Presidential Rhetoric and Populism

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Scholars and the general public have been struck by the norm-shattering rhetoric of President Donald J. Trump. His "rhetorical signature" is heavy with Manichean good-versus-evil messages, vilification of his opponents, and disdain for institutions and for evidence. But many politicians vilify their opponents and style themselves as uniquely able to solve their society's problems. In fact, Trump's Manichean discourse is typical of populist leaders, in the United States and around the world. Using text-as-data analysis of campaign rhetoric, we study the content and mood of presidential campaign speeches by a range of U.S. politicians, which allows a broader perspective not only on the uniqueness of Trump's rhetoric, but also its continuities with the rhetoric of others. This analysis allows us to define Trump as a right-wing populist. Right-wing populists, like left-leaning ones, are anti-elitist and Manichean in words and outlook. However, the two versions of populism differ in the nature of the anti-elitism, with right-wing populists targeting political elites and left-wing ones targeting economic elites. Right-wing populists also define the "other" as ethnic out-groups, who threaten the ethnically pure "people."

Trump the Populist?

On a nearly daily basis, President Donald J. Trump emits messages to the public that are sharply at odds with the norms of presidential speech. Trump's disruptor-in-chief profile has led scholars of political communications and the U.S. presidency to emphasize his uniqueness. Jamieson and Taussig (2017) use the term *signature*, with all the unique individuality that the word connotes, to describe Trump's mix of apparent spontaneity, Manicheanism, and disdain for accountability and for evidence. They write,

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> His apocalyptic contrasting of demise and deliverance, parsing of individuals as winners and losers, and demonization of those with whom he disagrees also differentiates Trump's rhetorical repertoire from that of those who previously held the office. Moreover, unlike his predecessors, Trump dismisses uncongenial evidence from institutionalized custodians of knowledge such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics. (Jamieson and Taussig 2017, 620)

Yet, though Trump certainly does have a rhetorical signature, his words are also a portal that connects him with politicians in other countries and other eras. He sounds like many figures scholars call *populists*. The Manichean nature of the world that his words evoke, the vilification of opponents, and the vitriol with which he condemns elites—all of this sounds like populism.

But the idea of Trump-the-populist will not be easily accepted by those with knowledge of the history of the term, at least as it has been deployed in the Americas. Populism is strongly associated with a kind of non-Marxist discourse of class conflict, and with economic distribution in both words and action. In the first half of the twentieth century, the term *populist* attached itself to a generation of Latin American leaders who rose to prominence after the Great Depression and who championed the poor and dispossessed. Lázaro Cárdenas redistributed hundreds of thousands of hectares to poor Mexican farmers, Juan Domingo and Eva Perón embraced Argentina's *descamisados* or shirtless ones, Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre in Peru aspired to lead a Latin American–wide alliance of poor and middle sectors, and Getúlio Vargas was known as the "father of the poor" of Brazil. The contemporary U.S. counterpart of these Latin American populists was Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), father of the New Deal.

Trump, who often brags about his wealth and has failed to introduce redistributive policies, bears little resemblance to FDR. Still, there is a thread that connects the current president to a tradition of U.S. populism, embodied by politicians like George Wallace, Huey Long, and Pat Robertson. All three embraced a Manichean worldview, and all claimed to speak for the common man or woman against elites. Wallace and Robertson also foreshadowed Trump in posing an ethnic "other" as threat, their words expressing a yearning for a whiter and more Christian America.

Likewise, scholars of comparative politics hear in Trump's discourse echoes of a slew of contemporary leaders from around the world. Where Trump evokes wagon trains bearing Christian settlers to the American frontier, Hungary's Viktor Orbán recalls an era during which Magyar culture was unpolluted by immigrants and non-Christians. Where Trump attributes treasonous motives to his Democratic and "deep-state" opponents, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sees similar motives among his liberal-secularist citizens, in the military, and in the deep state controlled by his Gulenist enemies.

Populist appeals are as much about who is excluded as they are about who is included: which elites, minorities, electoral opponents, or geopolitical rivals are responsible for obstructing the people's progress. Who do politicians identify as belonging to these out-groups? Once identified, how do they frame them to their political supporters? Are these out-groups misguided but well-meaning patriots, or are they implacable enemies of the people?

Our objective in this article is to explore the concept of populism and its variations in the context of U.S. presidential politics. We make sense of Trump's figure as populist

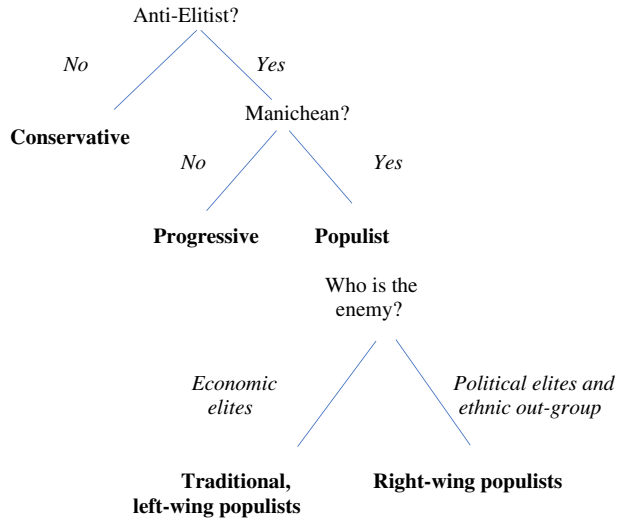

FIGURE 1. A Conceptual Scheme for Left- versus Right-Wing Populism.

by introducing a distinction between right-wing and left-wing populists.[1] Both varieties promote a Manichean worldview, using harsh language against opponents and framing themselves as moral saviors. Both claim to be anti-elitists. But the kind of enemy they vilify is quite different. Traditional left-wing populists rail against economic actors and elites: corporations, Wall Street, the wealthy. Right-wing populists rail against their partisan opponents and against ethnic and other out-groups.

Figure 1 offers a conceptual scheme that defines politicians according to whether they espouse an anti-elitist discourse, whether they promote a Manichean mindset, and whom they identify as the enemy—economic elites, political elites, or ethnic minorities.

The first distinction is between those who evince an anti-elitism and those who do not. We use the term *conservative* for those who eschew anti-elitism. Conservative has multiple meanings. In this context, we use it in the limited sense of denoting a politician who does not vocally question existing political and economic hierarchies.

Next, among anti-elitists, we ask whether the politician's discourse evokes a sharp, us-versus-them, good-versus-evil stance—whether or not the individual's worldview can be described as *Manichean*. We use the label *progressive* to denote anti-elitists who are not Manichean. As in our usage of *conservative*, the term *progressive* in this context is used in a very circumscribed sense. It is meant to convey a stance in favor of greater equality or undermining hierarchy, as well as tolerance and embrace of difference.

1. Müller (2016, 93) rejects the construct of left-wing populism in general, and Bernie Sanders as a left-wing populist because he identifies populism not with a policy profile but with a moral claim. We are not persuaded that the kinds of politicians we call left-wing populists eschew moral appeals. Note Sanders's claim, in the 2020 campaign, that large accumulations of wealth are "immoral." What is needed is a clearer differentiation of policy stances upheld by moral appeals, and those upheld without them.

