

# Loyal Opposition in an Anti-Establishment Age

## Congress Criticizes Institutions More, but Delegitimizes Them Less

António Câmara  
Harvard University

### Contributions

- **What:** Congress criticizes institutions more than ever, but delegitimization is rare and falling
- **Why:** Alleged shocks explain little of gradual, aggregate change; district-level mobile internet effects are null (Guriev et al. 2021)
- **Who:** opposition is near-universal, but more frequent and extreme from those far from power (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016)

### Argument

- Institutions substitute politics for violence by channeling conflict through rules (North 1991; Przeworski 2019; Weingast 1998)
- Politicians face incentives to attack institutions constraining them (Mayhew 2004; Feno 1977; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016)
- Contemporary attacks on institutions: rising threat to legitimacy or recurring style of politics (Lee 2020; Clayton et al. 2021)
- **Has opposition to institutions grown in Congress, how much of it delegitimizes rather than merely criticizes?**
- Criticism: position-taking amid anti-establishment sentiment; path dependence, retaliation fear limit politicians from delegitimizing institutions they may soon control (Uscinski et al. 2021; Pierson 2000)
- **Loyal opposition:** Even anti-establishment legislators tend to prefer institutional stability to radical change in the long run (Hirschman 2004; Easton 1975)

### Data and Methods

- 15.2M Congressional floor speeches, 1873–2026 (Rabbani and Kaufman 2026)
- **Annotation:** locally run open-weight `gpt-oss-120b` codes each institution reference by domain (state, political, market, epistemic), type (organization, sector, rule), stance, opposition mode
- **Quantities of Interest:**  $G$  is group in period  $t$ ;  $T_{Gt}(A)$  is the true category- $A$  reference count,  $W_{Gt}$  is words in  $G$ 's speeches in  $t$

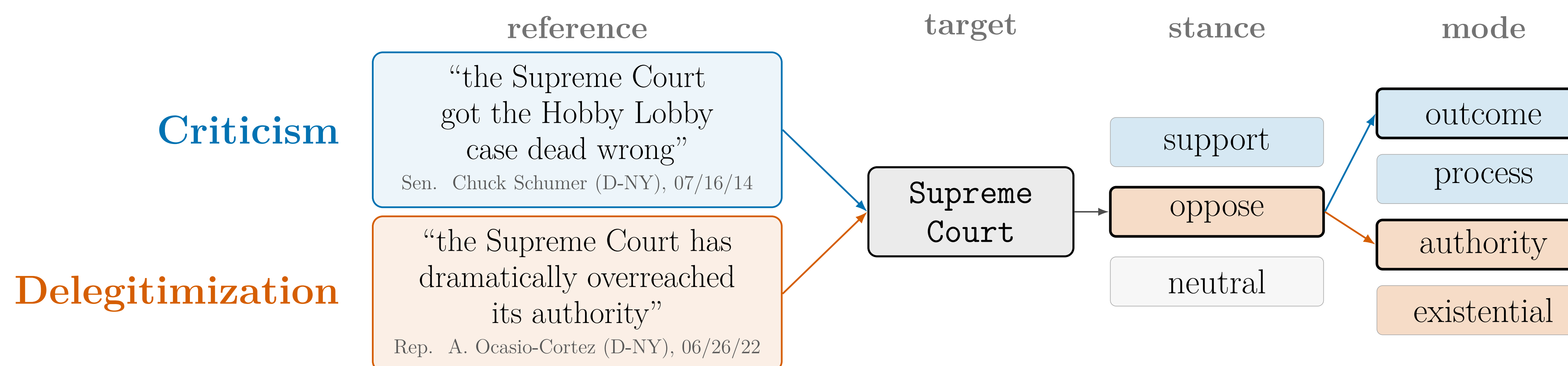
$$\rho_{Gt}(A) = \frac{T_{Gt}(A)}{W_{Gt}} \quad \pi_{Gt}(A | B) = \frac{T_{Gt}(A)}{T_{Gt}(B)}$$

