

Media Use, Feelings of Being Devalued, and Democratically Corrosive Sentiment in the US

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Abstract

The role of media use in democratically corrosive sentiment in the US is not well understood beyond the generalities that partisan news media is associated with belief in political falsehoods and that social media use, especially in the form of extremist speciality apps, fuels the spread of conspiracy and other falsehoods. We operationalize democratically corrosive sentiment in terms of populist attitudes, conspiracy beliefs, and expectation of fraud in the next presidential election. Using a survey (N=1998), we model five predictors of this sentiment: attention to right-wing media, attention to mainstream news, use of stronger-tie social media such as Facebook, use of weaker-tie social media such as Twitter, and use of Alt-Tech social media such as Gab. We also model right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, partisan identity, ideology, and a new measure we call “feelings of being devalued.” We find that mainstream media use is as strongly related to democratically corrosive sentiment in the inverse direction as partisan media is in the positive direction. We also find that use of stronger-tie social media is similar to that of Alt-Tech in that both are associated with democratically corrosive sentiment, while thinner-tie social media use is unrelated. Our new attitudinal measure, feelings of being devalued, is strongly associated with democratically corrosive sentiment. Our findings show important distinctions among social media as well as the value in treating democratically corrosive sentiment as a dimension of opinion with several components.

Concerns with the health of US democracy have led to a growing body of research on democratically corrosive sentiment. The literature examines populist attitudes, support for autocratic-style leaders or actions, political intolerance, acceptance of political violence, conspiracy belief, and other forms of sentiment. An important focus has been identifying predictors of these sentiments, and many have been explored in some depth, including racism, xenophobia, status threat, right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation (Malka & Costello 2023; Douglas, Sutton & Sochocka 2017; van Prooijen & Acker 2015; Imhoff *et al.* 2022; Garrett & Weeks 2017; Mutz 2018; Bartels 2020; Abramowitz & McCoy 2019; Piazza & Van Doren 2022; Jardina & Mickey 2022; Parker & Baretto 2013).

In the emerging picture of what predicts variation in democratically corrosive sentiment, one set of contributors has not yet come into adequate focus: media use. Many observers identify some connection between democratically corrosive sentiment and people's media diets, especially for right-wing mass media and for social media as a class (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral 2018; Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018; Garrett, Weeks & Neo, 2016; Waisbord 2018; Stecula & Pickup 2021; Strömbäck *et al.* 2022; Piazza & Van Doren, 2022). However, empirical results on the connections with attention to specific media types and brands have been mixed, especially where social media are concerned. Many studies find that certain types of social media use are predictive of some forms of democratically corrosive sentiment while others are not, but uncertainty remains (Min 2021; Enders, Klofstad & Uscinski 2022; Enders 2021; Uscinski *et al.* 2021; Piazza & Van Doren 2022).

In this study, we seek to advance understanding of media use as a predictor of democratically corrosive sentiment in the US. To do this, we distinguish five classes of media use: attention to mainstream news, attention to right-wing media, use of social media apps that facilitate stronger-tie networks, use of social media that facilitate thinner-tie networks, and social media apps tailored to the political interests of people with extremist views. We ask how each of these is associated with democratically corrosive sentiment in the form of populist attitudes, conspiracy belief, and expectations of fraud in the next presidential election. We also explore a new attitudinal measure that we call "feelings of devalued." To answer our questions, we draw on a cross-sectional survey of US adults (N=1998) fielded in 2022. The analysis shows that right-wing media and mainstream news have opposite relationships to democratically corrosive sentiment, as expected. We also find that in models with a full set of controls, democratically corrosive sentiment is unrelated to use of weaker-tie social media apps such as Twitter but that it is positively related to both stronger-tie social media apps such as Facebook and Alt-Tech apps such as Gab. We show that there are substantial differences among social media apps, just as there is between mainstream news and partisan mass media. Feelings of being devalued are a very strong predictor.

Democratically Corrosive Sentiment: Populist Attitudes, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Expectations of Election Fraud

Scholars have employed a variety of measures of democratically corrosive sentiment in the US (Armaly & Enders 2022; Kalmoe & Mason 2022; Piazza & Van Soren 2022; Malka &

Costello 2023; Kingzette *et al.* 2021; Bartels 2020; Inglehart & Norris 2016; Petersen *et al.* 2023; Kingzette *et al.* 2021; Simonovits, McCorry & Litvay 2022; Bloeser *et al.* 2023). Many approaches fit into one of the following categories: authoritarian predispositions involving attitudes toward executive power and constitutional protections, anti-pluralist sentiment involving political tolerance and fairness, and support for violence and lawbreaking. These attitudes can intersect with one another, and they can coexist with expressions of support for “democracy” as an abstraction (Malka & Costello 2023; Bartels 2020). Someone holding views that are corrosive of democracy, such as conspiracies theories about government cabals, may express strong support for the idea of democracy. At this stage, there is little consensus about how best to conceptualize the various dimensions of democratically corrosive sentiment (Ahmed 2022).

Uscinski *et al.* (2021) and Enders *et al.* (2022) demonstrate the value in distinguishing anti-establishment sentiment from extreme positions on the left-right ideological dimension. The anti-establishment dimension of opinion, which is common in the comparative literature, emphasizes populist attitudes and political conspiracy belief, both of which entail Manichean thinking as well as antagonism toward the political order rather than ideological positioning or or partisan identification. We adopt this approach. Populist attitudes are a central concern in democratic backsliding across democracies, providing a conceptual connection between the US and other democracies that are also experiencing erosion (Weyland 2020; Milner 2020). The thin-centered ideology approach to populism by Mudde (2004) has become widely used: Populism is belief in the opposition between the people, who are pure and good, and elites, who are corrupt and bad (Mudde 2004; Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove 2013). A variety of measurement scales are available (Silva *et al.* 2020), and in multi-party systems, vote share for populist parties is also an indicator. A variety of predictors of populist attitudes have been reported, including: party identification, ideology, political interest and knowledge, education, need for cognition, sense of political disempowerment, sense of loss of social or economic stability, right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation (Milner 2020; Pellegrini 2023; Uscinski *et al.* 2021; Spruyt, Keppens, & van Droogbroecken 2016; Arzheimer 2009; Bornschier 2010; Marcos-Marne, Gil de Zúñiga & Borah, 2022). Support for Trump and general populist-style antagonism toward democracy in the US are predicted by racial prejudice and status threat (Mutz 2018; Abramowitz & McCoy 2019; Piazza & Van Doren 2022; Jardina & Mickey 2022).

Belief in conspiracy is a companion to populist attitudes in the anti-establishment dimension of attitudes. Measures of populist sentiment and conspiracy beliefs show these are correlated (Stecula & Pickup 2021; Uscinski *et al.* 2021), and in the US a relationship exists between belief in misinformation and populist attitudes in the form of support for Trump (Milner 2020). There are several reasons for the association of populist sentiment and conspiracy belief. Motivated reasoning plays a role in both, helping to protect both populist and conspiratorial beliefs from correction or persuasion. Van Prooijen *et al.* (2022) refer to this nexus as “populist gullibility,” and the conviction that government elites work cohesively against the monolithic interests of the public overlaps with some specific conspiracy theories, including Replacement Theory, QAnon beliefs, the Birther conspiracy, and various ideas about COVID-19 or vaccinations being a hoax (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017). Without question, the most threatening of US conspiracies is Trump’s “Big Lie” about the 2020 election,

because it was so deeply embedded in the violently historic Capitol Insurrection, and because it remains motivating to his supporters. In addition, its presence in the public sphere is associated with pro-violence attitudes among Democrats (Arceneaux & Truex, 2022)

Belief in conspiracies has a variety of predictors. Some are more or less shared with populist attitudes, including feelings of loss of control, discomfort with uncertainty and the Dunning-Kruger effect, perception of threat or marginalization, social dominance orientation, and anxiety (Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka 2017; van Prooijen & Acker 2015). Manichean thinking, right-wing authoritarianism, and education (inversely) also predict conspiracy belief (Oliver & Wood 2014; van Prooijen & Acker 2014) as well as populist attitudes. Racial animus, which is associated with populist attitudes, has also been shown to predict belief in the birther conspiracy about Barack Obama (Pasek *et al.* 2014). Other predictors are specific to conspiracy, such as Faith in Intuition, pattern-seeking, jumping-to-conclusion bias, and other epistemic orientations, as well as Dark Triad personality traits (Imhoff *et al.* 2022; Garrett & Weeks 2017; Douglas, Sutton & Cichocka 2017). The fact that individuals who believe one conspiracy are likely to believe others, even when these are factually inconsistent, illustrates the presence of a general, monological orientation toward conspiracy (Wood, Douglas & Sutton 2012; Uscinski *et al.* 2016; Sutton & Douglas 2020; Goertzel 1994), although ideologically consistent beliefs are more likely to be mutually believed (Oliver & Wood 2014).

