

Status Threat and Trump Support

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Why do Americans support Donald Trump? The scholarly literature offers three general accounts: the “politics as usual,” “isms,” and “status threat” theses. Using national surveys from 2016 and 2018, we depart from piecemeal attempts to advance new psychological explanations in order to empirically adjudicate between these competing perspectives. We find that while traditional factors and some negative psychological orientations partially explain attitudes about Trump, the status threat thesis finds the most empirical support. Indeed, status threat – captured via a unique measurement strategy – explains support for Trump and the political issues he champions at least as well as, or better than, partisanship and ideology. Moreover, status threat exhibits more predictive power than racial resentment, sexism, anti-immigrant attitudes, authoritarianism, and conspiracy thinking, and is negatively related to support for mainstream Republican candidates. Our analyses suggest that Trump benefitted from activating a longstanding dimension of public opinion that transcends traditional party cleavages.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Status Threat, Partisanship, Racism, Sexism

Why did Americans vote for such a polarizing and non-traditional candidate as Donald Trump? This question has been posed by scholars, pundits, journalists, and even party leaders since then-candidate Trump began to amass popular support in 2015. Many researchers have embraced the idea that the social-psychological sources of Trump's support are somewhat different from those associated with more typical Republican candidates (Reny, Collingwood and Valenzuela 2019, Barber and Pope 2019, Blum and Parker 2019). Indeed, a body of research seeking to identify the factors driving Trump's support has rapidly developed (Grossmann 2019), as understanding his ascendancy has not only posed "a key social-science challenge" (Federico and de Zavala 2018, 110), but also sparked strong disagreement among scholars (e.g., Mutz 2018a).

Myriad factors have been identified, resulting in a list of, by our count, no fewer than a dozen social-psychological constructs, in addition to more traditional predictors of political preferences such as partisanship, ideology, and perceptions of the national economy. This expansive literature, at its core, offers three competing explanations for the rise of Donald Trump: 1) the "politics as usual" thesis, that there is no difference between Trump supporters and those who support more typical Republican candidates (e.g., Bartels 2018); 2) the "isms" thesis, that Trump supporters, in addition to being largely Republican and conservative, exhibit some combination of undesirable psychological traits, such as racism or sexism (e.g., Schaffner, Macwilliams and Nteta 2018); and 3) the "status threat" thesis, that Trump supporters, rather than exhibiting active group-based animosities, are better characterized as acting on a perception of status threat and social change (e.g., Mutz 2018b).¹

¹ We do not focus on what we might call the "socio-economic hardship" thesis, that economic hardship drove Trump support (e.g., Morgan 2018). While we account for socio-economic variables, our concern is more with the psychological antecedents of Trump support, and we note that the socio-economic explanation has enjoyed fairly little empirical support (e.g., Silver 2016, Mutz 2018a, Mutz 2018b, Ogorzalek, Piston and Puig 2019).

Each of these alternatives seems plausible, and each enjoys at least some empirical support, but little work has attempted to adjudicate between them. Rather, the literature has proceeded in a piecemeal fashion, with new manuscripts adding a new psychological construct to the traditional vote choice model, observing a statistically significant result, and claiming that support for Trump is based on “_____.” Such investigations usually offer incomplete empirical tests because necessary variables are missing – one cannot claim support for one explanation (e.g., sexism) without controlling for others (e.g., conspiracism), especially when explanatory factors are related. Moreover, previous work frequently conflates relationships between variables with absolute levels of those variables and, in the process, inaccurately characterizes the political psychology of the average Trump supporter.

In this study, we use unique data from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) and publicly available data from the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) to offer more complete tests of the psychological sources of Trump support. Ultimately, we find most support for the “status threat” thesis. First, we demonstrate the perils of failing to include the many predictors of Trump support in an explanatory model. Indeed, many of the psychological “isms” are very highly correlated, resulting in large and consequential biases in estimates due to omitted variables. On the other hand, however, inclusion of all the posited factors results in multicollinearity-based inferential problems: because of the high correlation between factors, it is empirically difficult to disentangle even their correlational associations with Trump support.

Next, we circumvent the aforementioned analytical issues and act on previous work suggesting that constructs such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia are – at least partially – the product of status threat. More specifically, we model observed attitudes regarding the “isms” as a

combination of both the specific “ism” constructs and a more general factor, which we demonstrate can best be interpreted as status threat. This strategy allows, but does not assume or require, Trump supporters to simultaneously register high in orientations such as racial resentment, sexism, or conspiracism. Moreover, the strategy allows for both a specific test of the connection between the “isms” and “status threat” theses. The resulting status threat factor is highly predictive of Trump vote choice and positive feelings toward Trump, as well as attitudes about political issues Trump has closely embraced (e.g., climate change denialism, building a border wall), controlling for partisan and ideological predispositions. Importantly, this status threat factor does not merely capture partisanship or ideology in another way – it is negatively correlated with support for establishment Republican candidates, and we observe a wide distribution of partisans and ideologues across the factor. These findings challenge the “politics as usual” thesis.

Finally, we examine attitudes and group differences in service of a more nuanced accounting of the psychological antecedents of Trump support. While the status threat factor is highly predictive of support for Trump and the political issues he has adopted, high correlations do not require high levels of the “isms.” Indeed, we find that no more than 8.5 percent of respondents are extremely negative across all items composing any of the racial resentment, sexism, anti-immigration, anti-political correctness, or conspiracy thinking scales, and further, no one is extreme across all of these. This evidence calls into question the “isms” thesis.

Ultimately, we conclude that the “status threat” thesis finds more support than the “isms” or “politics as usual” theses. Because so few individuals register extreme attitudes on any of the individual “ism” scales, it is simply impossible to explain Trump support with “rascism,” “sexism,” or the like. Moreover, it is a combination of psychological “isms” – or rather, what

believes them – that best explains Trump support. The “isms” are all empirically related – a relationship that can be theoretically accounted for by status threat, and that we show is highly correlated to direct measures of status threat. We note, however, that status threat need not boil down to a benign defense of self, nor does it imply that the “isms” are not important factors for some voters. Rather, our claim is that the status threat explanation receives the most empirical support.

These findings have important theoretical and methodological implications. First, psychological orientations toward social, racial, and political “others” are, as the burgeoning literature on social identity suggests (Mason 2018, Mason and Wronski 2018), frequently related to each other, and should, therefore, best be considered in concert with one another. Second, given the negative valence of the “isms” in question, scholars should consider that relationships between variables oftentimes say little about those variables’ absolute levels. Finally, whereas Americans are ideologically innocent in the traditional left-right sense (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017) and rely on partisan cues to arrive at opinions (Zaller 1992), we suggest that there exist other powerful dimensions of opinion, in this case a longstanding sense of status threat (Hofstadter 1964, Adorno, et al. 1950, Lane 1962, Parker and Barreto 2013, Cramer 2016, Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016, Skocpol and Williamson 2016), which when strategically activated, can win elections and induce reactionary politics (e.g., Cohen and Smith 2016). Trump exploited this sense of threat to “hunt where the ducks were” (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018), and in the process, may have initiated a “clash between an overwhelmingly white ethnic party and a cosmopolitan coalition of minority groups and college-educated whites” (Nyhan 2016).

Previous Explanations for Support for Donald Trump

Since 2015, scholars from across disciplines have attempted to explain Americans' support for Donald Trump. The hypothesized factors begin with the traditional political explanations, Republicanism and conservatism, both of which strongly predicted the Trump vote (Bartels 2016). Sociological factors, on the other hand, have garnered only weak support. Education, for example, is negatively associated with Trump support, but this relationship may be spurious, with education acting as a proxy for deeper orientations (Silver 2016). The working class's economic vulnerability was argued to be a major factor in Trump's victory (Morgan 2018), but further analyses suggest that Trump voters are relatively economically secure (e.g., Ogorzalek, et al. 2019). Disputes about the role of socio-economics aside, Trump has surely employed a rhetorical strategy that reaches well beyond socio-economic concerns and partisan affections – a strategy that may have resonated with the characteristics of his would-be base.

Trump's rhetoric was, at times, racist, sexist, xenophobic, anti-PC, conspiratorial, and authoritarian (e.g., Finley and Esposito 2019), and voters who shared such ideas tended to vote for him (Sherman 2018). As such, researchers have found that forms of racial prejudice toward African-Americans, Muslims, and Mexicans partially account for Trump voting (Schaffner, et al. 2018, Engelhardt 2019, Abramowitz and McCoy 2019, Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018, Craig, Rucker and Richeson 2018, Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2019, Major, Blodorn and Major Blascovich 2018, Jardina 2019). Other scholars have found that attitudes about immigration strongly predict the Trump vote (Manza and Crowley 2018, Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018). Perhaps most importantly, attitudes about both race and immigration played a greater role in determining the vote in 2016 than in previous elections (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2017, Donovan and Redlawsk 2018, Newman, Shah and Collingwood 2018, Reny, et al. 2019).

Attitudes about women are also associated with Trump support (Bracic, Israel-Trummel and Shortle 2019, Schaffner, et al. 2018, Setzler and Yanus 2018, Cassese and Holman 2019), with more sexist attitudes indicating higher support; this relationship was not observed with candidates running in previous elections (Valentino, Wayne and Ocenio 2018).

Broader worldviews also explain Trump support. Given that Trump often broke discursive norms, it is unsurprising that negative attitudes toward political correctness are associated with positive evaluations of Trump (Conway, Repke and Houck 2017, Edsall 2016, Finley and Esposito 2019). Also given Trump's rhetoric (Oliver and Rahn 2016), two related worldviews – populism (Carmines, Ensley and Wagner 2016) and conspiracism (Cassino 2016) – are positively related to support. Finally, Trump's "strong-man" image elevated authoritarian views in comparison to previous elections (Knuckey and Hassan 2019), and numerous studies show that various strains of authoritarianism are correlated with Trump support (Womick, et al. 2018, Ludeke, Klitgaard and Vitriol 2018, MacWilliams 2016).

Because most of the aforementioned work demonstrates the effect of psychological factors beyond traditional political predictors (which are almost always controlled for), we are reasonably comfortable concluding that the "politics as usual" thesis – whereby there is no psychological difference between Trump supporters and supporters of more mainstream Republican candidates from elections past – is on overly simplistic account of the 2016 election and Trump support, despite partisanship and ideology exhibiting strong relationships with vote choice (Bartels 2018). Even though many of the "isms" are correlated with partisan and ideological predispositions, they are surely not mere stand-ins for political identities for most people. Indeed, most people do not even feel particularly attached to the parties or ideological labels; after all, "independent" and "moderate" are the modal attitudes captured by associated

measures of partisanship and ideology (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Moreover, most theories of racism, sexism, and the like point to pre-political roots of such deep-seated orientations – i.e., racism should precede partisanship, not the other way around. Finally, recent work shows a marked increase in the effects of racism and sexism in the 2016 election (Valentino, et al. 2018, Enders and Scott 2019, Reny, et al. 2019), which suggests activation. Taken together, it seems that something more than “politics as usual” is at play with Trump and his supporters.

