HOW DID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECT FAR-RIGHT POPULIST
SENTIMENT IN THE UNITED STATES: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

by
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Abstract

Current literature identifies wide-ranging predictors for populist and conspiratorial sentiment like nativism, economic inequality, social isolation, and other mental health issues. This paper presents an empirical analysis investigating how COVID-19 non-pharmaceutical intervention (NPI) measures affected far-right populist sentiment in the United States. This study conducts logit regression using American National Election Studies (ANES) data from 2016 and 2020 to make the novel assertion that hopelessness and pride are both strongly associated with populist sentiment. It also reveals that other socioeconomical and political factors have greater influence than COVID-19 social restrictions. Logit regression of state-level data suggests that lifting NPI measures decreases feelings of anxiety and depression, feelings that prior research associates with being more vulnerable to extreme sentiment. These findings both compliment and contradict current literature and, despite this study not presenting causations, it does provide a theoretical framework for future analysis.

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1. Introduction

The capitol attack on January 6, 2021, will serve as a watershed moment in American history. At the time of this study, scores of researchers and analysts are investigating what conditions in the population contributed to the attack. Leading political figures at the time had been propelled into office, at least partially, through the support of far-right populists. Understanding the traits associated with this way of thinking can inform policies that uproot its leading causes. Presented in this study is a comprehensive approach at codifying and measuring far-right populism in the United States through empirically measuring the conditions most likely to predict it, while also presenting a theoretical framework for calculating how many may hold it.

1.1 What do we mean when we say far-right populism?

Populism itself is a rather elusive term as there are various definitions describing it, many with negative connotations. This paper uses Cas Mudde's definition, "A*n ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonist groups 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the* volonté générale *(general will) of the people*" (Mudde 2004, 543; definition found via Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, 150, italics in original). All populism is inherently Manichaean in that there are two mutually exclusive sides where "the people" are engaged in a struggle with the governing elites who seek to "undermine the rightful sovereignty of the common folk" (Oliver and Rahn 2016, 190). Specifically, far-right populism has three distinctive traits: it discursively generates threats to the nation, it accuses the governing class of betraying the people in favor of those threats, and, finally, it portrays itself as the rightful defender of the virtuous common folk against the evil elites (Bergmann 2018, 12).

1.2 The Far-Right Populism-Conspiracy Theory Nexus

Far-right populists create and propagate conspiracy theories to promote their own agendas and to energize their support base (Bergmann 2018, 3). Populism and conspiracy theories share key characteristics. First, both propose that the true meaning behind tragic events is obscured by a few, powerful elites, where the unwitting people are actively being plotted against by a secret group (Wood 2019). Second, both share a similar duality in views of the world by discursively asserting the existence of threats to the in-group (Bergmann 2018, 169). Additionally, populism is inherently political, whereas, conspiracies may be apolitical (Bergmann 2018, 170). In this sense, populism is naturally conspiratorial, but some conspiracies may not always support populist ideologies.

Conspiracy theories prove to be convenient ways to simply explain complex events or ideas. Many right-wing conspiracies have centered around a deep-state of bureaucrats and politicians secretly controlling society. (Bergmann 2018, 4). Conspiracy theories have an inherent self-sealing quality because they often overestimate the powers of certain agents and are unlikely to give credence to fact-checking or debunking because, as the theory argues, such efforts are likely on behalf of the nefarious agents themselves (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 207). Often, conspiracies overestimate the competence of government officials to conduct sophisticated, covert plans despite contradictory evidence that open society governments rarely keep secrets long term (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 208).[1]

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[1] A 2016 study mathematically argued that there was an inverse relationship between the number of people required to keep something secret and how long before the secret was uncovered i.e., the more people who know about a secret, the less time it will remain hidden (Grimes 2016).

Research by social psychologists have determined that there is a relationship between conspiratorial thinking and one's mental health. Social exclusion, lacking control, and perception of threats have all been shown to increase a person's chances of subscribing to conspiracy theories. A 2016 study determined that feelings of social exclusion were positively associated with endorsements of conspiratorial beliefs (Graeupner and Coman 2016). Another study demonstrated "the need to be and feel in control is so strong that individuals will produce a pattern from noise to return the world to a predictable state" (Whitson and Galinsky 2008, 117). As such, conspiracy theorists see illusory patterns by attributing intentional action to otherwise inexplicable events, rejecting the possibility that catastrophes sometimes happen by chance (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, 208). This kind of self-deception can be a result of perceived threats. One article determined through multiple case studies that people become more prone to endorsing superstitious beliefs during times when perceived threats are greatest i.e., during the Great Depression (Sales 1973, 48, 53). Although political ideology remained absent from these studies, they lay the foundation for understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic could have exacerbated feelings of social isolation leading many to feel no control over their own lives.

2. <u>Literature Review and Theoretical Framework</u>

This study seeks to understand how conditions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic influenced far-right populism in during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Populism entered the national dialogue in 2016 to explain how the Republican-candidate, Donald Trump, won the presidential election. As a result, researchers continue to analyze the growing role populism plays in current American politics and its association with

misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories (Oliver and Rahn 2016; Bergmann 2018). As COVID-19 spread across the country in the months leading up to the election, many states instituted varying non-pharmaceutical intervention (NPI) measures from shutting down social events to mandating masks to strict lockdowns whereby more and more Americans spent time socially excluded from each other.

Scholars have studied populism and the pandemic (Vieten 2020; Eberl, Huber, and Greussing 2020), populism and the role of the internet (Bimber 1998; Krämer 2017; LaFree et al. 2016), the populism-conspiracy theory nexus (Bergmann 2018), and how social exclusion increases one's vulnerability for believing conspiracy theories (Graeupner and Coman 2016; Whitson and Galinsky 2008). Research presented here combines the elements of previous studies and advances the collective understanding on what affects populist sentiment both at the individual and state-levels. It seeks to validate, in a unique and comprehensive way, the assertions that nativism, authoritarianism, education, and economic inequality all affect populist attitudes. Like the 2016 election, the 2020 U.S. presidential election showcased populist sentiment in favor of President Trump; however, current literature remains limited on how the pandemic may have influenced that sentiment. This paper posits the theory that stress on mental health resulting from COVID-19 NPI measures exacerbated populist sentiment.

