was evident in the 2020 US election when Joe Biden framed his campaign against Donald Trump, who he said had “cloaked America in darkness”, by creating anger and division (Biden, 2020). Ironically, Biden was framing the populist governance of Trump as a crisis in itself, suggesting that this tactic can be used by non-populists also. Keir Starmer used a similar strategy in 2024, when he claimed that chaos within the ruling Conservative Party had led to a political crisis (Asthana, 2024). The performance of crisis therefore may simply be a feature of modern politics, yet its prevalence within the literature surrounding populism has compelled me to include it as a feature.

2.7: Ideologically Shallow

As already touched upon, populism is not attached to any particular ideology and is instead a style which can be applied to cases across the political spectrum (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). Mudde and Kaltwasser describe populism as a thin-centred ideology which holds the singular belief that society is divided between a homogenous people and a corrupt elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 p.6). Through discussion of the previous six features, it is clear that my definition of populism is more focused on style, structure and performance than ideology. Weyland makes an important clarification that populism's personalistic nature means that it follows the leader's whims and can therefore be pragmatic and opportunistic (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). Its thin-centred nature means that the leader is able to shift policy positions for whilst still following the basic populist principles. Therefore populism is not only not an ideology in itself, but also indicates a lack of a coherent set of beliefs, where leaders prioritise vote maximisation over political principle. Weyland explains that this qualification is what disqualifies fascist leaders from being populist, as they tend to dogmatically pursue ideology. Scheppele also argues that populism is inherently opportunistic, presenting Victor Orban as an example of someone who appeals to the people with the motivation of retaining power (Scheppele, 2019). Whilst populists are by no means the only politicians who are opportunistic, this is a useful feature to distinguish between populist and ideologically extreme politicians.

Table 1 – Features of Populism and Associated Authors

| Populist Feature | Associated Authors |
|---------------------------|---|
| Personalistic Leader | Weyland, Rooduijn, Mudde and Kaltwasser |
| Appeal to the People | Moffit, Weyland |
| Anti-Elitism | Rooduijn, Moffit, Ostiguy |
| Appearance of an Outsider | Rooduijn, Mudde and Kaltwasser |
| Flaunting of "the low" | Ostiguy, Moffit |
| Performance of Crisis | Rooduijn, Moffit |
| Ideologically Shallow | Moffit, Weyland, Mudde and Kaltwasser |

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1: Application to research question

Now that the criteria for populism have been established, it is necessary to discuss how it will be applied to the question “Do non-populist politicians have populist features?”. Once the question is satisfactorily answered, I will consider the implications of this study for future definitions and discussion. I am taking a case-based approach to this study, using two major case studies of non-populist politicians. I have selected Tony Blair and George W. Bush as my two cases, specifically focusing on their first general election campaigns in 1997 and 2000 respectively. My analysis will begin by giving evidence for them being non-populist, and it should be expressed that they have been selected primarily as they rose to power prior to the rise in Western populism during the 2010s (Rooduijn, 2018). They led parties of different political persuasions and operated in different political systems, with Blair acting in the UK’s Westminster system compared to Bush in the US’s presidential model. This gives my research a greater range, allowing me to analyse populist features in two separate political contexts. I have chosen to spotlight the first election campaigns for two reasons, the first being that analysis of the cases’ lengthy political careers would be long-winded and would introduce contradictions of rhetoric and image at various different points. Analysing only the first elections avoids such pitfalls and gives my research a more concise focus. The second reason is that politicians are able to define themselves on their first national campaign, as it is their first time directly appealing to the wider electorate.

In order to analyse these case studies in accordance with my research question, I am deploying qualitative methods. The reasoning behind this is that many aspects of populism, such as the appeal to the people, are non-quantifiable and therefore better explored through an interpretive approach (Rooduijn, 2013). Qualitative methods will be applied to a range of primary and secondary sources surrounding the two campaigns, with data being categorised according to the seven features of populism. The qualitative strategy of coding will be used, as described by Maxwell, to fracture the data and rearrange it to allow for further discussion (Maxwell, 2009). This method is well suited for research within my developed framework of populist criteria and will help identify which features are themes within the sources for my case studies. My seven features will fulfil the role of themes in thematic analysis, and I will attempt to identify patterns which indicate whether or not these features are present in the cases (Mackieson et al., 2018). When necessary, I will be adding evidence from the wider literature alongside my chosen sources in order to reinforce my arguments.

