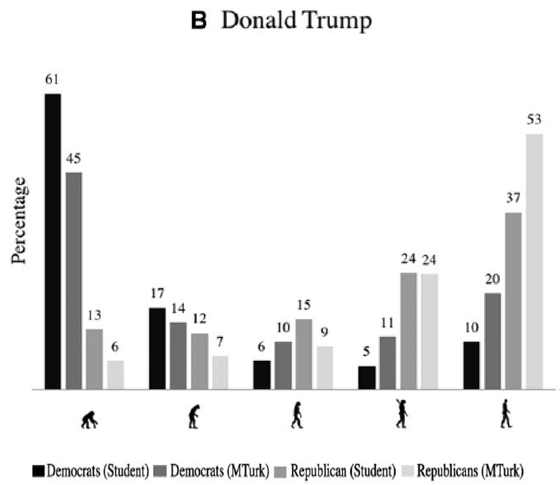
Dehumanization and Negative Partisanship in the 2020 Election: Looking at Twitter Mentions of @realDonaldTrump

Gary C. McDonald | Rice University

Motivation & Research Question

Motivation

- Research shows that an alarming number of partisans are willing to dehumanize members of the other party



- These results may be contaminated by expressive partisanship
- Survey responses may not reflect real-world behavior

Research Question

- *How prevalent is dehumanization in American Politics?*

Data

- Scraped Tweets that mentioned "@realDonaldTrump" during the month of October 2020 (n = 34,452)
- Research shows Trump is a prime target for dehumanization
- Elections provide an emotionally charged time period

Methods

1. Randomly selected 4,174 Tweets for manual coding
2. Tweets were coded along two dimensions
   1. Dehumanization (Yes/No)
   2. Sentiment (Positive/Neutral/Negative)
3. Split coded Tweets into Training and Validation sets
4. Naïve Bayes Classifier
5. Sentiment Analysis
6. Targeted Dictionary Analysis

Results

Coded Tweets

Sentiment	Frequency
Negative	2485
Neutral	2147
Positive	542

Dehumanizing?	Frequency
No	4985
Yes	189

Performance Model

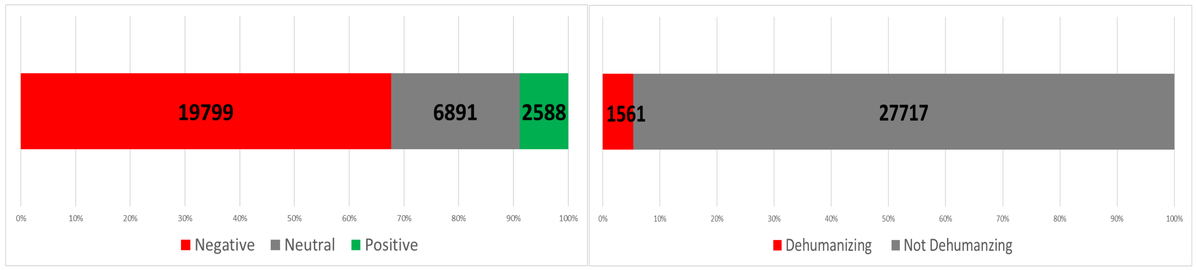
Sentiment

		Predicted Class: Negative	Neutral	Positive
Actual Class	Negative	**1074**	238	**81**
	Neutral	699	343	66
	Positive	**77**	60	**156**

Dehumanization

		Predicted Class: No	Yes
Actual Class	No	2551	142
	Yes	83	18

Predictions for Test Set



Results (Cont.)

Average Sentiment Score for Hand Coded Tweets

Positive	Negative
0.31	**-0.14**

P < .001

Negative (Dehumanizing)	Negative (Not Dehumanizing)
-0.236	**-0.135**

P < .001

Targeted Dictionary Analysis

Estimated Dehumanizing Tweets: 555

Conclusions

- Dehumanization is present on Social media, but it is relatively rare (less than 5%) of Tweets
- Negative Partisanship is rampant. Negative Tweets are almost 5x more prevalent than positive Tweets
- It is difficult to train a textual model to accurately identify dehumanization using Topic Modeling
- Tweets that were dehumanizing received lower sentiment scores than negative tweets that were not dehumanizing