Multiple studies discuss security concerns associated with far-right groups. Eirikur Bergman warns of dangers associated with far-right populist conspiracy theories as they can "erode trust in society" and serve as a "catalyst for radicalization and extremism" (2018, 174). Additionally, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) published a study in 2016 asserting that

individuals on the far-right had a "strong and positive relationship to violence." Recent evidence suggests the internet likely sped up the radicalization process for members of the far-right (LaFree et al. 2016, 41, 75). The security risks presented by far-right groups underpins the importance of learning how the global pandemic affected them.

Populism itself falls along a scale encompassing both far-left and far-right ends of the political spectrum. It is important to discuss this distinction here because understanding their differences determines how variables will be chosen and coded to measure the desired group. The main difference is that the far-left typically focuses on socially underprivileged populations whereas the far-right typically focuses on the interests of ordinary citizens (Bergmann 2018, 74). To help illustrate this difference, far-left populism in Latin America is characterized by socialist movements lead by Bolivian President Evo Morales and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez characterized as inclusionary since these movements sought to improve the quality of life for the country's most destitute (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013, 159). Conversely, far-right populism in Europe is considered exclusionary, characterized by nativist movements led by Jörg Haider in Austria or Jean-Marie Le Pen in France where discursive narratives pit in-groups against out-groups (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Oliver and Rahn 2016). This Manichaean form of political ideology is intrinsically intertwined with conspiracy theories that help to justify its radical claims.

2.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Far-Right Populism

Multiple studies (Vieten 2020; Eberl, Huber, and Greussing 2020) have investigated how the COVID-19 pandemic likely increased far-right sentiment. One study conducted three months into the pandemic argued that far-right movements in

Germany were mobilizing as a result of COVID-19 restrictions and that self-isolation coupled with a reliance on online communication may have made more people susceptible to far-right propaganda (Vieten 2020). A COVID-conspiracy theory survey of 660 adults showed that conspiratorial thinking was strongly related to broader conspiracy beliefs, more prevalent in individuals with less education, and had a positive, but weak, correlation with negative attitudes towards government NPI measures (Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2020). The results of the study did not reveal an increase in disinformation on alternative news sites but did discover that many added a populist spin to their content. One can infer a relationship between the pandemic and far-right populism, but literature on this relationship remains limited. Studying this relationship could provide insights into how crises and widespread threats serve as catalysts for promoting far-right populism and dangerous conspiracy theories.

2.2 Predictors of Populism

To assess the affect COVID-19 NPI measures have on far-right populism, a thorough analysis needs to put the pandemic in context of other predictors. Previous work on how education is associated with many socioeconomical factors provides insight into how it affects populism. The right-wing nationalist populist movements that materialized in Europe during the 1970's found support in the less educated working class to support their cause (Bergmann 2018, 74). Further work into the topic argued that globalization and it associated advances in technology and education made the less educated more insecure in the labor market and, as a result, their place in society (Oliver and Rahn 2016, 192). As this theory goes, "knowledge" societies require basic information processing skills that are continuously evolving thereby leaving the less

educated more vulnerable and insecure (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016, 337). Other research has suggested a link between insecurity and uncertainty with conspiratorial thinking (Grzesiak-Feldman 2013, 113) where the appeal of populism can take root.

Nativism is also a trait often associated with populism. Expanding on the previous paragraph, previous research has found correlation between lower levels of education and higher levels of ethnocentrism and lower tolerance for outgroups (Margalit 2019, 159; Oliver and Rahn 2016, 191). Research from the 1990's also determined a link between lower levels of education and opposition towards immigration (Citrin 1997, 874). For these reasons, researchers have asserted that nativism is a key feature of radical right ideology, an idea linked to a nationalist construct (Mudde 2010, 1173). In other terms, nativism implies an inherited entitlement to the common good of society, a distinctive trait of populism (Vieten 2020, 12). With this body of research, nativism will serve as an invaluable control variable for measuring the impact COVID-19 had on far-right populists during 2020.

Authoritarianism has long been a predictor of populism. Authoritarianism, as argued by Cas Mudde (2010), is a central component of far-right populist radicals representing the belief in a strictly ordered society where violations of authority deserve severe punishment. What distinguishes these far-right radicals from earlier groups like fascists and Nazis who also favored authoritarian leadership is the acceptance of democracy (Bergmann 2018, 92) thereby representing more interest in the will of the people in politics. Expanding further, previous research concluded that environmental threats is reliably associated with greater support for authoritarianism (Sales 1973). In

this regard, COVID-19 represents the worst biological threat in over a hundred years and, based off this research, should show an increase in far-right populist sentiment in 2020 as compared to 2016.

Previous research has also linked far-right ideologies to economic insecurity. This association draws upon previous research linking increasing income inequality to increasing social distances, exacerbating status differences within society (Pickett and Wilkinson 2015, 323). Current literature has demonstrated a link between this kind of inequality and globalization (Heimberger 2020). One study argued the emergence of political groups like far-right populists can be linked to the structural conflict between winners and losers of globalization (Kriesi 2006, 951). Research has identified three consequences from this structural conflict: increased economic competition, heightened cultural diversity, and increased political competition between the state and international organizations (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016, 337). As a result, globalization increases income inequality by raising the real return on skilled labor and lowering the real return on unskilled labor (Heimberger 2020, 2963). These unskilled labor groups who often consist of less educated workers fear competition from immigrants (Jay et al. 2019, 421; Margalit 2019; Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016, 344; Citrin 1997, 861) who can fulfill unskilled jobs at a lower cost to the employer. For these reasons, measuring far-right populism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitates variables that also measure attitudes towards income inequality and economic insecurity.

