The role of political extremists in electoral campaigns

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Working paper

Abstract

Do politicians set the agenda during campaigns? Do politicians make voters extremists, or do extreme voters make politicians extreme? Current theories of opinion formation suggest that voters blindly follow the views of their preferred politician. However, these theoretical suggestions fail to recognize the ideological complexity of the electorate and how different groups occupy different roles in the opinion-formation process. In this study, I formulate the *Downstream extremism* theory, a novel explanation to why past theories offer an incomplete explanation to the opinion formation process during electoral campaigns. I argue that extremist voters give cues to political elites, who in turn influence the mass public. Electoral campaigns are the mechanism by which politicians receive feedback from extremists. In this study, I present empirical evidence of one step of my proposed theory in which extremists express their views at higher levels than moderates. I leverage the randomness of the content of the 2020 US Presidential debate to estimate its effect on the expressed sentiment of Twitter users. My findings confirm my expectation that extremists respond to campaigns at higher levels compared to moderates. My theory presents crucial implications for how we understand the origin of political opinions. To understand why the electorate thinks the way it does, political scientists and practitioners alike ought to pay more attention to extreme voters.

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The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all.

John F. Kennedy, Vanderbilt University

(1963)

It is important to bear in mind that political campaigns are designed by the same people who sell toothpaste and cars.

Noam Chomsky (2005)

On January 6th 2021, the United States Capitol was violently attacked by mostly Republican extremists. Political scientists and media pundits have informally offered explanations to why citizens blatantly violated the most important institution of their country. The most compelling argument is that Donald Trump's rhetoric during and after the campaign inflamed his extreme supporters and which led to the insurrection. Outside of the United States, conflicts between extreme political ideologies have also caused numerous human tragedies as much from the right than from the left (Midlarsky 2011; Van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet 2015). These events offer anecdotal evidence to why it is crucial to understand the political behavior of extremists. The study of extremists presents important challenges since very little binds both sides of the ideological spectrum. Most political scientists will either focus on the extreme right or the extreme left. This void leaves a lack in understanding the implications of extremist political behavior as an entity for our society, institutions and social relations.

My goal in this paper is to understand the role political extremists take in electoral campaigns. Precisely, I argue that extremists shape the beliefs of politicians, and not the other way as past work leads us to believe. I offer insight to address this theoretical lacunae by introducing the *Downstream Extremism* theory, a novel interpretation of the role of extremists in opinion formation and cue-taking during campaigns. I demonstrate how extremists play the role of cue-givers for politicians, who in turn signal policy positions to the mass public.

In the past, scholars have shown that voters blindly adopt views that align with their preferred politician (Lenz 2013; Agadjanian 2020; Broockman and Butler 2017). The underlying assumption is that political ideas originate from politicians and are then conveyed to the electorate. I argue that ideas do not originate from politicians, but from political extremists. Although most voters do in fact "follow their leader", extremists do not, since leaders follow them.

Moreover, I posit that the high responsiveness of extremists towards campaigns is a key driver for how candidates will form their political beliefs. How does responsiveness towards campaign events demonstrate that politicians listen to extremists? I consider a response to campaigns not as a passive action, but as a feedback mechanism. The output, the response of extremists to campaign events, is an input directed towards politicians. Why is that? To being with, politicians seek out information about policy (Loewen, Rubenson, and McAndrews 2021). Research has shown that political elites will inform themselves of different sets of views and arguments to be better equipped when tasked to persuade voters (Grose, Malhotra, and Parks Van Houweling 2015). Moreover, political elites are surrounded by media pundits, campaigns professionals and informed citizens in the political ecosystem. They thus have access to an array of information coming from different sources. Although for decades mainstream news media has been their main source of information, the advent of social media has changed the way political elites consume information. One of the biggest changes in the media landscape is the abundance of information available to elites who up until then seemed protected by their social status. Ordinary voters suddenly have their ideas directly voiced to politicians.

In fact, a large proportion of voters who now have direct access to politicians are political extremists (Clark 2021). Why do political elites have a higher exposure to extremist views? Research in psychology shows that extreme voters have social traits that distinguish them from moderates in such ways that make them much more noticeable in the social sphere. They are shown to be ideologically inflexible (Zmigrod, Rentfrow, and Robbins 2020), vocal on social media (Hong 2013) and very confident (Fernbach et al. 2013; Prooijen and Krouwel 2019; Brandt, Evans, and Crawford 2015).

I empirically demonstrate extremists' outspokenness by measuring their response to campaign events. Using the case of the first 2020 Presidential debate, I estimate a regression-discontinuity-in-time model using Twitter data to measure if extremists respond more strongly to the debate than moderates. I find that extremists are more responsive to debates compared to moderates. Although these results only offer evidence for one component of the proposed theory, they nonetheless offer important insights for our understanding of campaigns and the formation of political attitudes.