However, there still remains one additional explanation for Trump support: the “status threat” thesis. Perceived status threat is the feeling that one’s place in the nation or in the world is being eroded for the worse (Wilkins and Kaiser 2014, Mutz 2018b, Major, et al. 2018). As a perception, it need not be based in reality, but is a powerful and consequential psychological mechanism nonetheless. Bonikowski (2017, 181) argues that “social changes have engendered a sense of collective status threat,” that has been channeled into “resentments toward elites, immigrants, and ethnic, racial and religious minorities, thereby activating previously latent attitudes and lending legitimacy to radical political campaigns that promise to return power and status to their aggrieved supporters.” In other words, observed attitudes designed to capture latent racism, sexism, and xenophobia may also be conceptualized as expressions of a latent sense of status threat.

The attitudes stemming from status threat are longstanding cultural and demographic dispositions that, like any “ingredient” of public opinion, can be activated and connected to political choices by strategic politicians (e.g., Grossmann and Thaler 2018). Moreover, many of the previously mentioned authors have argued that the psychological “ism” factors – racial resentment (Tesler 2016), anti-immigrant attitudes (Parker and Barreto 2013), populism/conspiracism (Uscinski and Parent 2014, Gidron and Hall 2017), sexism (Valentino, et

al. 2018), anti-PC attitudes (Lalonde, Doan and Patterson 2000), and authoritarianism (Hetherington and Suhay 2011) – can be at least partially explained by a sense of threatened status. It is perhaps, then, more efficient to conceptualize these factors as varying expressions of a latent sense of threat, rather than as individual explanations where only one can be correct.

By our accounting, then, the remaining plausible psychological explanations for Trump support include: one or all of the “isms,” or status threat. Though most of the aforementioned studies from both perspectives control for traditional predictors of vote choice, they rarely account for other psychological explanations for Trump support. While we know that racism, sexism, conspiracism, etc. exhibit strong relationships with Trump support in the face of partisanship and ideology, we know little of the effect of sexism, for instance, in the face of controls for conspiracism. Not only do previous accounts provide insufficient tests of the various specific “ism” explanations, they are additionally unequipped to adjudicate between any particular “ism” explanation and the “status threat” thesis. This is especially the case given that status threat may partially give rise to observed measures of racism, sexism, and the like.

Data and Analytical Strategy

In order to simultaneously examine the effects of the many factors posited to explain support for Donald Trump, we require measures of most of these on single surveys. Therefore, we fielded a unique module of items on the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) that included indicators to estimate attitudes toward racial minorities, women, immigrants, political correctness, and conspiracy thinking (see Table 1). The survey was administered to 1,000 respondents during October 2018. While these data were collected two years after the 2016 election, the predictors of interest are deep-seated, meaning there is little

reason to expect that they have changed in their absolute level, or in their correlation with Trump support between Fall of 2016 and 2018 (given that Trump has continued to activate them). That said, we also employ the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES), which included similar survey instruments, with two particular goals in mind: 1) to examine the robustness of our conclusions using the 2018 CCES data, and 2) to examine the effects of the Trump support factors on support for other Republican candidates in the 2016 Republican primaries.

The analytical strategy we take unfolds in four steps. First, we employ the CCES data to examine the interrelation between the Trump support factors, with an emphasis on the stability of observed effects across model specifications. Here, we are interested in understanding the extent to which inferences about the effect of any given predictor of Trump support are contingent on the inclusion or exclusion of other variables in the model. Second, we present a better strategy for conceptualizing and measuring the Trump support factors, which results in a measure of status threat. Third, we demonstrate that our measure of status threat is a better predictor of Trump support and attitudes associated with Trump than any of the individual “ism” factors or partisanship and ideology. Finally, we estimate status threat using a close approximation of variables from the 2016 ANES, confirming the predictive power of status threat, and showcasing its ability to discriminate between support for Trump and other Republican candidates.

Empirical Analysis

Each of the factors posited to explain Trump support, excepting partisanship and ideology, are measured via multiple-item scales. This strategy allows us to reduce measurement error and employ sharper estimates of the latent variables of interest. This also means that when we compare the effects of these variables, differences are less likely to be due to measurement error, but to true differences in the (controlled) unbiased effect of these variables, assuming that

Table 1: Question wording for all items employed below, 2018 CCES.

Racial Resentment

- 1) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
- 2) It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.
- 3) Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
- 4) Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.

Sexism

- 1) Women should earn the same wages as their male counterpart.
- 2) A woman's place is in the home.
- 3) The news media have been showing more concern about the treatment of women than is warranted by women's actual experiences.
- 4) Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.

Anti-Immigrant Attitudes

- 1) Illegal immigrants increase crime in the US.
- 2) Illegal immigrants decrease wages for Americans.
- 3) Immigrants contribute more in taxes than they receive in health and welfare services.
- 4) Immigration in general should be slowed down.

Anti-PC Attitudes

- 1) People can't say what they think about important topics, because of political correctness.
- 2) Political correctness has gone too far.
- 3) Too many people are easily offended these days over other people's language.

Conspiracy Thinking

- 1) Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places.
 - 2) Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway.
 - 3) The people who really "run" the country are not known to the voters.
 - 4) Big events like wars, the current recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us
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the empirical models we have specified are reasonably correct (Westfall and Yarkoni 2016).

Information about the number of items composing each scale, statistical reliability, and the proportion of shared inter-item variance accounted for by the first factor of an exploratory factor analysis appear in Table 2. Each of the scales is statistically reliable and squarely

unidimensional. Thus, these variables will be on a roughly equal playing field in terms of the

Table 2: Characteristics and psychometric properties of Trump support variable scales.

	# of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Prop. Variance Explained
Racial Resentment	4	0.908	0.930
Sexism	4	0.685	0.842
Anti-Immigrant Attitudes	4	0.847	0.957
Anti-PC Attitudes	3	0.861	0.992
Conspiracy Thinking	4	0.774	0.896

influence of measurement error when comparing their effects in models (Westfall and Yarkoni 2016).

We begin our investigation by examining the simple bivariate relationships between the hypothesized predictors. Table 3 contains correlations between each pair of factors, as well as partisanship and ideology. Most of the correlations are quite large and statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. The exception is conspiracy thinking, which – consistent with previous literature (Uscinski, Klofstad and Atkinson 2016) – appears less strongly related to the other variables. Racial resentment, sexism, anti-immigrant attitudes, anti-PC attitudes, and traditional political orientations are all highly correlated, ranging from 0.489 to 0.725.

From the magnitude of the intercorrelations in Table 3, one can already imagine the difficulties in disentangling the effects of each of these constructs on support for Trump (e.g., Achen 2002, Schrodt 2014). Multicollinearity will certainly affect substantive inferences by increasing standard errors, leading to inaccurate tests of statistical significance. Multicollinearity can also increase the sensitivity of estimates to model specification (Winship and Western 2016).

Table 3: Correlations between hypothesized predictors of Trump support. Pearson correlation coefficients.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Racial Resentment	1.000					
(2) Sexism	0.634*	1.000				
(3) Anti-Immigrant Attitudes	0.725*	0.596*	1.000			
(4) Anti-PC Attitudes	0.634*	0.514*	0.634*	1.000		
(5) Conspiracy Thinking	0.108*	0.138*	0.145*	0.214*	1.000	
(6) Partisanship	0.579*	0.531*	0.586*	0.489*	0.029	1.000
(7) Ideological Self-identification	0.642*	0.612*	0.662*	0.565*	0.072	0.680*

Cell entries are Pearson correlation coefficients.

* denotes $p < 0.05$ level with respect to a two-tailed test.

Relatedly, omitting variables – especially ones that are highly related to others in the model – causes theoretical and statistical issues of a different sort. Theoretically, models omitting too many variables will be misspecified and incapable of appropriately adjudicating between the various explanations for Trump support. Statistically, omitting variables that are highly correlated with others included in the model may produce biased estimates, and the likelihood of such a scenario increases as the magnitude of the intercorrelations between predictors increases.

To determine a viable path forward, we first undertake a series of model robustness checks per the routine devised by Young (2009) and Young and Holsteen (2017). These checks are designed to reveal the stability of estimates across model specifications, providing some empirical grasp of the potential effects of multicollinearity and omitted variable bias. First, we decide on a core set of theoretical and control variables that should be included in our models of Trump vote choice. These include: partisanship, ideological self-identification, racial resentment, anti-immigrant attitudes, sexism, anti-political correctness attitudes, conspiracy thinking, income, educational attainment, age, frequency of attendance at religious services, and dummy variables for self-identification as black, white, or Hispanic, gender, and residence in the South.

Then, we specify regression models with all possible combinations of these variables. This results in 2^{15} , or 32,768, possible specifications for a model explaining Trump vote choice. Next, retained estimates associated with a variable of interest are plotted via kernel density estimation. This provides an empirical estimate of a variable's "modeling distribution" – a distribution where variability in coefficient estimates is attributed to different model specifications, rather than sampling error such as in a sampling distribution. Finally, we use characteristics of these distributions across independent variables to make inferences about the stability of estimated effects across model specifications.

We are particularly interested in the shape of the empirical modeling distributions, including variance in the magnitude, sign, and statistical significance of the effect of a given variable across models. Relatively high instability according to the former criteria would suggest a large effect of some combination of multicollinearity and omitted variable bias. Substantively, this scenario would also suggest that previous attempts to empirically investigate the predictors of Trump support may be inaccurate – or, at least, incomparable – unless all of such predictors are included in the model. In other words, piecemeal investigations of the effects of the various psychological "isms" associated with Trump support may be misleading if controls for other "isms" are excluded from models.