Media Use and Democratically Corrosive Sentiment

Our interest is in understanding the relationships between various forms of media use and sentiments that are harmful to the operation of democracy, such as populist attitudes and conspiracy belief – “populist gullibility” - including the special case of conspiracy belief that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump and that the next presidential election might be as well. Social media and partisan news are well known for facilitating the spread of falsehoods, propaganda, and conspiracies (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral 2018; Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018; Garrett, Weeks & Neo, 2016; Klein, Clutton & Dunn 2019). The breakdown of the traditional mass media-based public sphere is sometimes described as having an “elective affinity” with populism (Gerbaudo 2018; Waisbord 2018) as well as with problems in the basic epistemic integrity of democracy (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga 2020; Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018). It is not clear, however, how various categories of media use are associated differently with democratically corrosive sentiment. Just as importantly, it is not clear what independent relationships exist when the various predictors of democratically corrosive sentiment are accounted for, such as status-threat, right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation. In what follows, we develop expectations about these.

Mass Media

In the US, the distinction between mainstream news and the right-wing mass media is important (Hmielowski, Hutchens & Beam 2020). The former employs traditional journalistic norms in support of classical 4th Estate functions, while the latter eschews these in pursuit of partisan advocacy and the monetization of selective exposure by audiences. Right-wing media are not simply news businesses with conservative editorial positions, such as the *Wall Street Journal*, which employs traditional journalistic norms and practices around accuracy and

responsible reporting. Fox News has long occupied the central position in the right-wing ecosystem (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018) and has come under considerable public and legal scrutiny for distributing falsehoods about the 2020 election and other topics. The relationship between attention to right-wing mass media and anti-establishment sentiment is well established both for populist attitudes and conspiracy belief (Levendusky 2013; Stecula & Pickup 2021; Strömbäck *et al.* 2022; Piazza & Van Doren, 2022; Stier *et al.* 2020). We expect this relationship to exist in the presence of controls for standard predictors of anti-establishment sentiment

H1. Attention to right-wing mass media is associated with anti-establishment sentiment.

The theoretical picture is more nuanced where mainstream news is concerned. These businesses operate within democratic norms, pursuing accuracy over advocacy. They report on the details of political institutions and competition among elites. These practices should work against simplistic populist narratives and may reinforce democratic norms about the legitimacy of political disagreement. Mainstream news businesses also engage in fact-checking, and frequently call out unfounded arguments and conspiracies. Exposure to fact-checks can alter false beliefs, although the conditions for this are stringent and not frequently met (Walter *et al.* 2020; Walter & Murphy 2018; Nyhan 2021). There are several reasons to expect limits on the pressure that mainstream news practices can exert against conspiracy. Even critical coverage of false claims may elevate these in public awareness and prime anti-establishment priors (Tsfati *et al.* 2020; Udani, Kimball & Fogarty 2018), or even backfire (Nyhan & Reifler 2010; but, see: Nyhan 2021; Wood & Porter 2018; Nyhan *et al.* 2019; Hameleers 2022). Motivated reasoning, the false consensus effect, and the hostile media phenomenon could lead individuals to counter-argue news that challenges their own populist or conspiratorial beliefs.

Also, a primary contributor to populist attitudes and other forms of democratically corrosive sentiment is status threat and racial or ethnic resentment (Mutz, 2018; Abramowitz & McCoy 2019; Piazza & Van Doren 2022; Jardina & Mickey, 2022). Exposure to mainstream news about public affairs may prime a sense of threat or resentment. Balance theory would likewise suggest that mainstream news coverage of the trials of President Trump could exacerbate conspiratorial beliefs, despite news content itself being critical and relatively unbiased.

Despite limits on the capacity of mainstream news to combat anti-establishment attitudes, the net effect of exposure to mainstream news is likely positive. Empirical work about whether the net effect of attention to mainstream news on anti-establishment sentiment has produced some findings of small or null relationships (Hollander 2018; Strömbäck *et al.* 2022; Gil de Zuñiga, Scheffauer, & Zhang 2023), but also several strong studies show a positive relationship. Goidel, Gaddie & Ehrl (2017) show in a comparative study that a correlation exists between support for democracy and news consumption where news is less superficial or episodically framed. Min (2021) finds news media use inversely correlated with the Obama birther conspiracy and belief that global warming is a hoax, although not differentiating mainstream and partisan news. In their study of conspiracy beliefs in Sweden, Strömbäck *et al.* (2022) find no relationship with TV news or tabloid newspapers, and a negative relationship with broadsheet news. Piazza & Van Doren (2022) find overall news use inversely associated

with supportive views of the Capitol Insurrection and political violence more generally. This leads to our second hypothesis.

H2. Attention to mainstream news is inversely associated with anti-establishment sentiment.

Mass Media and the Selective Exposure Challenge

The question of selective exposure is important to both of our hypotheses about mass media. Selective exposure results to some amount of partisan sorting among audiences, except in the case of centrists, independents, and the non-ideological. This means that for people with strong partisan orientations the relationship between media use and political attitudes is likely an unknown mixture of effects of content on audiences and their own selective exposure to pro-attitudinal news outlets.

In the case of anti-establishment attitudes, the picture is somewhat less straightforward. Clearly partisan selective exposure causes some audience sorting, but the anti-establishment dimension of opinion is orthogonal to the left-right ideological dimension (Uscinski *et al.* 2021; Enders *et al.* 2022). Populist attitudes can be oriented toward right or left, while conspiracy orientation is the product of a package of psychological attributes not partisanship. This means the effects of selective exposure may be much blunted. There is evidence that populists do obtain news from mainstream sources as well as partisan ones (Stier *et al.* 2020), and the largest effect of populist attitudes may be general mistrust in news rather than selective exposure (Mitchell *et al.* 2018). We do not doubt that some of our expected relationships in Hypotheses 1 and 2 are due to selective exposure, and therefore we frame these as associations rather than uni-directional effects. While we will not be able to test the size of effects in the two directions with our single cross-section, we expect that any associations we find are not simply the result of selective exposure. With partisan identification and other controls in place, we view associations between mass media use and democratically corrosive sentiment to be intrinsically interesting regardless.

Social Media

Few people doubt that social media facilitate the circulation of conspiracy theories and other falsehoods among citizens, and that social media also connect both populist leaders and elite conspiracists directly to mass audiences without the gatekeeping and analysis functions of mainstream news businesses (Engesser, Ernst & Buchel 2017; Ernst *et al.* 2017; Gerbaudo 2018; Hameleers & Schmuck 2017; Roberts 2020). While commentary on the connection between social media and democratically corrosive sentiment is extensive, it is unclear how much of this relationship is accounted for by people's underlying orientations and how much might be associated with media use itself.

Empirical reports on this connection are also extensive, but findings have been inconsistent. For example, Min (2021) finds that expression of conspiracy theories is positively related to a general measure of extent of social media use that assesses total daily time using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. Similarly, Schumann *et al.*

(2022) show a relationship in a German sample between populist attitudes and a measure of use of “social media (e.g. Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter...)” Enders, Klofstad & Uscinski (2022) study frequency of use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube and find this predictive of a QAnon thermometer, but not other measures of conspiracy including belief in election fraud. In an important study, Uscinski *et al.* (2021) study frequency of use of Facebook and Twitter, finding neither associated with populist attitudes or conspiracy belief. Enders *et al.* (2021) find that use of Facebook and Twitter are both modestly associated with belief in conspiracies. Piazza and Van Doren (2022) study positive attitudes toward the 2021 Capitol insurrection, which is not directly a measure of conspiracy belief but is adjacent, and they find that a generic measure of social media use is not associated with positive attitudes toward the insurrection. Strömbäck *et al.* (2022) find a positive relationship between a general measure of use of social media for public affairs and conspiracy belief. For COVID-19 conspiracies, around which an entire sub-literature exists, there is widespread agreement that social media use in general is predictive, but definitions of social media use vary greatly (van Mulukom *et al.*, 2022).

One reason for inconsistency in findings is likely how social media use is conceptualized and measured. Many studies measure frequency of use as a predictor of democratically corrosive sentiment. However, social media are primarily tools of entertainment and social connection, unlike mass news media, so variation in frequency of use should be driven by non-political factors and is likely to be a noisy predictor of political beliefs. Use of social media for public affairs or news is likely a stronger concept than overall frequency of use.

A more important reason for inconsistency in findings is likely the heterogeneous nature of social media apps. Some facilitate public communication with broad networks, some emphasize communication among familiar networks, some offer encryption and privacy, some emphasize video and others text. Some attract people banned from other apps. Different affordances and market niches have implications for the flow of political information. A good way to conceptualize differences and similarities among social media apps for political purposes is to organize them into three categories.