Elite cue-taking and Opinion formation

Scholars have provided numerous theories to explain the origin of mass political attitudes. The most compelling theory is proposed by Lenz (2013) who argues that voters blindly adopt the opinions of their preferred party or politician. This theory puts aside cognitive and psychological factors to explain the heterogeneity of opinion formation. Indeed, opinions are not developed on a individual level dependent of social context. Instead, the formation of opinions can be reduced to a causal flow going from political elites to voters. I illustrate an oversimplified version of the mechanism in Figure 1.
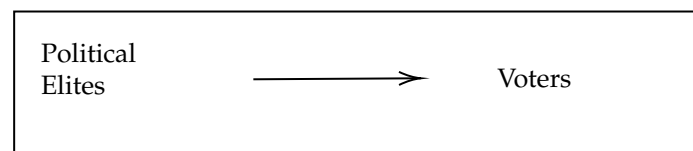

Figure 1: *Follow the leader* theory

The main implication of the causal flow is that the relationship is essentially bi-dimensional. This bi-dimensionality is based on two unsatisfactory assumptions of the theory. First, the theory assumes all voters fit in a homogeneous block. All voters have balanced levels of political interest, education, income, etc. They respond to political elites similarly regardless of context and individual-level characteristics. This assumption is unconvincing because the electorate is in fact a mosaic composed of very different voting groups. For decades, political scientists have segmented the electorate to explore heterogeneous effects based on a series of psychological, physiological and context-level factors. We have empirically demonstrated that groups based

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on race/ethnicity, gender, education, political interest and income respond to political stimuli differently. For example, Barberá et al. (2019) explore how types of voters, namely attentive citizens (Aldrich 1995; Arnold 1990), party supporters (Egan 2013; Kastellec et al. 2015) and the general public (Downs 1957), respond differently to agenda setting efforts. Given the plethora of research on the electorate's complexity, I expect certain voters to respond differently to political elites' cues.

The second theoretical assumption is that political beliefs and opinions originate from politicians, meaning that they are the architects of opinion. There is no mention of where politicians get their information from. They are completely responsible for crafting, designing and articulating their policy positions to the public. Politicians do not consume politics in the same way voters do. This assumption is unsatisfying because politicians engage with politics in ways similar to voters. First, politicians are personally present on social media and have the potential to be exposed to the same content that is being supplied to ordinary voters. Second, this assumption considers politicians as actors who have a different relationship with the political world. Although they do have different motives than voters, political elites also seek to learn and are exposed to exogenous stimuli which might persuade them (Loewen, Rubenson, and McAndrews 2021). Politicians have personal social media accounts, listen to podcasts, YouTube videos and cable news, as ordinary voters do. Therefore, we should consider political elites as vulnerable to persuasion as voters.

Downstream extremism theory

To respond to the unsatisfactory assumptions sustaining the *follow the leader* theory, I propose the *Downstream Extremism* theory. My theory contributes in two ways. First, I explain how different types of voters take different roles in the opinion formation process. I argue that extremists and moderates should be considered as separate groups, where extremists give cues to political elites and moderates take cues from political elites. Second, I explain how political elites inform their views. Contrary to what is previously assumed, politicians do not independently construct their opinions. Rather, politicians are informed by extremists. I argue that extremists have the most important voice during campaigns, thus being able to speak to the

ears of politicians. In turn, politicians will unwittingly internalize extremist views and incorporate them in their narrative.
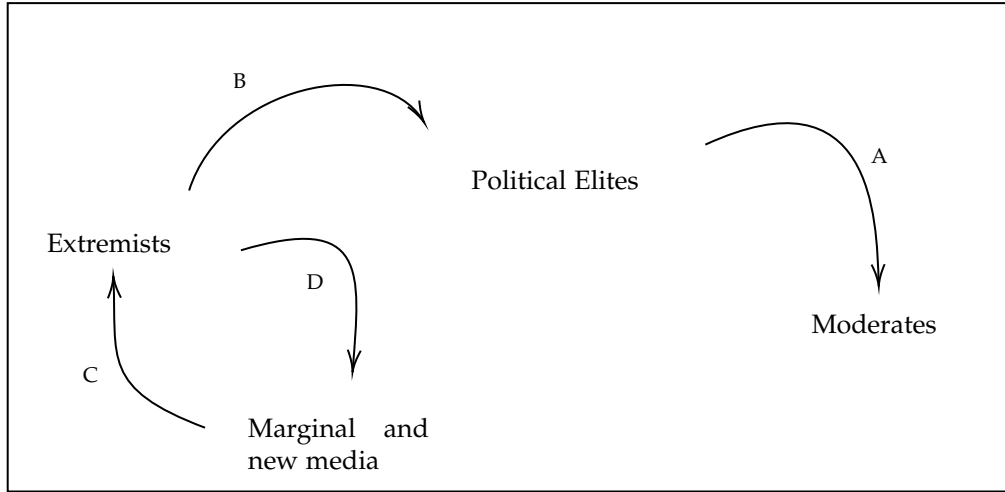

Figure 2: Opinion formation ecosystem under the Downstream Extremism theory

I illustrate my theory in Figure 2. There are four actors in this specified opinion formation ecosystem. I first include political extremists as the most extreme voters. These voters are from both sides of the ideological spectrum. I specify extremism on the bi-dimensional ideological axis from left to right [1]. The second actor is comprised of marginal and new media. I argue that extremists consume information from marginal and new types of media. These media include podcasts, online blogs, YouTube channels, Reddit and Facebook groups. For example, we may consider figures such as Cenk Uygur from The Young Turks and Alex Jones from Infowars as part of the marginal media ecosystem. Finally, I include political elites and moderates who come from the original specification of the *follow the leader* theory. However, I do not consider the electorate as a homogeneous block. Instead, I reduce the group strictly to moderates. Political elites include politicians, but also consultants, campaign workers and other actors directly surrounding politicians.

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1. I avoid defining extremists on the vertical axis. The second axis is often ambiguous to interpret, leaving it difficult to conceptualize for sorting extremists.

I posit that opinions, political beliefs and policy positions flow from marginal media to extremists, then to political elites and finally moderates. First, extremists and marginal media find themselves in a constant exchange of information as denoted by *C* and *D*. Their relationship is endogenous because extremists are not only consumers of marginal media, but many are in fact part of it. They therefore feed off each other which ultimately form what we may call 'extremists political ideas'.