### Measurement ladder

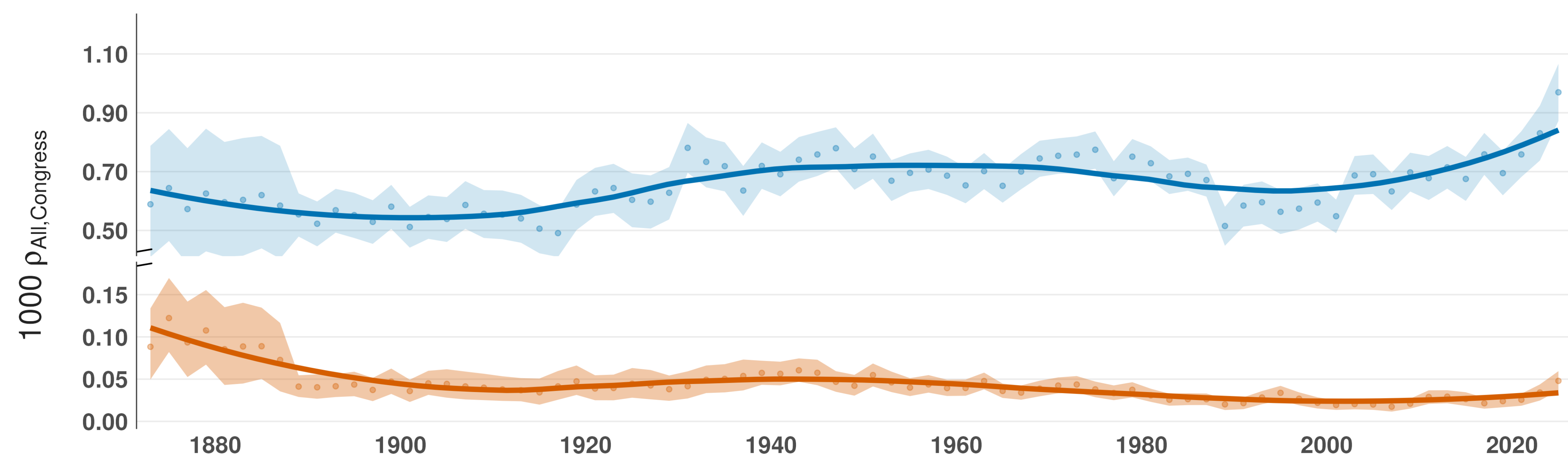
A	B
Mentions	N/A
Evaluations (support + opposition)	Mentions
Support	Evaluations
Opposition	Evaluations
Criticism (outcome + process)	Opposition
Delegitimization (authority + existential)	Opposition

- **Validation:** frontier LLM jury codes 5K sample stratified by period  $\times$  category  $s$ , oversampling rare categories & non-references
- **Estimation:** let  $y_i(A)$  count category- $A$  references in speech  $i$ ;  $S_C$  ( $V_C$ ) is (validation) speeches in cell  $C$ . Apply stratified residual correction to  $y_i^{\text{local}}(A)$ , propagate uncertainty to rates, shares:
 
$$\hat{T}_{Gt}(A) = \sum_{i \in S_{Gt}} y_i^{\text{local}}(A) + \sum_s \frac{|S_{Gts}|}{|V_s|} \sum_{i \in V_s} (y_i^{\text{frontier}}(A) - y_i^{\text{local}}(A))$$
- **Face validity:** detrended rates track expected benchmarks:
  - state mentions/evals/oppositions  $\leftrightarrow$  federal outlays (% of GDP)
  - market mentions/evals/oppositions  $\leftrightarrow$  recession months (% of Congress)
  - political & epistemic evals/oppositions/delegitimizations  $\leftrightarrow$  party polarization

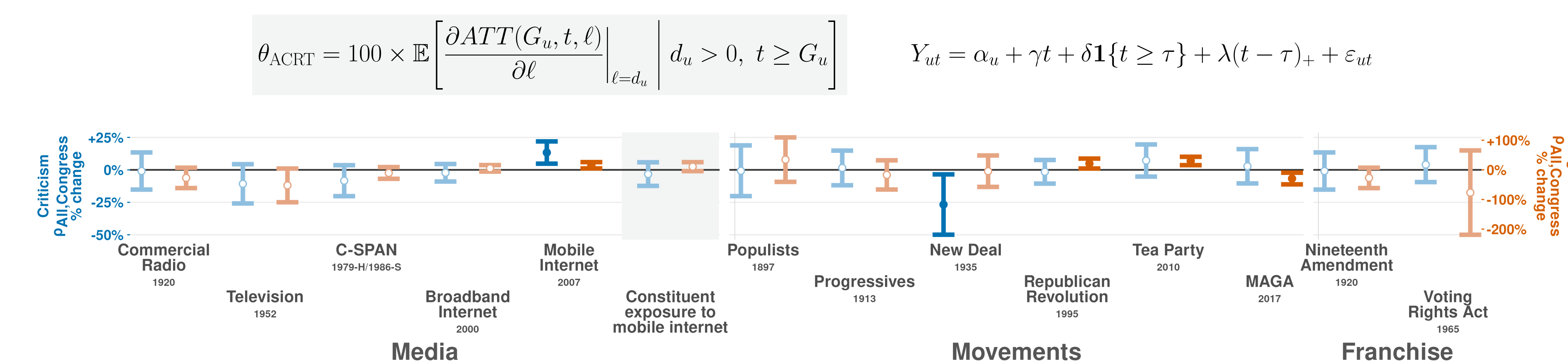
### How: Classifying Institutional Rhetoric