3.2: Data

I have opted to use 7 main sources for each of my case studies, with four of these being primary sources from the campaigns and the other three being academic literature. The first of these primary sources are Blair's speech at the Labour Party Conference of 1996 and Bush's speech to the RNC in 2000 (Blair, 1996; Bush, 2000a). These offer a lengthy display of both politicians' rhetoric whilst they are setting out their platforms for the coming elections in front of a supportive audience. Whilst Blair's speech took place months prior to the election, it was his last set piece conference speech as LOTO and puts focus on the upcoming ballot, therefore its inclusion is relevant. I have used another primary source for each case study where their positions are challenged, in Bush's case the first debate between him and Al Gore provides a perfect example of this, alongside the chance to contrast his style with the Democratic nominee (Bush, 2000b). In the absence of an election debate for Tony Blair, his *Question Time* appearance during the campaign has instead been selected, where he is challenged by members of the audience (Blair, 1997). Further campaign materials have also been included, notably the Labour Manifesto and the Republican Party Platform, which are analysed for their rhetoric and framing of policies (Labour Party, 1997; Republican Party, 2000). For the final primary sources I have used TV broadcasts to give a greater range of materials. For Blair, Labour's PEB on the 24th of April 1997 which focuses on him and his motivations and follows him both working and at home is clearly a relevant example for this (*Party Election Broadcast*, 1997). I have compensated for the shortened length of US TV advertising by combining two separate election adverts to analyse Bush, one where he speaks about personal responsibility and once with a voiceover describing his plan for prescription drugs (*Trust*, 2000; *Priority MD RNC*, 2000).

As far as academic sources are concerned, I have opted for a source for each candidate which focuses on their political style. For Blair this is Mark Bennister's analysis of his oratory whilst for Bush I have included Stanley Renshon's enquiry into his image (Bennister, 2015 pp.156-171; Renshon, 2005). The sections of Michael Kranert's article, which highlights first person pronouns in third way leaders, discussing Tony Blair have also been included, as this provides a strong secondary analysis of his rhetoric (Kranert, 2017). Sources covering the campaigns in detail are also used, in Blair's case Richard Howells' analysis of Labour's PEB campaign (Howells, 1997). Two texts have been selected for the Bush campaign, the first being Johnston, Hagen and Jamieson's book covering the 2000 presidential election, particularly the chapter on candidate traits (Johnston et al., 2004 pp.119-146). The other is Stephan J. Wayne's book *The Road To The White House 2000*, focusing on sections between pages 160 and 248 which cover

the campaign strategy (Wayne, 2001 pp.160-248). All of these sources make up my dataset for this study's analysis.

3.3: Limitations to my research

It is important to note that quantitative methods have been criticised for being vulnerable to assumption and bias on the author's part, creating potential for a flaw in my study (Mackieson et al., 2018). I have attempted prevent this by retaining full objectivity, yet it is not inconceivable that internal biases may have had some impact. Having only two case studies, whilst allowing greater depth, may not be fully representative of all non-populist politicians. Despite these flaws, I believe my methodology is equipped to comprehensively answer the research question.

Chapter 4: Case Study 1: Tony Blair

The first of my case studies is Tony Blair and his role in the 1997 Labour Party general election campaign, after which he would go on to serve as Prime Minister for 10 years. In the last decade, Blair has been vocal in expressing his opposition to populism, urging progressive centrists to construct a new policy platform to combat it (Blair, 2017). Additionally, the majority of academic literature would indicate that he is not an overtly populist actor, with Moffit directly stating that any accusations to the contrary should not be taken at face value (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). It is for these reasons that Blair can be defined as a non-populist politician.

4.1: Personalised Leadership

The populist characteristic of personalised leadership is undoubtedly present in Tony Blair, evident through both his rhetoric and prominence during the campaign. It is evident from the data that there was a personalised nature to his rhetoric. Kranert highlights Blair's frequent use of first person pronouns in speeches, particularly at the 1996 conference (Kranert, 2017). He deployed the motif of "I vow that we will" before reciting key policy pledges, with the use of the first person displaying his personal responsibility for such actions (Blair, 1996). The focus on the individual rather than the party here is a conscious choice and is emblematic of the personalised nature of Blair's leadership. Wider literature has noted that Blair acted to reshape party structures to centralise power, making him structurally personalistic as well as rhetorically (Shaw, 2016). This was displayed through his use of policy committees, which served to sideline the annual conference from policy decisions and give more control to the party's leadership (Kogan, 2019 pp.63-64).

It is also notable that Blair is described as charismatic, a trait which a populist leader requires according to Mudde and Kaltwasser, inspiring popularity and devotion (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 pp.66-67). Mark Bennister notes that much of Blair's appeal during the campaign was owed to him being considerably more charismatic than his rival, John Major (Bennister, 2015 pp.). On top of this, he was able to personify New Labour's cross-class appeal, making his image a focus of the campaign. He was presented in a presidential style during Labour's PEBs, with the documentary style broadcast focusing solely on his motivations and character (Howells, 1997). Blair's presidential image, alongside first-person rhetoric and moves towards centralisation serves as evidence that the populist feature of personalised rhetoric does apply to him.