In relation *B*, I show that extremists convey their opinions to political elites. Research has shown that extremists are extremely confident in the political beliefs (Kruglanski et al. 2006; Prooijen and Krouwel 2019), outspoken, intellectually sophisticated and have a certain level of social influence (Sidanius 1988). Moreover, Jacobson and Carson (2004) show that primary electorates, those who decide of the candidates to be represented at the general election, are much more partisan and extreme than the median voter. Besides from psycological factors which distinguish political extremists, they now have the tools to be heard in the age of social media. Politicians have direct access to extremist ideas on Twitter, Facebook and Reddit, replacing conventional modes of political learning. For instance, Reed et al. 2019 find that user engagement algorithms on Youtube promote extremist content at significantly higher levels than moderate content.

Finally, relation *A* conveys the original relationship from the *follow the leader* theory. We see that if we only consider these two actors, our understanding of opinion formation is incomplete. Here, ideas that politicians form based on extremists' feedback is internalized by moderates who, as the theory states, blindly follows their preferred politician. Political moderates are often characterized with the tendency to avoid social censorship and express higher levels of low self-esteem (Van Hiel and Mervielde 2003).

It is worth noting that extremists and moderates are not publicly identified as such. This implies that political elites are unable to tell the difference between extremists and moderates. Politicians do not take cues from extremists deliberately. They take cues because extremists are outspoken, influential and confident.

The main implication of my proposed theory is that politicians do not set the agenda, but extremists and marginal media do. Is it therefore crucial to study the political behavior and attitudes of extremists because, *down the line*, the rest of the electorate will adopt their views.

Campaign effects

In this section, I explain how campaigns are the principal apparatus used by extremists to convey their ideas to politicians.

Past work

Scholarly research on campaign effects in political science is not only substantial, but unsuitably disparate. Political scientists explored its effects on vote choice, political attitudes and emotions looking at door-to-door canvassing (Gerber and Green 2000), endorsements (Lau and Redlawsk 2001, Brox and Shaw 2006) and advertisements (Shaw 1999, Huber and Arceneaux 2007). Although the high attention given to the empirical study of campaigns may be seen as promising, it resulted in an ambiguous impression academics have about campaigns. While many argue that campaigns are an effective instrument for persuasion (Foos and De Rooij 2017; Panagopoulos 2012; Peterson 2009), recent research has ultimately found effects to be rather minimal and inconsequential in the grander context of political behavioral formation (Kalla and Broockman 2018; Brady, Johnston, and Sides 2006).

My explanation for why past work has often failed to identify significant campaign effects is because of the *follow the leader* effect. Political moderates absorb and internalize what politicians say, so any campaign event might seem meaningless since there is no discontinuity in attitudes. Moderates rationalize the views of their preferred politician, whether it be before or after the campaign. For there to be significant campaign effects, we should see significant changes in the position-taking of politicians when the campaign starts, which very rarely occurs.

Hillygus ([2010](#)) argues that given the complexity of campaign effects, future avenues of research should study its heterogeneity. Indeed, voters engage in dynamic decision making processes which can be complex to understand under a static model. However, past attempts of electoral analysis has focused on the disaggregation of independent variables at the expense of the disaggregation of the dependent variable. Past work has estimated the effect of multiple campaign events, such as debates, scandals or campaign rallies, on vote choice and political attitudes. This work largely ignores the disaggregation of campaign effects on an individual level. In other words, how are campaign effects internalized by different segments of the electorate?

The role of campaigns in the Downstream extremism theory

What role do campaigns play in the opinion formation ecosystem? Given their access to a plethora of ideas and opinions on social media, I argue that political elites use their campaign to receive feedback on position-taking. As previously mentioned, feedback received by politicians is biased in favor of extremists since they are highly confident when voicing their opinions.

Past research has assumed a linear relationship between the importance given to campaigns and the ideology of the electorate. This relationship is illustrated below in Figure 3. We see that extreme right-wing and left-wing voters give as much importance to campaign events than moderates.

My theory posits that political extremist give more importance to campaign events than moderates, explaining why political elites internalize their views. I illustrate my theoretical predictions in Figure 4. I expect extreme right-wing and left-wing voters to respond much more to campaign events than moderates, hence the u-shaped curve.
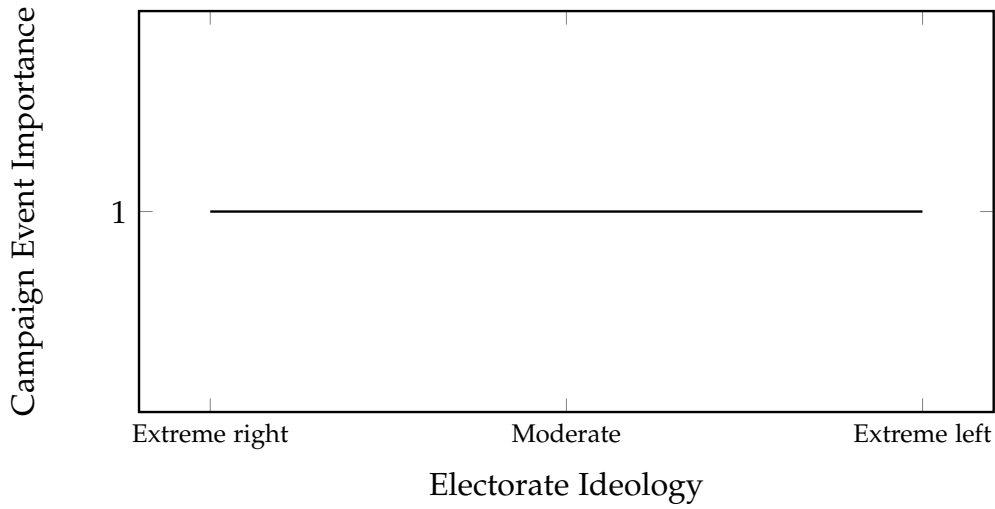
Figure 3: Prior expectation of campaign effects

