"Pure People" and "Corrupt Elites:" Corruption Talk in the 2020 Election

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ABSTRACT: The word "corruption" has two separate but interrelated meanings. The first kind of corruption refers specifically to an abuse of public office for private gain; the second is broader and indicates a disjunction between a political reality and the ideal to which that reality ought to conform. This paper explores the role of various forms of "corruption talk" in the 2020 presidential election. The first part of the paper examines the "supply side," looking at the kinds of "corruption narratives" that politicians offered in 2020. Using natural language processing, I analyze how Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and Bernie Sanders spoke about corruption. I show that while Biden tended to speak about corruption in a manner familiar to political scientists — as an abuse of public office for private gain – Sanders and Trump used "corruption" in a completely different way, referring to it as a quality of social groups, corporate interests, "foreign" values, or even the "system" as such. I then examine the "demand side," using data from the American National Election Survey (ANES) to demonstrate how various forms of "corruption talk" may have played a role in voting outcomes. Finally, I situate the rise of the anti-establishment appeal in the context of the neoliberal turn and propose that the most powerful tool to fight right-wing populism is a discourse that acknowledges the "corruption" of the status-quo and appeals to the principle of popular sovereignty, thereby providing a liberal and inclusive alternative to populism.

Introduction

This election will decide whether we restore the rule of a corrupt political class or whether we declare that in America we are still governed. We are the people. We govern. We're the boss. We're the people.[1]
-   Donald Trump, Oct 30, 2020, rally in Michigan.

What are you hiding? … Russia's paying you a lot. China's paying you a lot on… all your businesses all around… the world. China's building a new road to a new golf course you have overseas… Release your tax return or stop talking about corruption.[2]
-   Joe Biden, Oct 22, 2020, second presidential debate.

There has been practically no civilization without some concept of corruption — the meaning of corruption, however, has changed drastically from classical and medieval times to today.[3] In their *Intellectual History of Political Corruption*, Bruce Buchan and Lisa Hill explore the historical trajectories of two concepts of political corruption, what they call "degenerative" corruption and "public office" corruption.[4] They show that from the times of the early medieval

Christian kingdoms until just a couple of centuries ago, political corruption was primarily conceptualized as a degeneration or decay of the polity, rather than (exclusively and specifically) as an abuse of public office for private gain. From Socrates corrupting the morals and reason of the youth of Athens to Aquinas excoriating "tyranny as the "corruption" of monarchy"[5] — "degenerative" corruption captured any kind of disjunction between real and ideal. In the broadest sense, corruption has always referred to the relationship between a "real" state of affairs and the ideal to which that "real" state ought to conform – "co-rruption" is the *rupture between the real and the ideal*.

But in contemporary times, centrist politicians and political scientists almost exclusively talk about corruption as an abuse of public office for private gain. On the other hand, "populist" and "popular" politicians like Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders invoke the "degenerative" conception of corruption quite often. Nonetheless, these two concepts of corruption are by no means mutually exclusive, and as we will see, the liberal public office conception of corruption arises from the need to formally institutionalize safeguards against "degenerative" corruption. If "corruption" reflects the relationship between political ideal and political reality, in order to examine the divergence in the use of "corruption," we must first examine the underlying logic of "liberal" and "populist" politics.

I. The People, Democracy, and Corruption

With the exception of a few theocracies and dictatorships, contemporary states derive their legitimacy from some conception of popular sovereignty: the idea that legitimate *kratos* (power) resides in the *demos* (citizenry). Political corruption in the contemporary context therefore involves a derogation from the ideals underlying a political system grounded in the power of "the people." But what exactly is this entity, "the people"? If popular sovereignty means that (all) the people rule, "the people" can never be identified as an actual, empirical, unified political agent to which one can ascribe a particular action or will. This is because identifying the popular sovereign as a particular entity with particular qualities would mean excising a part of the people from the people,[6] thereby contradicting the principle of popular sovereignty — that (all) the people rule. For example, by identifying the will of the people with a pro-life stance, those who do not hold a pro-life stance are thereby excluded from the people. Instead, "who 'the People' are remains an open question, one which democracy in many ways is *about*. [emphasis mine]"[7]

Following this logic, the ideal of popular sovereignty is based on two conflicting ideas: 1) that there is a subject called "the people" which wields popular sovereignty, and 2) that the people can never be identified as an actual, empirical, unified agent.[8] If "the people" cannot be identified, we can never be certain that "the people" rules: *popular sovereignty is an ideal which by its nature can never be realized.* It contains a constitutive "corruption" — a rupture between real and ideal, which can only be papered over through various fictions.

As Edmund Morgan has convincingly shown, identifying "the people" as the basis of political legitimacy required the use of "make believe" from the very beginning: "Make believe that the people have a voice or make believe that the representatives of the people are the people."[9] But populism and liberalism resolve the tension ("co-rruption") inherent in the idea of popular sovereignty through two very different kinds of "make believe."

The liberal interpretation of popular sovereignty transforms the rulers from individual people into abstract office holders and conceives of the state as fundamentally neutral. Populism, on the other hand, brushes off one side of the contradiction: that the people is never identified as an actual, empirical, unified agent. Populism conceives of the People-as-One and of the populist

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ruler as the only true embodiment of the people, thereby making democracy mythologically "pure" again.

a. Popular Sovereignty and Corruption in Liberal Democracy

Following Claude Lefort's concept of democracy as a "form of society" in which "the locus of power becomes and empty place,"[10] we understand that democracy resolves the "constitutive corruption" of popular sovereignty through the fiction that no One rules; that the place of the sovereign is never occupied and the state serves as the terrain of conflict in which the interests of the people (plural) are debated, collated, and acted on. As long as "the people" is not imagined as an actual, empirical, unified agent (as One), it is impossible to definitively identify the *essence* and *will* of the popular sovereign: what it *is*, and what it *wants*; and, as a corollary, it is impossible to identify corruption *positively* with respect to it — as a degeneration of a moral and social order the validity of which emanates from beyond the social; "the people" is not conceived of as a unified transcendent entity: the source of social truth, morality, and power.[11] Instead, "the people appear only in the plural."[12]

But while it is impossible to identify the people *positively* as associated with a particular social and moral order, it is possible to identify it *negatively*: the popular sovereign is not the particularistic interests of an individual or faction. In this light, corruption in liberal democracy came to be understood as *the appropriation of sovereign power for private or factional ends.*
In order to keep sovereign power out of the hands of private or factional interests, democracy requires the functional separation of "private person" and "public office."[13] In the words of Max Weber, "members of the administrative staff should be completely separated from ownership of the means of production or administration" and citizens and officials "insofar as they obey a person in authority, do not owe this obedience to him as an individual, but to the impersonal order."[14] The boundaries that separate "public" and "private" are defined into existence and are, to an extent, arbitrary. But "rules of separation" are necessary in order to maintain the illusion of uncorrupted popular sovereignty: the illusion that officials act as agents of the people.

This codification of public and private interest means that there is a distinction between a "substantive" approach to corruption — the belief that regardless of formal rules, the conduct of an official or the content of legislation advances factional or individual interests — and a "formal" approach, which is entirely contingent on the formal terms of the official's authorization.
To illustrate this difference between formal and substantive corruption, consider the following example, which I take from Peter Bratsis' analysis of the "Clinton Coffee Scandals" during Clinton's campaign for a second term in office:

> If the coffee is being consumed by prospective campaign contributors in a public area, say, the nonresidential areas of the White House, it can be said to constitute political corruption because the president is allowing his private interests to contaminate the purity of the public space… If coffee is being consumed and contributions are being sought in space that is designated for the president's use as a private individual, no corruption is present. The same people, the same coffee, the same money changing hands; the only difference is in the room where it is occurring, which constitutes all the difference between corruption and noncorruption.[15]

Clearly, from a substantive standpoint, it is unclear why meeting in the oval office would constitute more of a subversion of public power for private ends than meeting in the private residences; but from a formal standpoint, it makes all the difference.

A substantive allegation of corruption involves direct, popular appeals ("the campaign finance system is corrupt because it has empowered the superrich at the expense of working people"); whereas allegations of formal corruption ("official X illegally embezzled Y dollars") unless combined with a substantive element,[16] involve no *direct* appeal to the idea of democracy as such. However, because the rules that govern public office are, or ought to be, designed to prevent substantive corruption, most formally corrupt instances are also substantively corrupt. (In other words, public office corruption is typically a subset of substantive corruption.)