3. Data and Methods

This study uses multiple datasets to examine the conditions affecting far-right populist sentiment. Two datasets came from the American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys from 2016 and 2020. Since 1948, scholars have used these studies for analysis on public opinion and voting behavior in U.S. presidential elections. The 2016 study uses a dual-mode design with both traditional face-to-face interviews ($n = 1,180$) and online questionnaires ($n = 3,090$) for a total sample size of 4,270 respondents. Researchers collected pre-election data from September 7 to November 7 2016 with post-election collection from November 9 to January 8, 2017 (American National Election Studies 2019)[2]. The 2020 study was a preliminary release lacking some of the cleaning, processing, data, and variables of a usual full release of the dataset. The study re-interviewed respondents from the 2016 study, drew a new cross-sectional sample, and featured post-election respondents from the General Social Survey. The study uses three modes for data collection: web, video, and telephone ($n = 8,280$). Researchers gathered pre-election data from August 18 to November 3, 2020 and then post-election collection from November 8 to January 4, 2021 (American National Election Studies 2021)[3].

Perhaps the biggest challenge in measuring an extremist ideology is that this study expects few people to identify with this thinking in casual settings and fewer in a formal survey. Quantitatively testing cultural explanations for populism is equally difficult (Margalit 2019, 165). To address the issue, this study generates a unique dependent variable from populist-related variables found in both datasets. A good composite, dependent variable is one that includes a variable measuring belief in external threats to

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[2] The 2016 U.S. Presidential election was on November 8
[3] The 2020 U.S. Presidential election was on November 3

the nation, a variable measuring belief that domestic elites are acting contrary to the wishes of the people, and, lastly, a variable measuring the degree to which an individual sees his or herself as a protector of the people from perceived threats (Bergmann 2018, 12).

This study uses three variables found in both 2016 and 2020 surveys. This study re-codes variables with a value of 1 representing answers that literature has associated with far-right populists; otherwise, the study codes unrelated answers as 0. A value of 1 represents if a respondent agreed to the statement, "America's culture is generally harmed by immigrants," otherwise the value is 0. Many studies have linked anti-immigration sentiment with populist attitude thereby validating its use in the dependent variable (Margalit 2019; Bergmann 2018; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Rudolph 2021). The second variable has a value of 1 for respondents who agreed to the statement, "What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one's principles," with the remaining responses having a value of 0. Among the multiple survey questions asking respondent's attitudes towards government corruption or governing elites, what distinguishes this variable is the assertion that compromise means forfeiting conviction. Conviction underpins many religious and political viewpoints but when taken in context of other variables, it can identify a specific subset of the population. The last variable measures how important gun access is to respondents. Those who think it is important have a value of 1, otherwise responses are 0 (American National Election Studies 2021). Because no survey question directly asked if a respondent saw his or herself as a protector of the people, this study uses a substitute measurement. Using the premise that far-right populists would associate gun access with defending one's rights, this study

considers the variable a logical stand-in. After generating the dependent variable for both datasets, 432 far-right populists in 2020 (5.23% of sample size) and 324 respondents in 2016 (8.23% of sample size). Although the number of identified populists increased by 108, the proportion decreased by 3% from 2016 to 2020. One possible explanation for the decreased percentage is that President Trump's policies towards immigration and refugee programs may have reduced anti-immigration sentiment, although further research is needed to test that hypothesis.

This study explores three approaches analyzing ANES 2020 data with all being at the individual-level of analysis. The first uses simple logistic regression comparing variables from both 2016 and 2020 datasets. The regression analysis uses a total of nine independent variables as potential predictors. Most predictors have binary values with values of 1 representing responses aligned with far-right populist sentiment. These nine covered an array of items inspired by studies associating far-right populism with factors like economic insecurity (Margalit 2019; Jay et al. 2019), nativism (Vieten 2020; Oliver and Rahn 2016), and proclivity towards violence (LaFree et al. 2016; Bergmann 2018).

The second approach also utilizes logistic regression analysis using variables unique to ANES 2020 survey, like online political activity and posting comments on the internet. One variable measures if a respondent believes the conspiracy that a laboratory manufactured COVID-19. Another variable measures whether a respondent thought COVID-19 NPI measures are too strict. Those who thought the measures are too strict have a value of 1, otherwise the value is 0.

The third approach uses logistic regression to analyze how a respondent's emotional state influences far-right populist sentiment. This approach uses 11 emotional

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variables covering fear, anger, anxiety, and happiness, among others. Research shows that anxiety may be more severe following major external events like natural disasters or terrorist attacks (Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2020, 2). This study treats the COVID-19 pandemic as analogues to a natural disaster.

A fourth approach in this study uses state-level data from two additional datasets. One utilizes Household Pulse Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau. This survey is a partnership between the Census Bureau, National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and many other federal agencies to measure how the COVID-19 pandemic affected American citizens (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Data came from 20-minute online surveys conducted across three collection periods (at the time of this writing) starting on April 23, 2020 running through March 1, 2021 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2021; U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Data tables from the survey show the percentage of respondents who reported feelings of anxiety or depression aggregated at the state-level. The second dataset uses New York Times information tracking NPI measures for each state, starting in April 2020 (The New York Times 2020). Collecting data one day a week every week from April 2020 to January 2021, this dataset coded values from zero to two. A value of two represents the most socially restrictive measures i.e., lockdown. A value of one, or "some restrictions," represents states that required mandatory mask wear and restricted at least some social gatherings like sporting events and indoor dining. Zero represents states that did not mandate masks or opened enough social activities like nightclubs, bars, church services, and indoor dining, all activities that help to reduce social isolation. Both

datasets included the District of Columbia and, as such, information for 51 states over a span of 41 weeks yields 2,091 observations.