4.2: Appeal to the People

The populist feature of appealing to a homogenous “people” is extremely prevalent in Blair’s rhetoric across the data. This was notable during the 1996 conference speech, when he referred to the people a total of 51 times throughout his address (Blair, 1996). Such references include his description of the Labour Party as “the political arm... of the British people”. The proclaimed people-centric nature of the party goes further in the 1997 manifesto, which styles itself as a “contract with the people”, a description later used by the populist party, Reform UK, in their 2024 manifesto (Labour Party, 1997; Reform UK, 2024). Throughout this rhetoric, the people are referred to as a homogenous entity in the populist manner (Rooduijn, 2013). Blair would also directly use the concept of the people to defend certain policy decisions, such on *Question Time* regarding the use of referendums, stating “we are involving the people and the people should be grateful” (Blair, 1997). Through this, he was able to present himself as seeking the direct consent of the people on issues such as the Euro or devolution. In keeping with populist definitions, Blair also presented himself as having a direct mandate from the people, displaying him in a presidential manner with support which bypasses the UK’s parliamentary system (Kranert, 2017). This is reflective of the populist style of building direct support and popularity to claim to embody “the will of the people” (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72).

Blair’s methods of communication also had populist features, linking to his personalised leadership. Whilst he did not regularly hold mass rallies as many populist leaders do, his arrival at Downing Street after his first election victory was staged to display his connection to the people. Blair opted to walk and was greeted a large crowd of supporters in a spectacle aimed at emphasising his connection with the voters (*BBC News*, 2017). TV was used as a direct method of communication during the PEBs of 1997, in particular through the documentary broadcast. This broadcast depicted Blair in informal settings, such as in his kitchen, which served to humanise him and make him relatable to viewers, further strengthening the connection (Howells, 1997). It is evident that both through rhetoric and communication methods, Tony Blair sought to connect to and embody the people.

4.3: Anti-Elitism

Whilst Blair regularly made appeals to the people, the notion of a conflict between them and an out of touch elite was not as prominent in both his actions and his rhetoric. During the 1996 conference speech, it was only when discussing education that he truly invoked anti-elitism, arguing the it was unjust that the best education was “available only for a few” (Blair, 1996). It can also be argued that he portrayed the privatised utilities as a self-interested elite during the 1997 campaign, however this appeared to be to justify the windfall tax as an individual policy

rather than a broader anti-elitist strategy (Blair, 1997). In fact, Blair's desire to have a cross-class appeal arguably prevented him from using rhetoric which antagonised any particular group, opting to reach out beyond Labour's traditional supporters (Bennister, 2015 p.159).

Whilst the elite is a stretchable concept, it is not evident that Blair relentlessly opposed any powerful or distant group during the campaign. Instead, well-off groups such as high earners and large corporations, were not targeted by New Labour. Blair actively opposed increases on the top rate of income tax and cut corporation tax, policies which could have been framed with anti-elite performance and rhetoric, marking a shift from Labour's past (Wickham-Jones, 2021). Ultimately, Bennister's assertion that Blair was focused on broaden the party's appeal appears to explain a relative absence of anti-elite sentiment (Bennister, 2015 p.159).

4.4: Appearance of an Outsider

Blair's prior political career made the image of a complete outsider impossible, yet the data suggests he did construct the image of being new and different. Whilst a lengthy involvement in politics is not completely absent from populist figures, Blair had served in frontbench positions under two consecutive leaders before his own ascension to the leadership, giving him the traits of an insider (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 p.74; Davis, 2025). Yet he sought to separate himself from traditional political leaders through his rhetoric, which was evident during the documentary PEB where he presented himself as a reluctant politician (Howells, 1997). He described a press event as "rubbish you have to do" and stated that his childhood dream was instead to be a footballer (*Party Election Broadcast*, 1997). He also had the distinction of not having the background of a traditional Labour Party member, meaning he could state that he "wasn't born Labour, [he] became Labour" (Blair, 1996). This presented him as a politician motivated by conviction rather than lifelong careerist ambition.

The manner in which Blair presented himself as an outsider reflects a desire to be perceived as authentic, which is an effective populist technique for politicians to establish themselves on the side of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 p.63). Bennister notes the a key part of Tony Blair's oratory was the presentation of himself as an ordinary person, which he took steps to enhance, such as downplaying his public school accent (Bennister, 2015 p.159). He also acted to remove himself from political and appeared on popular television shows to display himself in an apolitical setting. All of this served to help Blair distance himself from traditional politicians and spotlight his personality. Despite this, Blair never claimed to be a full political outsider, as this would be impossible given his past, but he did present himself as a "new" more personable

leader (Bennister, 2015 pp.158-160). Therefore I would classify him as partially echoing the populist feature of the appearance of an outsider without fully embodying it.