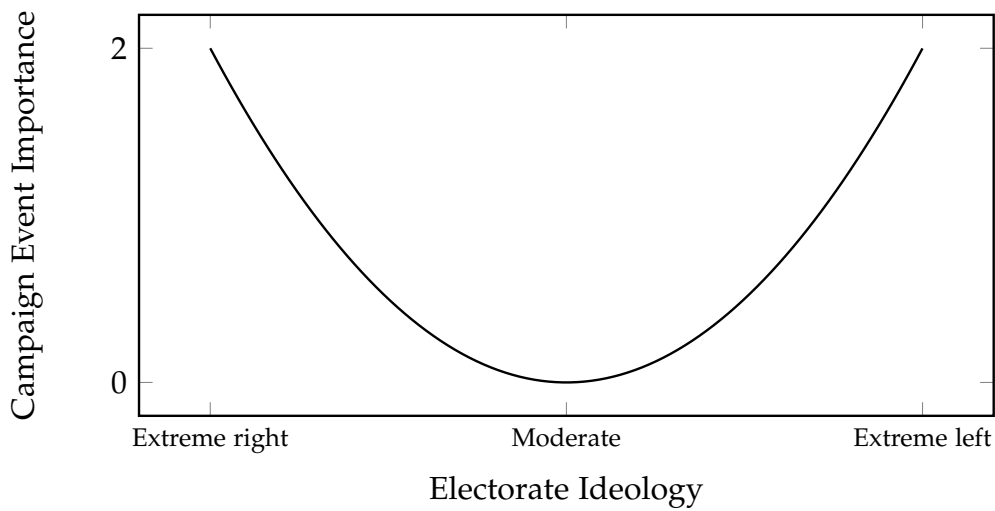Figure 4: Posterior expectation of campaign effects

Figure 5 shows the downstream effect of extremist views on the opinions of the rest of the electorate. I posit that the large and important responses of ideological extremists disseminates to the rest of the electorate. Even if immediate effects of campaigns might only be important for the small population segment of extremists, they later become important for the rest of the population. We can think of the effects to be lagged in time. The red line plots the relationship between the importance given to campaigns and the political ideology of the voter. The dotted line illustrates the relationship after the responses of extremists disseminates into the electorate. We can notice how the u-shape is flatter and has a higher constant than
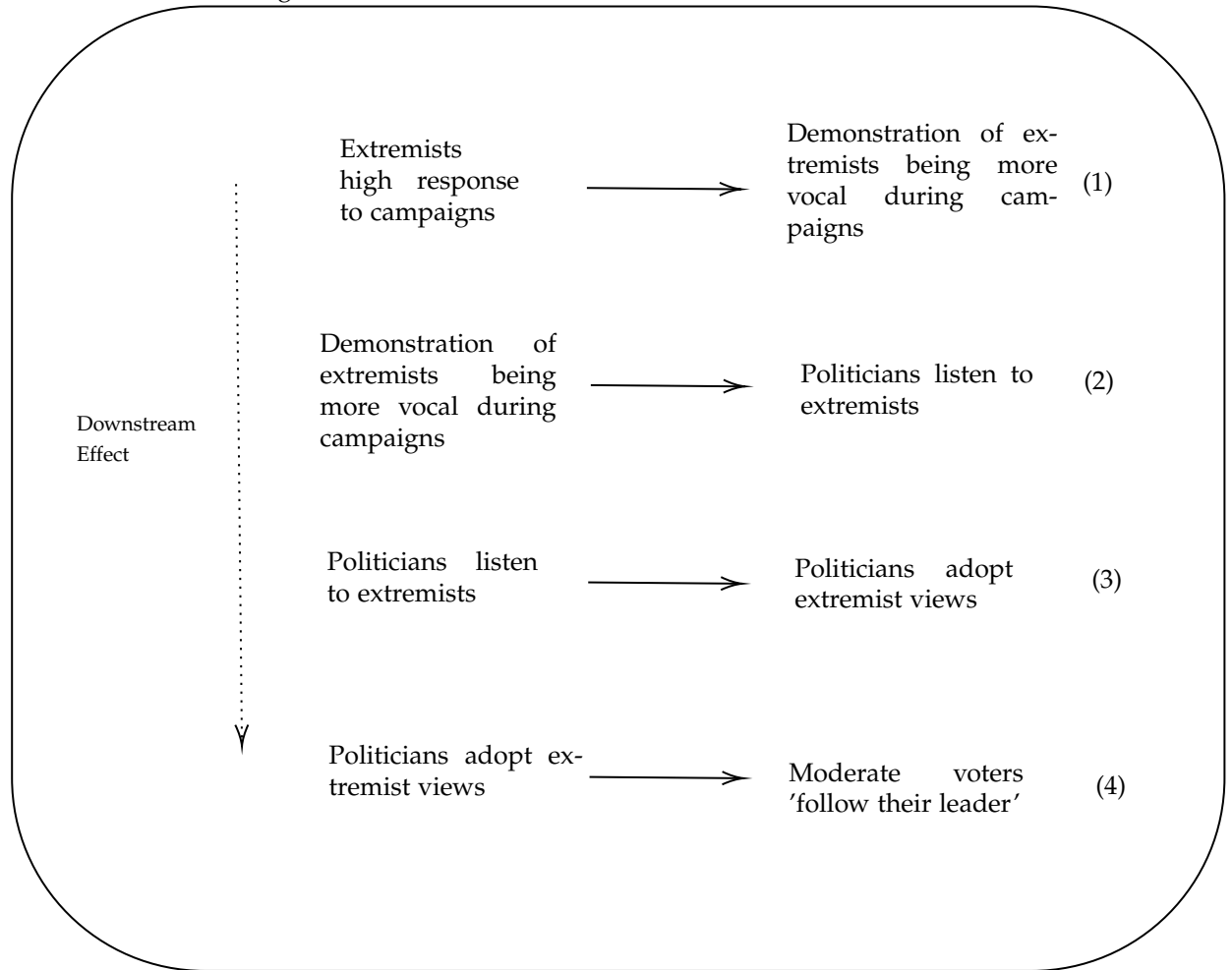
the red curve, indicating how campaign events become increasingly important for political moderates as time passes. The main implication of this theory is that any response held by extremists will down the line be internalized by the entire voting population.