We define anti-elitist, Manichean politicians as *Populists*. But populists may aim their verbal ire at quite different targets. One type excoriates economic elites; these are *traditional* or *left-wing populists.* Another type excoriates *political elites*; these are *right-wing populists*. The differences are not airtight: left-wing populists may also inveigh against political elites, and in the language of right-wing populists you will find a sprinkling of complaints about corporations or banks. But the latter tend to frame these economic diatribes around the idea that nefarious economic actors are enabled by their partisan opponents, the deep state, and the like.

Another important target of right-wing populists is ethnic or racial out-groups. We will see, in the U.S. context, that even when electoral pressures force the right-wing populist leader into alliance building with some out-groups, rather than by simply using friendly words toward that out-group, that leader's Manicheanism will lead him to forge alliances by identifying a common enemy.

Previous work, most prominently that of Hawkins and Silva (2018), systematically examines populist rhetoric. Our project differs from theirs in two key respects. First, the end goals of the two studies are different. Hawkins and Silva (2018) assign a populism "score" to politicians and parties by measuring the frequency of populist ideas, discourse, and rhetoric their speeches or manifestos contain. We aim not to score but to develop a conceptual scheme that distinguishes (1) populists from nonpopulists and (2) left-wing from right-wing populists, and to explore the usefulness of that scheme by applying it to a set of U.S. presidential candidates.

Our work is also distinctive in the methods we deploy. Hawkins and Silva (2018) use human coders to analyze the populist content of a small set of documents from politicians around the world, and then replicate this approach with machine learning. In contrast, we combine human and automated analysis to evaluate large bodies of text from a smaller set of politicians. As we explain below, we believe that this approach offers unique opportunities for understanding the dimensions of populist rhetoric.

Data and Method

To evaluate the speech of American politicians, we employ a combination of human and machine coding of campaign speeches. Machine coding permits us to analyze much larger quantities of politician rhetoric than would be feasible for human coders alone. Rather than select a sample of speeches for analysis, we aim to characterize the rhetorical strategies of entire campaigns: every political speech delivered by a candidate across one or more election cycles. We pair this analysis with conventional close reading of speeches. In combination, this hybrid approach affords a general conceptual map of politicians' speech as well as a close, meaningful understanding of their rhetoric.

We aggregate a large corpus of speeches from six U.S. presidential candidates, drawn from The American Presidency Project (Woolley and Peters 2008). Among these politicians, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders have been described as *populists* in academic and popular discourse. Given that we are interested in comparing these purportedly populist politicians with others who are not usually described with that term, we

TABLE 1
Description of Data

Politician	*Years*	*Speeches*	*Characters*
Franklin D. Roosevelt	1932, 1936, 1940	30	437258
Ronald Reagan	1964, 1976, 1979–80, 1982–86, 1988	82	885121
Barack Obama	2004, 2007–16	406	4986115
Hillary Clinton	2015–16	51	886394
Bernie Sanders	2015–16	25	377516
Donald Trump	2015–16	74	1185717

also study the rhetoric of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Ronald Reagan, and FDR. The basic characteristics of these corpora are summarized in Table 1. For the three candidates who ran for president in 2016—Trump, Sanders, and Clinton—we collect every speech they delivered during the primary or general campaigns. We pursue a similar strategy for the three politicians who won the presidency prior to 2016. For FDR, Reagan, and Obama, we gather all speeches in The American Presidency Project collection given at campaign events (either events for the candidate himself or for allies) or to the party's campaign committees. By filtering out dedicated addresses and matters of state, we hope to capture the universe of speeches in which politicians had the freedom to discuss topics of their choice.[2]

To train the algorithm to classify sentences with their emotional content and populist appeal, we begin with a hand-coding process. We decompose our 668-speech corpus to the level of individual sentences, which gives us 80,839 observations. A team of research assistants hand-coded a randomly selected 14% of the corpus. The coders conducted two tasks. The first task involved the categorization of the overall sentiment evoked by each sentence. They could code each sentence as having either a negative, a positive, both negative and positive, or a neutral emotional valence.[3]

The second task of our human coders was to determine whether a sentence mentioned one or more of a list of targets or "out-groups" we had defined. These included:

- **Political opponents:** a politician's direct rivals in a given election, members of an opposing political party, or the opposing party itself
- **Economic elites:** large companies (especially financial companies and banks) or references to chief economic officers (CEOs) or individuals known for their wealth
- **Governing elites:** bureaucrats, government officials, and lobbyists or "special interests"
- **Ethnic minorities:** the ethnic, racial, social, and religious groups that are minorities in the United States, including references to immigrants

2. Despite the fact that all three men served multiple terms, our collection of speeches by Barack Obama is much larger than that of FDR or Reagan. This reflects a disparity in the quantities of documents—in particular, campaign addresses—preserved by The American Presidency Project.

3. Words and phrases that convey positive sentiment express ideas like hope, success, or inspiration. Negative-sentiment words and phrases convey attack, pessimism, and anger, among others.

TABLE 2
Inter-Coder Reliability

Classifier	*Percentage Agreement*	*Gwet's AC_1 Score*	*Landis-Koch Scale*	*Altman Scale*	*Fleiss Scale*
Positive sentiment	60.7	0.56	Moderate	Moderate	Intermediate to good
Negative sentiment	69.4	0.75	Moderate	Moderate	Intermediate to good
Opponents	91.7	0.93	Almost perfect	Very good	Excellent
Ethnic minorities	97.2	0.98	Almost perfect	Very good	Excellent
Economic elites	95.3	0.97	Almost perfect	Very good	Excellent
Governing elites	90.6	0.93	Almost perfect	Very good	Excellent

These categories were not mutually exclusive: coders could select multiple out-groups if more than one was mentioned and could signal both negative and positive sentiment if the sentence contained aspects of both valences. Each sentence was classified by three coders, and disagreements were decided by majority vote (inter-coder reliability metrics are presented in Table 2).[4]

While the raw percentage agreement values[5] we report are generally more conservative than the rates reported by studies in which only two coders are employed, our dyadic agreement rates for sentiment classification are higher. The resulting inter-coder reliability data show high agreement for the classification of out-groups even in the presence of three coders.[6] To account for the possibility of chance agreement, we use three different benchmarking scales to interpret the magnitude of Gwet's AC_1 agreement coefficient.[7]

We then proceed to computer-assisted analysis. We use the labeled sentences to train a series of supervised classifiers in order to label the remaining 86% (69,844 sentences) of the corpus by sentiment and out-groups. For each classifier, we employ a convolutional neural network based on jointly learned word embeddings. Word embeddings, representations of words as dense, high-dimensional vectors, have become a popular tool for natural language processing tasks in the social sciences (Kozlowski, Taddy, and Evans 2019; Rheault and Cochrane 2020). Unlike "bag of words" approaches, which simply count

4. In order to overcome what Cicchetti and Feinstein (1990, 7) term the "Kappa paradox," which can arise when one uses Cohen's kappa as a measure of agreement, we rely on Gwet's AC_1 to measure inter-rater reliability. Gwet's AC_1 score is defined as "the conditional probability that two randomly selected raters will agree, given that no agreement will occur by chance." Wongpakaran et al. (2013, 2) diagnose two problems associated with using Cohen's kappa as a measure of inter-coder reliability: "in one paradox, a high value of the observed can be drastically lowered by a substantial imbalance in the table's marginal totals either vertically or horizontally while in the second paradox, Cohen's kappa will be higher with an asymmetrical rather than symmetrical imbalance in marginal totals, and with imperfect rather than perfect symmetry in the imbalance. An adjusted kappa does not repair either problem, and seems to make the second one worse." The three-way percentage agreements and Gwet's AC_1 scores for each of the classification categories are reported in Table 2.