4.5: Flaunting of “the low”

The concept of “the low” as Ostiguy articulates it is heavily relevant to the rhetoric of Tony Blair (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). There is evidence of Blair regularly deploying references to popular culture, such as in his conference speech, where he referenced the song *Thee Lions* (Wheeler, 2009). Blair adjusted the lyrics to proclaim that “Labour’s coming home” and that “17 years of hurt never stopped [him] dreaming”, allowing him to appear in touch with the public zeitgeist (Blair, 1996). He also portrayed himself as a man with culturally popular tastes, claiming his favourite food was fish and chips and he enjoyed to watch television programmes like *Gladiators* and *Eastenders* (Rentoul, 2001 p.299). “The low” has also been expressed by Blair through his use of more informal language, for example when he described himself as “a pretty normal guy” (Bennister, 2015 p.158).

Despite his tendency to utilise the cultural low, it is not clear that Blair entirely follows Ostiguy’s definition of “flaunting”, which implies an antagonistic performance (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). On the contrary, Bennister notes that Blair opted for softer rhetoric than his predecessors as leader to reach out beyond Labour’s traditional base (Bennister, 2015 p.159). Once again, Blair’s desire for a broad popular appeal prevented him from fully embracing a populist characteristic. This was further evident during his appearance on *Question Time*, where he acted calmly and politely towards members of the audience who strongly disagreed with him, at no point exhibited anything that would fall under Moffit’s definition of “bad manners” (Blair, 1997; Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). For these reasons it can be claimed that whilst Blair exhibited the cultural low, he did not flaunt it.

4.6: Performance of crisis

It is undoubtable that the performance of a crisis was present in the Labour campaign, yet the crisis wasn’t framed in the anti-elite manner common with populists (Rooduijn, 2013). The campaign rhetoric presented the crisis as a failure of governance by the incumbent Conservative government, which Blair repeatedly attacked. This notable occurred during *Question Time*, where he stated that “another five years of Conservative government is the problem facing the country” (Blair, 1997). He made similar attacks during the conference speech, describing the government as “feckless, irresponsible, incompetent managers of the British economy” and stating he was “repulsed by what they have done to our country” (Blair,

1996). Presenting a crisis of governance is far from unprecedented among populists, as it was part of Silvio Berlusconi's platform where he targeted the "political class" (Rooduijn, 2013). Yet since Blair did not present himself as a complete outsider to politics, these attacks are not targeted at a political elite and are instead aimed simply at the rival party.

Alongside a crisis of government, the campaign also presented a crisis of trust in politics. This was a defining feature of Blair's forward to the manifesto, where he stated a desire "to renew our country's faith in the ability of its government and politics" which had been tainted by "the Conservatives' broken promises" (Labour Party, 1997). This breakdown of trust implies a disconnect between the government and the people, making this a distinctly populist crisis. Blair's image as a leader in touch with the people allowed him to present himself as the solution to this particular crisis. It must be noted that the role of the opposition is criticising the government and seeking to replace it, therefore it structurally lends itself to performing a crisis (Haddon et al., 2024). It is undeniable that this populist feature was present in Blair's campaign rhetoric yet it can be argued that the crisis presented was nothing out of the ordinary for an opposition party.

4.7: Ideologically Shallow

Much of the data displays Blair being faced with accusations that he lacked principles during the campaign, reflecting the populist feature of a shallow and flexible ideology. Such accusations were prominent during Blair's *Question Time* appearance, with questions suggesting that Labour either offered nothing new or had abandoned their left-wing principles (*Question Time*, 1997). It was also claimed that due to Blair's focus on presentation and tendency to dilute his message, he was a politician who prioritised style over substance (Bennister, 2015 p.156). Such accusations were not entirely without basis, as Blair had made considerable effort to distance himself from the perceived dogmatism of Labour's past (Bennister, 2015 pp.156-171). However, it would be inaccurate to state that Blair was absent of ideology simply because the policies and beliefs he promoted were different from those traditionally endorsed by Labour.

The 1997 manifesto clearly states a "new and distinctive approach" from the "old left and Conservative right" to policy, justifying the rebranding of the party as "New Labour" (Labour Party, 1997). This new ideological outlook embodied by Blair was comprehensively discussed in Anthony Giddens' book *The Third Way*, which frames New Labour as embodying a new form of social democracy relevant to the 21st century (Giddens, 1998 p.1-26). The "Third Way" is defined as an ideology which combines elements of social democracy, such as increased public

spending in health and education, with embracing elements of the New Right like privatisation and the free market (Giddens, 1998). This ideology is clearly evident in both Blair's policy and rhetoric, as he famously stated his desire to prioritise "education, education and education" whilst the manifesto pledged not to return to the high taxation common in the 1970s (Blair, 1997; Labour Party, 1997). Blair's clear commitment to the Third Way counters suggestions that he was not ideological, therefore meaning that the populist feature of shallow ideology is not one he exhibited.