Stronger-Tie and Weaker-Tie Social Media. Facebook and related social media apps such as Snapchat and WhatsApp emphasize interaction in extant social networks of family or friends. Twitter, X, Threads, Instagram, and Tiktok emphasize the creation of online networks based chiefly on interests and attitudes, where pre-existing social relationships do not necessarily exist and where mutual consent is not needed for a network tie (Hughes *et al.* 2012). Differences exist between networks of all kinds where people have stronger and weaker ties. In the study of social media, these differences take the form of networks with varying levels of political homophily (Vaccari & Valeriani 2021). Stronger-tie social media networks, such as those found in Facebook, Snapchat, and WhatsApp, should replicate the higher levels of political homophily found more generally in people’s social networks. This suggests that exposure to challenging political perspectives should be less common in stronger-tie social media networks. In contrast, weaker-tie social media networks reflect interests and affinities, as in Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. To the extent people construct these networks around non-political interests, such as

sports, music, or popular figures, these should entail less political homogeneity than strong-tie networks.

Differences in political homogeneity have implications for democratically corrosive sentiment. Conspiracies tend to circulate most effectively among like-minded groups, and mobilizing like-minded others is a motivation for sharing anti-establishment claims (Metaxis & Finn, 2017; Sunstein & Vermeule 2009; Min 2021; Petersen, Osmundsen & Arceneaux, 2023). This suggests a stronger connection between anti-establishment sentiment and stronger-tie social media than weaker-tie social media. In line with this expectation, Ernst *et al.* (2017) compare the *supply* of populist content in Twitter and Facebook, finding more such content in Facebook. This constitutes our next expectation.

H3. Use of stronger-tie social media including Facebook has a larger relationship to anti-establishment sentiment than use of weaker-tie social media including Twitter.

Alt-Tech Social Media. A third category of social media became important in the late 2010s: “Alt-Tech” or “free-speech” apps (Uscinski *et al.* 2021). Many are oriented toward weaker-tie networks, and before its collapse Parler was sometimes known as Twitter for extremists. Among the most common Alt-Tech sites are Gab and 4chan/8chan, as well as Truth Social. The most important feature of these sites is that their business models focus on facilitating political communication among those with extreme ideological perspectives and those with anti-establishment views. They differ from both types of mainstream apps in this way, where the primary business model is monetizing attention of all kinds, especially through entertainment and non-political communication. Alt-Tech sites offer a politically congenial, pro-attitudinal environment for users with high political homogeneity, although users typically do not have extant social ties outside of social media. Enders *et al.* (2021) show that belief in QAnon and other conspiracy beliefs is more strongly associated with use of 4chan/8chan than use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube. Uscinski *et al.* (2021) find use of 4chan/8chan associated with anti-establishment sentiment consisting of conspiracy and populist attitudes, whereas use of Facebook and Twitter is not. We expect that use of Alt-Tech social media adds to anti-establishment sentiment, beyond the effects of other important contributors.

H4 Use of alt-tech social media is associated with anti-establishment sentiment.

Interaction Between Mass and Social Media

Mass media and social media function together as part of the aggregate media system. Not only does content generated by professional mass media circulate through social media, but content flows in the other direction from social media users to professional mass media. It is widely understood that social media use has disrupted some traditionally beneficial functions of the Fourth Estate, especially around gatekeeping on the truthfulness of claims (Bennett & Pfetsch 2018; Bennett & Livingston 2018; Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga 2020).

An important feature of the disruption of epistemic functions of mass media in the US is its ideological asymmetry. As Benkler, Faris & Roberts (2018) show, right-wing mass media, especially Fox News, are disinclined to identify or correct falsehoods that are

identity-confirming for conservatives, and they may do the opposite: calling attention to and promoting partisan falsehoods and conspiracies in a feedback loop. This contrasts with mainstream mass media, which are more likely to exhibit traditional journalistic norms for truthfulness, sourcing of claims, and error correction. While the rise of social media may have disrupted the public sphere broadly and in many ways, there should be a detectable interaction between use of right-wing mass media and social media where democratically corrosive sentiment is concerned. People who consume right-wing mass media and use social media should be more likely to hold populist attitudes, expect election fraud, and believe in conspiracies, while social media users who consume mainstream mass media should be lower in all three forms of democratically corrosive sentiment. These interactions should appear for the two categories of social media use that we expect to be associated with democratically corrosive sentiment, namely stronger-tie social media and alt-tech social media.

H5. There are positive interactions between use of right-wing mass media and a) stronger-tie social media and b) alt-tech social media in predicting democratically corrosive sentiment.

H6. There is a negative interaction between use of mainstream mass media and a) stronger-tie social media, and b) alt-tech social media in predicting democratically corrosive sentiment.

Feelings of Being Devalued

The literature on predictors of various forms of democratically corrosive sentiment has established the importance of attitudes toward authority and social order (in the form of Right-Wing Authoritarianism) and attitudes about status and social groups (especially in the form of Social Dominance Orientation). Analysis of racial attitudes and status threat has sharpened and extended our understanding of how racial and ethnic identity is associated with White resentment, populist discontent, and of other forms of democratically corrosive sentiment (Abramowitz & McCoy 2019; Mutz 2018; Jardina & Mickey 2022; Parker and Barreto 2013). At this point, the nexus between racial attitudes and anti-democratic sentiment is clear. We observe that a common thread in some predictors is a sense of insecurity or devaluation, and this sense would not have to be rooted in racial or ethnic prejudice. We wonder whether a more generalized sense of individual loss of worth or historical devaluation may be at work in conjunction with explicitly racial or ethnic attitudes. A more generalized sense of being devalued would not necessarily be associated with specific out-groups, and could arise from economic, cultural, or other experiences. Accordingly, we propose a research question.

RQ1. Do generalized feelings of being devalued predict democratically corrosive attitudes?

Methods

Our data come from a survey administered for us by Lightspeed Kantar Group to an online panel from May 17 to June 9, 2022. The sample of 2,000 respondents was constructed

using quotas for age, gender, household income, education, and region based on US Census data.

Dependent Measures: Anti-Establishment Sentiment

Populist attitudes. Our measure of populist attitudes was a nine-item scale as follows: Politicians should follow the will of the people; The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions; The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people; I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician; Politicians talk too much and do not act enough; In politics, talking about compromise means renouncing principles; The authorities have consciously exploited the situation with Covid-19 to weaken democracy; To have a job or career is OK, but what most women really want is a home and children; Men are oppressed in today's United States. The last three items are conservative in political orientation. Responses employed a seven-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. We built scales for the first six items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.78) as a measure of general populist attitudes and all nine (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80) as a measure of conservative-oriented populist attitudes. In the analysis, we employed the conservative measure.

Conspiracy Belief. We measured conspiracy belief in two ways, using a set of seven specific conspiracies, and a scale of general orientation toward conspiracy. The specific conspiracy questions varied in partisan appeal, using a four-point scale to measure extent of agreement that the following are true: immigration is organized purposefully by political, intellectual and media elites in order to replace the American population by immigrants (Replacement Theory); a group of international elites is in control of governments and media around the world and are using their control to manipulate world events (similar to QAnon); the US government knew in advance of the 9/11 attacks and was involved; Coronavirus (COVID) was purposely created and released by powerful people; the dangers of genetically modified foods are being hidden from the public; vaccines against the Coronavirus are more dangerous than what we are being told; and that climate change is a hoax (Cronbach's Alpha = .88).

To measure general orientation toward conspiracies (Bruder *et al.* 2013; Swami *et al.* 2011; Enders *et al.* 2013) we designed our own six-item scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.92) that taps into core beliefs about events generally being controlled by secret groups of elites. These items used a seven-point scale for agreement with the following: Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway; the people who really "run" the country are not known to the voters; big events like wars, the recent recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us; much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places; important news is deliberately hidden from the public by leaders; and groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate or hide evidence to deceive the public.

Expectation of Election Fraud. We distinguished expectation of election fraud in 2024 from other conspiratorial beliefs. It constitutes both the continuing shadow of the 2020 conspiracy claims and an indicator of prospective unwillingness to accept the next presidential

election outcome, and it is arguably the most democratically corrosive conspiracy-related belief extant today. We used a single item framed in a party-neutral way that could tap into expectations both by Trump voters and others who may expect that Republican officials might alter votes in their own candidate's favor. We asked: "How likely do you think it is that there will be significant fraud or vote-stealing in the next presidential election?" Respondents chose among a five-point scale from Definitely not to Definitely.

Independent Measures

Mainstream News and Right-wing media. Our approach to measuring media use was to ask respondents about their attention to individual media brands for "news about public affairs and politics." For mass media, we asked about frequency of use of each of twelve news outlets: Vox, NPR or PBS, New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, NBC News, CBS News, ABC News, CNN, Fox News, Breitbart, and One America News. We asked frequency of use on a seven-point scale, as follows: "Never, and I would never get news from it; never, but I might if I saw an interesting story; less than once a week; once a week; a few times a week; every day; multiple times per day; and I do not know this source of information."

From this, we constructed measures of attention to mainstream news and right-wing media. For attention to mainstream news, we took the respondents' highest score on frequency of obtaining news from the following outlets: Vox, NPR or PBS, New York Times, Washington Post, Huffington Post, NBC News, CBS News, ABC News, and CNN. For right-wing media, we took the highest score from among Fox News, Breitbart, and One America News. These measures therefore capture attention to the respondent's favored news source, but do not capture breadth of attention across outlets by summing individual outlets.