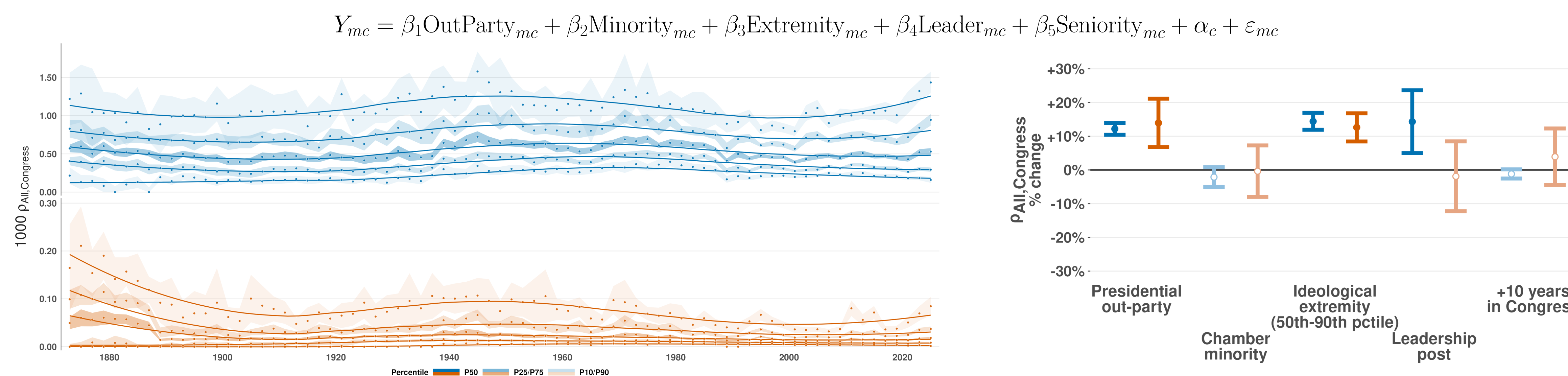
### What: Criticism Rises, Delegitimization Rare and Falling