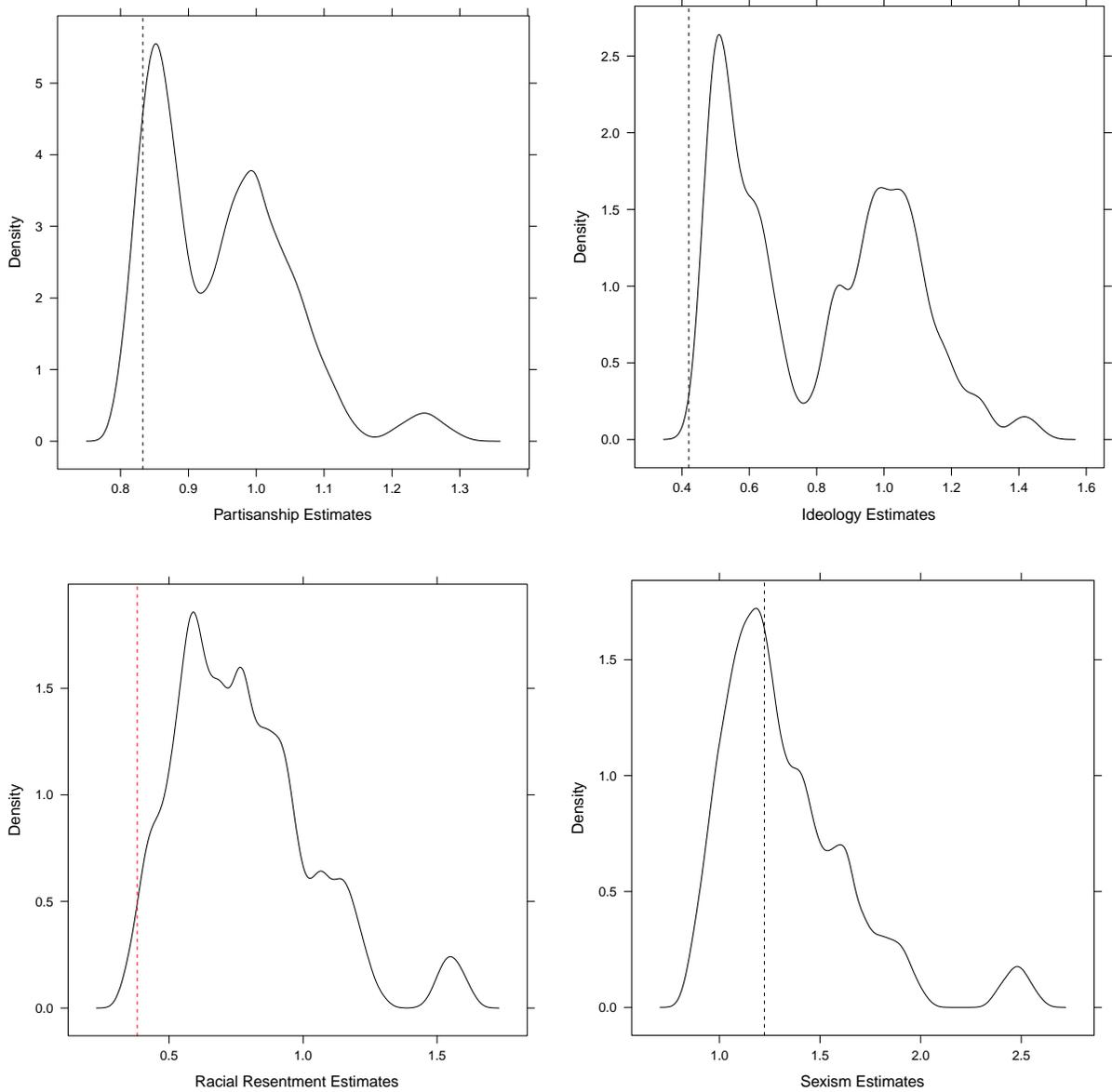
Figure 1 contains the empirical modeling distributions for each of the explanatory factors of interest in logistic regression models of Trump vote choice. There are some systematic characteristics of the set of distributions worth considering. First, most distributions are heavily skewed (e.g., racial resentment, sexism); some are even bimodal (e.g., conspiracy thinking, ideological self-identifications). More importantly, estimates from the full model – depicted by vertical dashed lines – rarely represent the average or median estimate (i.e., the center of the

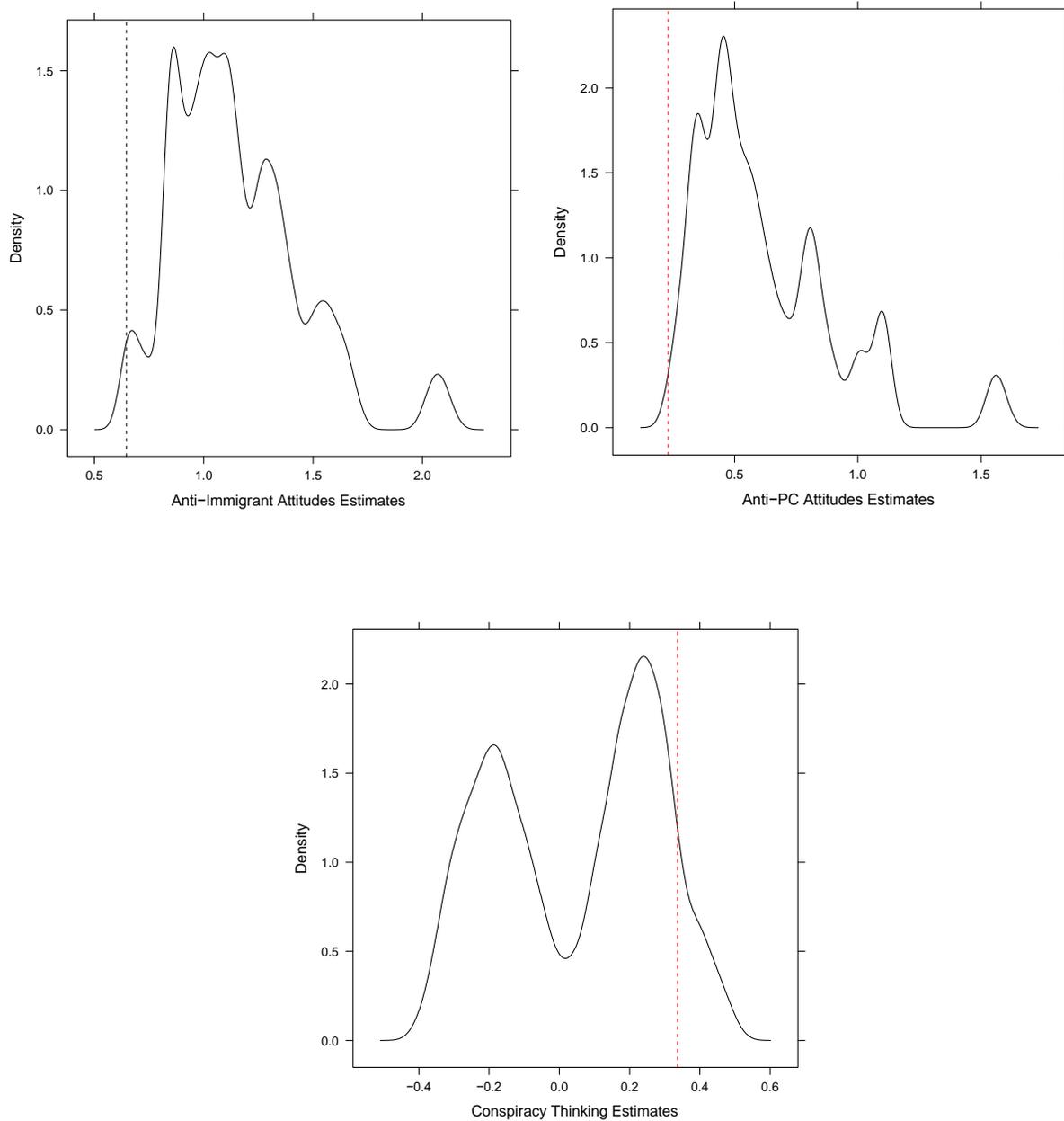
empirical modeling distributions). This signifies that omitted variable bias is present – removal of a subset of predictors dramatically alters the magnitude of the estimated coefficients. Finally, three hypothesized predictors of Trump support – conspiracy thinking, racial resentment, and anti-political correctness attitudes – are not statistically significant (as denoted by red dashed lines) in the full model, despite non-zero coefficients in the vast majority of models. Indeed, the full model estimate of the effects of racial resentment and political correctness attitudes fall toward the very low end of the empirical modeling distributions; the distribution for conspiracy thinking is actually bimodal about 0, signifying that some models reveal positive estimates, some negative.

Per the discussion surrounding Table 2 above, fluctuation in the magnitude, direction, and statistical significance of estimated effects is likely not due to measurement error. Rather, it appears that our inferences about the substantive impact of the predictors of Trump support are highly contingent on which of those predictors are included in the model. This may not seem like a particularly profound statement, *in practice*: Of course model estimates will change as the model itself changes. But, this fact does not change the reality that previous attempts at understanding the psychological sources of Trump support are simply incomplete because surveys do not typically include all of these factors.

Of course, diagnosing the problem says nothing of how fix it. Including all hypothesized support variables in the model – an improvement over the situation that others have found themselves in – still leaves us with the problem of multicollinearity. Note that the effects of racial resentment, conspiracy thinking, and political correctness attitudes are not statistically significant in the full model. However, we should not take this as a reliable sign that Trump failed to activate racist, conspiratorial, or anti-change orientations – indeed, these are some of the

Figure 1: Density plots of coefficient estimates from model robustness analyses. Density based on 32,768 models. Dashed lines represent estimate from full model with all controls. Lines presented in red signify a statistically non-significant estimate from the full model.





most popular explanations for Trump support. While conservative estimates are generally more desirable than the overestimations created by omitted variable bias, such conservative estimates also leave us unable to fully adjudicate between the various reasonable, theoretically-informed accounts of the psychological foundations of Trump support.

Sewing it Together with Status Threat

The solution to the remaining statistical problem lies in our understanding of the explanatory factors we are considering. Though researchers have proposed individual pet explanations for Trump's popularity, it appears that most of these psychological factors are closely related. It makes some intuitive sense that racial resentment, sexism, anti-immigrant attitudes, anti-political correctness attitudes, and conspiracy thinking are highly correlated – the observed attitudes used to capture these psychological orientations can all, at least partially, be conceptualized as the products of status threat. In other words, the observed correlations between the “isms” – and the omitted variable bias and multicollinearity following from those correlations – may be due to status threat.

Indeed, status threat can explain the strong interrelationships between the various Trump support factors in a way that partisanship, ideology, and other traditional psychological constructs cannot – it is the thread that weaves them together. Negative orientations toward racial groups, for instance, may be – at least partially – born of a sense of threat toward one's own social and economic status, even among members of other racial minority groups (Jardina 2019). Conspiracy theories have long been employed to explain “loser” status, whether the focus is political or socio-economic (Uscinski and Parent 2014, Hofstadter 1964). Finally, anti-political correctness attitudes, which are themselves closely related to racism and sexism, can be partially explained by a perceived threat to the status quo political culture (Lalonde, et al. 2000). These are but a few examples.