Social Media. Our approach to social media involved several steps designed to give us nuanced measures. We started with a question about general frequency of use of each of ten social media apps - Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Reddit, Telegraph, WhatsApp - and an eleventh category we called "Free-speech oriented platforms (such as Gab, Rumble, Truth, or a similar app)." We used a four-point scale as follows: Do not have an account; never but I have an account; rarely; from time to time; and often. This gave us measures of use for each of the social media tools individually. Respondents who reported using a particular app either "from time to time" or "often" received follow-up questions about whether they used it "to engage in public affairs and politics." We provided two categories of responses: *receiving* tapped whether the respondent had received any information about public affairs and politics, while *engaging* tapped whether the respondent had engaged with content by doing any of the following: "made my own posts," "commented," "shared posts," "reacted (like/hate etc.)." We scored respondents who do not use a particular app as "0" on receiving and expressing public affairs content. In our analysis, we employ the measure for engaging.

With measures for each of the individual social media apps engaging expressing public affairs content, we then aggregated. We aggregated Instagram, Reddit, TikTok and Twitter into a weaker-tie category; Facebook Messenger, Facebook, Snapchat, Telegram, WhatsApp went into

the stronger-tie category; and for Alt-Tech we used our single item: Free-speech oriented platforms (such as Gab, Rumble, Truth, or a similar app. The measure we employed in the analysis is binary, indicating whether or not the respondent used any app in each category for engaging in public affairs. aggregating.

Feelings of Being Devalued. We measured feelings of being devalued with three items (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.75) asking respondents' level of agreement on a seven-point scale with the following: Today's society often makes me feel worthless; society exploits people like me; and people like me are not valued the same way as before. This measure primes in-group identity (people like me) but does not prime specific out-groups or domains of identity.

Controls

Our analytic strategy for examining the relationship of media use to anti-establishment sentiment in our cross-sectional design was to estimate a model with controls for a set of predictors likely to influence either populist attitudes or conspiracy belief (most have been shown to predict both) as well as to contribute toward selective exposure to pro-attitudinal media.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation. For right-wing authoritarianism, we used the six-item Very Short Authoritarianism scale of Bizumic & Duckitt (2018), which captures orientation toward authority and social order. For social dominance orientation, we used the SDO7(s) scale from Ho *et al.* (2015), which captures orientation toward inequality among social groups.

Education and age. We asked respondents' highest level of education with a five-point scale, from grade school or some high school to advanced degree, and captured age with a birth year question.

Political Interest. We measured how interested respondents are in politics with a four-point scale: Not at all interested, not very interested, fairly interested, and very interested.

Ideology and Party identification. We measured ideology with self-placement on a left-right scale from 0-10, where 0 is farthest left and 10 is farthest right. For party identification, we asked which party the respondent feels closest to, the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, another party, or none. In the analysis, we used a binary variable where Republican identifiers score 1 and all others score 0.

Results

We begin by examining the contours of our measures of democratically corrosive sentiment. From the literature on conspiracy, we expected that our measures of seven specific conspiracy beliefs would be correlated with one another as well as with our six-item measure of general conspiracy orientation. Recall that we chose the seven specific conspiracies to encompass beliefs strongly held on the right, including those promulgated by Donald Trump, as well as older beliefs that are not identity-confirming for conservatives, such as the GMO and

9/11 conspiracies. Our results, which are shown in Table 1, are consistent with the fact that conspiracy beliefs cluster in individuals as a function of underlying, monological cognitive orientations. Beliefs in the seven conspiracies are correlated with Pearson r values ranging from 0.34 in the case of climate change hoax and cover-up of GMO dangers to a high of 0.65 in the case of vaccines being dangerous and COVID being purposely released by powerful people. As Table 1 also shows, our measure of general conspiracy orientation absent specific conspiracy content is correlated with each specific belief at r values from .51 to .63. This gives us confidence that our general conspiracy orientation measure is robust, and we employ it in the multivariate models.

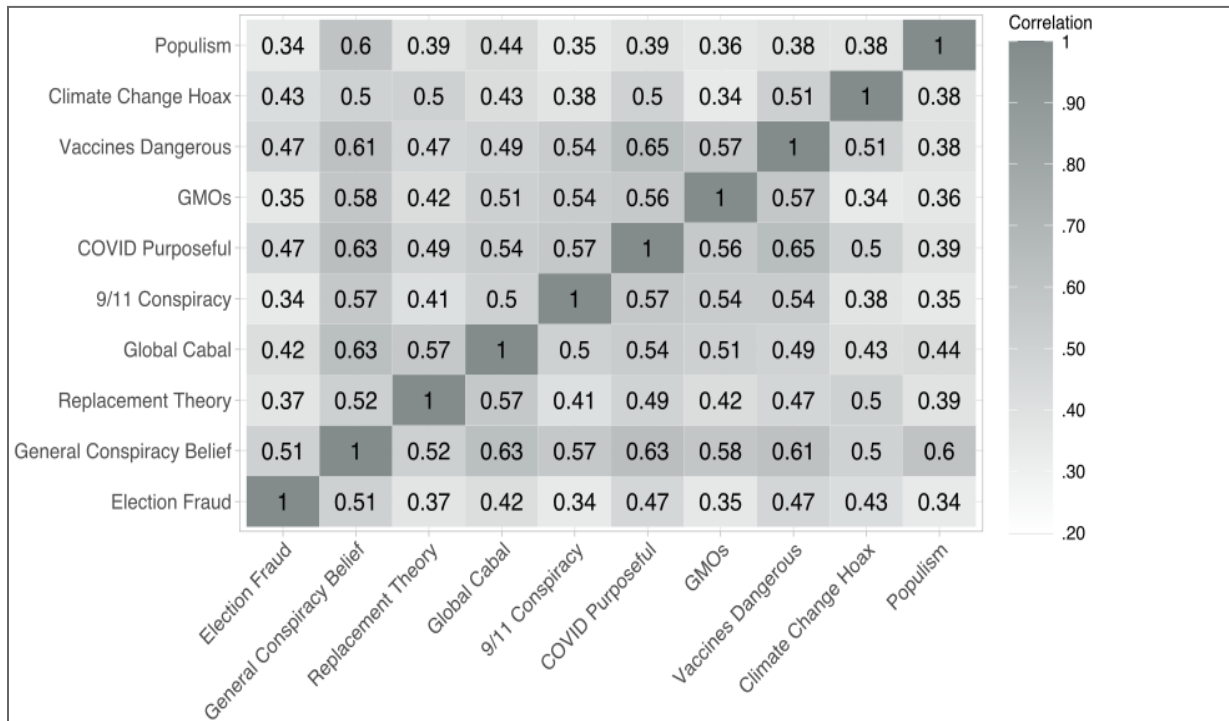


Table 1. Pearson Correlations among Specific Conspiracy Beliefs, General Conspiracy Belief, Expectation of Election Fraud, and Populist Attitudes

We anticipated that our measure of expectation of election fraud would correlate with populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, but we were unsure of which relationships would be strongest. Expectation of fraud in the next presidential election correlates with general conspiracy belief at $r=.51$ and with populist attitudes at $.34$. This supports our conceptualization of expectation of election fraud as a conspiracy-related belief. Given the moderate size of the correlation and because of its potentially special relevance to the health of the democracy in the future, we treat it separately from conspiracy belief. We also expected from the literature on democratically corrosive sentiment that populist attitudes would correlate with conspiracy belief. This is the case, at $r=.60$.

We estimated models predicting the three forms of democratically corrosive sentiment including controls for party identification, ideology, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, feelings of being devalued, political interest, education, and age. A plot of coefficients is shown in Figure 1, and full models are located in Appendix Table A1. The controls are strongly associated democratically corrosive sentiment. Conservative ideology is associated with all three dependent measures, as is Republican party identification, whose strongest relationship is with expectation of election fraud. Right-wing authoritarianism predicts populist attitudes and conspiracy belief, while social dominance orientation predicts expectation of fraud and conspiracy, and populist attitudes in the negative direction. We interpret these relationships as evidence of messaging effects to Republicans by party elites about the election. Trump, other Republican leaders, and conservative commentators mounted a campaign to persuade voters that the election was stolen. Messaging in line with populist attitudes generally and with conspiratorial beliefs in general was less prominent. The fact that social dominance orientation is inversely related to populist attitudes is consistent with the populist tenet that the public as a whole is pure, good, and homogeneous in its interests. In our data, political interest is positively associated with populist attitudes, negatively associated with election fraud, and unrelated to conspiracy belief.