5. The percentage agreement is calculated by dividing the number of times all three coders agree in their coding by the total number of observations, multiplied by one hundred.

6. Our percentage agreement rates for the out-groups are in line with other studies that use human-coded content analysis to measure populist discourse, such as Hawkins (2009) and Hawkins and Silva (2018).

7. We use the *R* package *irrCAC* to compute Gwet's AC_1 score and benchmark our agreement rates against three scales. As Table 2 shows, we achieved moderate reliability in classifying the emotional appeal within the sentences and high reliability for the identification of out-groups.

the frequency of words, word embeddings enable analysts to quantify speech for machine processing while retaining information about its syntactic structure and meaning.

To classify our full corpus by both sentiment and out-group, we construct a series of convolutional neural networks.[8] In recent years, deep neural networks have begun to frequently outperform other classifiers for text data. These models convert our training set into 32- or 64-dimensional word embeddings, which they then optimize to best predict the sentence labels. A convolutional layer in each model analyzes the text in windows of five to seven words, enabling the model to collect information about which words commonly appear together or in similar contexts. We train and tune the models on 75% of the labeled sentences while holding out the remainder as a test set. The accuracy and AUC (area under the receiver operating characteristic [ROC] curve) score of each classifier as evaluated against the test set are depicted in Table 3; the ROC curves themselves are presented in the appendix. The classifiers for out-groups generally perform well, exceeding 90% accuracy in all cases. The sentiment classifiers are somewhat less accurate. This is likely a reflection of the subjective nature of human sentiment coding—supervised classifiers are hampered by limitations in the clarity of the data used to train them. We seek to address these limitations by validating our findings with qualitative analysis of key documents.

We use these classifiers to predict the sentiment and out-group content of the remaining 86% of our corpus. As mentioned, we report two main results. First, we estimate the *prevalence* with which each politician discussed each out-group: the proportion of all sentences mentioning "others" that reference a given out-group. Second, we estimate the average *sentiment* with which each politician discussed each out-group, which we calculate as the average net sentiment (positive minus negative) of each sentence for each politician–out-group dyad. Paired with close textual analysis, these two quantities form the basis of the empirical evidence against which we assess our argument.

Anti-Elitism in Presidential Rhetoric

Most of the politicians whose rhetoric we study evince anti-elitist sentiments. This was true of all four Democratic politicians: FDR, who first ran for president in 1932 and was reelected in 1936, 1940, and 1944; Barack Obama, first elected in 2008 and reelected in 2012; Hillary Clinton, who ran in the Democratic primary in 2008 and, unsuccessfully, as the Democrats' nominee in 2016; and Bernie Sanders, Democratic primary candidate in 2016 and 2020.

Figure 2 is a first cut into their rhetoric. It indicates the prevalence and mood of their statements about the groups mentioned in the last section: their partisan opponents, governing elites, ethnic minorities, and economic elites. The areas of the circles on the figure correspond to the prevalence of each category of "other" in each speaker's discourse;

8. Because the language used to reference political opponents varies according to politician and election cycle, we considered fitting separate classifiers for each politician, but found that they failed to outperform the pooled classifier.

TABLE 3
Performance of Classifiers on Test Set

Classifier	*Accuracy*	*AUC*
Positive sentiment	0.76	0.76
Negative sentiment	0.81	0.82
Opponents	0.91	0.92
Ethnic minorities	0.98	0.84
Economic elites	0.95	0.97
Governing elites	0.97	0.89

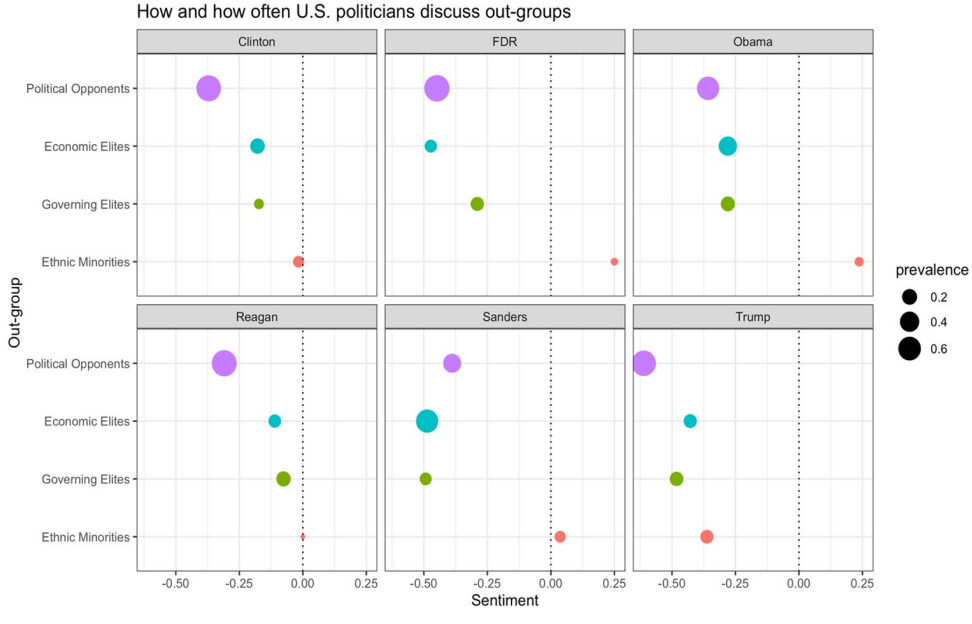

FIGURE 2. Politicians' Sentiment and Prevalence across the Out-Groups.

a larger circle for a given out-group suggests that that out-group was a more frequent topic of discussion. The location of each circle on the horizontal axis indicates the average tone of the speaker when he or she uses phrases related to this actor. Their statements hover on the negative side, though more decisively so for Trump, say, than for Reagan.

The most strongly worded anti-elitist messages, certainly on the economy, income inequality, and social hierarchy, are from Bernie Sanders. A fairly typical, and oft-repeated, example of Sanders's anti-elitist statements is this:

> [T]he super wealthy, who have wealth beyond comprehension—huge yachts, jet planes, tens of billions of dollars, more money than they could spend in a thousand life-times, while, at the same time, millions of people are struggling to feed their families or put a roof over their heads or find the money to go to a doctor. (Sanders 2015b)

Hillary Clinton, as well, uses strong language to condemn economic elites—though, as the figure shows, she does so less frequently and in less harsh terms than Sanders. As an example, Clinton lamented that

> Something is wrong when top CEOs earn 300 times more than what the average worker earns and I heard a statistic the other day that was kind of related to what we're talking about today, if you take the salaries, the compensation, of the top 25 hedge fund managers in America, those 25 men make more than all the kindergarten teachers in the country put together. (Clinton 2015b)

Obama's statements regarding economic elites can be located in between Clinton's and Sanders's. As a relative outsider (until he became senator and then, soon thereafter, president), he expressed somewhat more anti-elitism with regard to governing powers than did Clinton. For instance, in a statement that was coded as a negative one about governing elites, he said, "You know that we can't afford to allow the insurance lobbyists to kill health care reform one more time, and the oil lobbyists to keep us addicted to fossil fuels because no one stood up and took their power away when they had the chance" (Obama 2007). And in one attacking economic elites, he said, "After all we've been through, does anybody actually believe that rolling back regulations on Wall Street is somehow going to help small-businesswomen here in Las Vegas or the laid-off construction worker here in Las Vegas get back to work?" (Obama 2012).