Figure 1. National Average, Self-Reported Symptoms of Anxiety or Depression
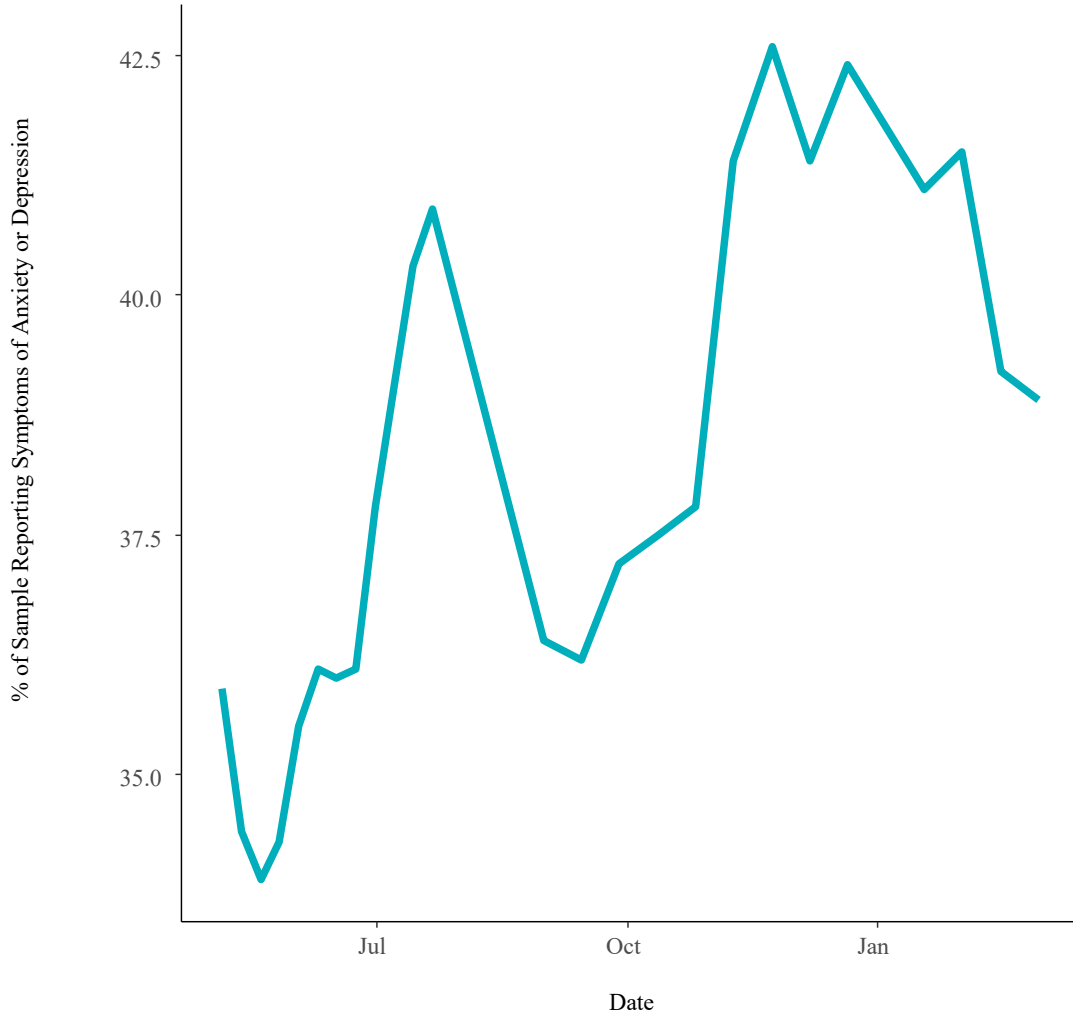
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey 2020-2021
Note: Survey data started April 23, 2020 and extends to March 1, 2021.

This study combines both datasets before using logistic regression analysis to measure the relationship NPI measures have on feelings of anxiety and depression at the state-level. The theory underpinning this analysis is that feelings of anxiety and depression from strict COVID-19 prevention measures could coincide with the emotional states affecting far-right populist sentiment. Figure 1 depicts the national-level

percentage of respondents reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression disorder from April 2020 to March 2021. The first spike in Figure 1 occurred in July 2020 during nationwide protests regarding racial equality and police accountability. The highest value of 42.6% occurred between 11 and 23 November following the U.S. presidential election. Feelings of anxiety and depression remained high through January following the capitol attack before falling in March 2021 when COVID-19 vaccines started reaching larger sections of the U.S. population.

4. <u>Results and Discussion</u>

4.1 Individual-level analysis using ANES survey data: 2016 vs. 2020

The first statistical analysis examines the difference between 2016 and 2020 ANES datasets to assess how COVID-19 affected far-right populist sentiment. Figure 2 compares the same variables from both datasets save the addition of the COVID-19 variable. The variable COVID-19, coded 1 to indicate feelings that prevention measures are too strict, does not have a significant relationship predicting far-right populism when included with other independent variables. Alternatively, in a bivariate logit model depicted in green in Figure 2, feelings that COVID-19 NPI measures are too strict have a significant relationship predicting far-right populism. The next variable, which measures ANES survey respondents who thought the country is on the wrong track, have opposite values from 2016 to 2020. This is the only variable to have opposing values between both datasets. In the 2016 model, feelings that the country is going in the wrong direction have a significant relationship predicting far-right populist sentiment, but then flips in the 2020 model. Party identification likely plays a large role in this discrepancy. Far-right populists likely opposed many policies implemented by President Barrack Obama, a

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Democrat, leading up to the 2016 presidential election. Conversely, this same

demographic likely supported the policies of President Donald Trump leading up to the

2020 election.