Figure 5: Downstream effect of extremists' attitudes
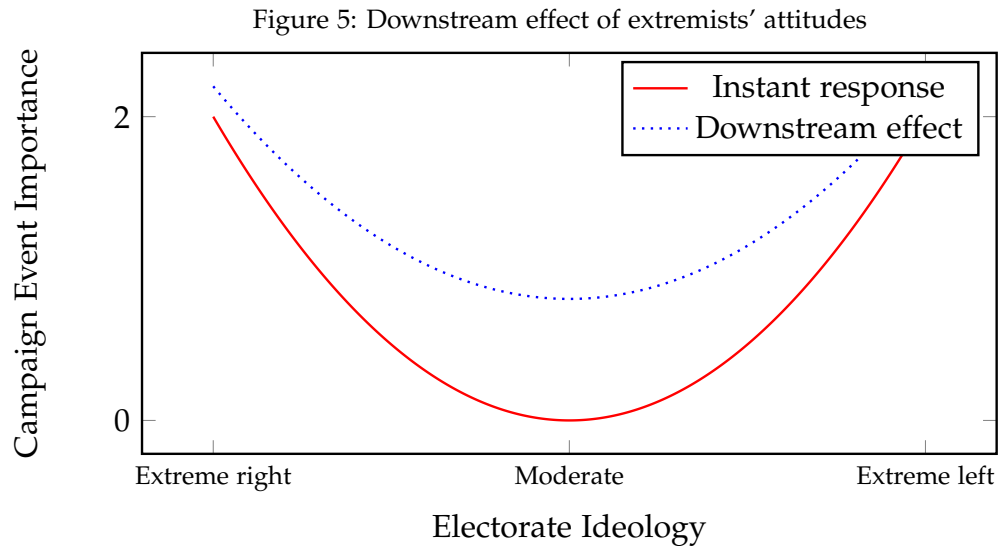
Finally, I illustrate in Figure 6 the role campaigns take in the flow of opinion formation. The figure summarize the main argument of my theory. It conveys the logical flow where each step has a chain reaction causing the next step. The first step of the flow causes the second, the second causes the third and the third causes the fourth step. We see how extremists' response to campaigns has a downstream effect on the political attitudes of moderates. In the next section of this article, I empirically demonstrate the first step, in which political extremists respond to campaigns to a greater extent than moderates.

Before presenting empirical evidence for the first component the downstream effect, I identify two potential theoretical objections. First, if political elites take cues from extremists, then their preferred policies should also be extreme. How does my theory explain the existence of moderate politicians? My response is that we do not know what moderate policy position-taking actually resembles. In fact, I advance that political elites are never moderates. Some are

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Figure 6: Downstream effect of extremists' attitudes

Downstream Effect	Extremists high response to campaigns	→	Demonstration of extremists being more vocal during campaigns	(1)
	Demonstration of extremists being more vocal during campaigns	→	Politicians listen to extremists	(2)
	Politicians listen to extremists	→	Politicians adopt extremist views	(3)
	Politicians adopt extremist views	→	Moderate voters 'follow their leader'	(4)

simply more extreme than others, giving the impression of moderation. In reality, we should expect moderate politicians to, for example, favor conservative policies on some issues, and liberal policies on others. This expectation is almost never fulfilled, therefore showing how rare true moderate politicians are.

Second, does this theory contradicts the Economic Theory of Democracy of Downs 1957 which states that politicians converge to the center of the ideological spectrum? To this argument, I offer an explanation to why exactly do politicians converge to the center in a bi-partisan electoral space. I consider that, decades ago, politicians were limited in developing electoral strategies. Their political angle was mostly based on responding to their opponent rather than

developing unique policy. This led to Downs' prediction of ideological convergence, since elections could be characterized as a constant feedback loop. Moreover, it was fairly easy to recognize their opponent's policy position because the signals were conveyed by very few messengers, namely the political candidate herself and the media. Today, ideological signals are blurred given the heightened number of actors included in the public political debate, facilitated among other factors by social media. Thus, it is less evident for politicians today to converge to the center given the difficulty of identifying clear policy positions of every actor in the political arena.

Empirical Strategy

In this study, I test the first step my theory outlined in Figure 6, that is whether political extremists respond more to campaigns than moderates. My demonstration of the validity of the first step gives legitimacy and precedence to the rest of the theory. If extremists do in fact respond more to campaigns than moderates, their feedback trickles down to the rest of the electorate as my theory anticipates.

To measure voter responsiveness towards campaigns, I use the case of the first debate during the 2020 American presidential election. The debate between Donald J. Trump and Joe Bidden was moderated by Chris Wallace and occurred on September 29th, 2020.