We begin with our Research Question about feelings of being devalued. This measure is the strongest predictor of populist attitudes and conspiracy belief in our models, and it is comparable to Republican identification for predicting expectation of election fraud. This is consistent with the literature showing a connection to democratically corrosive sentiment from status threat, racial resentment, xenophobia, and the like, although, notably, our measure does not explicitly prime race or ethnicity. As the marginal effects plots in Figure 2 show, an increase in feelings of being devalued by 1 standard deviation results in increases in populist attitudes and conspiracy belief by just under a half standard deviation, and an increase of around a quarter standard deviation in expectation of election fraud. Marginal effects of identifying as Republican are shown for comparison. Note that while the coefficients for Republican identity have p values of about .01 in the OLS model, marginal effects are not different from one another with other predictors at their means.)

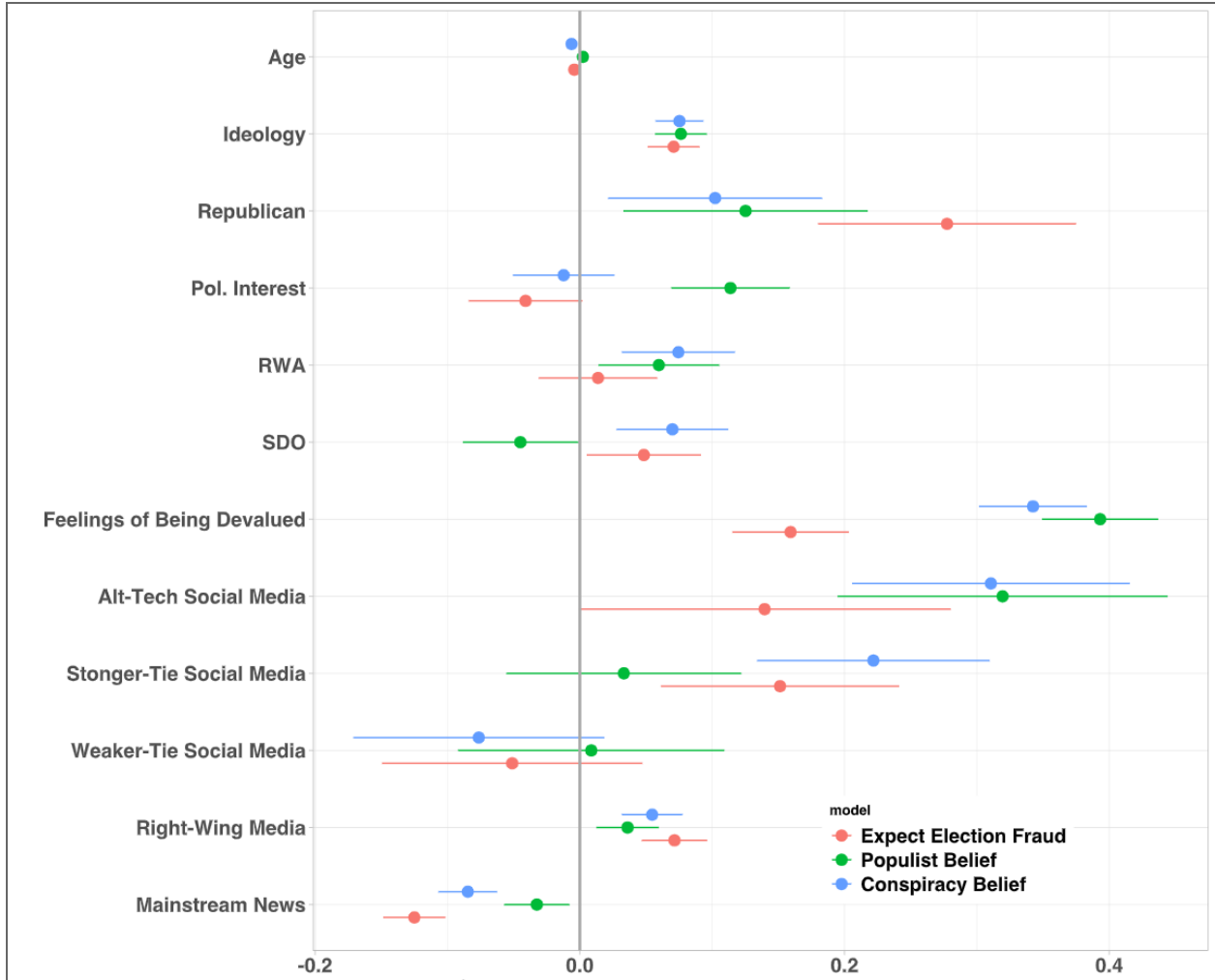


Figure 1. Predicting Populist attitudes, Conspiracy Beliefs, and Expectation of Election Fraud. Notes: OLS Coefficient Estimates with 95% confidence intervals, using Robust Standard Errors. N=1998; Adj R² = .42 for Conspiracy Belief, .29 for Expectation of Election Fraud, and .33 for Populist Attitudes; Full model available in Table A1.

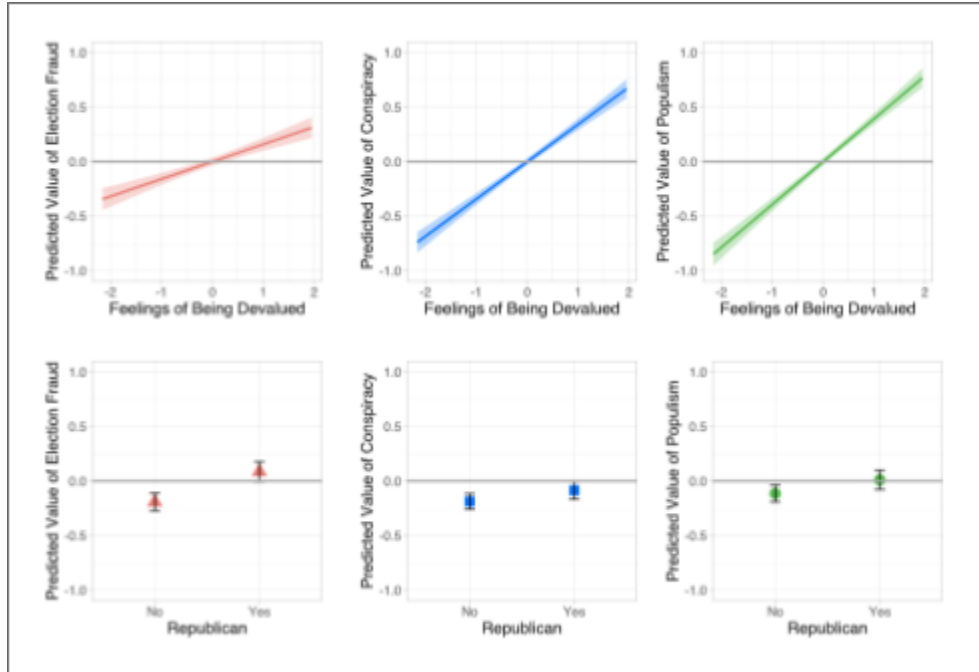


Figure 2. Marginal Effects of Feelings of Being Devalued and Republican Identity

Notes: Y-axes show marginal effects of each predictor with other variables at their means, in units of standard deviations.

Turning to the relationships with media use, our first two hypotheses address attention to mass media. Both are supported: right-wing news is positively associated with populist attitudes, conspiracy belief, and expectation of election fraud, while attention to mainstream news is inversely associated. The mainstream news measure is the only predictor that is consistently related to democratically corrosive sentiment in the negative direction. Figure 3 compares the marginal effects of mainstream news and right-wing media. The slopes are inverse, and of comparable magnitude.

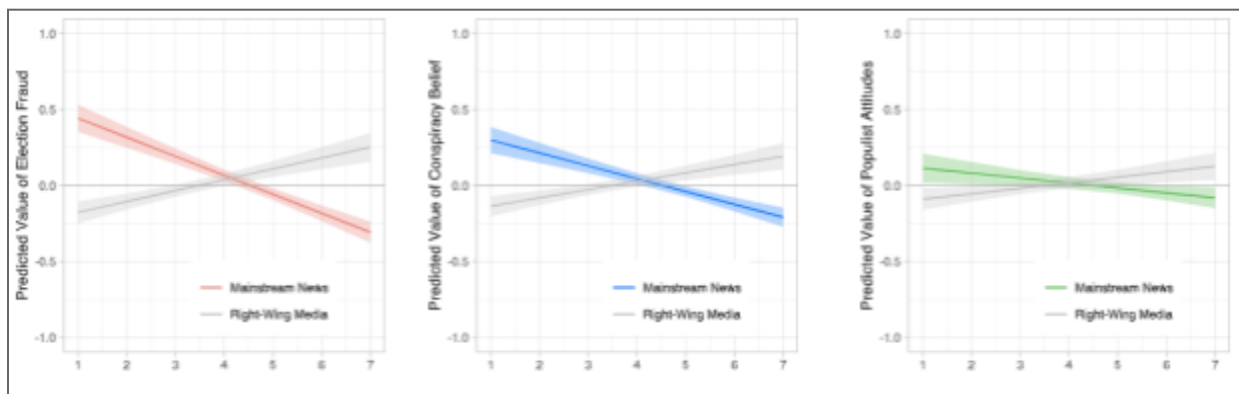


Figure 3. Marginal Effects of Mainstream News and Right-Wing Media

Notes: Y-axes show marginal effects of each predictor with other variables at their means, in units of standard deviations.