Figure 2. Comparison Between 2016 and 2020 Datasets at 95% Confidence Interval
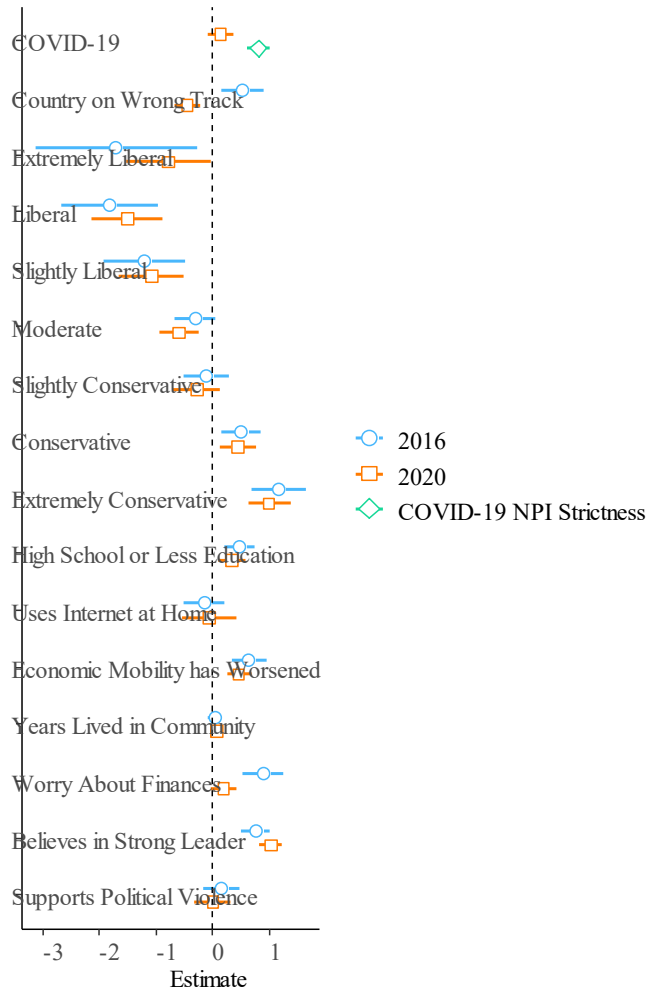
Note: The color lines represent each variable's 95% confidence level. The shape (circle, square, or diamond) represents the median value. Variables whose lines do not cross the vertical dashed line have a significant relationship predicting far-right populist sentiment. Variables whose entire confidence levels fall to the right of the dashed line have a positive relationship and to the left are negative. See Table 1 in Appendix A for Figure 2 regression table.

The next seven variables measure survey respondents self-reported political

philosophies. In both models, respondents who report being extremely liberal, liberal, or

slightly liberal all have significant relationships rejecting far-right populist sentiment.

Being extremely liberal in 2020 is a weaker predictor of far-right populism than in 2016. Far-left populists during the pandemic might have accounted for the difference between models; however, scholars should further analyze this to make a more confident assessment. From 2016 to 2020, self-reported moderates went from having no significant relationship with far-right populist sentiment to strongly opposing it. Individuals who identified as only being slightly conservative have no significant relationship in predicting the dependent variable. Self-reporting as either conservative or extremely conservative both have a significant relationship with the dependent variable. One should expect such a relationship, but it also serves a dual purpose of validating how well the dependent variable represents the target demographic.

Several variables measure different attributes research associates with far-right populism. In both models, respondents who report having a high school education or less have a significant relationship predicting the dependent variable. This result aligns with Spruyt, Keppens, and Droogenbroeck's (2016) study where they also measured a strong relationship between the less educated and populism. This study finds no relationship between using the internet in general and the dependent variable; however, the next analysis shows that specific online activity does have a relationship. Feelings that economic mobility has worsened over the last 20 years has a strong relationship predicting the dependent variable for both 2016 and 2020 models. This study applies the economic mobility variable as an indirect measure of economic insecurity and inequality. The results here support the conclusion made in previous research (Jay et al. 2019), which asserts a relationship between economic inequality and far-right populism. Conversely, and despite the pandemic, worry about finances have no significant

relationship in the 2020 model as compared to the 2016 model. This study does not determine a clear explanation for the difference, although it is possible stimulus checks helped alleviate some concern about family finances. Such an assertion requires more analysis, however.

The final variables in this analysis also focus on the attributes research associates with populism. Nativism in this study is a measure of the number of years a respondent has lived in his or her community rooted in the idea that the longer an individual lives in an area, the greater the chance of holding negative views towards immigrants or other out groups. The absence of a relationship here contradicts the most prevalent literature on the topic (Mudde 2010; Oliver and Rahn 2016) thereby necessitating continued research into this relationship. It could also mean that the variable used in this study was not an accurate measure of nativism. Respondents' attitudes towards strong leadership measures authoritarianism. This study finds a strong relationship for both 2016 and 2020 models. Alternatively, it is unlikely many people would advocate having a weak leader in the White House but, in context of other independent variables, it contributes to the understanding of far-right populists. The last variable measures the relationship between far-right populism and justification for using political violence. Previous studies linked a proclivity towards violence with far-right ideologies (LaFree et al. 2016; Butt and Byman 2020; Vieten 2020). Here, such a relationship is absent. With the ANES survey occurring around the time as nationwide protests where right-wing media sensationalized riots and vandalism, far-right populists were likely reluctant to admit supporting political violence.

4.2 Individual-level analysis using ANES survey data unique to 2020

Figure 3 shows the second statistical analysis using variables unique to the ANES 2020 dataset. Model 1 uses the same bivariate logistic regression as the COVID-19 NPI model from Figure 2 with similar results. Attitudes that COVID-19 NPI measures are too strict only have a significant relationship with far-right populist sentiment when measured in isolation, disappearing with additional independent variables. One of the strongest relationships with the dependent variable in this analysis is the perception that protests during 2020 were mostly violent as opposed to mostly peaceful or evenly split. Ambiguity in the question allows the respondent to recall the most salient protests rather than making the individual consider all protests over the year. With this ambiguity, riots in major cities and peaceful protests that turned violent were likely easier to recall than peaceful ones. Right-wing media also reported on violence surrounding the protests, meaning that more salient events likely had a greater impression on the respondent's memory.

The last few variables in this analysis include online activity and conspiratorial thinking, both of which research associates with populism (Vieten 2020; Krämer 2017). Online political activity has a strong relationship predicting the dependent variable. Positive values for this independent variable include respondents who affirmed to participating in online political activity like meetings, rallies, and similar events in support of a particular candidate. Conversely, posting comments online about a political issue within the last 12 months does not have a significant relationship with far-right populism. Again, the nature of the survey could have precluded respondents from admitting to this specific behavior, if assuming the respondent saw such an admission

with negative connotation. Additionally, it could indicate that far-right populists use the internet in a passive way whereby it is used as a tool to retrieve information rather than a mechanism to engage in political discourse. Under this premise, detecting far-right populists online becomes more difficult if the majority refrain from posting political comments. As such, the observable far-right content online might only reflect the vocal minority, challenging efforts to discern the actual number of populists from other statistical means like content analysis.