Chapter 5: Case Study 2: George W. Bush

My second case study spotlights George W. Bush and his successful 2000 presidential campaign. Much like Blair, Bush is on record expressing a dislike of populism, stating that he was “worried” about its prominence in today’s politics (Bush, 2024). Similarly to Blair, he is mentioned by Moffit as an example where accusations of being populist are inaccurate and therefore it is valid to use him as a non-populist case study (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50).

5.1: Personalised Leadership

The data indicates that George W. Bush displayed personalised leadership in a manner that is standard within the presidential system. Much of the campaign focused upon his personal qualities, depicting him as a commonsensical leader with the skills to govern effectively (Wayne, 2001 pp.161-210). In his speech to the RNC, he emphasised his record of delivery whilst working cross-party as Governor of Texas, attempting to frame this as one of his personal qualities (Bush, 2000a). This is reflective of Mudde and Kaltwasser’s conception of the populist leader who builds popularity based on their extraordinary individual skills (Mudde and Kaltwasser, pp.66-67). The ability to lead was another quality Bush aimed to present himself as having, evident in his rhetoric throughout the RNC speech when he criticised the incumbent Democratic administration for having “not led” (Bush, 2000a). He followed this up by stating “I will lead” attempting to portray a strong and decisive leader, with leadership being an area he led Gore in throughout the campaign according to polling (Johnston et al., 2004 p.121).

Despite strong personalistic elements, Bush’s rhetoric was not entirely focused upon his own image. His convention speech was notable as he preferred using the pronoun “we” over “I” when making commitments (Bush, 2000a). Such examples include promises that “we will abolish the death tax” and “we will give our military the means to keep the peace”, which do not present him as the sole changemaker. Whilst much of the campaign was centred around Bush’s personal character, there are systemic reasons for this in a presidential system. Johnston et al. argue that perception of the candidates’ personalities is a key influence on voting behaviour, meaning that Bush was incentivised to emphasise his own positive traits (Johnston et al., 2004 p.143). Therefore, whilst Bush did display elements of personalised leadership, he merely followed standard practice in presidential elections.

5.2: Appeal to the People

Bush framed traditional right-wing issues and promises in a populist manner to present himself as the candidate on the side of the people. He highlighted his support for individual choice

throughout the campaign, particularly on the issue of social security (Johnston et al., 2004 p.146). He presented this particular pledge with an appeal on a TV campaign advertisement where he directly appealed to the people, stating “I trust you to invest some of your own social security money for higher returns” (*Trust*, 2000). The direct and personal nature of this appeal reflects the populist feature of the direct connection between the leader and the people (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). He also used people-centric rhetoric to promote his tax policies, justifying tax cuts as “sharing the surplus with the people” (Bush, 2000a). Bush directly stated that “the surplus is the people’s money”, implying a sense of moral ownership and presenting himself as the man who would restore the people’s property, whilst echoing the populist idea that the people are the rightful holders of sovereignty (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). He used similar rhetoric on education, proclaiming that “local people should control local schools”, again focusing on restoring the people’s sovereignty (Bush, 2000a).

Bush also aimed to appeal to the people through the presentation of his character. His campaign sought to cultivate a down to earth image, including placing him with ordinary people in neighbourhood programs and in schools for underprivileged children (Wayne, 2001 p.162). During the first debate, he stressed that he sent his children to public schools, displaying himself as in touch with the people’s concerns regarding education (Bush, 2000b). This down to earth image was particularly effective when contrasted with perceptions of Al Gore, who was accused of fabricating anecdotes about his mother-in-law’s arthritis medication, displaying him as both dishonest and out of touch (Johnston et al., 2004 p.133). Bush’s relatable character, alongside his framing of issues such as tax and social security in terms of empowering people, means that he exhibited the populist trait of connecting to the people.