As we will see, Sanders primarily spoke about corruption within the substantive/popular framework, whereas Biden primarily spoke about corruption within the formal, public office framework.

b. Popular Sovereignty and Corruption in the Populist Imagination

Populism reinterprets the principle of popular sovereignty through a conception of the "People-as-One." The popular sovereign — the principle of political legitimacy and the basis of power — is equated with "the people" who are presented as an actual, empirical, unified agent, identified with the heartland and held up as the moral source of political legitimacy.[17] As theorist Claude Lefort notes, populism is an "image of a society which is one with itself," an image of an "organic community."[18]

Populists imagine that there is a singular common good, that a concrete and homogeneous political subject called "the people" can discern and will that common good, and that only the populist leader is capable of correctly interpreting the will of the "true people."[19] But this "people" is (and can only ever be) a *part* of the *whole* citizenry. The "true people" must be extracted from the empirical population.[20] Donald Trump put it best when he announced that "the only important thing is the unification of the people – because the other people don't mean anything."[21]

Substantive and formal corruption can often create an opportunity for the emergence of populism, and populists make both substantive and formal critiques of corruption. But while the populist and the formal and substantive conceptions of corruption will often coincide, this is not because populists understand corruption in the same way.

If the "true people" are the only legitimate basis of political power, corruption in the populist framework doesn't involve just any kind of appropriation of sovereign power for factional ends, it *involves undermining the "real people," and the political, social, and moral order that is imagined to be connected to "the people."* Populist politics is largely defined in terms of the *symbolic* opposition between "the people" and the "corrupt elite" which stands between "the people" and power. Consequently, allegations of "corruption" play an outsized role in populist discourse.

The conception of corruption that is unique to populism is what I call "symbolic corruption." Unlike the liberal substantive critique of corruption, in the symbolic framework, corruption is no longer understood to mean any privileging of private or factional interests against the interests of the whole (understood as the entire population); instead, corruption refers to actions, actors, groups, and institutions which are *symbolically* identified with the "corrupt elites." Through an analysis of campaign speeches by Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and Bernie Sanders, we will see how the formal/liberal, symbolic/populist, and substantive/popular conceptions of corruption (respectively) manifested in political discourse during the 2020 election and further elucidate each framework. We can then look at how this "corruption talk" may have affected voter choices. Finally, we can examine the underlying (substantive) factors – the crisis of representation, skyrocketing economic inequalities, and status anxieties caused by globalization and skill-biased technological change — that have created a latent "demand" for a political discourse built around

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the (symbolic) narrative that American democracy has been stolen from "real Americans" and that the power of the "real people" has been usurped by outside forces.
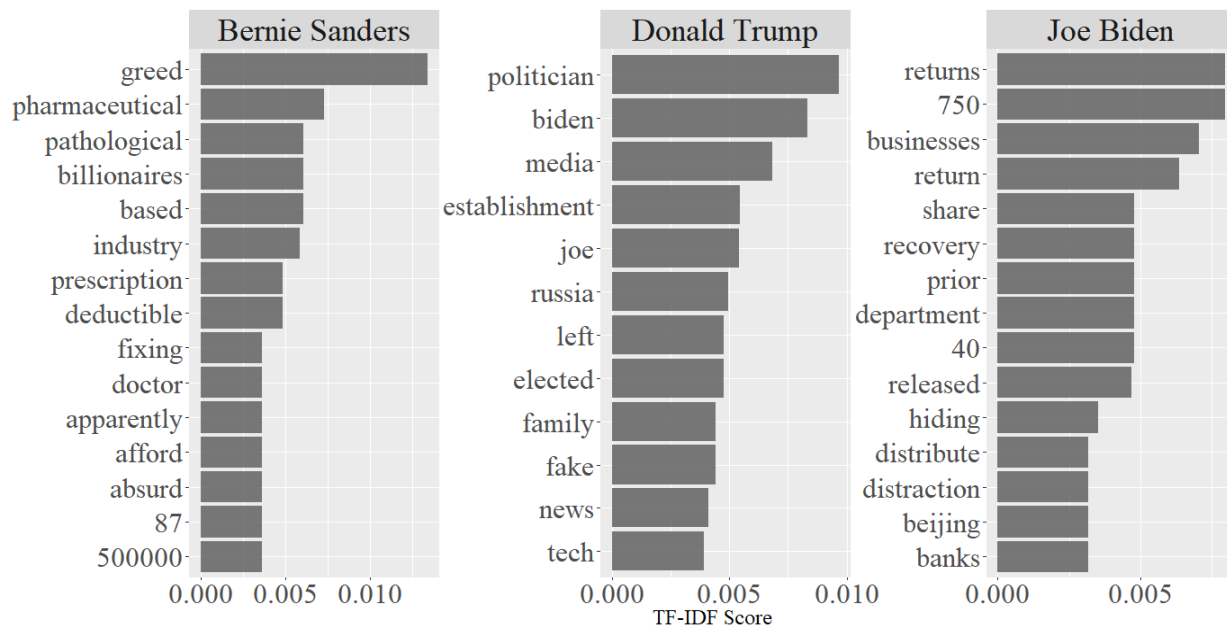
II. Corruption Talk in 2020 Campaign Discourse

In order to examine candidate discourse around the issue of "corruption," I use transcripts from Rev.com, a database that includes campaign rallies, political speeches, town halls, and presidential debates between January 15th and November 3rd, 2020 (which were harvested using web scraping software). There are a total of 230 unique transcripts in which Biden, Sanders, or Trump speak at least once; of these, there are 94 transcripts in which the word "corrupt" or "corruption" appears at least once. Each transcript is separated into paragraphs averaging around 250 words, which I treat as discrete "documents" for the purposes of natural language processing.

From a preliminary glance at the data, we find that Sanders and Trump invoked "corruption" far more often than Biden (7 and 9.4 times more often respectively), as we might expect given the central importance of critiques of the "corruption" of the status quo in the substantive/popular and symbolic/populist frameworks.

Table 1: Rev.com Database Descriptive Statistics

	Transcripts	Transcripts containing "corrupt" or "corruption	% of transcripts containing "corrupt" or "corruption"	Words	# of instances of "corrupt" or "corruption"	Rate per 100,000 words
Biden	142	13	9.2%	120,372	18	14.96
Trump	104	69	66.3%	256,100	362	141.35
Sanders	33	13	39.4%	21,706	23	105.96
Total	230[22]	94	40.9%	398,178	403	101.21

I begin by examining what kinds of words were most important for each speaker within the collection of "documents" that contained reference to corruption in order to determine the general kinds of ideas and issues that were most associated with each speaker's use of "corruption." For this purpose, I use the tf-idf statistic which is intended to measure how important a word is to a document within a collection of documents by dividing the term frequency within a subset of documents by the inverse of the number of documents in the whole corpus in which the term appears.[23]

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Figure 1: TF-IDF by Speaker Among Documents Containing the Word "Corrupt"

As we can see, Sanders and Trump tended to use more morally and normatively inflected vocabulary, such as "greed" and "family" when talking about corruption, whereas Biden tended to use more technical and neutral language. Trump appears to connect corruption with politicians, media, and the "establishment," Sanders with billionaires and the pharmaceutical industry and Biden with illegal business practices. Broadly, tf-idf can give us an idea of the general semantic sphere in which each candidate used the word "corrupt," corroborating the hypothesis that Trump, Biden, and Sanders use the word in a symbolic/populist, formal/liberal, and substantive/popular manner respectively.

But within these respective discourses, they each used "corruption talk" in the context of specific topics that were characteristic of their particular approach to the issue. In order to analyze what kinds of topics each candidate talked about and in what proportion, I use the structural topic model package in R (STM), which utilizes Bayesian estimation to search for "topics" in a large set of documents, assuming that these "topics" are latent variables which determine the content of the documents.[24] The model assumes that a "topic" is composed of a mixture of words where each word has a probability of belonging to a topic. It further assumes that a document is composed of a mixture of topic proportions that determine the word distributions within that document.[25] The sum of topic proportions across all topics for a document is one, and the sum of the word probabilities for a given topic is one.[26]
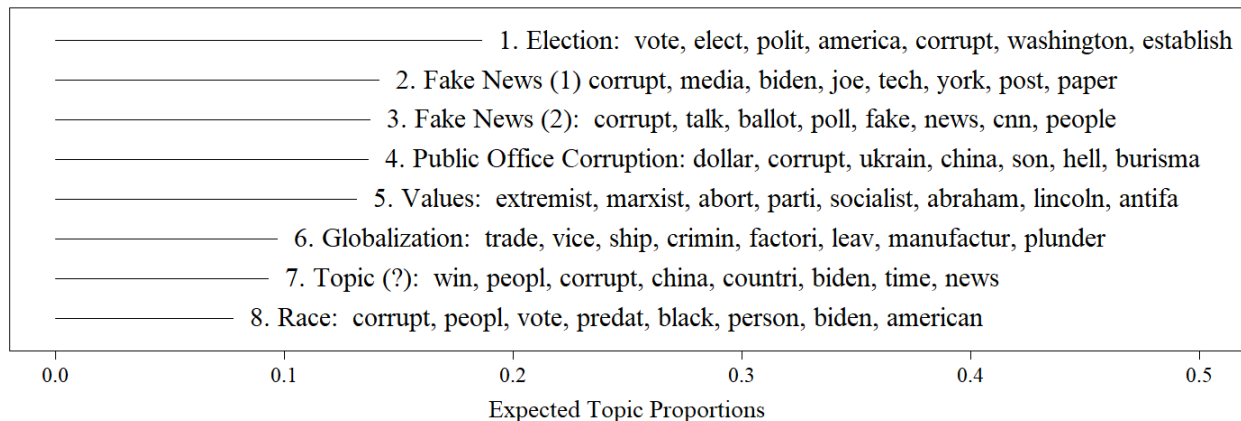
Applying the topic model to only the subset of documents in which corruption is discussed or mentioned, we can get an idea of how often each candidate talked about an issue or set of issues in conjunction with corruption.