I estimate a Regression-Discontinuity-in-Time (RDiT) model using Twitter data (Hausman and Rapson 2018). I collect all tweets posted between approximately 1 hour before the start of the debate and 1 hour after the debate (Chen, Deb, and Ferrara 2020). Tweets were collected from keyword search based on pre-identified terms related to American politics. Although it is impossible to verify if each collected tweet is about the debate, I assume that tweets related to politics posted in the United States the day of the Presidential debate are related to the said event.

Drawing from the Unexpected Event during Survey design (Muñoz, Falcó-Gimeno, and

Hernández 2020) , I propose a novel empirical method to estimate the causal effect of the debate on the expressed sentiment by Twitter users captured by their respective tweets. My objective is to estimate how important did the Twitterverse judge the debate. The RDiT model measures the jump in sentiment caused by the debate. This method is ideally suited for the goal of this study since it directly measures the importance given to the debate. To that end, large effects demonstrate a large response.

My empirical objective is to measure the difference in debate responsiveness between political extremists and moderates. To do so, I measure ideological point estimates of every Twitter user in my sample. I follow the Bayesian Spatial Following model proposed by Barberá (2015) to infer the ideology of Twitter users. This method allows me to identify precise ideal points from -4 to +4, where lower scores are given to Republicans and higher scores to Democrats. To distinguish the response of extremists from moderates, I estimate a total of 10 RDiT models. Each RDiT model bins Twitter users based on their ideology in intervals of 0.5. I estimate a model for users with a score between 1 and 1.5, another model for users with a score between 1.5 and 2, and so forth. Setting the bin at a 0.5 interval is ideal since it allows me to estimate enough heterogeneity in ideology while reaching statistical power in each model.

It is important to detail how my proposed measure speaks to whether campaign events *matter*. Scholars have studied campaign effects to know whether they are effective in persuading voters. To measure persuasion, scholars either focus on behavioral outcomes or attitudes and emotions. My proposed method does not measure the persuasive effectiveness of debates, rather how much *importance* is given to the debate. The larger the jump in sentiment when the debate starts, the more importance is given to the debate. I draw a parallel between the electorate viewing an event as important and whether the event mattered. In other words, a large response to the debate essentially means that the debate mattered for the electorate.

On the causal validity of the RDiT

The timing of a debate during a campaign is not random. This non-randomness may present a threat to validity of the Regression-discontinuity-in-time, as the cutoff point must be deter-

mined randomly. I argue that although debates are not random, the RDiT can still make a valid causal inference. It is true that the debate itself is not random, but its content is. Any response to the debate is completely unexpected, thus can be interpreted as random. In order to discount the possibility of making a causal inference with observational data, the question one must ask is if the units of analysis are able to influence the assignment variable, and if so, what is the nature of this control. Although the debate is not random, Twitter users cannot predict what will happen during the debate. The response of Twitter users is instantaneous, meaning they are reacting to the event as it happens. In the case of the first debate of the 2020 election, Twitter users could not have responded to Donald Trump's comment on the Proud Boys before the debate started. My intent is to estimate the effect of the *content* of the event on sentiment.

Outcome Measurement

To measure the importance given to the debate, I estimate the difference in the sentiment of tweets right before and at the start the debate. Sentiment is measured on an individual level, where each tweet receives one score. Each tweet's sentiment is measured with the Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner (VADER) developed by Hutto and Gilbert 2014. The sentiment score of a tweet is obtained by summing up the intensity of each word with a dictionary method. Sentiment scores range from -1 for negative tweets to +1 for positive tweets.

Identification Strategy

To estimate the effect of the debate on sentiment, I estimate a Regression-Discontinuity-in-time model (Hausman and Rapson 2018). Following Imbens and Lemieux (2008), I specify the RDiT as a local linear regression with a first-order polynomial. I do not use high-order polynominals given the possibility of forcing an artificial discontinuity at the cut-off point and overfitting (Gelman and Zelizer 2015; Gelman and Imbens 2019). I use the `rdrobust` statistical software package to estimate the model and compute the optimal bandwidth that minimizes the mean-squared error of the regression (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2015).

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_{RDD}\, debate_{it} + \beta_1\, minute_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

In this model, the outcome y_{it} refers to the sentiment score of Tweet i at minute t. The start of the debate is defined by $debate_{it}$, a dummy equal to 1 for tweets after 9:20 PM EST, the beginning of the debate, and 0 for tweets before 9:20 PM. Finally, $minute_{it}$ is the time of the tweet of the measured in minutes on September 29th, 2020. The discontinuity is sharp given that the running variable of time completely determines $debate_{it}$ (Anderson 2014). Even if the debate officially started at 9:00 PM, I set the discontinuity twenty minutes later for two reasons. First, the timestamp of tweets are slightly late because of the time-lag induced by the API when collecting the data. Second, I allow for a few minutes after the start to let viewers respond to the content, as it is hard to react to the content before at least a few minutes of debating.