5.3: Anti-Elitism

The concept of an out of touch elite who have taken sovereignty away from the people is extremely prominent in George W. Bush’s rhetoric. He presents the Washington government, and Washington politicians in general, as the detached elite in the mould described by Rooduijn (Rooduijn, 2013). The 2000 Republican Party Platform mentions Washington on 9 occasions, with none being positive, including a derisive reference to “Washington-based politicians” who “rip-off” union members to finance campaigns (Republican Party, 2000). During the convention speech, Bush made efforts to associate Washington with “bitter arguments” and fearmongering, presenting it as dishonest and ineffective at governing (Bush, 2000a). This depiction of a Washington elite out of touch with the people was also present when Bush discussed his tax cuts. He argued that the budget surplus was “not the government’s money”

and by cutting taxes he would be taking it away from the Washington elite and back to the people (Bush, 2000a). Whenever Bush stressed his support for individual choice on any issue, he would note his opposition to government control (Johnston et al., 2004 p.146). Just as Moffit describes the fundamental conflict of populism as between the people and the elite, Bush frames the division as between central government control and individual choice (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50).

Bush ensured he associated Al Gore with Washington and therefore the elite, a connection grounded in reality since Gore had served as Vice President for the past 8 years. During the first debate he referred to Gore's attacks on his financial credibility as "Washington fuzzy math" and suggested that Washington politicians made decisions based on polling rather than principles (Bush, 2000b). He also presented Gore as arrogant, believing he knew better than the people and desiring to spend money "on their behalf". Through advertising, Gore was depicted as a supporter of "big government" which would allow "Washington bureaucrats" to interfere (*Priority MD RNC*, 2000). Through both his own rhetoric and attacks on his rival, Bush framed the traditional right-wing opposition to big government as a populist conflict against the distant Washington elite.

5.4: Appearance of an Outsider

Bush placed great emphasis on his background outside of central government in order to ensure he was viewed as an outsider to Washington unlike his rival. He spotlighted this during his convention speech, when after criticising Washington he stressed "I come from a different place", discussing his upbringing in Midland, Texas (Bush, 2000a). He repeated this assertion during the first debate, remarking that him and Al Gore "do come from different places" thereby contrasting himself with the Washington insider (Bush, 2000b). Bush's considerable efforts to portray himself as an outsider were necessary since he was the son of a former president and therefore in a privileged position and tied to Washington. By having connections to the elite but presenting himself as an outsider, Bush framed himself in the insider-outsider mould described by Mudde and Kaltwasser, similar to populists like Silvio Berlusconi and Sarah Palin (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017 p.63).

The data indicate that Bush did not just contrast himself from the elite through direct statements, he ensured his entire image was that of a Washington outsider. In terms of speaking style, he used moderate tones to contrast the harsher partisan rhetoric of politicians in Washington (Wayne, 2001 p.209). He further separated himself from Washington partisanship by speaking of his desire to work with both Republicans and Democrats (Bush, 2000b). His

previous experiences and background were also a part of his rhetoric, such as his previous job in “small oil” which helped differentiate him from career politicians. Renshon argues that, despite his father’s prominence in politics, George W. Bush was not driven by a lifetime desire to seek the presidency, being motivated by policy ambition rather than personal ambition (Renshon, 2005). The image of a conviction politician helped Bush be viewed as authentic and honest compared to the careerist self-interested Washington elite. It is evident from this that the populist appearance of an outsider was a key part of his repertoire.

5.5: Flaunting of “the low”

Ostiguy’s conception of populism as the flaunting of the low was clearly reflected in Bush’s campaign. The deliberate provocative performance inferred by the verb “flaunting” could be seen clearly during the first debate, where he made direct criticisms of Al Gore. He accused Gore of using “Washington fuzzy math” when analysing the Republican policies and suggested that he was “running on mediscare” (Bush, 2000b). Bush’s use of the “mediscare” pun reflects the cultural low which Ostiguy argues that populists embrace by using less formal language (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). Ostiguy also notes the prominence of “folksy” expressions in populists, a term which has been frequently applied to Bush’s manner (Wayne, 2001 p.162). Bush would also use informal language and phrases, such as in his RNC speech where he proclaimed “don’t mess with Texas” (Bush, 2000a). It is notable that Ostiguy directly references Bush as an example of a politician who, despite coming from a rich and political family, falls on the low end of the socio-cultural dimension (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98).

Bush’s flaunting of the low became even more pronounced due to Al Gore being perceived as the archetypal “high” politician (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98). Since populism thrives on high politicians being viewed as aloof and out of touch, Bush aimed to exaggerate this divide. He did this through weaponising a common misconception that Gore claimed to have “invented the internet”, which despite being misleading, depicted Gore as egotistical and dishonest (Wiggins, 2000). During the first debate, Bush responded to Gore’s detailed criticism of the finances prescription drugs policy with the sarcastic remark “not only did he invent the internet, but he invented the calculator” (Bush, 2000b). This joke at the Vice President’s expense qualifies under Moffit’s definition of “bad manners” whilst also helping to dismiss a legitimate policy criticism (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). The great advantage Gore had over Bush was his perceived superior intellect and competence, yet through flaunting the low, Bush portrayed this as a negative, making Gore seem elitist and arrogant compared to with his own grounded and relatable image.

