Abstract

Referring to the political contexts of the United States and the United Kingdom, this study explores how the effects of a rift in political representation triggered by the 2008 financial crisis (Baba et al. 2009; Inglehart and Norris 2016) forced national leaders on both sides of the political spectrum and the Atlantic to rethink their political agendas, each according to their own cultural context and background, in an effort to intercept ‘the people’, who strongly believed they had lost their voice (Rosanvallon 2011). By drawing on previous research concerning post-crisis partisan conflict, this study examines the extent to which government representatives adapt their political communication style to appeal to ‘the people’ at a time when resolute political action is needed the most. In doing so, the study posits that these mainstream political leaders have also capitalized on populist rhetoric and on its typical appeal to ‘the people’ and popular power. Conceptualizing who ‘the people’ are, however, is not straightforward (Canovan 1999, 2005; Taggart 2002), and it is by following this assumption that the study argues that ‘the people’ does not only refer to human social actors, but that the construct is also the result of political action planned by those who speak, act and stand for their best interests. With this in mind, a corpus of electoral and special-issue speeches of two US presidents and two British prime ministers, dating from 2009 to 2018, was collected and analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively with methods based on corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, supported by transitivity, appraisal and social actor analysis. By focusing on recurrent political themes and repertoires of political action that incorporate representational features of ‘the people’ across cultures, preliminary results point to the configuration of two discursive representational models that contain traces of populist communication styles.