Conceptualization of a general orientation – such as status threat – that underlies the various dimensions of support for Trump is congruent with both the speculations of previous scholarship and the analyses presented thus far. It is also more theoretically parsimonious and

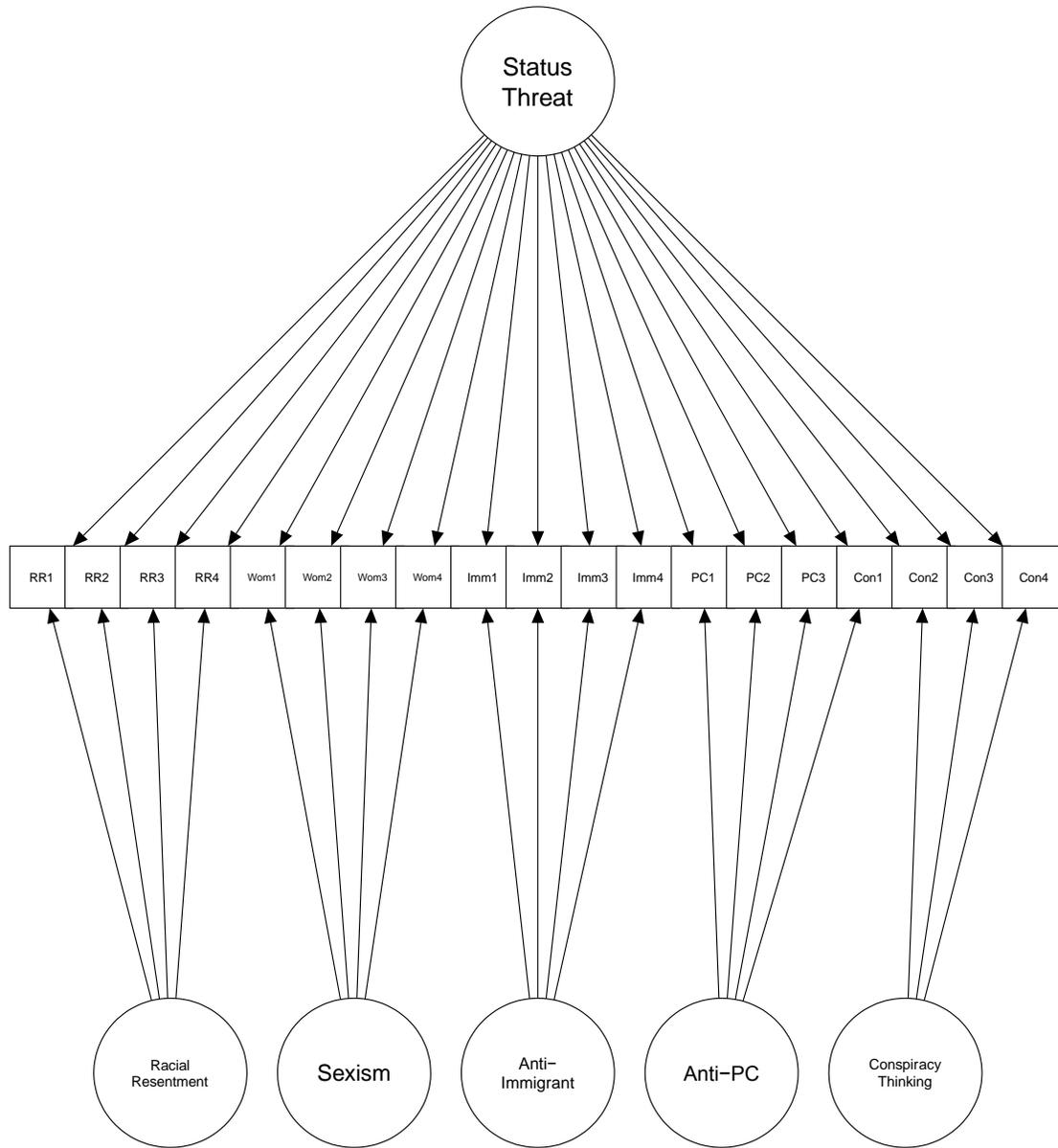
does not require a majority of Trump supporters to be racists, anti-immigrant, or sexist, which is surely a tall order. That is, this conceptualization allows individuals to have a profile along these individual “isms,” but avoids the issue of branding all Trump supporters with negative labels that may not be accurate. Empirically, a reconceptualization of Trump support along these lines circumvents some of the problems associated with multicollinearity, resulting in a simpler and, hopefully, more powerful model of Trump support.

To understand the utility of this strategy, consider the example of intelligence. Intelligence researchers going back to Charles Spearman – perhaps the most influential figure in the development of the common factor model (Horn and McArdle 2007) – have posited that intelligence is both theoretically and empirically composed of a general intelligence factor, usually denoted “g,” and many more individual factors that capture specific dimensions of intelligence, such as arithmetic ability, vocabulary, and visual perception. Modeling intelligence in this way allows individuals to vary along specific dimensions of intelligence, while still allowing individuals to be oriented along a single, general intelligence continuum.

This is precisely what we aim to do in modeling the psychological sources of Trump support. We employ a bifactor model of the covariances between the observed indicators of racial resentment, sexism, anti-immigrant attitudes, anti-political correctness attitudes, and conspiracy thinking. A path diagram of the bifactor model we estimate appears in Figure 2.2. Here, the specific psychological factors related to Trump support are analogous to the specific dimensions of intelligence, and the status threat factor is analogous to the general intelligence

² A related, “higher-order model” operationalizes the general factor as causing the specific factors, and the specific factors, in turn, causing observed indicators. As is frequently the case (Cucina and Byle 2017), this model does not fit the data quite as well, though the substantive results tend to be very similar. Ultimately, we do not believe that the effects of the general factor should be moderated by the specific factors, which is the causal relationship implied by the higher-order model. Indeed, the utility of our reconceptualization of Trump support is that many of the specific indicator items may be conceptualized as both the product of racial resentment, for instance, as well as status threat. This is a thin line, but a critical distinction nonetheless.

Figure 2: Path diagram depicting bifactor model of items capturing racial resentment, conspiracy thinking, anti-immigrant attitudes, sexism, and anti-political correctness attitudes. Latent variables (factors) in circles, observed indicators (survey items) in squares.



factor. Observed covariances of the individual indicators of racial resentment, sexism, anti-immigrant attitudes, anti-political correctness attitudes, and conspiracy thinking, are, theoretically, the causal product of both specific constructs of the same name and status threat. If this model fits the data well, we will have achieved a more parsimonious and theoretically-powerful account of Trump support, as well as circumvented the remaining statistical issue of

high and – per the model robustness analyses presented above – consequential multicollinearity between predictors of Trump support.

Estimates from the bifactor model are reported in Table 4.3 Several characteristics of the model output suggest excellent fit to the data. First, all but one factor loading (of 38 such estimated loadings) is statistically significant across specific factors, and all observed indicators significantly load on the status threat factor, albeit with varying degrees of strength. Moreover, all fit statistics suggest excellent model fit. The root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) is at the recommended 0.05 cutoff for “excellent” model fit (Kline 2015), and both the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) are above the recommended 0.95 rule of thumb (Hu and Bentler 1999). It appears that the observed attitudes associated with the “isms” can be accurately accounted for using the bifactor structure.

Thus far, we have partially established construct validity through examination of model fit. Observed relationships between attitudes are best accounted for with a combination of specific “ism” factors and a more general latent factor. But, how can we be more certain that the general factor can be accurately interpreted as “status threat”? We investigate the question by correlating the model-generated general factor scores with an external scale of responses to the following items:⁴

1. Whites are economically losing ground in this country due to no fault of their own.
2. Discrimination against whites is as big a problem as it is against Blacks and other minorities.
3. Minorities overtaking whites as the majority of the U.S. population by 2050 will be good for the country.

³ We used the “lavaan” package in R to estimate the model. The “mirt” package, which is capable of estimating the bifactor model under the IRT parameterization, provides identical substantive inferences.

⁴ The Cronbach’s alpha reliability estimate for the scale among the total sample is 0.67, and 0.70 for whites only.

Table 4: Estimates from bifactor model. Cell entries are standardized MLE coefficients.

	Status Threat	Racial Resentment	Sexism	Anti-Immigrant Attitudes	Anti-PC Attitudes	Conspiracy Thinking
<u>Racial Resentment</u>						
RR1	0.785*	0.382*				
RR2	0.757*	0.423*				
RR3	0.747*	0.398*				
RR4	0.767*	0.339*				
<u>Sexism</u>						
Wom1	0.349*		0.555*			
Wom2	0.791*		0.117*			
Wom3	0.422*		0.322*			
Wom4	0.679*		0.101			
<u>Anti-Immigrant Attitudes</u>						
Imm1	0.708*			0.206*		
Imm2	0.727*			0.227*		
Imm3	0.840*			0.394*		
Imm4	0.748*			0.344*		
<u>Anti-PC Attitudes</u>						
PC1	0.739*				0.406*	
PC2	0.800*				0.442*	
PC3	0.600*				0.472*	
<u>Conspiracy Thinking</u>						
Con1	0.280*					0.738*
Con2	0.095*					0.488*
Con3	0.121*					0.586*
Con4	0.143*					0.840*
<u>Fit Statistics</u>						
χ^2 (133 df), p-value			338.858, 0.000			
RMSEA			0.050			
Prob(RMSEA \leq 0.05)			0.452			
SRMR			0.035			
CFI			0.971			
TLI			0.963			
<i>n</i>			601			

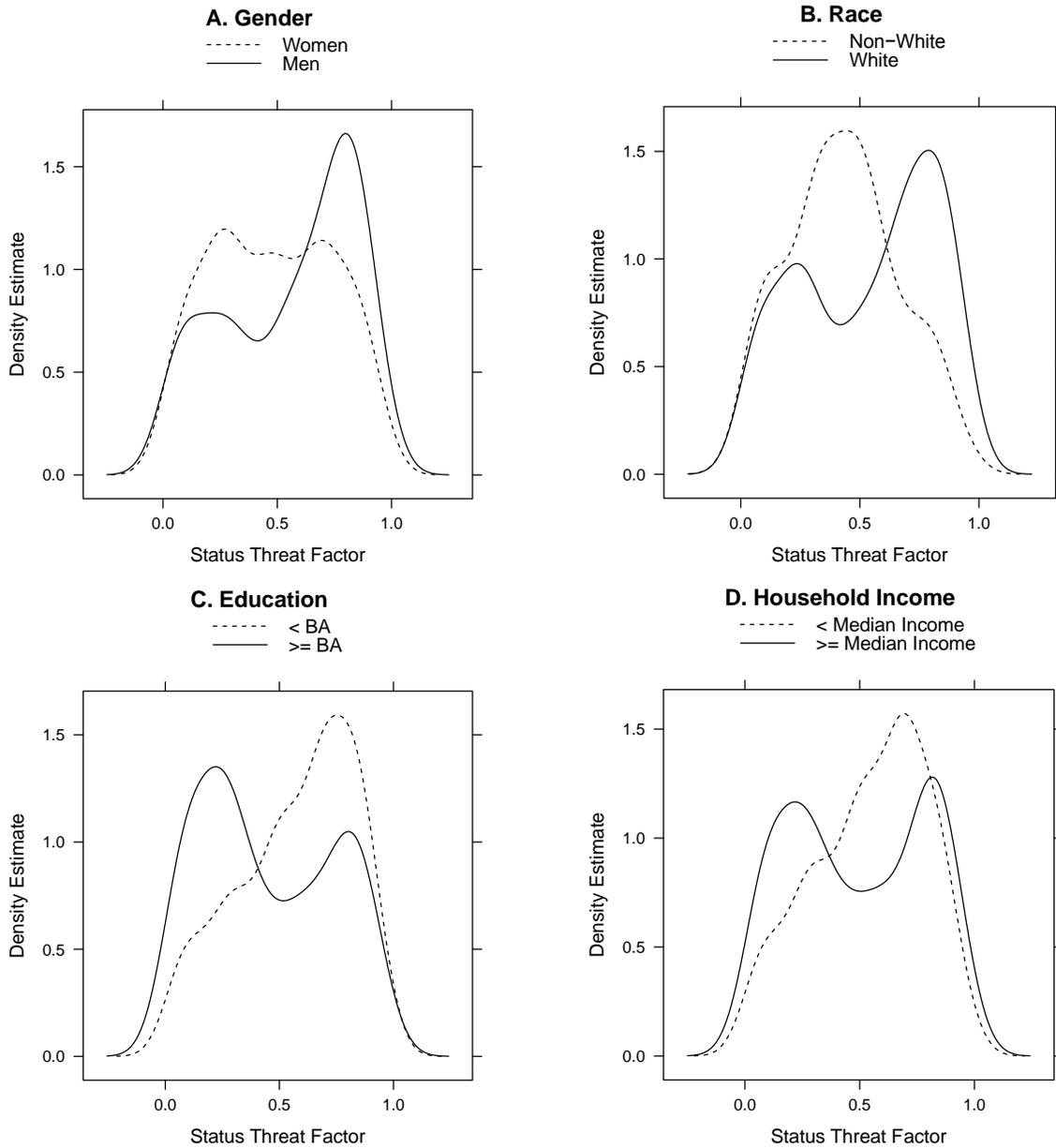
Standardized MLE coefficients. * $p < 0.05$ level with respect to a two-tailed test.