A close reading indicates that the single figure in this group who eschewed anti-elitist rhetoric was Ronald Reagan. Reagan was a Republican who ran successfully for president in 1980 and was reelected in 1984. (It is significant that the only other Republican in this group, Donald Trump, did deploy anti-elitist messages, though ones that differed from the anti-elitism of the Democrats, as we shall see.) For instance, inspection of Reagan's economic statements that our procedures coded as negative were not diatribes against the wealthy but condemnations of high taxes and regulation. As befitted his profile as a pro–small government, pro-business conservative, Reagan avoided the criticisms of Wall Street, the wealthy, and corporations that featured frequently in the discourse of progressive and populist politicians.

Gradations of Manicheanism

A fact that jumps out from Figure 1 is that all politicians spoke frequently about their political opponents, and all did so in starkly negative tones. But there is negative—and then there is excoriating. These differences in Manicheanism, and the gradations in between, emerge from comparisons of the ways in which the candidates spoke about the opposing party. It is worth stressing that these differences are not "mere talk," but in fact reveal differences in strategy. The candidates who deployed less divisive language in fact pursued an additive strategy, of winning over converts by using a welcoming language. The most Manichean candidates, epitomized by Trump, favored a divisive strategy, one of building alliances by identifying common enemies.

Consider Reagan, the "happy warrior." When he first ran for the presidency in 1980, he attempted, quite successfully, to win over many erstwhile Democratic voters. His approach to doing so was to use relatively friendly words about Democrats, as expressed in his 1980 stump speech:

> I know in this place and speaking to this audience I would have to be addressing not just Republicans but Democrats and independents as well. And I hope this is true. Because number one, we can't change the course we're on without you. You are welcome, we need your help and support in a crusade to change the direction of our nation. (Reagan 1980b)

When Reagan spoke about the opposing party's leaders, he went out of his way to characterize the incumbent Democratic administration as well-meaning, even if it was incompetent and wrongheaded:

> [T]he important issues of the day have fallen into the hands of people *whose motives are certainly not in question* but whose fundamental understanding of how to lead America is woefully inadequate. (Reagan Reagan 1980b, emphasis added)

The other Republican presidential candidate who successfully courted many Democratic voters, Donald Trump, adopted quite the opposite rhetorical tactic. Graciousness toward opponents, whether heartfelt or strategic, is not in Donald Trump's toolkit. Where Ronald Reagan told Democratic voters that he needed them for his "crusade" and painted their current president as well-meaning but inept, Trump, in 2016 and thereafter, never mentioned the opposing party without lurching negative, even when he was trying to court their voters. For instance:

> [W]e have a lot of Democrats who support us, frankly, we have a lot of Democrats that aren't crazy. They have intelligence. Because the Democrat Party has gone so far left that nobody knows what to do. It's become radical resistance. (Trump 2018)

In contrast to Reagan's picture of opposing-party leaders as well-meaning but incompetent, Trump's language is replete with the Manichean notion that his opponents' intentions are nefarious. A typical example:

> Nancy Pelosi, crying Chuck Schumer, and the radical Democrats, they want to raise your taxes, they want to impose socialism on our incredible nation, make it Venezuela. … They want to take away your health care … destroy your Second Amendment and throw open your borders to deadly and vicious gangs. … Democrats have become the party of crime. … The Democrats have truly turned into an angry mob, bent on destroying anything or anyone in their path. (Trump 2018)

Another way to look at the harsh Manicheanism of Trump, in comparison to the more everyday panning of one's opponents that many U.S. candidates engage in, is to examine the most common adjectives that accompany mentions of their partisan rivals. Hillary Clinton's adjectives, when referring to Republican opponents, are relatively mild. The

most frequent ones include *wrong, unfit, divisive, unqualified, hard, presidential, afraid*, and *fair*. Reagan's are even milder: *liberal, democratic, republican, free, patriotic, foreign, military, tougher, balanced, hard, fair*, and *judicial*.

But Trump is ferocious. Among the adjectives he most frequently uses in juxtaposition to his Democratic opponents are *foreign, special, radical, illegal, bad, corrupt, congressional, criminal, terrible, massive,* and *disastrous*.

Comparing the extreme language of Trump with the softer tone of Reagan, it might be tempting to attribute some of the shift to a change in the times. Yet an even earlier president, FDR, used language that, though not as hard-edged as Trump's, still carried an undertone of good-against-evil. By personal demeanor, FDR hardly fit the mold of a rabble-rouser, and as a member of a wealthy East Coast political dynasty he did not come by his anti-elitist rhetoric naturally. But the father of the New Deal, who made his way to office during the Great Depression, indeed deployed the language of us-versus-them, the poor against the wealthy. A typical statement, foreshadowing the language of Sanders, is this:

> It is patent in our days that not alone is wealth accumulated, but *immense power and despotic economic domination* are concentrated in the hands of a few, and that those few are frequently not the owners but only the trustees and directors of invested funds which they administer at their good pleasure. (Roosevelt 1932, emphasis added)

By the measure of Donald Trump, FDR's verbal juxtapositions of the forces of good and evil in the American economy and society were tame. Manicheanism is probably best considered a matter not just of kind but of degree. Still, we are left with three American politicians—FDR, Sanders, and Trump—who fall most clearly into the bin of populism: they are anti-elitists who used strong language of struggle between good and evil. Do our analyses suggest a further distinction among these populists, in light of the enemies they identify?

Who Are the Targets?

FDR's diatribes against "immense power and despotic economic domination" contained echoes of the populist language of his contemporaries from around the Americas, all struggling with the aftermath of the 1929 crash. This language has not disappeared from U.S. politics; if anything, it has revived in the wake of the Great Recession. This strand of populism differs sharply, as we shall see, from one that identifies economic elites and ethnic minorities as the real threat to Americans.

Economic Populism

The essence of the distinction between left- and right-wing populism is captured in Figure 3. The figure illustrates differences between Trump's campaign discourse and that of 2016 (and 2020) Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders. What is clear is

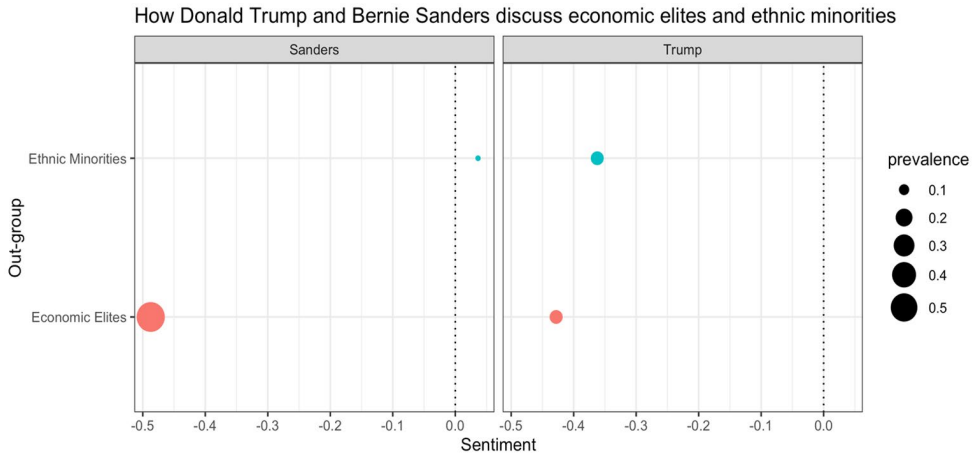

FIGURE 3. Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders on Economic Elites and Ethnic Minorities.

that Sanders, in line with the traditions of twentieth-century leaders going back to FDR and Cárdenas, identifies powerful *economic actors* as the enemy and rails against them, frequently. Donald Trump, in turn, spends less time vilifying the economically powerful and uses a friendlier tone when he refers to them.