II. A - Trump's Corruption Discourse

In order to model Trump's corruption talk, I specify a topic model containing 8 topics.[27] Figure 2 below shows the relative proportion of these topics — if a topic has a proportion of .2, that means around 20% of Trump's corruption talk revolves around that topic. The model also returns the words that are most likely to indicate the presence of each topic[28] as well as the topic proportion of each document. (For example, a given document might be a mixture over topics 5

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and 3, containing 70% topic 5 words and 30% topic 3 words.) In the figure below, each topic is labeled with a title that most closely fits the content of the documents containing the highest proportion of that topic. For example, the documents containing high proportions of topic 5 are about the corruption of American values by the left – hence the label "values."

Figure 2: Trump Expected Topic Proportions

We find that the 5 most prevalent themes in Trump's corruption discourse, in order, were: the election (more specifically, dethroning the corrupt elites and giving power to "the people") (topic 1), fake news, particularly in conjunction with election coverage (topics 2 and 3), Joe Biden and Hunter Biden's alleged public office corruption (topic 4), the corruption of American values (topic 5), and globalization (topic 6).

Trump often uses the word "corruption" when he is not talking about public office corruption (or anything that a political scientist schooled in the principal-agent model might recognize as "corruption"). As we've outlined, "populistic" political logic pits a "pure people" against a "corrupt elite." In describing this opposition in terms of policy, values, culture, etc. Trump will often use the word "corrupt" as an *adjective* to qualify an organization, person, group, value, or idea associated with the "corrupt elite."

Topic 1 — election and rule by "the people" vs. "the elites" demonstrates the symbolic conception of corruption in its most distilled form; it tells us the most about Trump's use of "corruption talk" and is a logical place to begin. The following are some excerpts from the documents most associated with topic 1. In the table below (and in all subsequent tables) documents are ordered by how highly associated they are with the topic – i.e. the document that is 99% "about" topic 1 is listed first, the document that is 98% "about" topic 1 is listed second, etc. Among the top-ranked documents, some are omitted because their content is identical or nearly identical to another document in the selection (candidates will often use specific lines over and over again during the campaign).

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	Topic 1 – Election: Restoring American Democracy to "The People"
Michigan, November 2	This election comes down to a very simple choice. Do you want to be ruled by the corrupt and selfless [sic] political maniacs? Or do you want to be ruled by the American people? You're supposed to be ruled by the American people.[29]
Michigan, October 30	This election will decide whether we restore the rule of a corrupt political class or whether we declare that in America we are still governed. We are the people. We govern. We govern. We're the boss. We're the people.
Pennsylvania October 31	In 2016 Pennsylvania voted to fire this corrupt political establishment and you elected an outsider as President who is finally putting America first… And if I don't sound like a typical Washington politician, it's because I'm not a politician. Right?[30]
Michigan, November 2	If you want your children to be safe, if you want your values to be honored, if you want your life to be treated with dignity and respect, then I am asking you to go to the poll tomorrow and vote, vote, vote… For the last four years, the depraved swamp has tried everything to stop me and to stop you… Together we will defeat the corrupt establishment. We will dethrone the failed political class, and we will drain the Washington swamp. And we will save that American dream. That beautiful, beautiful American dream.[31]
Wisconsin, November 2	Do you want to be ruled by the corrupt and selfish political class or do you want to be governed by the American people? That's what it's all about. It's the American people. They've taken that away.[32]

These excerpts contain little to no substantive content. Trump's discourse is full of what theorist Ernesto Laclau calls "empty signifiers": signifiers with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified that have different meanings to different people, allowing the audience to project their own signification onto the speech.[33] Words such as "American people," "American dream," "political establishment," "depraved swamp," "values," "dignity," etc. have no fixed or concrete meaning – they are all marshaled by Trump to set up a Manichean opposition between the "pure American people" and the "corrupt elite," signifying who "we" are in opposition to who "they" are.

Without directly addressing any particular issues, Trump evokes the idea that America and American democracy have been stolen from its rightful owners, the "true people." Populist political logic divides society into two camps: on the one side the elite and the consolidated power structure, and on the other the block constituted by the populist leader and the people.[34] Following this logic, Trump claims to be an outside maverick, who "doesn't sound like a typical Washington politician" or "play by the rules of the Washington establishment."[35] He is the voice of the people and claims to represent them directly. Within this "logic," being "governed by the American people" is the same thing as being governed by Trump.

	Topics 2 and 3 – Corrupt media and Fake News
Rally - Pennsylvania, Oct 26	CNN is fake corrupt news… they're corrupt. They have to report the news. They are the enemy of the people. They really are. They're the enemy of the people.[36]
Rally - Pennsylvania, Oct 26	They're fake and they're corrupt people. They're fake. They're corrupt. I never watched CNN, but I had to see it this morning… I watched MSDNC… MSDNC. And you watch these polls and you say, they're fake polls. They're fake. These are real polls [gestures toward crowd]. We're going to win in Florida. We're going to win in Pennsylvania… we're watching you, governor, very closely in Philadelphia. A lot of bad things happen there with the counting of the votes. We're watching you Governor Wolf, very closely.[37]
60 Minutes Interview Oct 22	I wouldn't be here if I didn't have social media, because the media is corrupt… the media is corrupt… the media is fake, and frankly, if I didn't have social media, I'd have no way of getting out my voice.[38]

Democratic representatives are made accountable to the citizenry through both "direct" and "mediated" mechanisms. Direct accountability occurs during election time or in the case of recall votes. Mediated accountability involves the check that civil society and the media exert on governmental power.

Trump frames civil society and media institutions as part of a group of liberal, coastal elites that want to trick and mislead the people in order to further their own (rather than "the people's") interests. He therefore claims that the only way to get the truth out and to communicate "directly" with the people without the corrupt mediation of the mainstream media, is through his various social media platforms. Trump positions himself simultaneously as the leader, and as one of the people ("we are the people, we govern"). His identification with the "real people" makes mediated accountability through the "fake media" — and "corrupted," "elite" institutions more generally — not only unnecessary but a subversion of the power of "the people," and thereby a "corruption" of popular sovereignty.[39]

But the idea that his base somehow plays a role in his decision making or in checking his power, is a complete illusion. In the words of Jan Werner Müller, populists imply "that 'the people' can speak with one voice and issue something like an imperative mandate that tells politicians exactly what they have to do in government… Yet the fact is that the imperative mandate has not really come from the people at all; its supposedly detailed instructions are based on an interpretation by populist politicians."[40] When Trump says that only "we" are qualified to watch vote counting he really means "I" and those who do exactly what I tell them. Within this framing, there is no role for the institutions of horizontal accountability to exert any sort of restraining influence on the true representative of the "real people."[41]

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	Topic 5 - The "Corruption" of American Values
Rally – North Carolina, March 2nd	The Democratic party is the party of high taxes, high crime, unlimited regulations, open borders, late term abortion, socialism, blatant corruption, and the total obliteration of your second amendment. The Republican party is the party of the American worker, the American family, the American dream, and the late great Abraham Lincoln.[42]
Rally - Michigan, November 2nd	Every corrupt force in American life that betrayed you and hurt you is supporting Joe Biden. The failed establishment that started the disastrous foreign wars… The career politicians that offshored your industries and decimated your factories and sent your jobs away… The open border lobbyists that killed our fellow citizens with illegal drugs and gangs and crime… The far-left Democrats that ruined our public schools, depleted our inner cities, defunded our police, and demeaned your sacred faith and values… The anti-American radicals defaming our noble history, heritage, and heroes… Antifa, and the rioters, looters, Marxists, and left-wing extremists, they all support Biden.[43]
Rally – Michigan, October 17th	This election will decide whether we preserve our magnificent heritage or whether we allow far left radicals to wipe it all away. Joe Biden has made a corrupt bargain in exchange for his party's nomination. He has handed control of his party over to the hardcore militant left… [The democratic party is] now the party of socialists, Marxists and left-wing extremists… America is the most magnificent, most virtuous nation that has ever existed.[44]

Beyond the media and the political establishment, much of Trump's corruption talk concerned external threats to the values, lifestyles, and livelihoods of the "real people." Within this discourse, it is not the principle of popular sovereignty itself that is being corrupted, but rather the popular sovereign ("the real people") is threatened with cultural and economic displacement by the "other people." In the United States as elsewhere in developed Western nations, the transition from industrial to post-industrial society and the spread of post-materialist values led to a restructuring of the cultural axis of political contestation.[45] Across the post-industrial regions of Western Europe and North America "white working-class people sense that they have been demoted from the center of their country's consciousness to its fringe."[46] Trump played off of this feeling, claiming to give voice to groups whose status is increasingly in decline, identifying them as real Americans whose "noble history, heritage, and heroes" must be protected against the "corrupt force[s] in American life." Once again, the use of empty signifiers is extremely important in Trump's construction of the dichotomy between "pure people" and "corrupt elite." Trump extols the virtue of the "American worker, the American family, and the American dream," defined in opposition to some nebulous group ("every corrupt force in American life that betrayed you and hurt you"); he gestures towards a set of amorphous values connected with some unspecified time when American was "great."