Although these items are likely to better elicit attitudes from white respondents (which are a “high status” racial group), they nonetheless provide a reasonable external operationalization of status threat. Indeed, these are precisely the types of items employed by the status threat literature (e.g. Craig and Richeson 2014). The correlation between this scale and the general factor scores is 0.82. This striking relationship provides a strong additional piece of supportive evidence for our interpretation of the general factor. It also lays a bedrock of evidence for the “status threat” thesis and shows that the full gamut of attitudes associated with the specific psychological “isms” may be themselves due to status threat.

We next consider concurrent validity – the extent to which the general factor is capable of distinguishing between groups it should theoretically be able to distinguish between if status threat is an appropriate interpretation. In Figure 3, we plot the distribution of the general factor by gender, race, educational attainment, and household income. The patterns we observe are consistent with the status threat interpretation. Generally, men and whites are higher along the factor than women or non-whites. Likewise, those low in educational attainment and household income – those likely to actually be socio-economically threatened – are higher along the factor than those with higher levels of education and household income, despite the bimodality of the higher income group. Thus, we possess a third piece of supportive evidence for our interpretation of the general factor as status threat.

Before considering the predictive validity of the status threat factor, we wish to note that it is not a mere substitute for partisanship or ideology. We plot the distribution of the status threat factor scores by partisanship and ideology in Figure 4. In both cases we observe fairly distinct bimodal distributions, with Republicans and conservatives clustered to the high end of the scale, and Democrats and liberals toward the low end. “Pure” independents and moderates are widely

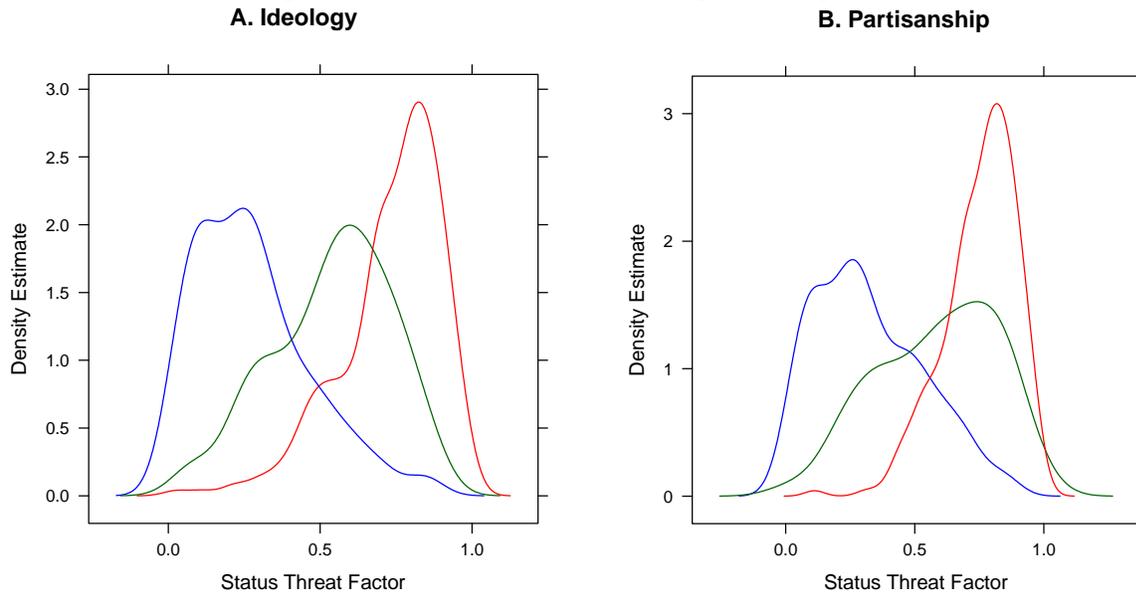
Figure 3: Distribution of the status threat factor by gender, race, educational attainment, and household income.



distributed across the range of the status threat factor, with slightly more clustered toward the top end of the scale.

Given the distribution of its component parts, on the one hand, we expect that the attitudes that compose the status threat factor should discriminate between partisan and ideological identities, *to some extent*. On the other hand, we also expect that a non-trivial

Figure 4: Distribution of the Trump Profile factor, by self-identification as a liberal/Democrat (blue), conservative/Republican (red), or moderate/Independent (green).



proportion of conservatives and Republicans will be positioned low on the status threat factor, while a non-trivial proportion of liberals and Democrats will be positioned middling or high. Moreover, moderates and independents should be oriented at all locations along the latent continuum. The findings in Figure 4 meet these expectations. For example, 21% of Democrats lie in the upper half of the scale, and over 36% of Independents are in the lower half. Thus, the status threat factor is related to partisanship and ideology, but far from determinative of, or determined by, them.

Predicting Support for Trump and Related Sentiments

The penultimate stage of our investigation entails demonstrating the predictive power of the status threat factor, especially related to other variables. We do so with respect to both specific measures of Trump support (voting for and feelings toward Trump) and a set of issues promoted by Trump: climate change denial, skepticism about Trump collusion with Russia, and distrust of the news media. Strong and statistically significant effects of the status threat factor

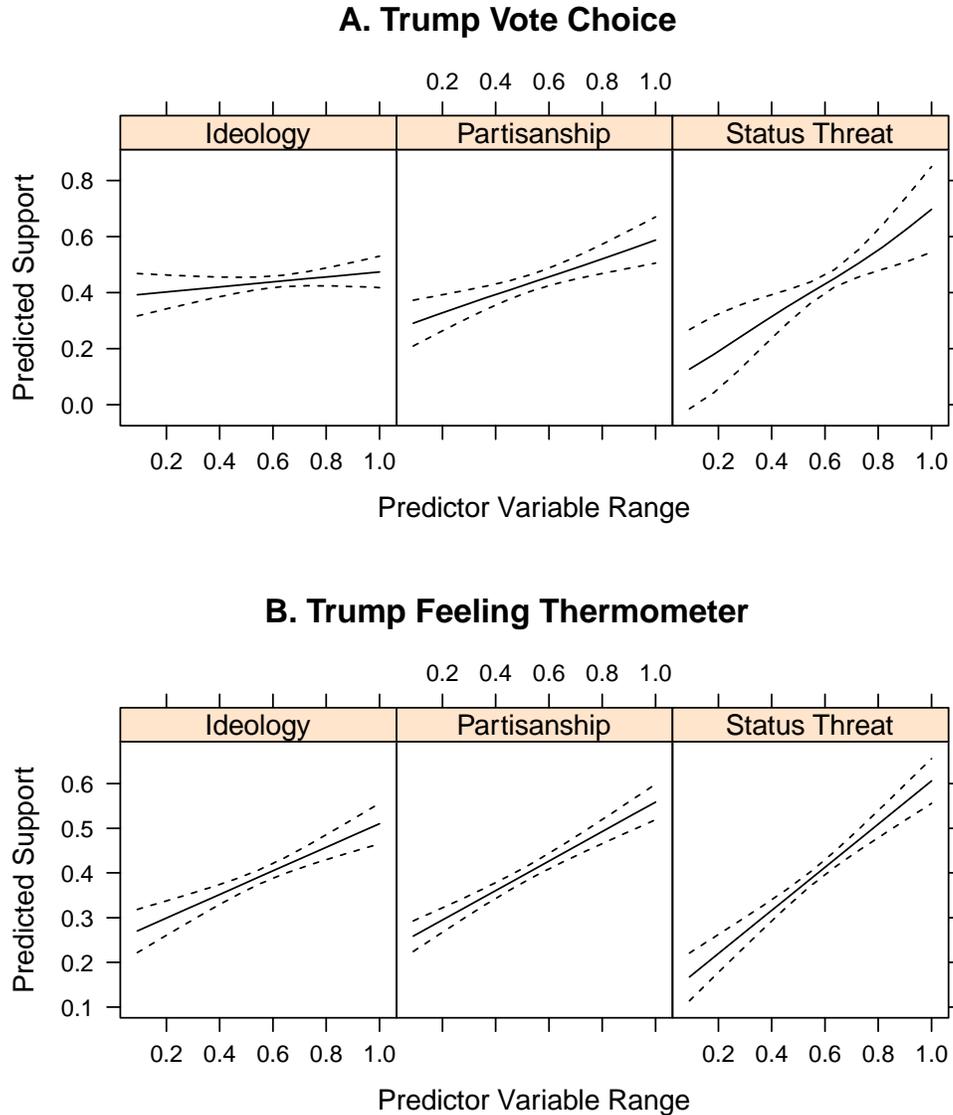
will not only provide a final piece of predictive validity for the measurement strategy, but demonstrate that Trump's rhetoric was capable of stirring something other than partisanship, ideology, or any specific "ism" orientation. Recall that campaigns are about activation. If Trump was able to activate, foster, and direct a sense of status threat, we should observe that status threat is highly related to Trump-specific issues, controlling for other factors.

First, we regressed Donald Trump feeling thermometer scores (0-100) and Trump vote choice on the status threat factor, as well as partisanship, ideology, and a host of controls for retrospective evaluations of the national economy, income, religiosity, educational attainment, age, race/ethnicity, gender, and residence in the South.⁵ Ideology, partisanship, and the status threat factor are all coded such that larger values denote more conservative, Republican, and "threatened" orientations. Full model results appear in the Supplemental Appendix, but model-based predictions over the range of the three explanatory variables of interest appear in Figure 5.