Sanders's words of disparagement are aimed at traditional populist targets: Wall Street, bankers, the super-wealthy. Except for the absence of complaints about the railroads and the gold standard, he sounds a lot like American populists of the late nineteenth century.

In some ways, Trump's criticisms of the rich run parallel to those of these left-leaning populists. All complain about the influence of wealth in politics. For Trump, "the big donors and the special interests have bled this country dry and stripped our middle class and stripped our companies of its jobs and its wealth" (Trump 2016f). Sanders also denounces that "a handful of super wealthy campaign contributors have enormous influence over the political process, while their lobbyists determine much of what goes on in Congress" (Sanders 2015a).

But Trump's apparent economic populism bleeds into his more favored targets of vilification: his political opponents and ethnic others. He does not decry the existence of large fortunes per se, but their corrupting influence on American politics—in particular, their presumed corrupting influence on his partisan rivals. Hence, in the 2016 presidential race, he complained about "the people getting rich off the rigged system are the people throwing their money at Hillary Clinton" (Trump 2016c); "[Clinton] is totally bought and paid for by Wall Street, the special interests, the lobbyists, 100 percent"; "She's totally owned by Wall Street" (Trump 2016i). We found few Trump mentions of Wall Street—a common target of Sanders—in which the Republican candidate failed to also mention his rival, Hillary Clinton.

Trump's distance from the traditional language of economic populism makes sense. His personal wealth and self-proclaimed business acumen were central to his political persona and to his claim to be able to fix what was wrong with the U.S. economy and society. Furthermore, Trump's policy preferences are not redistributive. His one major policy success was the 2017 tax reform, which afforded enormous benefits to the wealthy; and Trump and his allies tried hard—at the time of this writing, unsuccessfully—to undo the Affordable Care Act, the first major public health-insurance program in decades and greatest policy achievement of Trump's predecessor and nemesis, former President Obama. For these reasons, Trump eschews denunciations of the lifestyles and accumulations of resources of wealthy Americans.

Ethnic Antagonism

Is it misguided, then, to speak of Trump as a populist? The answer is "no," as long as one accepts the construct of right-wing populism. Right-wing populism replaces the class appeals of left-wing, redistributive populism with ethnic and partisan appeals. Indeed, even when Trump deploys some of the phrases of economic populism, they bleed into the essence of his brand of populism: the vilification of the ethnic other.

It is well known that the essence of Trump's rhetorical signature is his disparagement of immigrants, in particular people from Mexico and Central America, and their offspring. Another frequent target is Muslims, in the United States and globally.

Though many of Trump's disparaging statements about these groups are simply appeals to racial prejudice, attributing to them traits like criminality, he also treats these groups as economic scapegoats. In a context of near-full employment, the traditional trope of immigrants "stealing" jobs from Americans gets a makeover. Now it is corporate America, with its purportedly nefarious links to Trump's political rivals, that bears responsibility for bringing immigrants into the country (and sending capital and investments out). Another stratagem, as we shall see, is to cast the Latino immigrant as competitor for public services.

On the first argument, the right-wing populist spins a verbal web of responsibility from economic interest groups to corrupt politicians to immigrants. "The fundamental problem with the immigration system in our country," Trump stated repeatedly in his 2016 stump speech, "is that it serves the needs of wealthy donors, political activists and powerful, powerful politicians" (Trump 2016j). These are "large corporations who have no borders" (Trump 2016a).

The racial and ethnic Manicheanism typical of right-wing populism, and its contrast with the class language of traditional populism, is again on display in Figure 3. The figure shows that Sanders speaks a bit less *frequently* than Trump about ethnic minorities, and quite a bit less *negatively* about them. In fact, the negative valence of the two politicians' comments on minorities belies deeper differences between them. Sanders decries the bad *conditions* that minorities face and the ways in which our society has failed these groups. Trump more frequently decries the *minorities themselves*, in particular when he speaks of Latino immigrants. His campaign began with the claim that immigrants

from Mexico are rapists and criminals and proceeded from there. When speaking about African Americans, he, like Sanders, decries the conditions they face—conditions that he describes in apocalyptic terms. He blames these conditions on his Democratic rivals.

To give some examples, Sanders laments that "Twenty percent of the children in this country live in poverty and that includes 40 percent of African-American children" (Sanders 2015c). Trump laments these same conditions but blames his rivals: "Hillary Clinton would rather provide a job to a refugee from overseas than to give that job to unemployed African American youth in cities like Detroit, who have become refugees in their own country" (Trump 2016g). "Instead of providing free healthcare and jobs to millions of refugees, we need to rebuild our inner cities and take care of Americans" (Trump 2016b). Or, at his most conspiratorial, "Hillary's pledge to enact 'open borders'—made in secret to a foreign bank—would destroy the African-American middle class" (Trump 2016d).

As we have seen, Sanders, in line with a tradition of economic populism, criticizes banks, Wall Street, and corporations for their rapacity. Trump's economic populism is confined to his complaints about how his elite political *opponents* are in the pockets of economic elites, such as "Wall Street." When the only other Republican in our study set, Reagan, made downbeat comments on the economy, these often touched on traditional conservative complaints about high taxes and excessive regulation. Trump also plays on these themes, but emphasizes more his anti-elitist, anti-globalist profile. Once in office, of course, Trump has pursued a mix of anti-globalist, and, in his view, anti-elitist trade policies with a fiscal and regulatory agenda very much in line with Reagan's agenda.

So, while some of Trump's apparent populism forecasts a set of policies and actions that would distinguish him from traditional conservatives, in particular his economic protectionism, in some regards this discourse was "mere rhetoric" masking a more traditional Republican economic agenda.

Democratic politicians, as leaders of a multiethnic party, sometimes struck negative notes in discussions of minorities in ways that were not all that different from Sanders. Clinton touched on issues, like police abuse and gun violence, in an attempt to signal an agenda of change that would help these minorities. This comes through, for instance, in her discussions of issues of intense interest to African Americans, a key Democratic Party constituency. An example is her choice of the topic of killings by police of Black Americans, such as "Walter Scott shot in the back in Charleston, South Carolina. Unarmed. In debt. And terrified of spending more time in jail for child support payments he couldn't afford" (Clinton 2015a).

Bernie Sanders, whose populism is economic but not ethnic, deploys a rhetoric on race, ethnicity, and religion that—like Clinton's—is all about bridge building; missing is any idea of representing an ethnically pure "people." Hence, this part of Sanders's 2016 stump speech:

> What this campaign is about is building a political movement which revitalizes American democracy, which brings millions of people together—black and white, Latino, Asian-American, Native American—young and old, men and women, gay and straight, native born and immigrant, people of all religions. (Sanders 2016)

We have been drawing contrasts among several politicians whose party (Democratic) is multiethnic in nature and one (Republican) that is much less so. Perhaps it is this difference in party constituencies that explains the contrast. Yet Ronald Reagan, leading a party with little support among nonwhites and religious minorities, used anodyne language that was supposed to be a welcome mat for all:

> These visitors to that city on the Potomac do not come as white or black, red or yellow; they are not Jews or Christians; conservatives or liberals; or Democrats or Republicans. They are Americans awed by what has gone before. (Reagan 1980a)

The starkest differences, then, in the mood of discussions of ethnic, racial, and religious minorities were not between Democrats and Republicans but between the right-wing populist and the rest. Quantitative analysis confirms that Trump's negativity regarding ethnic minorities is basically off the charts. Figure 4 shows that none of the other candidates approached the gloominess and vitriol of Trump when discussing minorities.