Our next hypotheses addressed social media, starting with use of Alt-Tech apps, which we expected to be positively associated with democratically corrosive sentiment. The data support this, and while that is intuitive, the strength of the relationships is noteworthy. The marginal effect of using Alt-Tech apps on populist attitudes and conspiracy belief is about a half standard deviation, while it is smaller for expectation of election fraud. This only comparable predictor in our model is feelings of being devalued. Figure 4 shows the marginal effects.

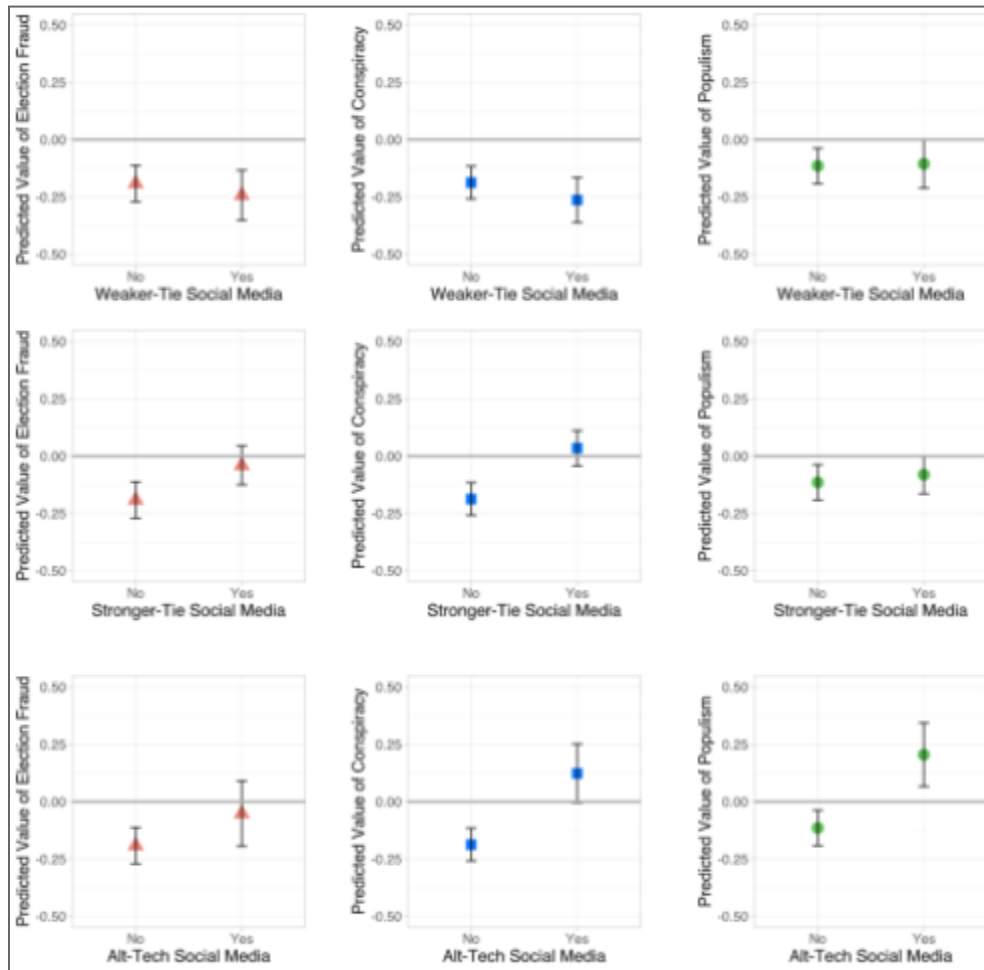


Figure 4. Marginal Effects of Social Media Use

Notes: Y-axes show marginal effects of each predictor with other variables at their means, in units of standard deviations.

For mainstream social media, we predicted a stronger relationship with democratically corrosive sentiment for stronger-tie apps such as Facebook than for weaker-tie apps such as

Twitter. The data show that the coefficients for weaker-tie apps are not different from zero, which we interpret to mean that the expressions of populist attitudes, conspiracy and election fraud that one can easily find by browsing in weaker-tie social media apps are accounted for by the other variables in our model.

The situation is different for stronger-tie apps. Use of these is positively associated with conspiracy belief and election fraud, but not with populist attitudes, as shown in Figure 3. These results support our hypothesis for conspiracy and election fraud, but not for populist attitudes.

In order to check whether these results might be an artifact of how we classified the social media apps as either stronger-tie or weaker-tie, we re-ran the models using only Facebook and Twitter to represent the two categories. The results are substantively the same, both in overall model fit and coefficient size and significance. See Appendix Table A2 for details.

Our final hypotheses addressed positive and negative moderation for social media use and right-wing media and mainstream media, respectively, drawing on the literature showing the importance of the mass media context to social media effects.. To test these expectations, we re-ran our models again employing the appropriate interaction terms for right-wing media with stronger-tie social media and with alt-tech social media, and for mainstream news with both forms of social media. All of the coefficients were small and non-significant, leading us to reject these hypotheses. Surprisingly, people's use of mass media does not moderate the relationship of their social media use and attitudes about democracy. See Figures A3 and A4 in the Appendix for effect size plots.

Discussion

While the psychological and ideological predictors of democratically corrosive sentiment are thoroughly documented, the role of media use is less well settled empirically and theoretically. In this paper, our goal was to advance the understanding of the relationship of media use to democratically corrosive attitudes in the form of populist attitudes, conspiracy belief, and expectation of fraud in the next presidential election. Our findings support the conclusions of other studies that populist attitudes and conspiracy belief are associated; we add to this fact correlations with expectation of election fraud. Our findings are also consistent with the literature showing that conspiracy orientation is monological.

Our main findings support the well-known relationship between attention to right-wing media and democratically corrosive sentiment. We add to this the finding that attention to mainstream news has at least as strong a relationship in the negative direction. To the extent that right-wing media are a venue for populist attitudes, conspiracy belief, and expectation of election fraud, mainstream news works in the opposite direction.

As for social media use, we posited that stronger-tie social media such as Facebook would have stronger relationship to democratically corrosive sentiment compared with weaker-tie social media apps such as Twitter. Our findings support this, and in fact weaker-tie

social media use is unrelated to our measures of democratically corrosive sentiment. This supports our expectation that populist attitudes, conspiracy beliefs, and expectations of election fraud are most likely to circulate among networks of people who are more familiar to one another and who have a higher degree of political homophily.

Not surprisingly, Alt-Tech social media such as Gab are also associated with democratically corrosive sentiment. This illustrates a nuance of the principle that engagement with these ideas is strong among more familiar networks. Alt-Tech social media tend toward thinner-tie networks - Twitter for extremists - but they also are designed especially for people with views outside the mainstream. They share with thicker-tie social media the property of political homophily among people with extremist ideology and democratically corrosive sentiment. While prior studies emphasized the role of Alt-Tech platforms in the spread of such democratically corrosive content, our study suggests that mainstream stronger-tie apps like Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, WhatsApp and Telegram may be more instrumental in the long run, especially because of their greater reach. One of our main findings is that distinctions should be made between stronger-tie and weaker-tie social media tools, as well as distinguishing these from extremist Alt-Tech tools. How these distinctions play out in the future will be interesting to see, as the social media industry continues to change rapidly. Individual apps change, adding affordances that are relevant to network types, and competition among firms leads to a changing roster of apps as the failure of Gab, the struggles of Twitter/X, and the rise of Threads show.

Our expectation of interactions between use of mass media and social media were not supported. It is not the case that attention to right-wing news strengthens the relationship of strong-tie social media or Alt-Tech social media to democratically corrosive sentiment. We do not doubt the importance of mass media at the system level to the health of the public sphere, but in our data social media and mass media have independent relationships to democratically corrosive sentiment.

Feelings of being devalued is a very strong predictor, comparable in size to use of Alt-Tech social media, and stronger than RWA and SDO. This finding suggests that the endorsement of conspiracy theories and populist attitudes may serve as adaptive responses to feelings of social devaluation that are not only tied to the racial and ethnic out-group dynamics documented in the literature on White resentment and status threat.