Results

Tweets collected were posted online on September 29th, 2020 from 7 PM EST until 12:00 AM EST. Figure 7 illustrates a density plot of the ideology of all users in the sample. Although most users are from the left, we see a bias of extremist users towards the right. If we consider ideology to be symmetrical, where -1 is the equivalent of 1 on the other side of the spectrum, the data has an over-representation of left-wing and extreme right-wing users. This asymmetry may cause biased estimates given my goal of estimating the effects for extremists on both sides of the spectrum. Indeed, the models for the extreme left might be low-powered compared to the models for the extreme right. There are very few users who have a point estimate below -2, whereas there are many users with point estimates between 2 and 4.
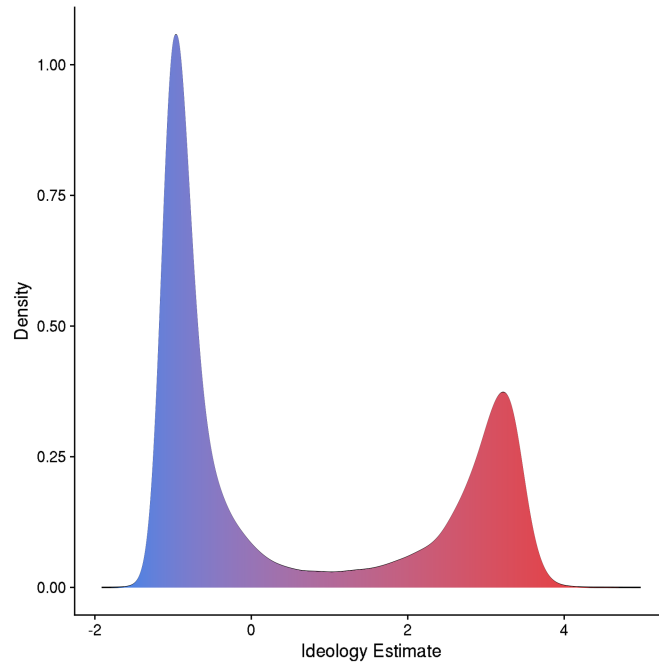
Figure 7: **Density Plot of ideal point estimates.** Ideal points were estimated using the `tweetscores` statistical software package developed by Barberá ([2015](#)). Negative values are given to Democrat users. Positive values are given to Republican users.

I estimate ten Regression-Discontinuity-in-time models. One model is estimated for each 0.5 interval on the ideological scale. This specification allows me to estimate different models for political extremists and moderates and compare the coefficients. Following my theoretical expectations, the absolute value of coefficients for models using a sample of extremists should be the largest.

I plot the absolute value of coefficients for each model in Figure [8](#). Red coefficients are the conventional RDiT estimates and blue coefficients are the robust estimates. The x-axis goes from left for extreme left-wing Twitter users to right for extreme right-wing users. We see that the effect sizes are larger on the extremes than in the middle, confirming my expectation that extremists respond more to campaign events than moderates. There are two outlier groups on the far right. My estimates show that these groups respond much less to the debate. Although this result might invalidate my theory, I argue that these groups are not representative of extreme right-wing voters. I expect these groups to be mostly comprised of bots, as they are drastically more conservative than average right-wing users. In fact, users in these groups do
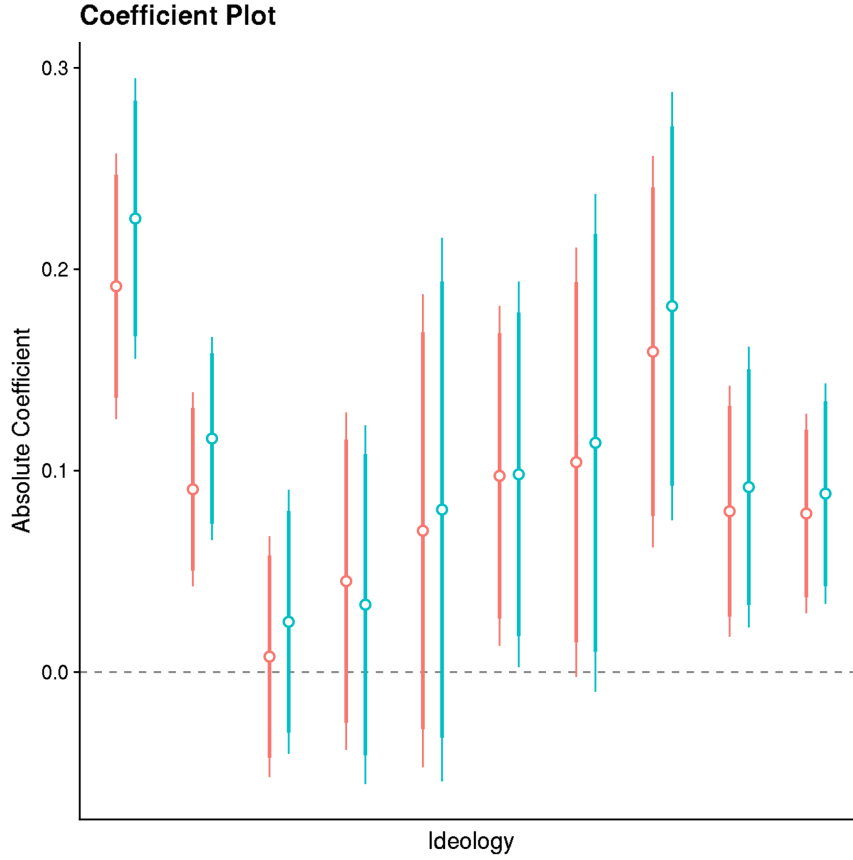
Coefficient Plot

Figure 8: **Coefficient Plot of RDiT models.** The models are specified with local linear regression. Effect sizes are in absolute terms. Red coefficients are the conventional estimates and blue coefficients are the robust estimates. Effects on the left of the x-axis are models estimated with a sample of Democrat Twitter users, and effects on the right of the x-axis are for Republican users. Models are estimated using the `rdrobust` statistical software package developed by Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2015).

not have their equivalent on the left side. The lack of equivalency in distribution density lends to the idea that these users are 'too extreme' to be true, resembling bot-like behavior.