That said, the realities of U.S. electoral politics mean that even a right-wing populist, if he hopes to win national elections, has to try to avoid openly antagonizing major ethnic groups. Like the other leader we studied whose party, the Republican, has more tenuous links to minority communities, Trump has to do *some* ethnic and religious coalition building. One of his strategies has been to claim credit for historically low unemployment rates among Blacks and Hispanics. Reagan used bland and lofty language to build alliances. Trump, the Manichean, attempts to *forge alliances by identifying common enemies*. Hence, in the 2016 campaign, he attempted to draw support from Jews and LGBTQ

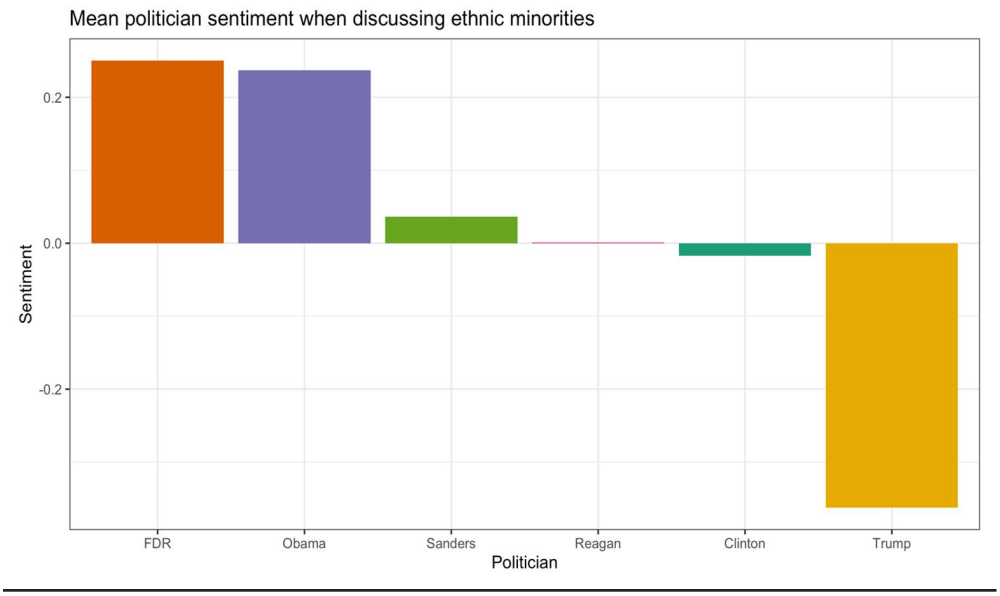

FIGURE 4. Politicians' Sentiment on Ethnic Minorities.

Americans by heaping disdain on a presumed common enemy, Muslims: "I refuse to allow America to become a place where gay people, Christian people, and Jewish people, are the targets of persecution and intimidation by Radical Islamic preachers of hate and violence" (Trump 2016e).

To give another example, when Trump tries to court Black voters, he frequently does so by identifying a presumed common enemy, immigrants. For instance:

> Hillary's Wall Street immigration agenda will keep immigrant communities poor, and unemployed Americans out of work. She can't claim to care about African-American and Hispanic workers when she wants to bring in millions of new low-wage workers to compete against them. (Trump 2016h)

The language of alliance building has been more common in U.S. presidential politics than Trump-style divisiveness. FDR, too, spoke occasionally about ethnic or religious out-groups and did so using a welcoming language. As an example, he said, "The service of democracy is the birthright of every citizen, the white and the colored; the Protestant, the Catholic, the Jew; the sons and daughters of every country in the world, who make up the people of this land" (Roosevelt 1940). And the adjectives he deployed in the context of discussions of these minorities were largely descriptive (e.g., *foreign, colored, white, Irish, Jewish*, and *Scandinavian*).

Text-as-data analysis of these speeches confirms what a close reading suggests: not political party, nor even attitudes toward economic elites, but right- versus left-wing populism distinguishes the acerbic, mild, or welcoming tone of politicians vis-à-vis racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. The softest words came from a Democrat and left-leaning populist, FDR, and from a conservative Republican, Ronald Reagan. Both had strategic reasons for adopting the tone that they did. The harshest tones, by far, come from our paragon of right-wing populism, Donald Trump.

Conclusions: American Politicians and Populism(s)

We have offered evidence that populist politicians—those who embrace a Manichean, us-versus-them, good-versus-evil worldview, and frame themselves as uniquely able to represent the "people"—come in two varieties. The left-wing, traditional version poses "us" as the economically downtrodden and "them" as powerful economic actors. The right-wing version poses "us" as the ethnically pure "people" (in the United States, whites and Christians) and "them" as political opponents, ethnic minorities, and immigrants.

Figure 5 revisits our conceptual map, now filling in the location of the U.S. presidential candidates whose rhetoric we have studied. The one example we had of a politician who did not embrace anti-elitism was Ronald Reagan. The non-Manichean progressives were Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama; though both could deploy intense and passionate language, neither framed themselves as the unique saviors for their societies or their opponents as ill-intentioned, implacable enemies.

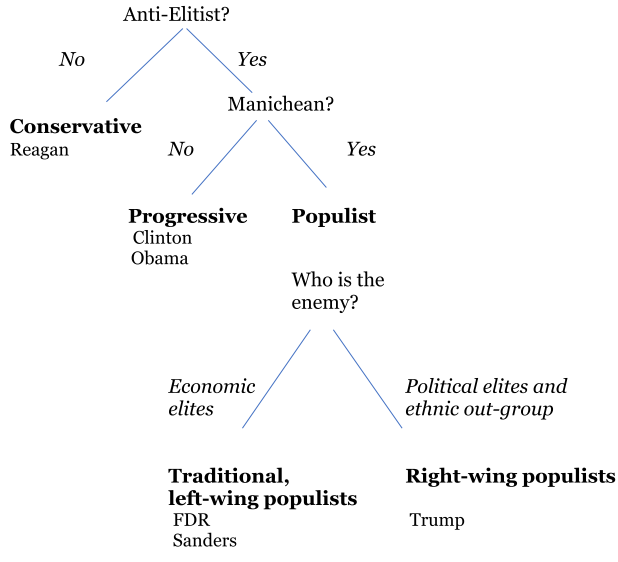

FIGURE 5. A Conceptual Scheme for Left- versus Right-Wing Populism with Politicians.

Our evidence suggested that Bernie Sanders and, perhaps more controversially, Franklin Roosevelt, fit the mold of left-wing populists: us-versus-them, moralistic thinkers who identified the enemy as the economic elites. (We would look forward to refinements of the measure and evaluation of Manicheanism that would offer a firmer categorization of Roosevelt.)