The coefficients on the explanatory variables of interest are statistically significant, and they are larger than any of the other control variables in the model, including education or income. Of course, it makes good sense that both partisanship and ideology are important factors in explaining support for Trump. However, both ideology and partisanship exhibit less predictive power than the status threat factor. Take, for instance, the predicted probability of a vote for Trump over Clinton in panel A of Figure 5. For the strongest Democratic identifiers, this probability is about 0.30; for the strongest Republicans, about 0.60. However, for the status threat factor, those low on the scale voted for Trump with a probability of 0.13, and those very high with a probability of 0.70. A similar trend holds for Trump feeling thermometer scores in

⁵ All variables were rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Figure 5: Predicted Trump feeling thermometer scores and probability of Trump vote choice, across the range of partisanship, ideological self-identifications, and the status threat factor, controlling for other factors. Interval and ordinal control variables held at their mean, nominal at modal value. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals.



panel B, though the effects of partisanship and ideology more closely approximate that of the status threat factor.

The status threat factor also provides substantively and statistically significant predictive power in explaining attitudes about issues that Trump has regularly broached. Next, we regressed attitudes regarding skepticism about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, denial

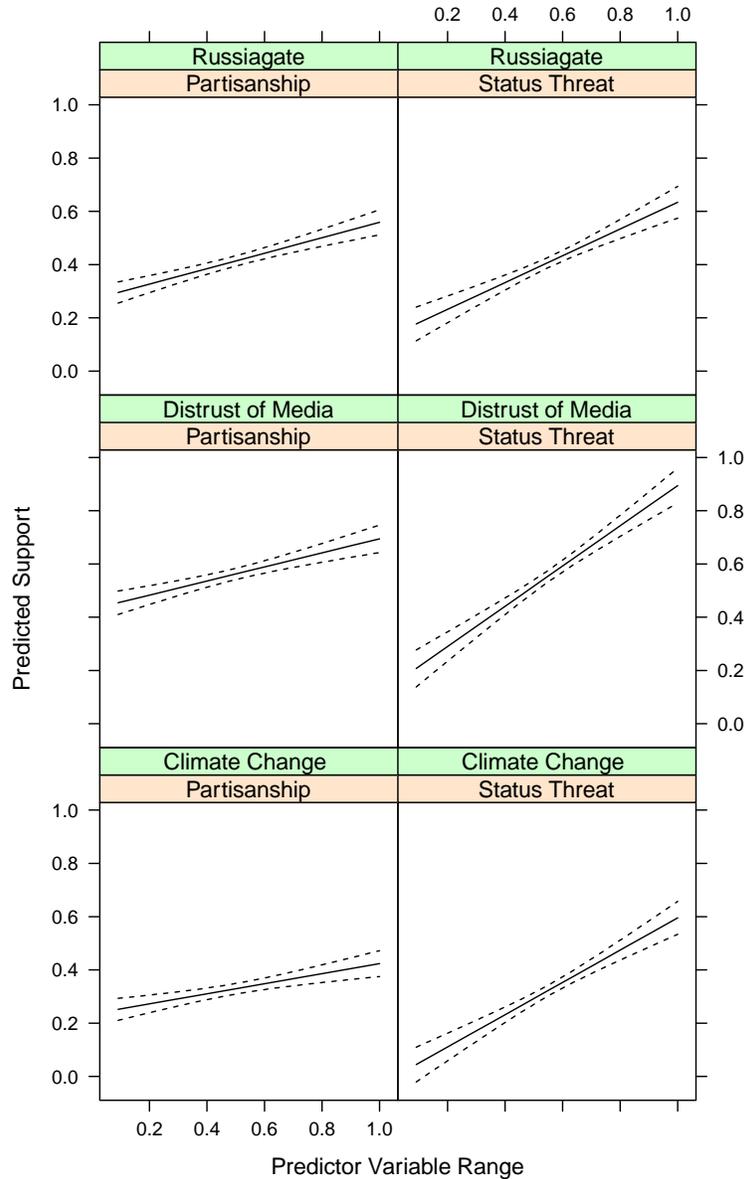
of climate change, and distrust of the media on the Trump profile, partisanship, ideology, and the control variables. These issues were not only made salient by Trump, but they speak to status threat as well: Russia's role in the election delegitimizes and threatens Trump's presidency, climate change calls for collective solutions thought to threaten American lifestyles (McCright and Dunlap 2011), and the media is often thought of as biased toward outsiders pushing for change (Jones 2004). Once again, all variables were rescaled 0 to 1, where larger values denote Trump-congruent positions. Full model estimates appear in the Supplemental Appendix, and model predictions over the range of the status threat factor and partisanship appear in Figure 6.

Here again, we observe substantively large effects of the status threat factor in explaining attitudes associated with Trump's espoused stances on key issues. Those low on the status threat factor strongly agree that "climate change is real and caused by manmade carbon emissions," agree that "the Russians colluded to rig the 2016 presidential election," and disagree that "much of the mainstream news is deliberately slanted to mislead us." Those high on the status threat factor espouse the opposite attitudes. The status threat factor is also more predictive of these attitudes than are either partisanship (pictured) or ideology. These analyses demonstrate how powerful and all-encompassing a sense of threat is to myriad political attitudes, especially when this orientation is cued, fostered, and redirected by a savvy politician.

Republicanism in Another Way?

Finally, we consider both the robustness of our analytical approach, as well as the discriminatory power of the status threat factor when it comes to other Republican candidates who did not employ rhetorical strategies designed to evoke status threat. We first replicate as closely as possible the above analyses using the 2016 ANES, which included many of the

Figure 6: Predicted distrust of media, skepticism of anthropogenic climate change, and disbelief in Russian collusion in the 2016 presidential election across range of the status threat factor and partisanship, controlling for other factors. Interval and ordinal control variables held at their mean, nominal at modal value. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals.



variables utilized above. Of those, most are either direct replications or substantively identical (see Supplemental Appendix). We note that the 2016 ANES included items designed to measure authoritarianism, an oft-cited reason for Trump support (e.g. MacWilliams 2016) not available

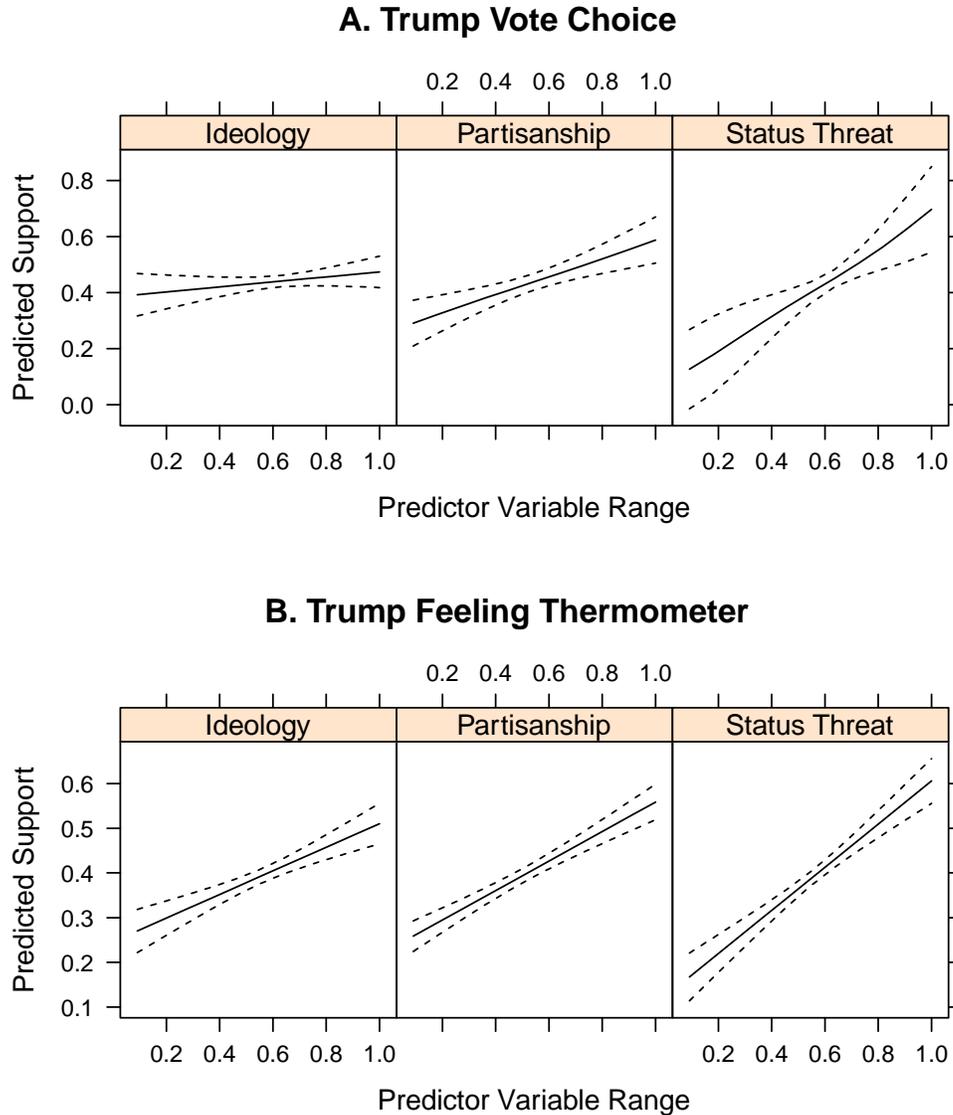
on the CCES; however, it does not include measures of conspiracy thinking,⁶ and only includes a single measure of attitudes toward political correctness. Theoretically, this may result in a less complete and statistically blunter measure of status threat, even though we are able to include authoritarianism. Authoritarianism has been found to predict Trump support, but also, various forms of status threat have been found to predict authoritarian tendencies (Hetherington and Suhay 2011, Feldman and Stenner 1997).

Despite missing some indicators, the bifactor model again fits the data very well.⁷ As with the 2018 CCES data, all fit statistics meet their respective rules of thumb and all indicators load significantly on the status threat factor. Moreover, the factor is correlated at 0.74 with a three-item scale of sentiments about minorities adapting to the customs and traditions of the U.S., the will of the majority prevailing over minority rights, and immigrants harming American culture. We also observe similar relationships between the status threat factor scores and measures of support for Trump and Trump-related issues. Figure 7 depicts the relative influence of partisan and ideological self-identifications and the status threat factor on feelings toward Trump and Trump vote choice in the general election. Although the effects of the status threat factor and partisanship are slightly more comparable than we observed in the 2018 CCES data, the effects rival those of partisanship and prove greater than those of ideology. These very minor discrepancies could be attributed to data that is more proximal to the 2016 election, or to an incomplete operationalization of the status threat factor. Either way, our empirical estimate of the status threat factor is substantively very similar to that found using the 2018 CCES data,

⁶ The specific conspiracy belief items on the 2016 ANES are problematic as measures of general conspiracy thinking (Enders, Smallpage and Lupton 2018).