	Topic 6. Globalization and the Economy
Rally – NV, Feb 21st	For years, Washington politicians took money from lobbyists, global corporations and corrupt special interests to ship our jobs and factories. They stole our wealth. They shipped it overseas and to other countries. America lost one in four manufacturing jobs following the twin disasters of NAFTA and China's entrance into the WTO… Under my administration, the great betrayal of America is over. America is no longer for sale.[47]
Rally – Pennsylvania, Oct 26th	The corruption of politicians like Biden and it is corruption, is exactly why I ran for president. I ran for trade; I hated the trade deals. I said, "Why are you allowing them to take all of your car companies and moving them to Mexico and Canada?[48]
Rally – Wisconsin, Oct 17th	Joe Biden shipped away your jobs, shut down your factories, threw open your borders and ravaged our cities while sacrificing American blood and treasure in endless wars. Joe Biden is and always has been a corrupt politician.[49]
Rally – Georgia, Oct 16th	Joe Biden is the living embodiment of the corrupt political class that enriched himself [sic] while draining the economic life and soul from our country. For the last 47 years, Joe Biden, he shipped away your jobs, shut down your factories, threw open your borders and ravaged our cities while sacrificing American blood and treasure in endless and ridiculous foreign wars.[50]

While Trump does not truly identify, much less actually address the underlying causes of status loss, in this case he does connect the feeling of status loss to real, substantive issues: immigration, trade globalization, deindustrialization, and economic decline supposedly orchestrated by a corrupt elite (of which "Joe Biden" is the living embodiment"). This is the closest Trump comes to making a substantive rather than symbolic critique of corruption.

Trump paints America as the victim of a collusion between the liberal establishment and foreign countries, who together "drained the economic life and soul from our country." He also connects the economic disruption caused by globalization and technological change with migration — not logically, but affectively. Immigrants, foreign countries, and the domestic elites they supposedly collude with are convenient scapegoats. This narrative is capable of explaining a complex and heterogeneous reality through a simple affective logic: "here is what is happening, this is why, and these are the people who are doing it to you." *They* are taking *our* jobs and our factories. This is who we are; these are our enemies; only I can defeat them and restore us to our rightful place. Ultimately, even this more substantive critique of corruption is subordinated to a symbolic logic.

In these excerpts, Trump also seems to vaguely gesture at formal, public office corruption. But while Trump may, at times, be implying *not only* that Biden is on the side of a secretive cabal aiming to undermine American workers, *but also* that Biden personally and illegally profited in doing so, it's clear that Trump's allegations of "corruption" here as well as elsewhere do not refer to an actual act of law breaking or anything resembling formal public office corruption. The "corrupt special interests" are never identified with any particular person or group in a plausible way, they gesture instead at the Manichean opposition between the people and the "corrupt political class" behind the "sacrifice of American blood and treasure" and the "great betrayal of America."

	Topic 4 - Public Office Corruption
Rally - Michigan, Nov 1st	While Biden was giving China your jobs, his family raked in millions and millions of dollars from the Chinese communist party. Joe Biden is a corrupt politician who bought and is paid for… His son's like a human vacuum cleaner. "Hey Dad, what country are you going to today?" "China." "Oh, good, maybe I can take in a couple of million." … [Hunter] wants China to pay $10 million a year for recommending service… I guess he calls it introductory services. He's introducing his father.[51]
Rally – North Carolina, Sept. 19th	In Ukraine, [they gave Hunter] $183,000 a month, and a $3 million upfront payment for him and his friends, with no experience and no job, and they said, do you know energy? No, I don't… They're corrupt.[52]
Rally – Florida, Oct 29th	All Biden does is talks [sic] about COVID… He doesn't call it the China virus. You know why? Because China has him paid off… They gave his son one and a half billion to manage. He makes millions of dollars a year, I assume.[53]
Rally – Minnesota, September 30th	And what about Omar where she gets caught harvesting?[54] I hope your US attorney is involved. I've been reading these reports for two years about how corrupted, crooked she is… frankly harvesting is terrible, but it's the least of the things that she has done… she tells us how to run our country… she's been crooked for a long time… AOC also. You take a look at the corruption, the disgusting corruption. 700% increase refugees coming from the most dangerous places in the world including Yemen, Syria, and your favorite country, Somalia, right? Biden will turn Minnesota into a refugee camp… Overwhelming public resources, overcrowding schools, and inundating your hospitals.[55]

Even when Trump did speak about "public office" corruption – which was the case in somewhere around 15-20% of his invocations of "corruption" – he usually framed (often vague and unspecified) charges of public office corruption in terms of the broader claim that the elites are fundamentally morally bankrupt and, ultimately, *evil*. The last excerpt is particularly telling; after accusing Ilhan Omar of corruptly tampering with ballots, he expresses outrage that she — an outsider and enemy of "the people" — "*tells us* how to run *our country*" and warns that as a consequence of her "disgusting corruption" Minnesota can expect a "700% increase in refugees." It is also notable that Trump's accusations of public office corruption against Biden increased as Biden began to comment on Trump's various conflicts of interest in the lead up to the election. It has repeatedly been noted that part of Trump's strategy is to fling whatever he is accused of back at his accusers,[56] which may explain the relative increase in his accusations of public office corruption over the course of the campaign, culminating in various accusations against Hunter Biden.

Notably, in the Hunter-Ukraine case, Trump illegally abused the powers of his office, threatening to withhold funds from Ukraine in order to further his private interest (getting re-elected) — in other words, Trump committed public office corruption. However, within Trump's framing, Trump was using all of the powers at his disposal to unmask the moral degeneracy of the "corrupt elite" – and to some extent, this framing worked. A Pew poll conducted in November of 2019 found that 65% of Republicans who got their news from right-wing outlets believed that Trump "temporarily withheld US aid to Ukraine because he wanted to advance a US government position" whereas only 10% believed he did so in order to "help his reelection campaign."[57]

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II. B - Biden and Sanders on Corruption

In order to model Biden and Sanders' corruption talk, I use models with 3 rather than 8 topics, given the far smaller samples; in both cases, all topics had nearly equal topic proportions, and so I omit the STM topic proportion plots for the sake of tidiness.

As shown in Table 1 (on page 8), Biden spoke about corruption over nine times less frequently than Trump. When he did speak about corruption, he nearly always used the term to indicate formal, public office corruption. Occasionally, he mixed more substantive appeals into his discourse, but these always served the purpose of exciting outrage about issues of public office corruption. Out of Biden's eighteen mentions of corruption, all but two fall into one of three broad topics: 1) Trump's tax returns and illegal business activity, 2) public office corruption in the Trump administration, or 3) corrupt disbursement of CARES act funds. (The other two mentions were unrelated and model reported that they contained equal mixtures of all three topics, when in fact they corresponded to none of the topics.)

	Biden - Topic 1. Public Office Corruption of the Trump Administration
Energy Plan Speech – July 14th	It seems like every few weeks, when he needs a distraction from the latest charges of corruption in his staff or the conviction of high-ranking members of his administration and political apparatus, the White House announces "it's infrastructure week."[58]
Discussion – NC, Sept. 23rd	This has been the most corrupt administration in modern American history. The Justice Department has turned into the president's <u>private</u> law firm…[59]

	Biden - Topic 2. Trump's Tax Returns and Illegal Business Activity
Presidential Debate – Oct. 22nd	What are you hiding? … Russia's paying you a lot. China's paying you a lot on… all your businesses all around… the world. China's building a new road to a new golf course you have overseas… Release your tax return or stop talking about corruption.[60]
Rally – Michigan, Oct 31st	I released 22 years of my tax returns… He hasn't released one. He talks about corruption. What is he hiding? He owes $41 million out there. Who's he owe it to? … and this guy talks about corruption.[61]

Despite the fact that around 70% of Biden's corruption talk concerned acts of public office corruption by Trump or his associates (Topics 1 and 2), Biden's accusations of corruption didn't stick with Trump's base. Corruption for them was identified with an elite that Biden belonged to and which Trump attacked from the outside as an anti-establishment maverick. Within Trump's "logic," whether something was or was not corrupt was contingent on where it stood in the divide between people and elite. As long as an affective identification between the leader and the people is maintained, "corruption" remains trapped in this logic.