5.6: Performance of Crisis

Despite Bush openly criticising the Washington government, he stopped short of proclaiming a full blown crisis during the campaign. In fact, in some cases he did the opposite, opening his convention speech by referring to the present “good times” and claiming “never has the promise of prosperity been so vivid” (Bush, 2000a). The tone of that speech was one of opportunity rather than crisis, indicating a desire to “use these good times for great goals”. The party platform also made reference to the “powerful economy” the country had, claiming this meant a “unique chance to confront persistent challenges” (Republican Party, 2000). Polling suggested that voters largely believed that the incumbent government had positively impacted the economy, which Gore attempted to capitalise on (Johnston et al., 2004 pp.108-110). With voters believing in the current prosperity and being supportive of the incumbent administration, it would perhaps have been unwise of Bush to proclaim a crisis given his desire to stay in touch with the people.

Yet criticism of the Clinton-Gore administration was still prominent in the Bush campaign, as he argued they were responsible for numerous policy failures. Bush claimed that the incumbents had overseen an “erosion of American power” and military, with the country having reduced influence on the world stage (Bush, 2000a). Campaign advertising stated that prescription drug prices had “skyrocketed” under Clinton-Gore and that Bush was the candidate with a solution (*Priority MD RNC*, 2000). He also argued that there were failures in education and healthcare policies which he would aim to solve (Bush, 2000a). Yet these critiques don’t imply the same level of urgency as Moffit argues populists portray, instead merely pinpointing policy areas which a Bush administration would aim to improve (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). It is notably that, despite these criticisms, Bush’s overarching argument was that the USA faced “good times” and focused on opportunity, therefore his campaign did not have the feature of performing a crisis.

5.7: Ideologically Shallow

George W. Bush did not present himself as staunchly ideological in his rhetoric, though it is difficult to argue he was ideologically shallow. Wayne describes him as attempting to contrast the ideological nature of Washington by emphasising the theme of working collaboratively with both parties (Wayne, 2001 p.162). During the campaign he attempted to shift the perception of him as staunch right-winger by emphasising issues traditionally dominated by Democrats, such as healthcare and education (Johnston, 2004 p.144). This move to occupy the centre could be viewed as opportunistic and therefore populist according to Weyland (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). Yet whilst Bush shifted focus to outmanoeuvre Gore, he notably didn’t pander to audiences and would stick to principles on many issues despite hostility, such as free trade and opposing

intense anti-immigrant rhetoric (Renshon, 2005). It can also be argued that Bush was merely trying to broaden his appeal by shifting focus away from his party's traditional base, a common strategy in presidential elections which had also been used by Bill Clinton in 1996 when he focused on crime prevention (Wayne, 2001 p.162).

Bush presented his platform as a coherent ideology, labelling it "compassionate conservatism" (Bush, 2000a). This included emphasising social tolerance, such as praising progress towards gender and racial equality and defending Mexican immigrants as simply seeking a better lives for their children (Renshon, 2005). Bush highlighted issues of compassion such as education and social security, with his moderate tone helping reinforce the compassionate image (Wayne, 2001 p.162). This was combined with focus on traditional conservative talking points, including his promise of tax cuts and support for individual responsibility (Bush, 2000a). The anti-Washington feature of the campaign is also a traditional right-wing argument, stemming from opposition to statism and big government. The combination of tolerance and compassion with individualism and fiscal conservatism made up the ideology of compassionate conservatism. Therefore, George W. Bush's 2000 campaign did not have the populist feature of a shallow ideology.

Chapter 6: Findings

Table 2 – Features of Populism and whether they are present in Tony Blair and George W. Bush

| Populist Feature | Associated Authors | Tony Blair | George W Bush |
|---------------------------|---|------------|---------------|
| Personalistic Leader | Weyland, Rooduijn, Mudde and Kaltwasser | Yes | Yes |
| Appeal to the People | Moffit, Weyland | Yes | Yes |
| Anti-Elitism | Rooduijn, Moffit, Ostiguy | No | Yes |
| Appearance of an outsider | Rooduijn, Mudde and Kaltwasser | Partially | Yes |
| Flaunting of “the low” | Ostiguy, Moffit | Partially | Yes |
| Performance of crisis | Rooduijn, Moffit | Yes | No |
| Ideologically Shallow | Moffit, Weyland, Mudde and Kaltwasser | No | No |

6.1: Answering the Research Question

Through this case based approach, it is evident that the question of this dissertation “do non-populist politicians have populist features?” can be conclusively answered in the affirmative. Table 2 displays that Tony Blair clearly displayed 3 of the 7 populist features, whilst partially evoking another 2, and that 5 of the criteria were present in George W. Bush. The only feature which was absent from both was a shallow ideology.