⁷ Full model estimates appear in the Supplemental Appendix, as do distributions of the status threat factor stratified by partisan and ideological self-identification.

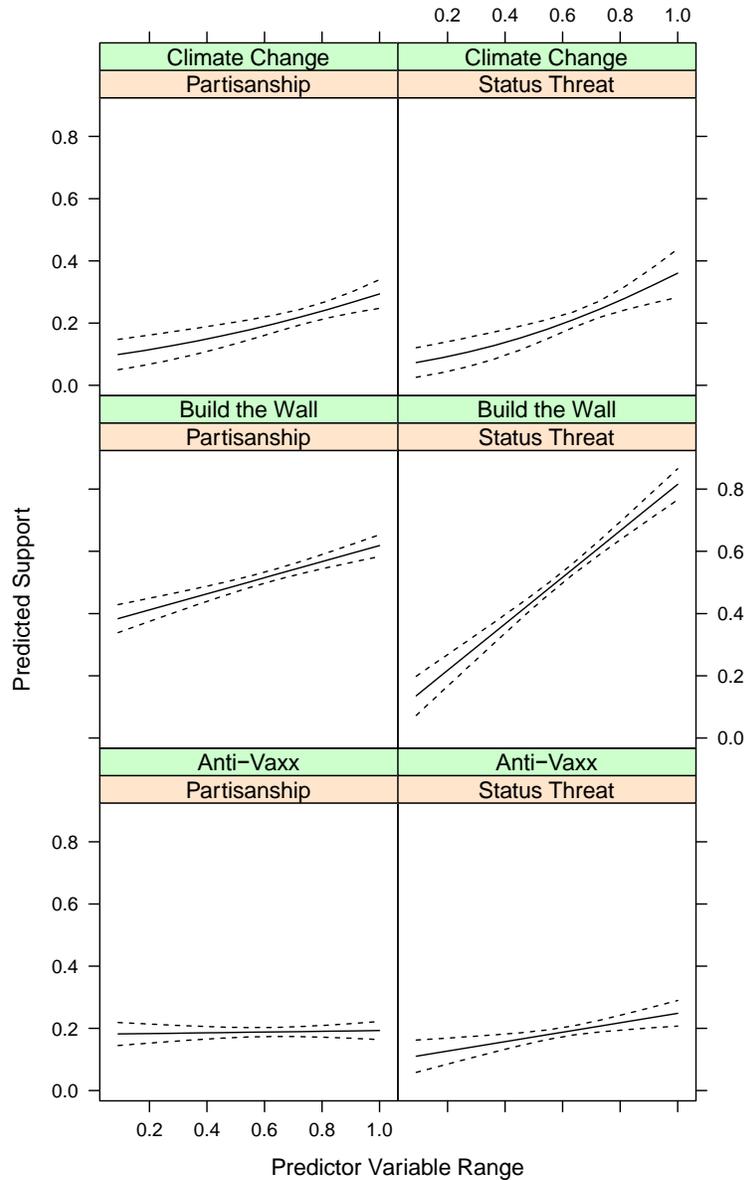
Figure 7: Predicted Trump feeling thermometer scores and probability of Trump vote choice, across the range of partisanship, ideological self-identifications, and the status threat factor, controlling for other factors. Interval and ordinal control variables held at their mean, nominal at modal value. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals. 2016 ANES data.



underscoring the utility of the strategy and the strength and stability of these psychological factors.

Figure 8 shows that the status threat factor is again highly predictive of attitudes about Trump-related issues, even compared to partisanship, holding other factors like ideology and socio-demographic characteristics constant. In each case, the status threat factor provides more

Figure 8: Predicted skepticism of anthropogenic climate change, perceived danger of childhood vaccinations, and supportive attitudes about building a wall along the U.S.-Mexican border across range of status threat factor and partisanship, controlling for other factors. Interval and ordinal control variables held at their mean, nominal at modal value. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals. 2016 ANES data.



explanatory power than either partisanship (pictured) or ideological self-identifications. This is most apparent when it comes to attitudes about “the wall” and anti-vaxx attitudes, the latter of which does not have a statistically significant relationship with partisanship or ideology.

Finally, we consider the discriminatory power of the status threat factor. If status threat is more strongly related to Trump support than general conservatism or Republicanism, it should predict support for Trump over other Republican candidates, controlling for partisanship, ideology, and other known predictors. This is precisely what we find. We estimate a multinomial logistic regression where the dependent variable captures voting for Trump, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, or Marco Rubio in the 2016 primary elections. The predicted probability of casting a vote for each of the candidates across the range of the status threat factor, holding constant the strength of partisanship and ideology, retrospective evaluations of the economy, and socio-demographic characteristics, is depicted in Figure 9.⁸

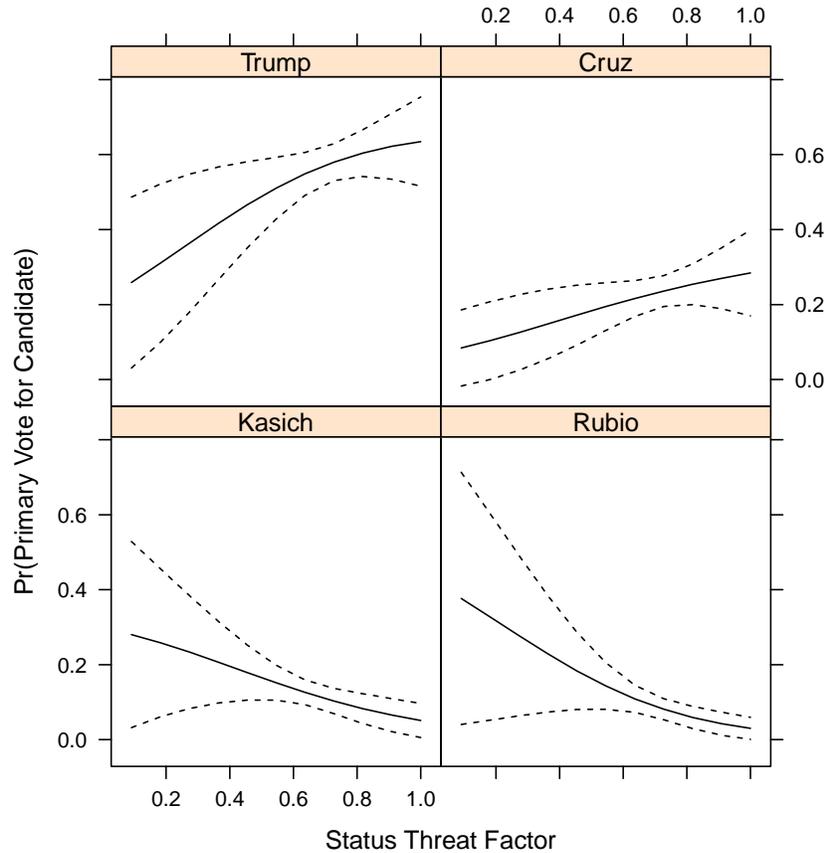
Even among self-identified Republicans voting in the primary, the status threat factor exhibits a great deal of predictive power in explaining support for Trump compared to others.⁹ We find a weak positive relationship between the status threat factor and voting for Cruz, as we might expect given his platform and rhetoric. Such is not the case when it comes to Rubio and Kasich, who employed more traditional Republican rhetorical strategies. For both of these mainstream Republican candidates, we observe a negative relationship between the status threat factor and candidate support.

In sum, the status threat factor appears to be predictive of not only feelings about Trump and the unique issues attached to him, but even support for other Republican candidates, albeit in a different direction. Moreover, models including the status threat factor perform better models designed to operationalize the “politics as usual” or “isms” theses. In Table 5, we present AIC

⁸ Full model estimates appear in the Supplemental Appendix.

⁹ The relatively wide confidence bands toward the low end of the status threat factor simply reflects that there was a wide range of plausible probabilities of voting for each of the candidates *among Republicans*. In other words, Republicans very high on the status threat factor were very likely to vote for Trump, and very unlikely to vote for Kasich and Rubio (Cruz is somewhere in the middle). Some Republicans of average conservative ideology that are lower on the status threat factor still may have voted for Trump, just as they may have voted for Kasich or Rubio.

Figure 9: Predicted probability of voting for each of four Republican candidates in the 2016 U.S. presidential primaries, controlling for other factors. Respondents are Republicans. Interval and ordinal control variables held at their mean, nominal at modal value. Dashed lines represent 95% confidence intervals. 2016 ANES data.



and BIC estimates for three models of Trump support – each of which corresponds to a different thesis – from both the 2018 CCES and 2016 ANES. These quantities, which are the combined product of both the explanatory power and parsimony/complexity (i.e., number of estimated parameters) of a model, are used to compare the relative “quality” of statistical models. The lower the value of the AIC and BIC, the better the model.

The “politics as usual” model includes partisanship, ideology, retrospective economic evaluations, and a host a socio-demographic controls for factors such as religiosity, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, income, gender, and residence in the South. Taking this as a

Table 5: Model AIC and BIC fit statistics for the “politics as usual,” “isms,” and “status threat” models.

	AIC	BIC
Trump Thermometer, 2018 CCES		
The “Politics as Usual” Model	-185.4956	-124.8915
The “Isms” Model	-290.6149	-208.3895
The “Status Threat” Model	-271.8871	-212.0669
Trump Vote Choice, 2018 CCES		
The “Politics as Usual” Model	225.3695	281.9763
The “Isms” Model	190.8178	268.3308
The “Status Threat” Model	179.3076	239.1279
Trump Thermometer, 2016 ANES		
The “Politics as Usual” Model	-61.88544	6.664764
The “Isms” Model	-240.5562	-145.6906
The “Status Threat” Model	-269.5036	-199.7176
Trump Vote Choice, 2019 ANES		
The “Politics as Usual” Model	459.5054	524.8026
The “Isms” Model	393.1022	483.4656
The “Status Threat” Model	393.5545	463.3405

base model of sorts, we also specify models that add all individual psychological factors¹⁰ (the “isms” model) or that simply add the status threat factor (the “status threat” model).

AIC and BIC disagree about whether the status threat model is better than the combined “isms” model for affect toward Trump in the 2018 CCES data and Trump vote choice in the 2016 ANES data. For the other two dependent variables, the status threat model performs best according to the both AIC and BIC. Thus, we possess additional supportive, albeit not wholly conclusive, evidence for the “status threat” thesis.

¹⁰ Note that this is, in a sense, a generous operationalization of the “isms” thesis. Most previous literature argues in favor of only a single psychological “ism.” Here, we include all “ism” factors since we are interested in a strict test of whether all individual “isms” provides more explanatory power (i.e., we are ignoring the statistical significance, or lack thereof, of any particular variable) that the single status threat factor.