The most important limitation in our study is its cross-sectional design. As is the case with other cross-sectional survey projects examining democratically corrosive sentiment and media use, we are unable to make a strong claim about the strength of causality in each direction (Uscinski *et al* 2021). Bi-directionality is a timeless challenge for scholars attempting to make causal inferences about media use, both inside and outside of the laboratory. Cross-sectional surveys such as ours can typically accomplish only so much with the use of controls. Two-wave panel surveys can overcome this problem, but they can suffer from over-stringency and false negatives, since the marginal effect of media use over a period of some months between waves is often small where respondents have been chronically using the media outlet for years. Some causally strong laboratory experiments on media face the

problem that selective exposure is circumvented when subjects are randomly assigned to treatments, such that they are reacting to content they might not encounter outside the lab. Natural experiments and opportunities for regression-discontinuity designs are uncommon. In our case, selective exposure is the primary concern regarding reverse causation. There are good reasons to expect that selective exposure does not account for our findings. The anti-establishment dimension of opinion of interest to us is mainly orthogonal to the left-right ideological dimension: Populist attitudes occur on the left and right, and populists do obtain news from mainstream sources, while conspiracy orientation is the product of several psychological attributes other than partisanship. Only expectation of election fraud should have a strongly partisan orientation. And, ideological moderates and people without strong partisan identities should not engage in selective exposure of media brands. Undoubtedly some of the relationships we find involve reverse causation from democratically corrosive sentiment to media choices, especially in the case of Alt-Tech social media and right-wing media in the case of election fraud. We expect selective exposure to be less important for thicker-tie and thinner-tie social media, since people engage with these for many reasons beyond news.

A perfect storm in the world of media and democracy is raging at present. First, democratically corrosive sentiment continues to threaten the functioning of elections and policy-making. The trials of Donald Trump and his third campaign will continue to prime and exacerbate these sentiments. Second, the social media industry has successfully forestalled serious regulatory efforts in the US Congress but efforts by some legislators continue; meanwhile, voluntary content standards for falsehoods and extremism are *weakening* at some firms. And third, the explosion of generative AI will have untold disruptive consequences, including new possibilities for industrial-scale spread of conspiracies and falsehoods. Our study shows the continued importance of traditional 4th-Estate journalism in the face of this storm, as well as the need to focus standards and policy-making on thicker-tie social media.

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Appendix

	Expect Election Fraud	Populist Attitudes	Conspiracy Belief	Expect Election Fraud 2	Populist Attitudes 2	Conspiracy Belief 2	Expect Election Fraud 3	Populist Attitudes 3	Conspiracy Belief 3
Mainstream News	-0.125	-0.032	-0.085	-0.123	-0.034	-0.084	-0.121	-0.039	-0.08
	-0.012	-0.013	-0.011	-0.012	-0.012	-0.011	-0.018	-0.017	-0.016
	p<0.001	p=0.010	p<0.001	p<0.001	p=0.004	p<0.001	p<0.001	p=0.024	p<0.001
Right-Wing Media	0.072	0.036	0.055	0.078	0.027	0.059	0.072	0.034	0.055
	-0.013	-0.012	-0.012	-0.02	-0.019	-0.018	-0.013	-0.012	-0.011
	p<0.001	p=0.003	p<0.001	p<0.001	p=0.162	p<0.001	p<0.001	p=0.006	p<0.001
Weaker-Tie Social Media	-0.051	0.009	-0.076	0.008	-0.014	-0.127	-0.171	-0.113	-0.163
	-0.05	-0.051	-0.048	-0.097	-0.094	-0.087	-0.127	-0.123	-0.114
	p=0.309	p=0.866	p=0.114	p=0.937	p=0.881	p=0.144	p=0.177	p=0.356	p=0.152
Stronger-Tie Social Media	0.151	0.033	0.222	0.126	0.011	0.246	0.249	0.077	0.319
	-0.046	-0.045	-0.045	-0.09	-0.087	-0.081	-0.118	-0.114	-0.106
	p<0.001	p=0.462	p<0.001	p=0.162	p=0.898	p=0.002	p=0.035	p=0.502	p=0.003
Alt-Tech Social Media	0.14	0.319	0.311	0.283	0.268	0.591	0.285	0.259	0.308
	-0.072	-0.064	-0.053	-0.208	-0.201	-0.187	-0.241	-0.233	-0.217
	p=0.052	p<0.001	p<0.001	p=0.173	p=0.183	p=0.002	p=0.237	p=0.268	p=0.155
Feelings of Being Devalued	0.159	0.393	0.342	0.16	0.393	0.344	0.16	0.393	0.343
	-0.022	-0.022	-0.021	-0.02	-0.02	-0.018	-0.02	-0.02	-0.018
	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001
SDO	0.048	-0.045	0.07	0.049	-0.045	0.068	0.047	-0.047	0.069
	-0.022	-0.022	-0.022	-0.022	-0.021	-0.02	-0.022	-0.021	-0.02
	p=0.028	p=0.043	p=0.001	p=0.027	p=0.035	p<0.001	p=0.034	p=0.028	p<0.001
RWA	0.014	0.06	0.074	0.013	0.06	0.073	0.013	0.06	0.074
	-0.023	-0.023	-0.022	-0.022	-0.021	-0.02	-0.022	-0.021	-0.02
	p=0.546	p=0.010	p<0.001	p=0.544	p=0.005	p<0.001	p=0.555	p=0.005	p<0.001
Pol. Interest	-0.041	0.114	-0.012	-0.042	0.115	-0.012	-0.042	0.115	-0.012
	-0.022	-0.023	-0.02	-0.021	-0.021	-0.019	-0.021	-0.021	-0.019
	p=0.062	p<0.001	p=0.532	p=0.046	p<0.001	p=0.530	p=0.050	p<0.001	p=0.518
Republican	0.277	0.125	0.102	0.274	0.127	0.102	0.278	0.127	0.103
	-0.05	-0.047	-0.041	-0.046	-0.045	-0.042	-0.046	-0.045	-0.041
	p<0.001	p=0.008	p=0.013	p<0.001	p=0.004	p=0.014	p<0.001	p=0.004	p=0.013
Ideology	0.071	0.076	0.075	0.071	0.076	0.076	0.071	0.076	0.075
	-0.01	-0.01	-0.009	-0.009	-0.009	-0.008	-0.009	-0.009	-0.008
	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001	p<0.001

	-0.004	0.002	-0.006	-0.004	0.002	-0.006	-0.004	0.002	-0.006
	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001
	p=0.002	p=0.068	p<0.001	p=0.002	p=0.063	p<0.001	p=0.002	p=0.063	p<0.001
RW Media x Alt Tech				-0.026	0.008	-0.056			
				-0.039	-0.038	-0.035			
				p=0.513	p=0.833	p=0.114			
RW Media x Stronger-Tie SM				0.007	0.008	-0.009			
				-0.025	-0.024	-0.023			
				p=0.787	p=0.739	p=0.689			
RW Media x Weaker-Tie SM				-0.018	0.007	0.015			
				-0.025	-0.024	-0.022			
				p=0.465	p=0.770	p=0.498			
Mainstream News x Alt Tech							-0.027	0.009	0
							-0.042	-0.041	-0.038
							p=0.522	p=0.816	p=0.999
Mainstream News x Stronger-Tie SM							-0.023	-0.01	-0.023
							-0.026	-0.025	-0.023
							p=0.365	p=0.694	p=0.319
Mainstream News x Weaker-Tie SM							0.027	0.028	0.02
							-0.026	-0.025	-0.024
							p=0.299	p=0.274	p=0.398
Num.Obs.	1998	1998	1998	1998	1998	1998	1998	1998	1998
R2									
Age	0.291	0.334	0.425	0.291	0.334	0.426	0.291	0.334	0.426
R2 Adj.	0.286	0.33	0.422	0.286	0.329	0.422	0.286	0.329	0.421
RMSE	0.84	0.82	0.76	0.84	0.82	0.76	0.84	0.82	0.76
AIC	5012	4886.6	4591.5	5016.7	4892.2	4594.7	5016.4	4891.2	4696.3
VIFs	≤1.89			≤1.67 (except for interacting terms)			≤1.78 (except for interacting terms)		

Table A1. Models Predicting Democratically Corrosive Sentiment

Notes: OLS Coefficient Estimates with Robust Standard Errors.