The fact that so many features of populism are present in non-populist politicians presents problems for it on a conceptual basis, and the case studies have illuminated issues with many of the criteria. Firstly, both Blair and Bush were found to be personalistic in their leadership, in Bush’s case due to the US’s presidential system which places significant focus on the character of candidates (Johnson et al., 2004 p.143). Therefore any campaign in a presidential system is likely to be personalistic out of necessity rather than any deliberate style or structure. Blair’s campaign in 1997 was also described as presidential, indicating that it is more of an echo of the American political system than a populist strategy (Howells, 1997).

Both politicians also appealed to the homogenous concept of the people in their rhetoric, which suggests that this is just as much a feature of democratic campaigns as it is of populism. Evidence for this includes the phrase “the people” being used in speeches to convey a broad

appeal to voters (Blair, 1996; Bush 2000a). Analysis of Bush has also uncovered issues with the populist conflict between the people and the elite. The fact the concept of the people versus the elite is so stretchable meant that Bush could apply it to traditional right-wing talking points like opposition to big government (*Priority MD RNC*, 2000).

The appearance of an outsider comes as a natural progression from opposing the Washington elite for Bush, since attacking the politicians of the central government made it necessary for him to distinguish himself from them. The position of his rival as the archetypal Washington insider made such a distinction all the more evident. Bush also adopted the image of a conviction politician which helped create a more trustworthy image (Renshon, 2005). There were also echoes of the outsider image in Blair, who aimed to present himself as a new type of leader. The lack of trust in government in both countries also served as an incentive for the outsider image, with it being below 40% in the US and just 22% in the UK in the build-up to both campaigns (Pew Research Centre, 2024; Carvel, 2001). For similar reasons, the flaunting of “the low” has advantages, since traditional “high” politicians will likely suffer from this distrust. Blair also displayed how association with the culturally popular can boost relatability and connection to the electorate, helping to humanise a candidate (Bennister, 2015 p.158). Ostiguy himself defines George W. Bush as a culturally “low” politician, adding further evidence that this is a concept which stretches beyond populists (Ostiguy, 2017 pp.73-98).

The performance of crisis has been found to be a feature of opposition politics, as flagged earlier in my definition. In 1997, Blair presented the crisis as one of poor government to great success given the unpopularity of the incumbent Conservative government, whilst also highlighting policy areas which he wished to improve, such as health and education (Blair, 1996). Whilst Bush contradicts this by not proclaiming a time of crisis, this may prove to be an exception given the many other examples of non-populist politicians who present crises, such as Biden and Starmer (Biden, 2020; Asthana, 2024). Hence, my research has found that non-populist politicians have displayed six out of the seven features of populism, with a shallow ideology being the only exception.

6.2: Implications

One possible explanation for the prominence for these features is that, against the scholarly consensus and their own assertions, both Blair and Bush are actually populists. Yet this would trigger further questions as to just how many politicians perceived not to be populist would now have to be reclassified. If the majority of politicians were suddenly considered populist, it would no longer be a useful term to describe those who it currently encompasses. I believe my

findings instead suggest that present definitions of populism involve excessively broad criteria, an issue also flagged by Weyland (Weyland, 2017 pp.48-72). Another conclusion which could be drawn is one which Moffit suggests, that populism is a spectrum rather than a binary label (Moffit, 2016 pp.28-50). My own interpretation is that academic understandings of populism need to be reshaped around the only feature not to reveal itself in the case studies, a shallow ideology. This appears the only feature which does not suffer from the issue of excessive breadth and could therefore form the basis for future academic definitions and discussion of the issue.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

To conclude, my qualitative study has displayed that non-populist politicians are capable of displaying most populist features present in academic literature. It was found that six out of seven of the populist criteria were present in either Tony Blair or George W. Bush, giving a conclusive answer to my research question. My study is limited by its small number of case studies, leaving open an opportunity for further research with a more wide ranging set of cases to review and confirm my finding. Nevertheless, this analysis forms a valuable contribution to the body of literature surrounding populism due to the flaw it exposes with the prevailing definitions of populism. I have displayed how conceptions of populism which focus on features including appealing to a homogenous people and flaunting the cultural low are at risk of being excessively broad and unintentionally encompassing non-populist politicians. The study has indicated that the only established populist characteristic without this risk is a shallow ideology. The prominence of populist discourse within contemporary politics means that a newer, more precise definition is necessary, with this dissertation suggesting that a possible starting point could be to root it in the attribute of a shallow ideology. Overall, I have displayed that non-populist politicians can have populist features, signalling a need to review present conceptions of the topic.

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