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Analysing populist trends in the current U.S. political discourse: The case of person pro-forms

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In recent years, and especially following the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, one of the main features of the American political scene has been the ongoing polarization of the public debate. The causes of this schism can be found primarily in the deep social divisions that span throughout the country (Mason, 2016), which are also reflected in its political discourse. This paper aims to offer insights into the recent polarization of U.S. political discourse by analysing the use of person pro-forms (e.g., *I*, *we*, *us*) used by new political actors (i.e., those closer to Donald Trump, those defining themselves as outsiders, and those who have gained popularity over the last two years) during cable news political interviews, with particular attention to how their inclusive or exclusive functions (Levinson, 1983) contribute to populist stances.

The analysis of pro-forms was based on the transcripts of 40 interviews for a total of 94,372 words representing 50 actors across political ideologies and party affiliation. The methodological approach integrated quantitative corpus-based techniques, specifically AntConc (Anthony, 2014) and Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2003), and follow-up qualitative analysis of pro-forms within their context of usage, while also utilizing the interview videos for further interpretive insights. Results indicate that pro-form usage by the new political actors followed a similar strategy regardless of party affiliation. Most differences were instead

found when comparing pro-forms used by new actors with those of older and/or established politicians, even when sharing the same party affiliation. In particular, the new actors did not appear to associate themselves with any pre-existing form of power, but rather with the people they recognized as the only source of power, as was the case with some members of Congress who avoided identifying with it or who separated themselves from their own party. This finding recalls Laclau's (2005) characterization of populist political discourse as favouring the emergence of the people as the only source of power by eliminating the barriers of democratic institutions. Furthermore, the new actors' pro-form usage seemed to be influenced by the distinctive approaches of U.S. cable news media which, by often pursuing slanted representations of news (Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017), are strongly influencing American political discourse and reinforcing more radical views.

As similar trends towards polarization can be found in other areas of the world, for example in the United Kingdom and Italy, the findings can be revelatory of where the Western political system may be heading in the near future, especially in relation to the spread of populism and risks for democratic systems.