Figure 3. ANES Data Unique to 2020 at 95% Confidence Interval
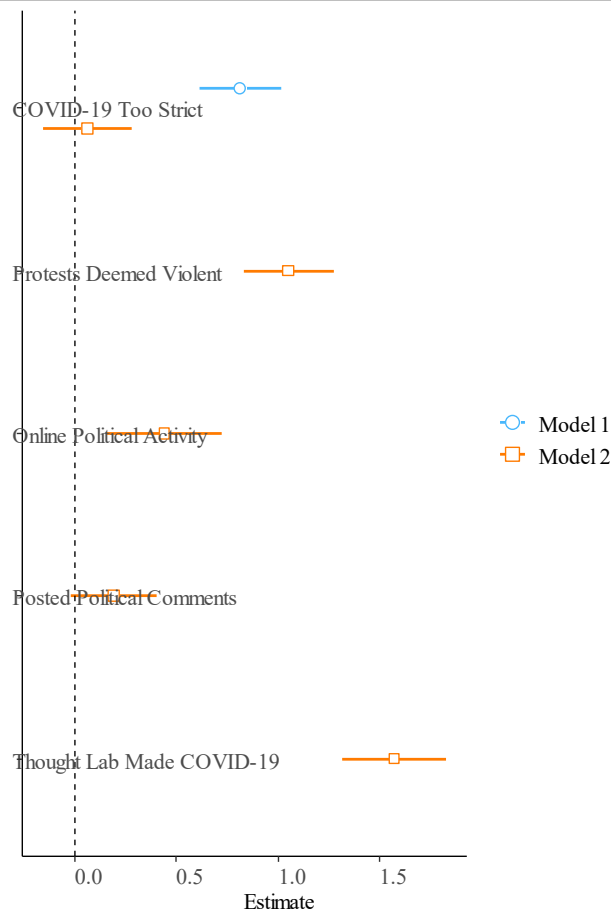
Source: 2020 American National Election Study Time-Series Data
Note: The color lines represent each variable's 95% confidence level. The shape (either circle or square) represents the median value. Variables whose lines do not cross the vertical dashed line have a significant relationship predicting far-right populist sentiment. Variables whose entire confidence levels fall to the right of the dashed line have a positive relationship and to the left are negative. See Table 2 in Appendix A for Figure 3 regression table.

The last variable in Figure 3 measures conspiratorial thinking. Beliefs that a laboratory manufactured COVID-19 have the strongest relationship with far-right populist sentiment out of all the independent variables in Figure 3. This revelation ties closely to previous works that make similar claims (Bergmann 2018; Eberl, Huber, and Greussing 2020; Oliver and Rahn 2016, 198; Oliver and Wood 2014; Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2020). In conjunction with the results from the first analysis, this study supports the findings of Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan (2020) who also determined that COVID-19 conspiracy theories were positively related to individuals who also held broader conspiratorial beliefs, had less education, and had more negative attitudes towards government responses to the global pandemic.

4.3 Individual-level analysis using emotional state variables

Figure 4 depicts the third statistical analysis that investigates how self-reported emotional states relate to far-right populist sentiment. Of the 11 independent variables, only two have significant relationships with the dependent variable: feelings of hopelessness and pride. The ANES survey asked these emotional state questions before the 2020 election. The first independent variable in Figure 4 measures how hopeful survey respondents felt about the country's current situation. The strong, negative relationship suggests that feelings of hopelessness have a significant relationship with far-right populists. Hope is associated with potential, possibility, and the future (Cavanaugh et al. 2011, 39), whereas, hopelessness sees the future as bleak or uncertain. Figure 2 suggests that far-right populists thought the country was on the right track in 2020, however, seemingly contradicting the results in Figure 4. It is important to note that the survey question in Figure 2 asked about the current state of the county instead of

the future state. The delineation is important when understanding populist hope and

attitude towards the future. Although this study is unable to find any corroborating

research on the relationship between hope and populism, other studies have linked

feelings of stress, anxiety, and economic insecurity to conspiratorial thinking.

Furthermore, this study also demonstrates that beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracies have a

significant relationship with far-right populism (Grzesiak-Feldman 2013; Oliver and

Rahn 2016; Jay et al. 2019; Bergmann 2018).

Figure 4. ANES 2020 Emotional Variables at 95% Confidence Interval
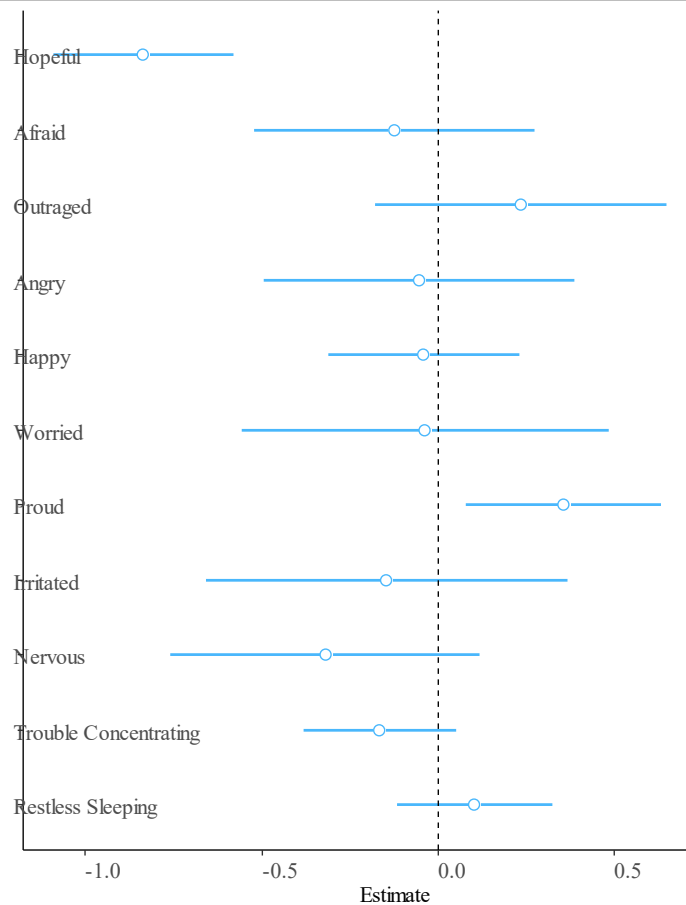
Source: 2020 American National Election Study Time-Series Data
Note: The color lines represent each variable's 95% confidence level. The shape represents the median value. Variables whose lines do not cross the vertical dashed line have a significant relationship predicting far-right populist sentiment. Variables whose entire confidence levels fall to the right of the dashed line have a positive relationship and to the left are negative. See Table 3 in Appendix A for Figure 4 regression table.