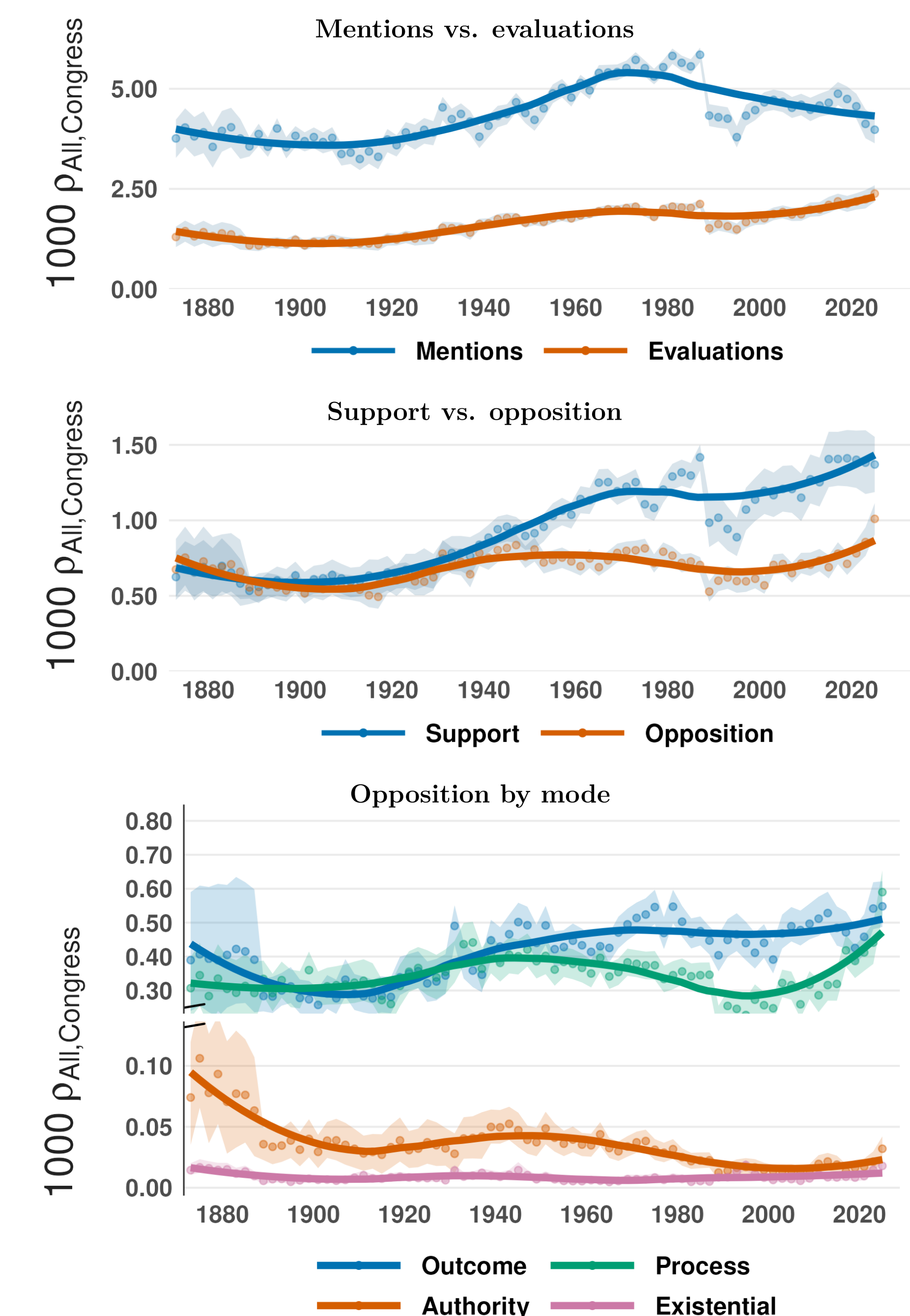
### Why: Alleged Shocks Do Not Explain the Gradual Change



### Who: Everyone Opposes, but Most Frequent and Extreme from Those Far from Power



### Evaluations Rise but Mentions Flat, Support Now Outpaces Opposition



### Most Opposed Institutions by Domain

		State				2020s		
Entity	N opp	Opp %	Entity	N opp	Opp %	Entity	N opp	Opp %
State Dept.	1,569	75.5	Supreme Court	1,554	75.5			
Supreme Court	1,387	73.9	FBI	738	76.2			
courts	1,099	69.4	IRS	727	81.3			
Dept. of Defense	968	64.8	courts	632	68.9			
Dept. of Agriculture	567	56.2	ICE	616	79.9			

		Political				2020s		
Entity	N opp	Opp %	Entity	N opp	Opp %	Entity	N opp	Opp %
Congress	3,713	64.2	Congress	5,964	34.6			
Senate	3,162	62.9	Biden administration	4,853	98.1			
House	1,832	58.1	Senate	4,143	46.5			
Cmte. on Appropriations	561	66.8	President	2,157	70.7			
Democratic Party	437	70.0	White House	2,001	81.3			

		Market				2020s		
Entity	N opp	Opp %	Entity	N opp	Opp %	Entity	N opp	Opp %
banks	667	74.2	Federal Reserve	300	74.3			
railroads	275	63.8	Big Tech	259	98.1			
Federal Reserve System	250	75.5	Wall Street	251	96.9			
Wall Street	247	97.2	Big Oil	245	99.2			
Federal Reserve	242	82.0	insurance companies	211	97.7			

		Epistemic				2020s		
Entity	N opp	Opp %	Entity	N opp	Opp %	Entity	N opp	Opp %
newspapers	189	76.5	media	670	89.1			
press	169	61.7	CDC	220	59.3			
media	21	84.0	universities	199	54.5			
magazines	20	66.7	press	149	67.7			
Washington Post	19	63.3	mainstream media	121	100.0			