No doubt can exist about the Manichean mindset of Donald Trump. His take-no-enemies approach to the world of political speechmaking is legendary. Whether such a grim, apocalyptic discourse will become more common in American politics, post-Trump, is a question frequently asked in the United States today.

Our study is an exercise in conceptual development. Without well-defined constructs and clear distinctions among like phenomena, causal analysis is fruitless. Our conceptual scheme is suggestive of important causal questions that future research might address. What lies behind differences in politicians' rhetoric? Why do politicians from the same political party adopt strongly contrasting strategies? And what explains the success of these strategies?

Our study underscores the tantalizing fact that two leaders from the same political party can take drastically different rhetorical approaches and both enjoy a good deal of success from their alternative rhetorical strategies. This is the puzzle of Reagan and Trump. Both are conservative Republicans, both won over many Democratic voters, and both became powerful leaders of their party. Yet their rhetoric could hardly be more different. Reagan won over voters with optimism and a welcome mat. Trump won them over with hatred, fear, and disdain for anyone who was not with him. The contrasts between them are proof that both optimism and fear, generosity and hatred, can appeal to voters.

It is too soon to tell how enduring the Trump-style appeal will be, how well it might hold up under economic hardship, and whether the politics of divisiveness will be replicated by post-Trump politicians.

Another question, one that we plan to explore in future research, is the relationship between populism, whether right-wing or left-wing, and democratic erosion. The latter is a phenomenon whereby officials come to office in free and fair elections and then proceed to undermine and even destroy the institutions and practices of democracy (see Bermeo 2016; Przeworski 2019). Among the candidates we studied who won their presidential elections, all—to some degree—chipped away at democratic rules and procedures. FDR attempted to pack the Supreme Court; Reagan defied Congress and illegally sold arms to Iran to supply counterrevolutionary forces in Central America. Obama, frustrated by congressional obstruction, passed important measures, in some cases controversially, by executive orders. All of these presidents contributed, to some degree, to what is sometimes called the Imperial Presidency or, in the language of comparative politics, to executive aggrandizement.

But none of these leaders comes close to the degree of democratic erosion that has been engineered by Donald Trump. Of course, we have studied a small group of leaders; it would be reckless to infer strong conclusions from this set. Did the campaign rhetoric of Turkey's Erdoğan echo the populist discourse of Trump? Are the rhetorical contrasts traced here replicated in Orbán's Hungary? In Bolsonaro's Brazil? Much more research will be needed to answer these questions. If the answer turns out to be "yes"—if politicians who strike the chords of right-wing populism in their initial campaigns are more likely to go on to erode democratic institutions—then their messages will represent an early warning system for voters around the world concerned with safeguarding their democratic systems.

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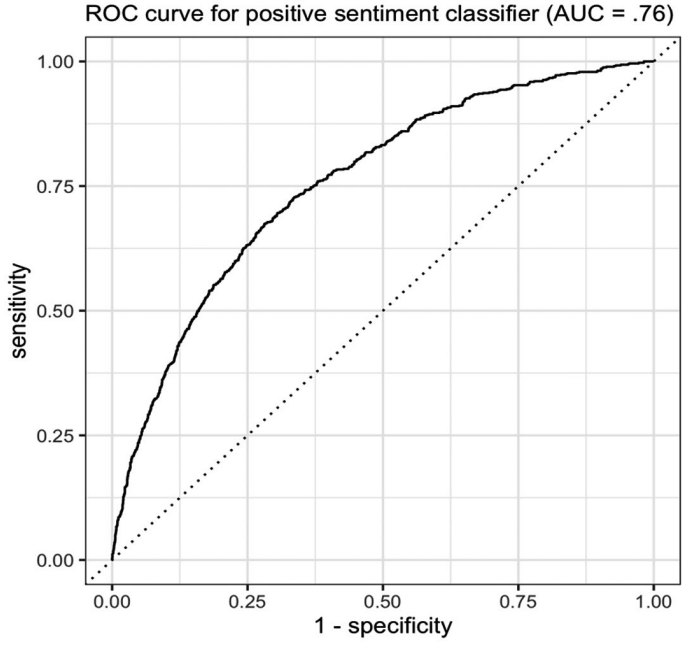
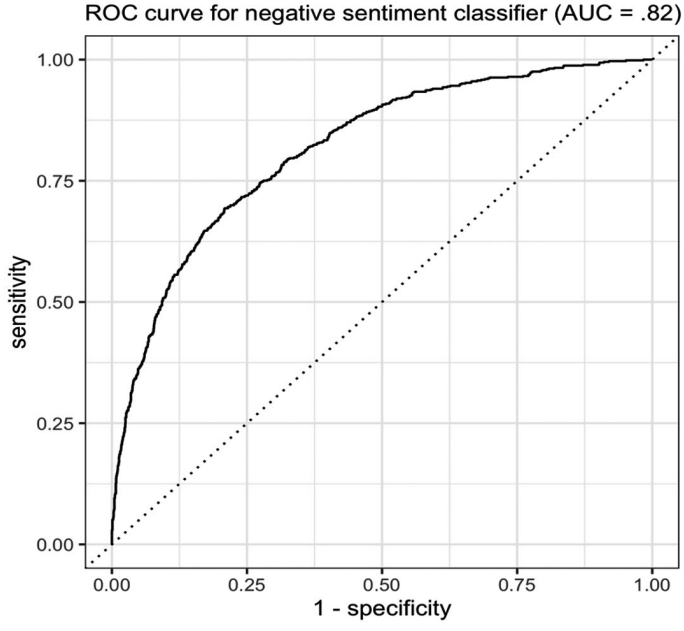
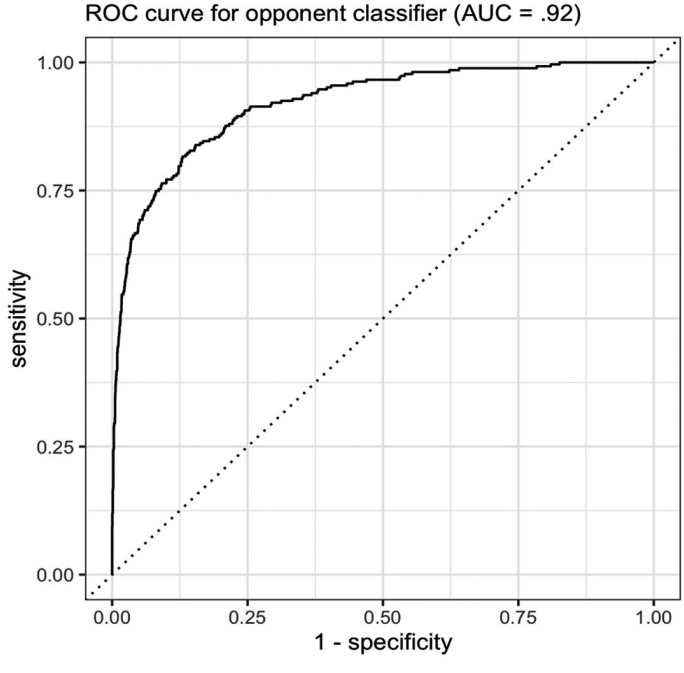
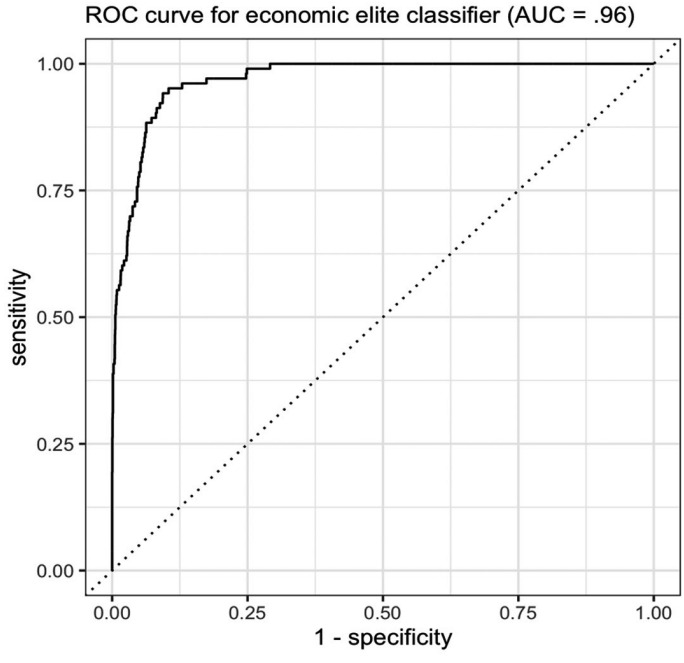
Appendix