How proud respondents feel about the current state of the country also has a significant relationship with far-right populism. Feeling proud is often associated with concepts like achievement, fulfillment, and the past (Cavanaugh et al. 2011, 39). Therefore, this analysis finds that far right populists likely hold negative or uncertain views about the future while holding a favorable view of the past and a sense of achievement. In this context, President Trump's 2016 campaign slogan of "Make America Great Again" likely resonated with far-right populists because it exploited their feelings of patriotism and nationalism.

4.4 State-level analysis of COVID-19 NPI on anxiety and depression

The fourth statistical analysis is at an aggregate level measuring the effect state NPI measures have on resident's self-reported levels of anxiety or depression. Figure 5 depicts the box and whisker plots for each NPI going from "No Restrictions" to "Lockdown." The median value for all three NPI measures is around 37%.

Further analysis suggests a relationship between "Some Restrictions" and the percentage of the population self-reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression disorder. In a generalized linear model, states with NPI measures that mandated mask wear but also opened other social activities like dining outdoors have a significant relationship with decreasing feelings of anxiety or depression at the 95% Confidence Level. States that loosen COVID-19 lockdown measures by opening some social activities while still requiring masks, decrease feelings of anxiety and depression created during the pandemic. A Pearson's Chi-squared test also suggests the relationship is significant ($x^2 =$ 653.9, $df = 440$, $p\text{-}value = 1.54e^{-10}$). To be clear, this analysis suggests a relationship does exist between state government responses to COVID-19 and the mental health of

citizens; however, this analysis does not include any other independent variables and therefore should be considered with caution. Further analysis at the state-level could investigate this relationship further and better inform government officials when making decisions during public health and safety crises.

Figure 5. Non-Pharm Intervention on Anxiety and Depression
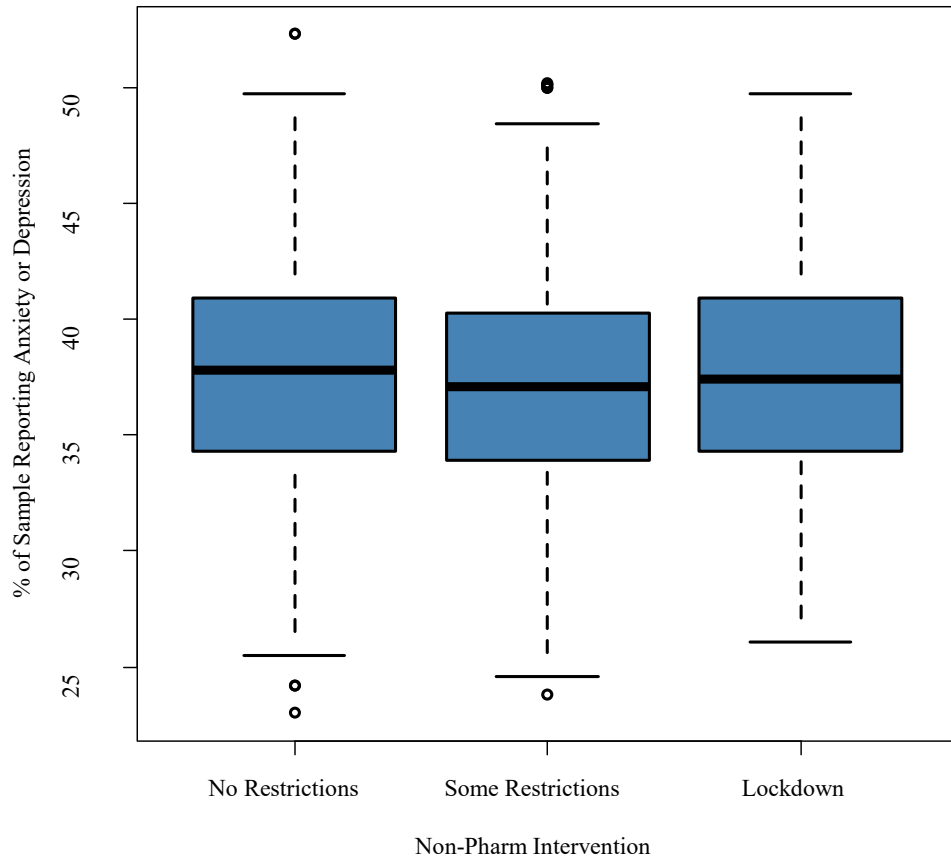
5. <u>Conclusion</u>

This study addresses how the COVID-19 pandemic affects far-right populist sentiment among American citizens. With the understanding that few people will self-identify as a populist due to its assumed negative connotation, this study generates a

composite, dependent variable encompassing attributes the current literature associates with far-right populism. This research then takes four different approaches to analyze many predicting conditions like beliefs about COVID-19, feelings towards state government responses to the virus, and other factors associated with the composite, dependent variable.