	Biden - Topic 3. Disbursement of CARES act funds
Sanders Endorses Biden in Livestream Meeting, April 13th	Donald Trump and his team are trying to gut the whole oversight of the Corporate Loan Program now. Trump fired the Inspector General … who was put in place to police corporate corruption and what's he trying to hide? [sic] Congress should demand answers.[62]
Virtual Town Hall – June 27th	Trump's corrupt recovery is focused on the wealthy, well-connected, not the millions of mom and pops that are out there facing ruin… 40% of the funds didn't go to small businesses at all and the Main Street lending program has lent not a single dollar.[63]

In his discussion of the CARES act,[64] "corrupt recovery" Biden has a more substantive appeal. He implies that much of the disbursement of funds occurred in an illegal manner; but, more

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importantly, he alleges that the wealthy and those with connections to the Trump administration benefitted disproportionately at the expense of "Main Street" and the American people as a whole. Regardless, only five of Biden's eighteen mentions of corruption deal with these more substantive issues. For Biden, "corruption" (noun) signifies a specific action, event, or pattern of actions and events; Biden rarely used "corrupt" (as an adjective) to indicate a quality (not directly connected to formal public office conception) of some organization, entity, group, or society as a whole.

Unlike Biden, Sanders primarily talked about corruption in these more substantive terms, using the concept to indicate the presence of a rupture between real and ideal. He talked about the disproportionate influence of certain economic interests and social groups within democracy; he even went so far as to say that American democracy itself had been corrupted by these interests. In fact, nearly all of Sanders' corruption talk is concerned with factional interests (corporations and the rich) exerting undue influence in political and economic life.

	Sanders - Topic 1. Misc. Factional Interests in Economic and Political life
Democratic Debate – Iowa, Jan. 15th	We [need] the courage to take on the one percent, take on the greed and corruption of the corporate elite and create an economy and… government that works for all of us, not just the one percent.[65]
Rally – Missouri, March 9th	Within a corrupt political system, where billionaires buy elections, our job is to reinvigorate democracy so we have one person, one vote, not billionaires buying elections.[66]

Nonetheless, Sanders does make vague and general allusions to formal public office corruption. When Sanders attacks the corruption of the healthcare industry, he may, in part, be thinking about illegal behavior on the part of the industry, or the public office corruption that facilitates it. When Sanders denounces Trump's "corrupted administration," he is doubtless at least partly thinking of Trump's manifold violations of the emoluments clause. When he speaks of corporate corruption, he is certainly, at least in part, thinking of actual illegal activities and bribery of elected officials.

	Sanders - Topic 2. The Trump Administration
New Conference – March 11th	[Trump is a] pathological liar… running a corrupt administration. He clearly does not understand the Constitution of the United States and thinks that he is a president who is above the law. He is a racist, a sexist, a homophobe, a xenophobe, and a religious bigot.[67]
Rally – California, March 2nd	We will not have a corrupted administration for four more years. We will not have a President who has apparently never read the Constitution of the United States. We will not have a President who is undermining American democracy… we are a democracy, not an autocracy.[68]

	Sanders - Topic 3. The Greed of the Healthcare Industry
Rally – South Carolina, Feb. 28th	Don't tell me we can't take on the greed and corruption of the pharmaceutical industry… Charging us, in some cases, 10 times more for the same exact drugs sold abroad… we're going to pass a Medicare for All single-payer program.[69]
Democratic Debate – Jan 15th	Now is the time to take on the greed and corruption of the healthcare industry, of the drug companies, and finally provide healthcare to all through a Medicare for All single payer program.[70]

But more importantly, Sanders is concerned with precisely the fact that so many of these "corrupt" behaviors are *not* illegal, that they have been codified in the laws as a legitimate part of

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the system. For Sanders, "corruption" is something that occurs in relation to the constitution, the principles of American democracy, and the American people. Ultimately, Sanders is concerned with the corruption of democracy – with the *demos* whose *kratos* has been usurped.

However, unlike Trump, Sanders never identifies this *demos* positively, as possessing a concrete will, reason, or morality which can only be embodied in his own person. Instead, Sanders focuses on substantive appeals to the ideal of democracy; the ideal that the people, in the abstract, have a say in creating "government that works for all of us." Sanders is quite clear that "the people," means all the people. For Sanders, Trump is corrupt, in part, because "he is a racist, a sexist, a homophobe, a xenophobe, and a religious bigot" – because he excludes a part of the people from the people. At its core, Sanders' appeal to the principle of popular sovereignty remains popular, rather than populist.

III. Did "Corruption Talk" Work?

Now that we've seen how each candidate used "corruption talk" and examined the political logic driving these different usages, the logical next question is, "did these various forms of corruption talk work?" Perceptions of "corruption" are high among the American public, with over 70% of voters reporting that they believed political corruption was either "very" or "quite" widespread.[71] But did this contribute to a "demand" for "corruption narratives" that played a role in determining vote choices in the 2020 election? Did "corruption talk" appeal to voters? Furthermore, were voters concerned with public office corruption in particular? Or was the more inchoate sense that elites are removed, untrustworthy, and self-serving the factor that ultimately drove voting outcomes?

In order to answer these questions, I use data from the American National Election Study (ANES), which is a representative survey of Americans before and after the 2020 presidential elections. I am interested in the role that perceptions of public office corruption vs. a more generalized distrust of elites (which could be addressed through either substantive and symbolic "corruption talk") have in predicting vote choice for Sanders over Biden in the Democratic primary, and vote choice for Trump over Biden in the general election.

I take answers to the question "How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe taking is among politicians"[72] as my indicator of perceptions on public office corruption. My variable on degenerative corruption is composed of the average of responses to three questions: 1) "Most politicians are trustworthy," 2) "Most politicians do not care about the people," 3) "When it comes to public policy decisions, whom do you tend to trust more: ordinary people or experts?" Responses to each question range on a 5-point scale: for the first two, the scale runs from "agree strongly" to "disagree strongly"; for the third, the scale runs from "trust ordinary people much more" to "trust experts much more." All of the survey questions included here were administered in the month after the 2020 election.

My "corrupt elites" variable is the average of each respondent's score across all three questions.[73] I take these questions as good indicators of attitudes toward "degenerative" corruption because they each express an aspect of distrust toward elites: lack of trust in politicians, the feeling that politicians are emotionally removed from the people, and the belief that the people ought to take back control of government from technocratic elites. These questions have a relatively low level of correlation, with the Pearson r statistic ranging between .2 and .3: in other words, they are not measures of the same phenomenon; they measure *different aspects* of a single phenomenon. Answers to each of these questions were recorded on a five-point scale, which I then normalize to a one-point scale — regression coefficients thus express the change in vote outcome likelihood when moving across the entire spectrum of the variable.

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I model the primary and general election using the subset of those respondents who reported voting for Biden or Sanders, and Biden or Trump respectively, excluding incomplete data. My benchmark specification is an ordinary least squares regression with the public office and "corrupt elites" variables as the main regressors, controlling for basic demographic variables — age, income, race, gender, education, rural/urban, and party identification for the Trump/Biden regression. (Table 2 below displays only the main regressors, for the full regression, see table 4 in the appendix.

Without adding the corrupt elites variable into our regression, we find that beliefs about the level of public office corruption are a strong predictor of voting outcomes, with an 18 and 16 percent increase in the likelihood of voting for Trump or Sanders when moving across the entire range of the variable.

However, given that neither Trump nor Sanders were concerned about public office corruption, this result may initially appear puzzling. Only when we consider that beliefs about public office corruption may be a product of a worldview that sees elites as "degeneratively" corrupt does this striking finding begin to make sense. Those who have an inchoate sense that elites are unrepresentative, self-interested, nefarious, and culturally removed from people like them may also be more likely to believe that politicians engage in public office corruption such as bribery.

