Master's Thesis Evaluation Form

Student's name: Sophie Elisabeth Benson

Thesis title: Populist Trends in Republican Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speeches

Name of the supervisor: Anna Shavit

Name of the opponent: Tomáš Dvořák

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the thesis? Please give your reasons for the suggested grade in detail below.

1.   Does the author show understanding of one or more theories, and use theory to generate a hypothesis or to make the problem area more understandable.

Comments: In my view there are two problems. First, the thesis lacks solid literature review. Second, it also does not do a good job of applying theory on the data.

a. The author devotes a lot of space to history of American populism. That is ok. But it itself is not a theory. Populism in American politics is today one of the most researched issues in social science. There is very little from this literature in the theoretical section of this thesis.

b. However, my main concern is the following: Very often it is combined arguments from scholarly literature with arguments taken from newspaper/media articles. As if combination of these could constitute a theoretical basis for the thesis. Section 1.2.3 "Economic populism" can serve as an example. The aim of this section is to discuss to what extent is American populism driven by economic factors. References to scholarly articles are combined/blended with several references to media articles from New York Times, Guardian and New York times again. These media sources are treated in the same way as scholarly articles. The problem is not only that the presentation of the state of art is missing but that it is not followed principles of academic work and reasoning.

c. The thesis focuses on presidential nomination acceptance speeches. But there is no theory and/or literature that would be focused on this issue. At least the seminal work of J. Tulis (The Rhetorical Presidency) could have been included.

d. The thesis takes the model of Taggart as a guide for identifying populism in the respective speeches. The of model of Paul Taggart is presented reasonably well. What I disagree about is the operationalization/materialization of the key tenets of his theory. In particular, how can "absence of core values" (that populism is not based on any clear political ideology) be operationalized as "Impulsive enthusiasm, ecstatic audience responses, and chants that interrupt the flow of speeches"? How can self-limiting nature of populism (the temporary relevance of populist mobilisation) be operationalized as charismatic leadership? Mainly the former is unfathomable to me.

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2.   Is the research question articulated clearly and properly? Is the research question sufficiently answered in the conclusion?

Comments: The research goal is clear in the sense that the author wants to analyze whether the populist rhetoric is intensifying in republican candidate speeches. That is fine. What is not so fine is that it is stated that this should be done in correlation with the shrinking Republican primary demographics. Nowhere in the thesis is presented data on Republican demographics. It is also not related to the data from presidential acceptance speeches in any analytical step.

3.   Is the thesis based on relevant research and literature and does it accurately summarize and integrate the information?

Comments:
No. Bibliography is strongly based on media articles. Scholarly peer-reviewed articles constitute only a smaller part of the literature used. Articles from New York Times, Guardian, Time, CNN etc. are common. There is only about 10 peer-reviewed sources. That is ok for bachelor thesis but not for master thesis.

4.   What is the quality of the data or the other sources? Are the sample method, data collection and data analysis appropriate?

Comments:
Data quality is fine. Analysis is appropriate.

5.   Are the findings relevant to the research question? Are the conclusions of the thesis based on strong arguments?

Comments: Findings are used to answer the research question.

6.   Are the author's thoughts distinguished unambiguously from the borrowed ideas?

Comments:
Yes

7.   Is the thesis containing original/innovative research (in terms of topic, approach, and/or findings)?

Comments:
The choice of topic is original and interesting. Analysis not so much.

8.   What is the quality of style and other formal requirements?

Comments:
In terms of style and formal requirements everything is fine.

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9.   *Are there any other strengths and weaknesses of the thesis, which are not included in the previous questions? Please list them if any.*

Comments: The thesis presents a story/narrative that Republican party facing shrinking white electorate has reacted by increasing populist rhetoric. On page 27: "…party rhetoric shifted away from seeking to persuade general electorate and instead focused on encouraging populist anger in their core base regarding their slippering significance in the national discourse". Where is the evidence for this? The author takes evidence from a 2013 report following election of Barack Obama in 2012 that argues that the core electorate of the party is shrinking and that the party needs to improve its communication with the voters. But where is the evidence that the Republic party reacts by "encouraging populist anger"? Even the results of the empirical research presented in the thesis do not seem to support this – there does not seem to be any correlation between time and populist rhetoric (Table 2). Such a statement should be backed up by some evidence (analysis of party manifesto, interviews with politicians etc.) – none of this is present.
The author also treats Republican party as a homogeneous unit. But political parties are not like this. There are internal disagreements, factions differing in political ideology etc. Imposing single overarching narrative to the party without any evidence is not convincing.
Finally, the author portrays the Republic party as "law and order" racist and unresponsive party unable to cope with social change and thus clinging to inciting fear and using the populist strategy. Fine. But these statements are often not supported. If the author decides to take this stance there is also a literature that views these issues in the same (similar) light (e.g. Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018 "How Democracies Die") – however such literature is not presented.

The thesis has the following strengths:
-   The thesis has a clear structure, research goals are clearly stated, the argumentation and the structure of argument is also clear.
-   A like the idea of analyzing and comparing acceptance speeches and going back to 1960s is a great idea for a thesis.
-   The analysis and coding is done carefully, transparently and overall the analysis is trustworthy. The interpretation of the scores from coding seems relevant and interesting explanations are presented.

10.   *What topic do you suggest for the discussion in the thesis defence?*

Comments:

What is the difference between politics and science?

Does the Republican Party have some internal factions/wings?

11.   *Declaration that the supervisor has read the result of the originality check in the system: [   ]   Theses   [   ]   Turnitin   [   ]   Original   (Urkund)*

Supervisor's comment on the originality check result:

Overall assessment of the thesis:

I have major problem with the fact that **much of the theoretical section is a combination of peer-reviewed and media articles treated in the same way. This is in my view a very serious mistake and a violation of the standards of academic work**. The thesis does not include a conventional literature review section - based on peer-reviewed sources. Given solid empirical analysis I do recommend this thesis for defence but with grade E.

(Please, state clearly whether the thesis is or is not recommended for a defence and write the main reasons for the recommendation).

Proposed grade: E

(A- B: excellent, C-D: very good, E: good, F: fail)

Date: Signature:

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