A comparison between 2016 and 2020 identifies several factors associated far-right populist sentiment. The perception that the country was going on the wrong track in 2016 had a strong positive relationship whereas the opposite is true in 2020. An omitted variable from this analysis, chiefly the party leading the executive branch of government, likely contributes to the results polarity. Additionally, other variables like lower education, concerns that economic mobility has worsened over the last two decades and beliefs in a strong leader in the White House are all strongly associated with far-right populist sentiment.

Using survey questions exclusive to 2020, logit regression indicates other variables strongly associated with the composite, dependent variable. Attitudes that COVID-19 government responses are too strict are only associated with the dependent variable when no other independent variables are included in the regression. With their addition, participation in online political activity and attitudes that social protests through the summer of 2020 were mostly violent rather than peaceful also have a strong association with the dependent variable. The strongest of these is conspiratorial beliefs that a laboratory manufactured COVID-19. Here, this study contributes to the growing literature linking conspiracy theories to the far-right (Georgiou, Delfabbro, and Balzan 2020; Oliver and Wood 2014; Eberl, Huber, and Greussing 2020; Bergmann 2018).

An analysis of individuals' emotional states suggest that hopelessness and pride are strongly, albeit inversely, associated with far-right populism. This study makes a novel assertion that hopelessness is strongly associated with predicting far-right populism. Hopelessness is associated with feelings of the future suggesting that populists hold negative views of what the future holds for them. Alternatively, pride is associated with the past, including feelings of accomplishment, and is strongly associated with predicting far-right populism. The dichotomy of these emotional feelings correspond to conservative apprehension towards social progress and admiration for past accomplishments.

Lastly, a state-level analysis compares government responses to COVID-19 and residents' self-reported feelings of anxiety and depression. Initial results suggest that loosening lockdown measures, opening some social activities while still enforcing mask mandates improved the mental health of citizens. Unfortunately, there is low confidence in this assessment due to a lack of other independent variables thereby necessitating further analysis to draw a stronger conclusion.

In summation, many factors influence far-right populism in the U.S. Although the relationship between feelings of anxiety and depression with state NPI measures remains inconclusive, the Household Pulse Survey suggests that the pandemic affected the mental state of American citizens. Those who felt hopeless as a result had a stronger proclivity towards far-right populism. In this sense, one might ascertain that hope in the face of adversity and threat can help fight extreme sentiment.

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Curriculum Vitae

    In 2013, Jeremiah commissioned from the United States Air Force Academy with a Bachelor of Science in Military History. The following spring, he completed his intelligence officer qualification course at Goodfellow Air Force Base, San Angelo, Texas. Jeremiah has deployed twice to the Middle East with assignments in California, New Mexico, and, Texas. In 2021, Jeremiah graduated from Johns Hopkins University Krieger School of Arts and Sciences Advanced Academics Program with a Master of Science in Government Analytics and a graduate certificate in Intelligence.

Table 1. Comparison Between 2016 and 2020

	2016	2020
COVID-19		0.15
		(0.11)
Country on Wrong Track	0.53 **	-0.45 ***
	(0.19)	(0.11)
Extremely Liberal	-1.70 *	-0.77 *
	(0.73)	(0.38)
Liberal	-1.82 ***	-1.50 ***
	(0.43)	(0.32)
Slightly Liberal	-1.20 **	-1.08 ***
	(0.36)	(0.29)
Moderate	-0.30	-0.59 **
	(0.19)	(0.18)
Slightly Conservative	-0.11	-0.28
	(0.21)	(0.21)
Conservative	0.51 **	0.45 **
	(0.18)	(0.16)
Extremely Conservative	1.17 ***	1.00 ***
	(0.24)	(0.19)
High School or Less Education	0.48 ***	0.35 **
	(0.13)	(0.12)
Uses Internet at Home	-0.14	-0.05
	(0.18)	(0.25)
Economic Mobility has Worsened	0.65 ***	0.47 ***
	(0.15)	(0.11)
Years Lived in Community	0.04	0.07
	(0.06)	(0.05)
Worry About Finances	0.90 ***	0.19
	(0.18)	(0.11)
Believes in Strong Leader	0.76 ***	1.03 ***
	(0.12)	(0.11)
Supports Political Violence	0.16	0.01
	(0.17)	(0.16)
N	3937	8280
AIC	1973.64	2996.45
BIC	2074.09	3115.82
Pseudo-R^2	0.17	0.15

Note: All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. Standard errors in parentheses. AIC is the Akaike's Information Criterion and BIC is Bayesian Information Criterion where lower numbers are preferred. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2. Variables Unique to ANES 2020 Dataset

	Model 1	Model 2
COVID-19 Too Strict	0.81 ***	0.06
	(0.10)	(0.11)
Protests Deemed Violent		1.05 ***
		(0.11)
Online Political Activity		0.44 **
		(0.15)
Posted Political Activity		0.19
		(0.11)
Thought COVID Made in a Lab		1.57 ***
		(0.13)
N	8280	8280
AIC	3338.90	2977.56
BIC	3352.95	3019.69
Pseudo R2	0.02	0.15

Note: All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. Standard errors in parentheses. AIC is the Akaike's Information Criterion and BIC is Bayesian Information Criterion where lower numbers are preferred. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 3. Emotional State Variables

	Model 1
Hopeful	-0.84 ***
	(0.13)
Afraid	-0.12
	(0.20)
Outraged	0.23
	(0.21)
Angry	-0.05
	(0.22)
Happy	-0.04
	(0.14)
Worried	-0.04
	(0.27)
Proud	0.35 *
	(0.14)
Irritated	-0.15
	(0.26)
Nervous	-0.32
	(0.22)
Trouble Concentrating	-0.17
	(0.11)
Restless Sleeping	0.10
	(0.11)
N	8280
AIC	3300.93
BIC	3385.19
Pseudo R2	0.04

Note: All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. NPI Affect on Anxiety and Depression

	Model 1
(Intercept)	37.55 ***
	(0.17)
Some Restrictions	-0.51 *
	(0.26)
Lockdown	0.11
	(0.33)
N	1683
AIC	10049.76
BIC	10071.48
Pseudo R2	0.00

Note: All continuous predictors are mean-centered and scaled by 1 standard deviation.
*** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.