I illustrate an example of the discontinuity in Figure 9. This plot illustrates the effect of the debate on the sentiment expressed by the most extreme left-wing users with ideal points between -1.5 and 1. To give some substantive meaning to these scores, Twitter users who fit in this interval include the median House Democrat, Barack Obama and the Human Rights Campaign (the largest LGBTQ civil rights organization in the US). The plot demonstrates a clear cutoff in sentiment at the start of the debate. Moreover, we see that the discontinuity is not artificially created by the local polynomial. Data points are significantly higher before the

cutoff than after.

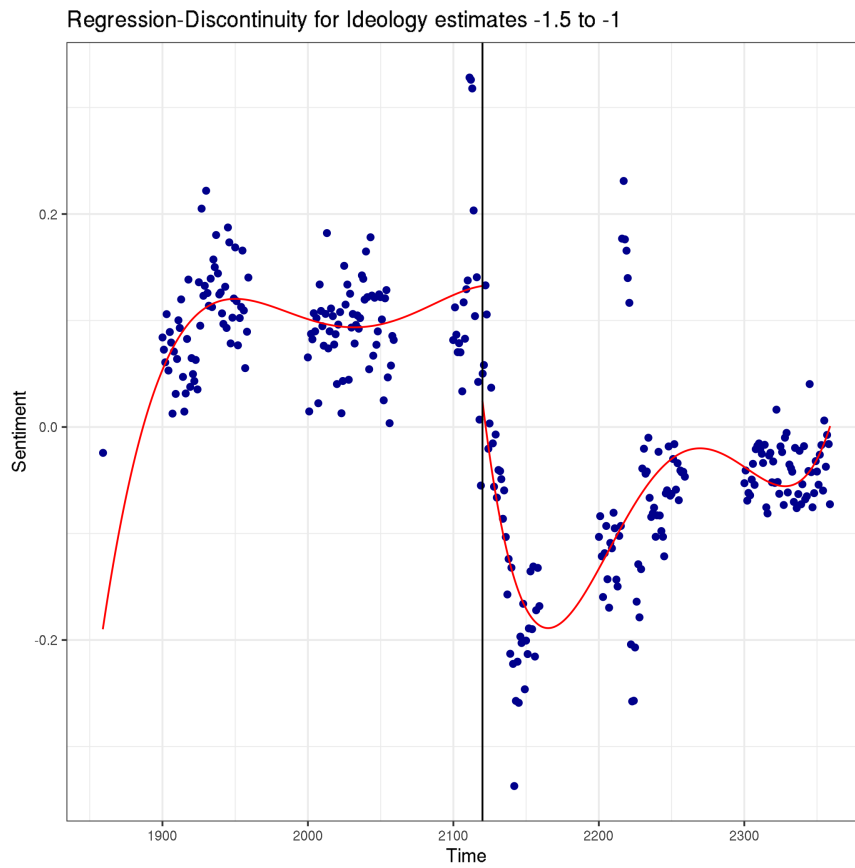Regression-Discontinuity for Ideology estimates -1.5 to -1

Figure 9: **Regression-Discontinuity Plot.** The cut-off point is at 21:20, the start of the debate. This model is estimated for all Twitter users with a ideal point score ranging from -1.5 to 1. Plot was created using the `rdrobust` statistical software package developed by Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik (2015).

Discussion and Conclusion

The rise of extremist politicians and media figures have preoccupied the state of American politics for the last several years. Not only have they set a new tone for the state of this country, but they have also changed the lives of many. On January 6th 2021, radical political behavior came at the cost of several American lives. However, we have yet to know the origin of extremist ideas. Where did these radical ideas come from? Was Donald J. Trump the architect of the new extreme right, or was he simply following his most extreme partisan base?

In this article, I propose the *Downstream extremism* theory, a novel interpretation of the role of extreme voters in the opinion formation process. I theorize that extremists act as cue-givers to political elites, who in turn give cues to the rest of the electorate. Extremists are able to give cues to politicians because of their personality traits and new tools accessible to them such as social media platforms. My theory would lead to the following explanation of what happened on January 6th 2021: Donald J. Trump was simply echoing the views of his extreme supporters. Although his actions probably did amplify what would have been a much smaller protest, the political beliefs surrounding the theme of distrust in government and institutions originate from extreme Republican voters and media.

I empirically demonstrate that extremists do in fact respond more to campaigns than moderates. I use the case of the first 2020 Presidential election debate to estimate its effect on the sentiment of Twitter users. Methodologically, I offer new insights on how to make causal inferences using text data from social media.

Building on this study, I plan to offer empirical evidence of the other steps underlying my theory. Specifically, I plan to show how the outspokenness of extremists during campaigns determines the position-taking of politicians during campaigns. In this article, I only demonstrate that extremists respond more to campaigns. I do not move beyond the first step in the theory as shown in Figure 6.

A few empirical strategies may be used to prove the validity of my theory. First, network analysis contagion models can estimate the spread of opinion in social networks. This will allow me to measure to what extent the views of extremist Twitter users are spread in the network. Second, I can leverage data from extremist social networks such as Gab social to measure whether topics spoken about on that platform precede topics on conventional networks such as Twitter. Moreover, I plan to use survey data to define extremist voters on a left-right ideological scale. One of the main issues with identifying extremists on an ideological scale is the lack of labels to classify them. Survey data from Europe will allow me to correlate the voter ideology with vote choice (an ideal label). This will identify at what point on the ideological scale do voters start supporting extremist parties. Finally, on a theoretical level, I plan to formalize my argument and establish precise predictions which may facilitate my empirical strategies.

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