A Deeper Consideration of the “Isms” Thesis

Thus far, we have claimed that the many posited psychological sources of Trump support are correlated because of the latent sense of status threat that partially explains the observed indicators of the “isms” – a perspective that is consistent with others’ speculation (e.g., Mutz 2018b, Tesler 2016, Barreto, et al. 2012). It is precisely this theory that we use to justify the bifactor structure of the “isms” that fits the data so well, and that generates an empirical estimate of status threat that is highly predictive of support for Trump and associated issues. We conclude our investigation with a deeper consideration of what variation along the status threat factor actually corresponds to when it comes to observed attitudes – an analysis that will further highlight the deficiencies of the “isms” thesis.

Consider the individual attitudinal profiles presented in Table 6. We randomly sampled two individuals from the 2018 CCES dataset: one at, or lower than, the 25th percentile along the 0-1 Trump profile, one at or higher than the 75th percentile. Our goal was to blindly acquire *relatively* extreme individuals in both directions, so that their individual attitudinal profiles may be examined.

The first individual sampled scored a 0.29 on the status threat factor. They registered as a strong Democrat and extremely liberal – the most extreme positions on the two most important political orientation measures in political science. The second individual, who registered as a Republican Party “leaner” and slightly conservative, scored a 0.74. Despite a wide gap on the status threat factor and scores in the first and fourth quartile, neither respondent provides particularly extreme responses in either direction. Of the three extreme responses provided by the conservative respondent, one deals with perceived “deservingness” of blacks, another with a rather tame attitude (on its face, at least) about immigration being “slowed down,” and a third –

Table 6: Examples of individual attitudinal profiles for relatively high and low values on the status threat factor.

	Status Threat Scores (0–1)	
	0.29	0.74
<u>Symbolic Political Predispositions</u>		
1) Partisanship	Strong Democrat	Lean Republican
2) Ideology	Extremely Liberal	Slightly Conservative
<u>Racial Resentment</u>		
1) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult...	A	D
2) It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard enough	SD	A
3) Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.	D	SD
4) Irish, Italian, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up...	D	A
<u>Sexism</u>		
1) Women should earn the same wages as their male counterpart.	SA	A
2) A woman’s place is in the home.	D	SD
3) The news media have been showing more concern about...women than is warranted...	D	N/N
4) Feminists are making entirely reasonable demands of men.	D	A
<u>Anti-Immigrant Attitudes</u>		
1) Illegal immigrants increase crime in the US.	D	A
2) Illegal immigrants decrease wages for Americans.	D	N/N
3) Immigrants contribute more in taxes than they receive in health and welfare services.	N/N	D
4) Immigration in general should be slowed down.	N/N	SA
<u>Conspiracy Thinking</u>		
1) Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places.	A	N/N
2) Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway.	A	A
3) The people who really ‘run’ the country are not known to the voters.	A	N/N
4) Big events like...outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people...	D	N/N

Note: SA=“strongly agree,” A=“agree,” N/N=“neither/nor,” D=“disagree,” SD=“strongly disagree”
Case identification numbers: 416172031, 416179346

strong *disagreement* that a woman's place is "in the home." This respondent appears more supportive of equal rights for women and less conspiratorial than the more liberal respondent who is low on the status threat factor.

These are only two examples, but they suggest a simple, yet powerful, point. Even though others have observed reasonably strong *associations* (e.g., correlations) between the psychological factors posited by the "isms" thesis and Trump support, this says nothing of the absolute *levels* of the attitudes that compose those scales – only that some are systematically higher than others. Simply put, we do not possess much evidence for the "isms" thesis. The familiar claims that all Trump supporters are racist, sexist, xenophobic conspiracy theorists do not best characterize the psychology of the average Trump supporter, at least as far as survey questions can tell us. Indeed, a small proportion of respondents are extreme in the undesirable direction on any given question, and no more than 8.5 percent of respondents are extremely negative across all survey items composing any of the racial resentment, sexism, anti-immigration, anti-PC, or conspiracy thinking scales. Finally, *no one* in our sample is consistently extreme across all of these factors.

These observations provide a final piece of disconfirmatory evidence for the "isms" thesis. Rather than extreme racists, sexists, etc., these individuals are most appropriately interpreted as *more troubled* than others by the social, economic, or political gains of various groups – the claim of the "status threat" thesis. We do not wish imply that extremists do not exist. Surely there are extremists of this sort among Trump supporters, or any group, and they should not be ignored or discounted. That said, the charge of social scientists is to decipher broad patterns and model structural relationships. To this end, and also considering other goals such as

parsimony and prediction, our judgement is that the “status threat” thesis of Trump support finds the most supportive evidence.

Conclusion

Numerous attitudes have been shown to predict Trump support. An uncharitable reading of this literature might even identify an enterprise more interested in identifying “new,” statistically significant predictors of Trump support than a “best” explanation. In this manuscript, we highlight the value of the extant literature, but also point out its limitations. We sought to provide a comprehensive investigation of the many posited psychological sources of support for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and beyond. Many of these psychological orientations – racial prejudice, sexism, xenophobia, anti-political correctness, conspiracy thinking, and authoritarianism – have been operating in American politics long before 2016, and have been since (Parker and Barreto 2013). As such, the analyses presented above are useful for our understanding of the American political landscape well beyond the confines of the Trump years.

To take stock, we set out to investigate the veracity of the “politics as usual,” “isms,” and “status threat” theses of Trump support. In doing so, we learned that many factors that played no, or less of, a role in previous elections were important to explaining Trump support (e.g., Valentino, et al. 2018), thus providing disconfirmatory evidence for the “politics as usual” thesis. Upon discovering the high and consequential intercorrelations between the many psychological factors posited to explain Trump support, we estimated a bifactor model whereby the individual attitudes composing each of the individual psychological factors were modeled as the product of a more general orientation that we labeled status threat. This status threat factor was highly correlated with an external measure of status threat and broke down along gender, racial,

educational, and income lines in expected ways. Moreover, the status threat factor strongly predicted support for Trump and issues championed by Trump, controlling for other factors. Finally, these status threat models performed better than models designed to operationalize the “politics as usual” and “isms” theses.

Despite the high correlation between the status threat factor and partisan and ideological self-identifications, it is clear that the measure is not a mere substitute for such symbolic political orientations. As other scholars have begun to show, Trump supporters are different than non-Trump supporting Republicans (Barber and Pope 2019, Blum and Parker 2019). By capturing a broader psychological orientation toward power and social, economic, and political status – “status threat” – we were able to more powerfully model the sentiment at the heart of Trump support, thus casting doubt on the “politics as usual” and “isms” theses.

We reiterate our caution about the exact nature of Trump support. Our final analysis, examining the actual responses to individual survey questions, reveals that very few individuals, even on the high end of the Trump profile, provide extreme attitudes about racial minorities, women, immigrants, or elite conspiratorial activities (see also arguments by Engelhardt 2019). And even if that were the case, extreme responses to many of the survey items used to capture (what we label) racism or sexism, would not *necessarily* qualify one as a racist or misogynist as commonly understood. For example, agreeing to some extent that “immigration in general should be slowed down” says little about racism or xenophobia. This is in addition to the obvious points that not all respondents interact with the survey items in the same way, and that substantive interpretations should be made carefully.

By our reading of the specific attitudinal profiles of respondents, Trump support could be accounted for by a perceived threat to some peoples’ status in American society, or perhaps even

a more general fear of changing societal values and America's place in the world (Mutz 2018b). In other words, individuals might exhibit attitudes that *could be interpreted* as racist, sexist, or xenophobic, but which, in actuality, are not born of a deep, antagonistic relationship with minorities or women. Status threat does not require a hatred of others, only a sense that things are changing in ways that are difficult to come to grips with. People innately view the past with rosy hindsight (Caplan 2007) and many fear social change (Craig and Richeson 2014). This nostalgia may very well be expressed in ways that are at first glance unseemly, particularly when harnessed by unscrupulous politicians. Consider, for instance, an individual's longing for a time when more products were made in the U.S. by Americans; a strategic politician can easily connect such a benign view to workplace raids and support for a border wall.

This is to neither dismiss the fact that some of Trump's support does indeed come from outright racists, sexists, xenophobes, and conspiracy theorists, nor the normatively problematic consequences of such ingredients of Trump support (Nelson 2017). Some of Trump's supporters surely do exhibit attitudes and behaviors born of a deep-seated antagonism with minorities and women, and there are extreme attitudinal profiles in the data. Further, attitudes positively related to support for authoritarian politics and white ethno-nationalism pose a serious challenge to a civilized democratic politics (Bonikowski 2017, Maskovsky 2017, Whitehead, Perry and Baker 2018, Sides, et al. 2019), however we interpret such attitudes. We hope that our findings cause researchers to be more circumspect in the substantive inferences they make from survey responses, consider alternative strategies for measuring racial prejudice, sexism, xenophobia, and the like, and be cognizant of implicit biases they may impose on the scientific process (al Gharbi 2018, Reicher and Haslam 2017, Zigerell 2019, Grossmann 2019). For example, scholars across disciplines pathologized conspiracy theorists for most of 21st century (Hofstadter 1964). Only

upon recent re-inspection have they come to see conspiracy beliefs as the product of common biases that everyone falls victim to (Douglas, et al. 2019). Researchers should not make the same mistake with respect to supporters of any one political candidate.

Because American politicians pay a penalty for trafficking in overt racism, sexism, xenophobia, and conspiracy theories, most tend to engage in no more than dog-whistle politics (Haney-López 2015). This strategy presumably allows the benefit of activating voters' grievances without paying a cost for overt racism, for example. Facing a crowded primary field, it was entrepreneurial for Trump to activate attitudes that his competitors either ignored or did not directly activate. While Trump was good at activating feelings of threat, he is not alone. We have already seen others mimic Trump's language and policy stances in the US and across the world. Consider for example the Brexit movement, and current leadership in Poland, Turkey, and Hungary which all appear to be driven by widespread feelings of threat. Politicians do not have to behave exactly like Trump in order to activate in people what Trump has. It is there for the taking.

When people are made to feel threatened – like their social, economic, or political place in the world is in jeopardy – it is logical that they turn to those who seem to best understand their position and make the most convincing case for a solution. This scenario has played out under authoritarian and despotic regimes across space and time, from Nazi Germany to contemporary Turkey. Trump's formula is, at its core, not particularly unique – just new for contemporary U.S. politics. This makes it all the more important to understand.

To hang Trump support on the “isms” misses the broader picture of his appeal and may further foment political divisions with empirically inaccurate characterizations. Headlines such

as, “*Hostility toward women is one of the strongest predictors of Trump support,*”¹¹ cast aspersions over a vast number of people with little context. Just as history does not cast the average German as an ideological Nazi, we should be cautious in casting the average Trump supporter as a racist, sexist, xenophobic conspiracy theorist. Rather, these are people whose underlying insecurities have been cued, fomented, and connected to political decisions by strategic elites. As such, future scholarship should be directed at better understanding both the psychology and causes of status threat – and how politicians can successfully manipulate the masses by cueing it.

¹¹ *Vox*, Libby Nelson, Nov 1, 2016.

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