Table 2: Voting Outcomes Regression

Dependent Variable:	Trump Vote in General Election		Sanders Vote vs Biden in Democratic Primary	
Predictors	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	-0.02 (-0.08 – 0.05)	-0.10 ** (-0.16 – -0.04)	0.73 *** (0.59 – 0.87)	0.66 *** (0.52 – 0.80)
Public Office Corruption	0.18 *** (0.13 – 0.22)	0.03 (-0.02 – 0.08)	0.16 ** (0.06 – 0.27)	0.08 (-0.03 – 0.20)
Corrupt Elites Variable		0.36 *** (0.30 – 0.41)		0.23 *** (0.10 – 0.35)
Observations	4462	4462	1418	1418
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.606 / 0.605	0.619 / 0.618	0.182 / 0.177	0.190 / 0.184

* p<0.05   ** p<0.01   *** p<0.001

This hypothesis is confirmed by our regression analysis. When we introduce the corrupt elites variable, the statistical significance of the public office variable drops out for both the general and primary election models. Moving across the entire range of the "corrupt elites" variable *we see an extraordinary 36 and 23 percent increase in the likelihood of voting for Trump and Sanders respectively*. General distrust of elites takes on the entire explanatory value of beliefs about public office corruption: public office corruption now has no role in predicting Trump or Sanders vote in a best fit linear regression model.

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When Trump talked about corruption, he often referred to various cultural grievances, while Sanders was primarily concerned with economic inequalities. In order to test whether distrust of elites is affected by perceptions of economic and cultural issues, I run another regression, this time treating the corrupt elites variable as my dependent variable, again controlling for demographic characteristics.

In order to examine the effect of economic factors, I look at three variables: opposition to free trade, the belief that free trade takes away American jobs, and self-reported class (upper, middle, working, and lower). In order to measure the effect of cultural resentment, I look at four variables: the belief that American culture is harmed by immigrants, like/dislike of feminism, support for "traditional family values," and the perception that "rural people don't get enough respect" — note that rural/urban is one of the control variables (for the full regression, see table 5 in the appendix).

Table 3: "Corrupt Elites" Regression

Predictors	Public Office Estimates	Culture Estimates	Economy Estimates	Kitchen Sink Estimates
(Intercept)	0.30 *** (0.27 – 0.33)	0.57 *** (0.53 – 0.61)	0.59 *** (0.55 – 0.63)	0.31 *** (0.26 – 0.36)
Public Office Corruption	0.38 *** (0.36 – 0.41)			0.36 *** (0.33 – 0.38)
Culture Harmed by Immigrants		0.08 *** (0.06 – 0.11)		0.06 *** (0.04 – 0.08)
Feminism Thermometer		-0.06 *** (-0.09 – -0.04)		-0.06 *** (-0.09 – -0.04)
Traditional Family Values		0.03 ** (0.01 – 0.05)		0.02 ** (0.01 – 0.04)
Rural People don't Get Enough Respect		0.10 *** (0.07 – 0.13)		0.06 *** (0.03 – 0.08)
globalization effect jobs			0.05 *** (0.02 – 0.08)	0.02 (-0.01 – 0.04)
Free Trade Oppose			0.07 *** (0.05 – 0.10)	0.03 ** (0.01 – 0.06)
Self-Reported Social Class			-0.10 *** (-0.13 – -0.07)	-0.07 *** (-0.10 – -0.04)
Observations	4203	4203	4203	4203
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.304 / 0.302	0.180 / 0.177	0.160 / 0.158	0.332 / 0.329

*$p<0.05$ **$p<0.01$ ***$p<0.001$*

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I find that cultural resentments play a large role in predicting distrust of elites, but that opposition to globalization and self-reported social class are slightly less effective at explaining variation across the corrupt elites variable. Interestingly, beliefs about public office corruption are highly predictive of beliefs about degenerative corruption, even in the kitchen sink regression, and explain more of the variation in the dependent variable than either economic or cultural factors. This does not mean that perceptions of public office corruption "cause" generalized distrust of elites; if anything, the direction of causality runs the other way: those who believe that "elites are secretly working to advance their own interests rather than those of regular people," are more likely to believe that "acts of bribery and embezzlement are common among politicians." However, perceptions of public office corruption are nonetheless a large component of generalized distrust of elites; indeed, they appear to be a significantly larger component than, for example, the perception that American culture is harmed by immigrants.

Ultimately, we find that the economic and cultural factors which are associated with a generalized distrust of elites are precisely the issues that Trump addressed through his discourse around corruption. (Sanders also addressed economic displacement and the increasing sense of alienation from elites, but without resorting to racist dog whistles or playing of cultural resentments.) This connection between candidate discourse, the cultural and economic factors that lead to increasing distrust of elites, and the regression analysis on vote choice strongly suggest that the feeling that the system as a whole is fundamentally corrupt was channeled through the symbolic and substantive narratives that Trump and Sanders constructed through their "corruption talk," and that this perception of generalized corruption played a role in vote choice for Sanders/Trump and against Biden in the 2020 election.

IV. Conclusion

The success of anti-establishment candidates like Trump or Sanders on the national stage would have been inconceivable only twenty (maybe even ten) years ago. Over the past half century, faith in the American system of government has plummeted, with trust in the federal government decreasing from 60 percent in the years prior to the Vietnam War protests and the Watergate scandal to somewhere around 20 percent today.[74]

The growing feeling that the system is fundamentally corrupt and that elites are only looking out for themselves has been driven by two primary factors: skyrocketing economic inequalities and shifts in the normative order that leave certain portions of the population (particularly those with the strongest claim to traditional American identity) feeling left out of the dominant elite value system.

On the one hand, the superrich have made enormous gains in the past fifty years at the expense of the American middle class, the supposed bulwark of American democracy. Since the early 1970s, the U.S. economy has nearly doubled in size,[75] but this growth accrued almost exclusively to the top 1%.[76] In Thomas Piketty's terms, the rate of return on capital tends to exceed the overall growth rate (r > g), and given the absence of redistributive policies, regulation, and cooperative ownership, those who derive their income from capital have seen their fortunes skyrocket, while average hourly wages have stagnated or even declined.[77]

On the other hand, over the past half century, post-materialist values of autonomy, self-expression, gender equality, multiculturalism, secular values, and LGBTQ rights have increasingly replaced traditional American values grounded in a protestant work ethic and national exceptionalism. People who fail to assimilate themselves into the new normative order "feel socially-marginalized as a result of incongruence between their values and the discourse of mainstream elites."[78] Many people who voted for Trump believed not only that the existing

political establishment is fundamentally corrupt, but also that American values and the American people itself has been corrupted through immigration, globalization, and the imposition of a new normative order by foreign hearted liberal elites.[79] These voters were seeking not only objective material gains but also an increase in subjective social status: recognition and respect. This is what Trump spoke to through his corruption talk when he excoriated:

> "Every corrupt force in American life that betrayed you and hurt you, the career politicians that offshored your industries and decimated your factories and sent your jobs away… The open border lobbyists that killed our fellow citizens with illegal drugs and gangs and crime… The far-left Democrats that ruined our public schools, depleted our inner cities, defunded our police, and demeaned your sacred faith and values… The anti-American radicals defaming our noble history, heritage, and heroes."[80]

Sanders and Trump both addressed our contemporary democratic discontent through their corruption talk (which, as we have shown, played a role in their respective appeals). Sanders spoke primarily to the issue of economic inequalities, while Trump spoke primarily to the feeling of status loss and cultural change. Both used a discourse that pits "the people" against a "corrupt elite"; and both spoke to the feeling that power has been taken from the people.
But while Trump's corruption talk was exclusionary and backward looking, a tool of political elites to divide and conquer through a symbolic logic that obscures substantive issues and plays off the cultural resentments of the white working class, Sanders' corruption talk was inclusionary and constructive, emphasizing the creation of a just social system and a normative order in which everyone has a place and is accorded respect and recognition. Trump used a populist appeal to exclude a part of the people from the people; Sanders used a popular appeal, understanding that "the people" means "all people," and that no one can ever claim to definitively speak for (let alone embody) all of the people.

Meanwhile, Biden generally avoided talking about "corruption" and when he did, his discourse was largely limited to condemning formal, public office corruption. While Biden was successful in the 2020 race, as the perception that the status-quo is "corrupt" increases, a discourse that fails to address "degenerative corruption" will be less and less effective.

In order to be successful, leftist political discourse must be grounded in the promise of American democracy — the ideal of government by the people, for the people, but avoid constructing "the people" as a part of the whole. It must identify the substantive corruption in our political system — the disjunction between the ideal of American democracy and the reality of American plutocracy — while remaining within a liberal framework. "The people" contains a beautiful promise: the promise of democracy and liberty. Despite its perils, we must return to the idea of "the people."