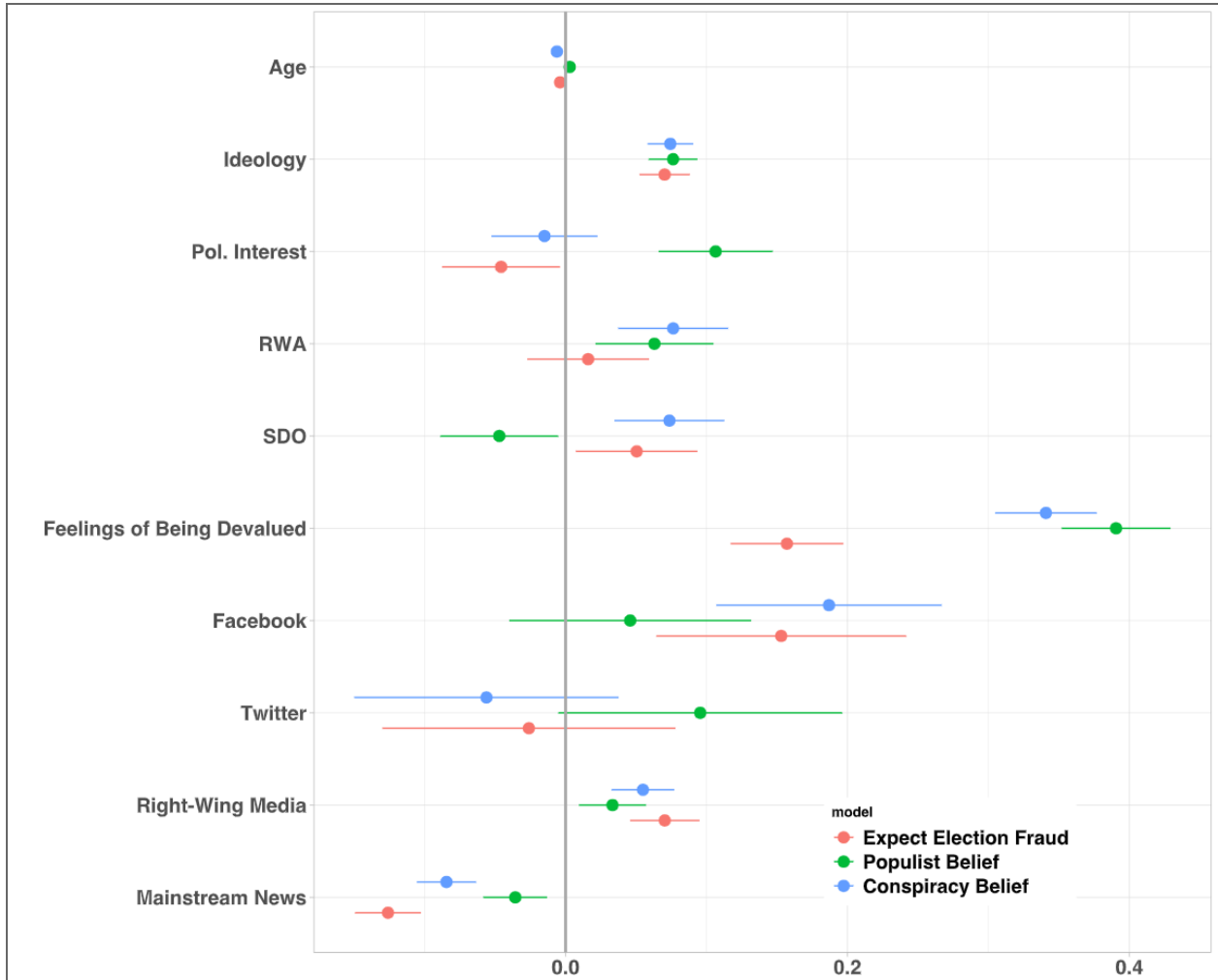


Figure A1. Alternative Models Using Facebook and Twitter

Notes: OLS Coefficient Estimates with 95% confidence intervals, with Robust Standard Errors. N=1998; Adj R² = .42 for Conspiracy Belief, .29 for Expectation of Election Fraud, and .34 for Populist Attitudes

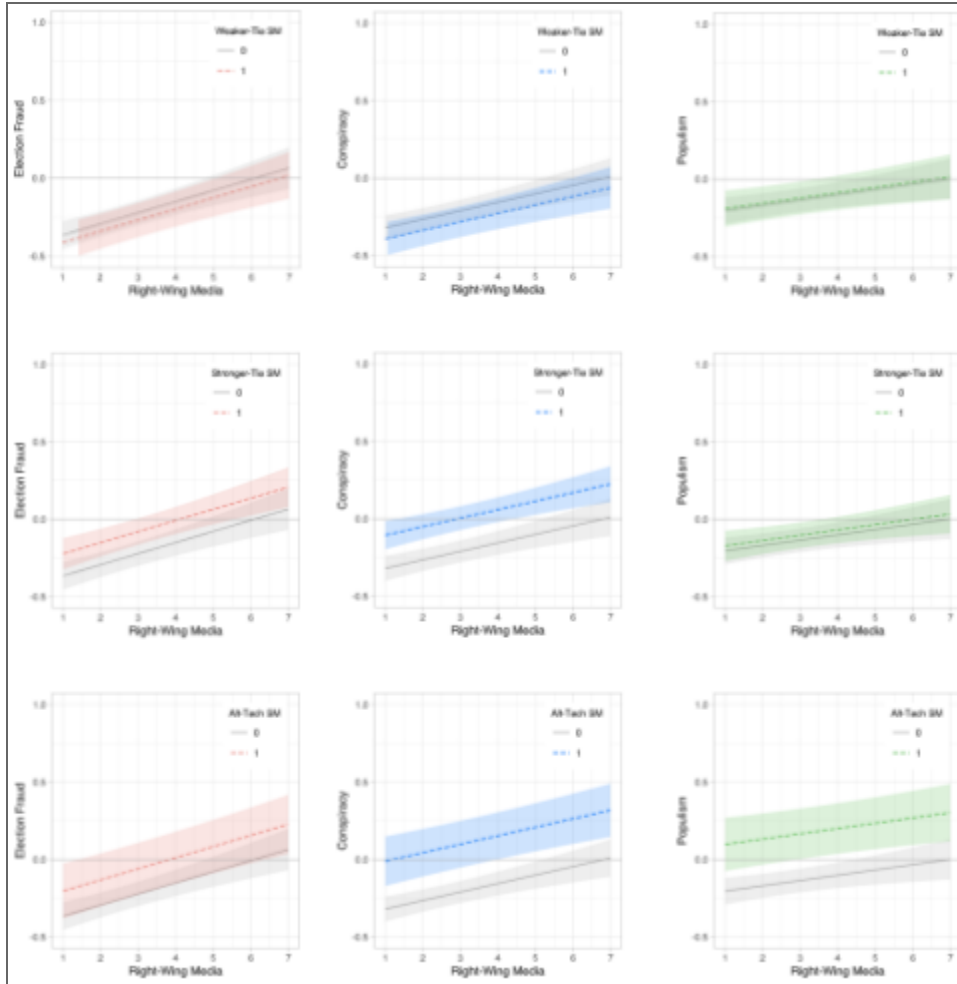


Figure A2. Interactions between Right-Wing Media and Social Media Use

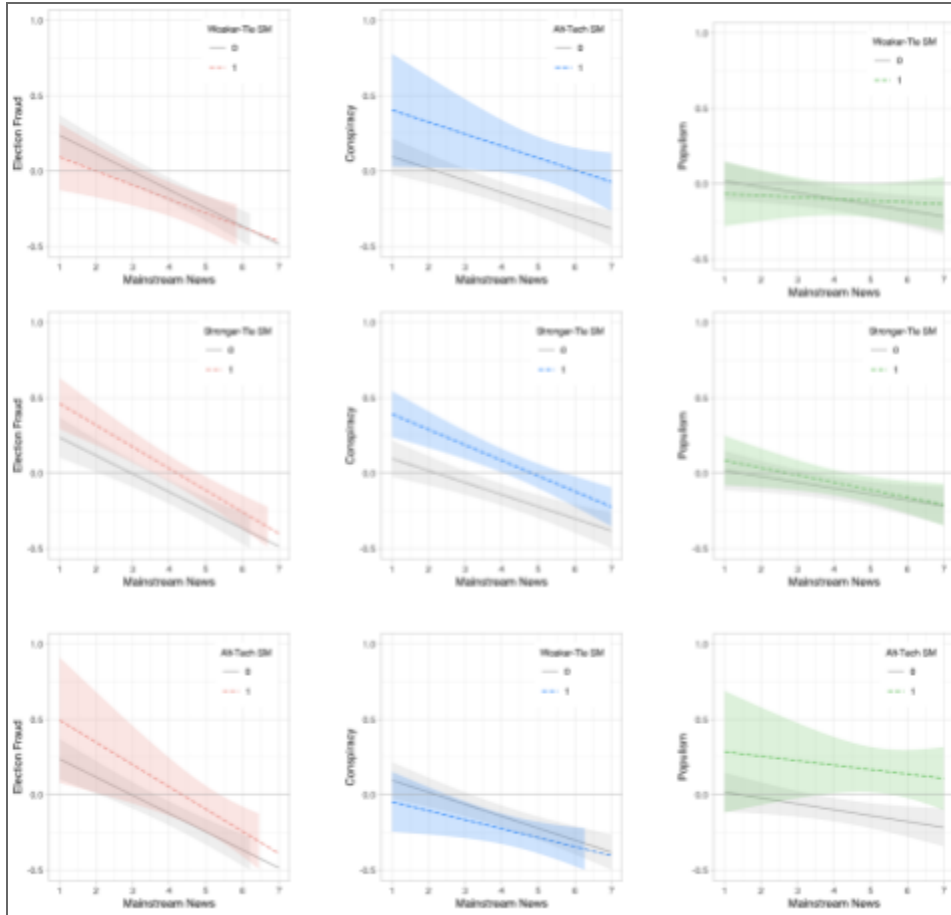


Figure A3. Interactions between Mainstream News and Social Media Use