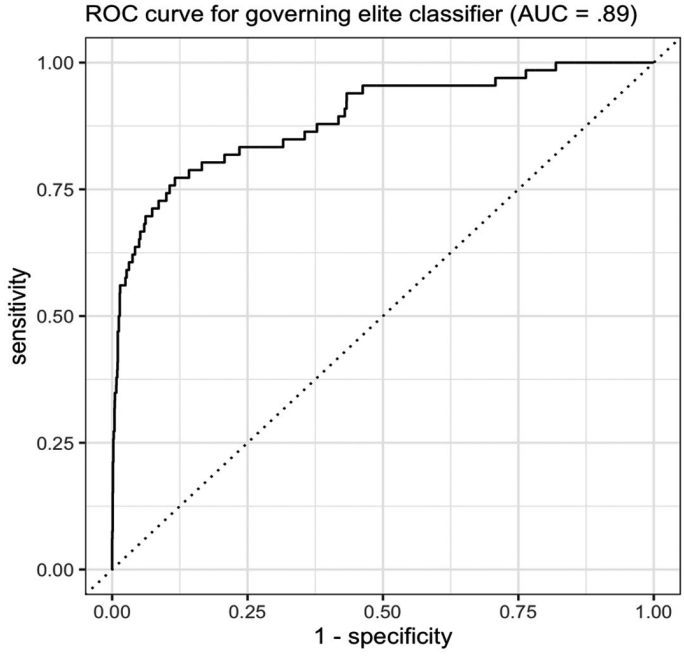
ROC Curves

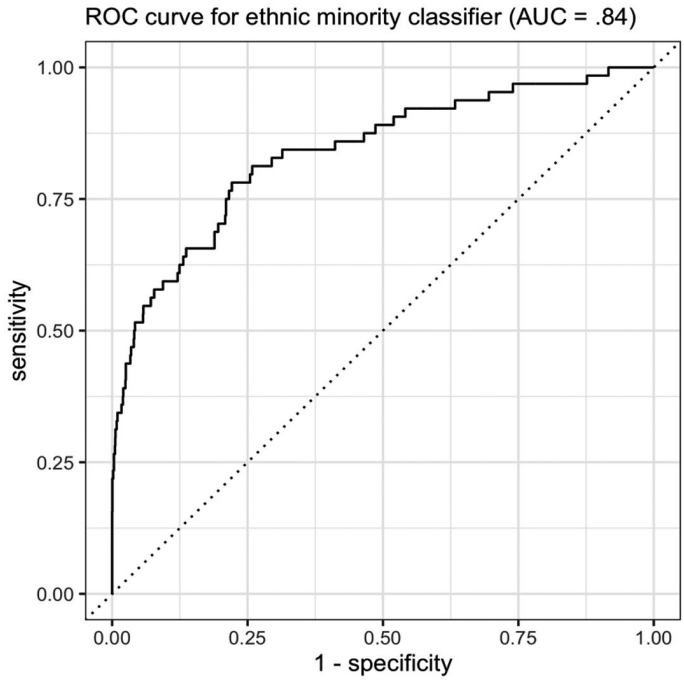












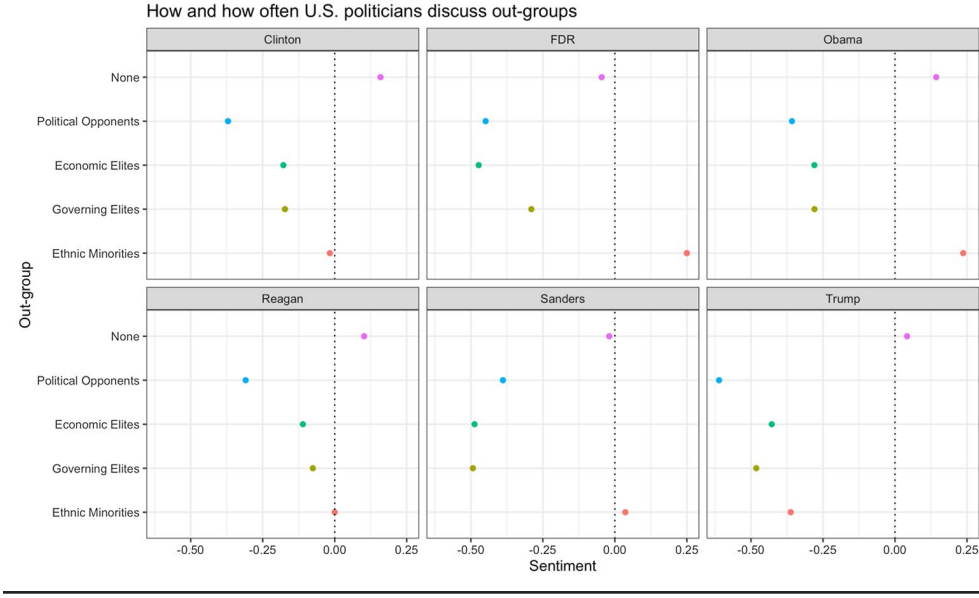


FIGURE A1. Mean Politician Sentiment Including Sentences That Do Not Specify Any Out-Groups.

TABLE A1
Politicians' Sentiment and Prevalence across the Out-Groups

Politician	*Classifier*	*Mean Sentiment*	*Prevalence*
Clinton	Opponents	−0.37	0.75
	Economic elites	−0.18	0.19
	Governing elites	−0.17	0.05
	Ethnic minorities	−0.02	0.08
FDR	Opponents	−0.45	0.79
	Economic elites	−0.47	0.11
	Governing elites	−0.29	0.14
	Ethnic minorities	0.25	0.02
Obama	Opponents	−0.36	0.58
	Economic elites	−0.28	0.35
	Governing elites	−0.28	0.17
	Ethnic minorities	0.24	0.04
Reagan	Opponents	−0.31	0.77
	Economic elites	−0.11	0.12
	Governing elites	−0.08	0.18
	Ethnic minorities	0.00	0.00
Sanders	Opponents	−0.39	0.33
	Economic elites	−0.49	0.57
	Governing elites	−0.49	0.10
	Ethnic minorities	0.04	0.08
Trump	Opponents	−0.61	0.71
	Economic elites	−0.43	0.14
	Governing elites	−0.48	0.15
	Ethnic minorities	−0.36	0.13