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Appendix

Table 4: Voting Outcomes Full Regression

Predictors	Trump Vote in General Election		Sanders Vote in Democratic Primary	
	Estimates	*Estimates*	*Estimates*	*Estimates*
(Intercept)	-0.02 (-0.08 – 0.05)	-0.10 ** (-0.16 – -0.04)	0.73 *** (0.59 – 0.87)	0.66 *** (0.52 – 0.80)
Public Office	0.18 *** (0.13 – 0.22)	0.03 (-0.02 – 0.08)	0.16 ** (0.06 – 0.27)	0.08 (-0.03 – 0.20)
Corrupt Elites		0.36 *** (0.30 – 0.41)		0.23 *** (0.10 – 0.35)
Income	-0.04 *** (-0.04 – -0.03)	-0.04 *** (-0.04 – -0.03)	0.00 (-0.01 – 0.02)	0.00 (-0.01 – 0.02)
Education	-0.02 *** (-0.02 – -0.01)	-0.01 *** (-0.02 – -0.01)	-0.00 (-0.01 – 0.01)	0.00 (-0.01 – 0.01)
Age	0.00 *** (0.00 – 0.00)	0.00 *** (0.00 – 0.00)	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.01)	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.01)
Party ID [Republican]	0.78 *** (0.75 – 0.80)	0.75 *** (0.72 – 0.77)		
Party ID [Independent]	0.31 *** (0.28 – 0.33)	0.29 *** (0.26 – 0.31)		
race [Black]	-0.10 *** (-0.13 – -0.07)	-0.11 *** (-0.15 – -0.08)	-0.20 *** (-0.26 – -0.15)	-0.21 *** (-0.26 – -0.15)
race [Hispanic]	-0.06 *** (-0.10 – -0.03)	-0.06 *** (-0.10 – -0.03)	-0.04 (-0.11 – 0.03)	-0.05 (-0.12 – 0.02)
Gender [Female]	-0.00 (-0.02 – 0.02)	0.00 (-0.02 – 0.02)	-0.07 ** (-0.11 – -0.03)	-0.07 ** (-0.11 – -0.03)
Rural Urban [Suburb]	0.01 (-0.01 – 0.04)	0.01 (-0.01 – 0.03)	-0.07 ** (-0.12 – -0.02)	-0.06 * (-0.11 – -0.01)
Rural Urban [Small Town]	0.05 *** (0.02 – 0.07)	0.04 ** (0.02 – 0.07)	-0.04 (-0.10 – 0.01)	-0.04 (-0.10 – 0.01)
Rural Urban [Rural]	0.09 *** (0.06 – 0.12)	0.07 *** (0.04 – 0.10)	-0.04 (-0.11 – 0.04)	-0.04 (-0.11 – 0.03)
Observations	4462	4462	1418	1418
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.606 / 0.605	0.619 / 0.618	0.182 / 0.177	0.190 / 0.184

* p<0.05   ** p<0.01   *** p<0.001

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Table 5: Corrupt Elites Full Regression

	Corrupt Elites			
Predictors	Public Office	Culture	Economy	Kitchen Sink
(Intercept)	0.34 *** (0.31 – 0.37)	0.60 *** (0.57 – 0.64)	0.59 *** (0.55 – 0.62)	0.36 *** (0.32 – 0.40)
Public Office	0.35 *** (0.33 – 0.37)			0.32 *** (0.30 – 0.34)
culture harmed by immigrants		0.08 *** (0.06 – 0.10)		0.06 *** (0.04 – 0.08)
Feminism Thermometer		-0.10 *** (-0.13 – -0.08)		-0.10 *** (-0.12 – -0.08)
Traditional Family Values		0.04 *** (0.02 – 0.06)		0.03 *** (0.02 – 0.05)
Rural people don't Get Enough Respect		0.11 *** (0.08 – 0.13)		0.07 *** (0.05 – 0.10)
globalization effect jobs			0.05 *** (0.02 – 0.08)	0.02 (-0.01 – 0.04)
Free Trade Oppose			0.08 *** (0.06 – 0.11)	0.04 *** (0.02 – 0.06)
Self- reported Social Class			-0.09 *** (-0.12 – -0.06)	-0.06 *** (-0.08 – -0.03)
Income	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.00)	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.00)	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.00)	-0.00 ** (-0.01 – -0.00)
education	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.01)	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.01)	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.01)	-0.01 *** (-0.01 – -0.00)
age	-0.00 *** (-0.00 – -0.00)	-0.00 *** (-0.00 – -0.00)	-0.00 *** (-0.00 – -0.00)	-0.00 *** (-0.00 – -0.00)
Party ID [Republican]	0.14 *** (0.13 – 0.15)	0.09 *** (0.08 – 0.11)	0.15 *** (0.14 – 0.17)	0.09 *** (0.07 – 0.10)
Party ID [Independent]	0.08 *** (0.07 – 0.09)	0.06 *** (0.05 – 0.07)	0.09 *** (0.07 – 0.10)	0.05 *** (0.04 – 0.07)
race [Black]	0.01 (-0.00 – 0.03)	0.01 (-0.00 – 0.03)	0.02 ** (0.01 – 0.04)	-0.01 (-0.02 – 0.01)

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race [Hispanic]	-0.00 (-0.02 – 0.01)	0.00 (-0.01 – 0.02)	0.00 (-0.02 – 0.02)	-0.01 (-0.02 – 0.01)
Rural Urban [Suburb]	0.01 (-0.00 – 0.02)	0.00 (-0.01 – 0.02)	0.01 * (0.00 – 0.03)	0.00 (-0.01 – 0.01)
Rural Urban [Small Town]	0.02 ** (0.01 – 0.03)	0.01 (-0.01 – 0.02)	0.02 ** (0.01 – 0.03)	0.00 (-0.01 – 0.01)
Rural Urban [Rural]	0.04 *** (0.03 – 0.06)	0.03 *** (0.02 – 0.05)	0.05 *** (0.03 – 0.06)	0.02 ** (0.00 – 0.03)
Gender [Female]	-0.00 (-0.01 – 0.01)	0.02 *** (0.01 – 0.03)	0.01 (-0.00 – 0.02)	-0.00 (-0.01 – 0.01)
Observations	4203	4203	4203	4203
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.391 / 0.389	0.310 / 0.308	0.273 / 0.270	0.436 / 0.433

*$p<0.05$ **$p<0.01$ ***$p<0.001$

Endnotes

[1] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Waterford Township, Michigan October 30." *Rev.com*, 30 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-waterford-township-michigan-october-30.

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[4] Buchan, Bruce, and Lisa Hill. *An Intellectual History of Political Corruption.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 6.

[5] Aquinas, Thomas. *Selected Political Writings.* Translated by J. G. Dawson, B. Blackwell, 1965. 19.

[6] Lefort, Claude. *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism.* Polity, 1986. 19

[7] Müller, Jan-Werner. "Populism and Constitutionalism." Oxford Handbooks Online, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.013.28, 13.

[8] Ibid. 13.

[9] Morgan, Edmund S. Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America, W. W. Norton & Company. Kindle Edition. 13.

[10] Lefort, 17.

[11] Contrast this with "degenerative" conception of corruption in feudal kingship, where corruption was understood as a deviation from the divinely ordained order.

[12] Müller, Jan Werner. *What Is Populism?* (Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 40.

[13] While this separation of power and person at various levels of government may also be characteristic of other systems (such as the bureaucratic absolutist monarchies of the 18th and 19th centuries), democracy is the only system in which the ultimate source of authority is not occupied by an individual who appropriates that authority to their own person, where rational-legal authority is (at least nominally and in theory) characteristic of all levels of power, ensuring (in the words of political theorist Claude Lefort) that the ultimate place of power remains "empty."

[14] Weber, Max. *Economy and Society*. (University of California Press, 2013), 218.

[15] Bratsis, Peter. "The Construction of Corruption, or Rules of Separation and Illusions of Purity in Bourgeois Societies." *Social Text*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2003, pp. 9–33., https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-21-4_77-9, 15.

[16] One could allege that Trump's use of secret service money to pay his own private jet companies is formally corrupt. But one could then add that he is undermining American taxpayers and usurping power from the American people in order to enrich himself. This would combine a formal allegation with substantive/popular appeal.

[17] Diehl, Paula. "Twisting Representation." *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, 2018, pp. 135., https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315226446-10.

[18] Lefort, 20.

[19] Müller, Jan Werner. *What Is Populism?* 25.

[20] Arato, Andrew. "Political Theology and Populism." *Social Research: An International Quarterly,* Volume 80, Number 1, Spring 2013, 147.

[21] "CBS Weekend News : KPIX : May 7, 2016 5:30pm-6:01pm PDT : Free Borrow & Streaming." *Internet Archive*, archive.org/details/KPIX_20160508_003000_CBS_Weekend_News/start/540/end/600. 0

[22] Several Transcripts include speech data from more than one candidate (particularly debates and Rallies in which Sanders and Biden appeared together). This explains the discrepancy between total and the sum of Biden, Trump, and Sanders.

[23] Silge, Julia, and David Robinson. *Text Mining with R : A Tidy Approach*. Vol. First edition, O'Reilly Media, 2017. 31.

[24] Roberts, Margaret E., et al. "STM: An R Package for Structural Topic Models." *Journal of Statistical Software*, vol. 91, no. 2, 2019, https://doi.org/10.18637/jss.v091.i02.

[25] For a more detailed explanation, see: https://cacm.acm.org/magazines/2012/4/147361-probabilistic-topic-models/fulltext

[26] Blei, David M. "Probabilistic Topic Models." ACM, 1 Apr. 2012, https://cacm.acm.org/magazines/2012/4/147361-probabilistic-topic-models/fulltext.

[27] The number of topics is a user determined hyperparameter. In this case, a model with 8 topics achieves the highest level of semantic coherence (a statistical property provided in the STM package which is maximized when the most probable words in a given topic frequently co-occur together) among the possible models containing less than 12 topics.

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[28] The words shown in the table on the next page are the words that have the highest relative likelihood of indicating the presence of a topic, and already give the user an idea of what each topic is likely to be about (e.g. "Ukraine, son, Burisma" indicates that topic 7 is likely to be about Trump's allegations of public office corruption against Joe and Hunter Biden).

[29] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Grand Rapids, Michigan November 2." *Rev.com*, 3 Nov. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-grand-rapids-michigan-november-2.

[30] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Reading, Pa October 31." *Rev.com*, 1 Nov. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-reading-pa-october-31.

[31] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Grand Rapids, Michigan November 2." *Rev.com*, 3 Nov. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-grand-rapids-michigan-november-2.

[32] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Kenosha, WI November 2." *Rev.com*, 3 Nov. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-kenosha-wi-november-2.

[33] Laclau, Ernesto. *On Populist Reason*. Verso, 2005. 72.

[34] Ibid., 83-86.

[35] It is important to note that I am not alleging that Trump has any special attachment to the American people, or, even that deep down he subscribes to a "populist world view." Populism is a political logic, but it is also a style and a strategy for gaining and influencing power – for the purposes of the present analysis, Trump's psychology is irrelevant.

[36] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Allentown, Pa October 26." *Rev.com*, 26 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-allentown-pa-october-26.

[37] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Allentown, Pa October 26." *Rev.com*, 26 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-allentown-pa-october-26.

[38] "Donald Trump Leaked Unedited 60 Minutes Interview Transcript." *Rev.com*, 22 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-unedited-60-minutes-interview-transcript.

[39] Diehl, 135

[40] Müller, Jan Werner. *What Is Populism?* 31.

[41] Diehl., 138

[42] "Donald Trump Charlotte, North Carolina Rally Transcript: Trump Holds Rally before Super Tuesday." *Rev.com*, 2 Mar. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-charlotte-north-carolina-rally-transcript-trump-holds-rally-before-super-tuesday.

[43] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Grand Rapids, Michigan November 2." Rev.com, 3 Nov. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-grand-rapids-michigan-november-2.

[44] Taylor, Ryan. "Donald Trump Michigan Rally Speech Transcript October 17." Rev, Rev, 17 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-michigan-rally-speech-transcript-october-17.

[45] Roberts, 8

[46] Gest, Justin. *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality.* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 15

[47] "Donald Trump Las Vegas, Nevada Rally Transcript." *Rev.com*, 25 Feb. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-las-vegas-nevada-rally-transcript.

[48] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Lititz, Pa October 26." *Rev.com*, 26 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-lititz-pa-october-26.

[49] "Donald Trump Rally Transcript Janesville, Wi October 17." *Rev.com*, 20 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-transcript-janesville-wi-october-17.

[50] "Donald Trump Macon, Georgia Rally Speech Transcript October 16." *Rev.com*, 17 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-macon-georgia-rally-speech-transcript-october-16.

[51] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Macomb County, MI November 1." *Rev.com*, 1 Nov. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-macomb-county-mi-november-1.

[52] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript in Fayetteville, NC September 19." *Rev.com*, 20 Sept. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-in-fayetteville-nc-september-19.

[53] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Tampa, FL October 29." *Rev.com*, 29 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-tampa-fl-october-29.

[54] Trump is claiming that Omar was involved in Illegal ballot harvesting. This has been debunked. More information here: https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/10/16/fact-check-project-veritas-no-proof-voter-fraud-scheme-link-ilhan-omar/3584614001/

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[55] "Donald Trump Duluth, Minnesota Campaign Rally Transcript September 30: Night after First Debate." *Rev.com*, 30 Sept. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-duluth-minnesota-campaign-rally-transcript-september-30-night-after-first-debate.

[56] Wang, Amy B. "'Like I Said: A Puppet': Hillary Clinton Doubles down on Trump and Russia." *The Washington Post*, 14 Jan. 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/14/like-i-said-puppet-hillary-clinton-doubles-down-trump-russia/.

[57] Jurkowitz, Mark, and Amy Mitchell. "Views about Ukraine-Impeachment Story Connect Closely with Where Americans Get Their News." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*, Pew Research Center, 28 Aug. 2020, www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/01/24/views-about-ukraine-impeachment-story-connect-closely-with-where-americans-get-their-news/.

[58] "Joe Biden Clean Energy Plan Speech Transcript July 14." *Rev.com*, 18 July 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-clean-energy-plan-speech-transcript-july-14.

[59] "Joe Biden Racial Equity Discussion Transcript September 23." *Rev.com*, 23 Sept. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-racial-equity-discussion-transcript-september-23.

[60] "Donald Trump & Joe Biden Final Presidential Debate Transcript 2020." *Rev.com*, 23 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-joe-biden-final-presidential-debate-transcript-2020.

[61] "Joe Biden & Barack Obama Campaign Event Speech Transcript Flint, Mi October 31." *Rev.com*, 31 Oct. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-barack-obama-campaign-event-speech-transcript-flint-mi-october-31.

[62] "Transcript: Bernie Sanders Endorses Joe Biden in Livestream Meeting." *Rev.com*, 14 Apr. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/transcript-bernie-sanders-endorses-joe-biden-in-livestream-meeting.

[63] "Joe Biden & Trump Surrogates Hold Town Hall for Apia: Transcript." Rev, Rev, 27 June 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/joe-biden-trump-surrogates-hold-town-hall-for-apia-transcript.

[64] The CARES act was the pandemic stimulus passed by Trump.

[65] "January Iowa Democratic Debate Transcript." *Rev.com*, 21 Feb. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/january-iowa-democratic-debate-transcript.

[66] "Bernie Sanders St. Louis Rally Speech Transcript – March 9, 2020." *Rev.com*, 9 Mar. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/bernie-sanders-st-louis-rally-speech-transcript-march-9-2020.

[67] "Bernie Sanders News Conference Speech Transcript: Sanders Stays in Race despite Key Losses." *Rev.com*, 11 Mar. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/bernie-sanders-news-conference-speech-transcript-sanders-stays-in-race-despite-key-losses.

[68] "Bernie Sanders Los Angeles Rally Transcript before Super Tuesday." *Rev.com*, 2 Mar. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/bernie-sanders-los-angeles-rally-transcript-before-super-tuesday.

[69] "Bernie Sanders Columbia, South Carolina Rally Transcript." *Rev.com*, 29 Feb. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/bernie-sanders-columbia-south-carolina-rally-transcript.

[70] "January Iowa Democratic Debate Transcript." *Rev.com*, 21 Feb. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/january-iowa-democratic-debate-transcript.

[71] American National Election Survey. *2020 Time Series Study* [Dataset]. 19 July 2021, electionstudies.org/data-center/2020-time-series-study/.

[72] With the choices being: "1. Very widespread, 2. Quite widespread, 3. Not very widespread, 4. Hardly happens at all." (I inverted these values, so as to allow an *increase* in the variable "how corrupt" to indicate a corresponding *increase* in the belief that government is corrupt).

[73] The values of questions 1 and 3 are inverted, so that higher values indicate in increase in populist conceptions of corruption.

[74] "Trust in Government: 1958-2015." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy,* Pew Research Center, 30 May 2020, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/11/23/1-trust-in-government-1958-2015/.

[75] "The Post-1979 Shortfall in American Economic Growth: A Rough Survey: Focus for July 16, 2014." *Equitable Growth*, 16 July 2014, equitablegrowth.org/post-1979-shortfall-american-economic-growth-rough-survey-focus-july-16-2014/.

[76] Piketty, Thomas. *Capital and Ideology*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 671.

[77] DeSilver, Drew. "For Most Americans, Real Wages Have Barely Budged for Decades." *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 30 May 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/07/for-most-us-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/.

[78] Gidron and Hall, 21.

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[79] As Noam Gidron and Peter Hall show in a recent paper, lower subjective status is positively associated with distrust of elites, a belief that the political system is corrupt, and voting for anti-establishment parties in North America and Europe. See Gidron and Hall, 20.

[80] "Donald Trump Rally Speech Transcript Grand Rapids, Michigan November 2." *Rev.com*, 3 Nov. 2020, www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-rally-speech-transcript-grand-rapids-michigan-november-2.