Collective Narcissism and the 2016 United States Presidential Vote

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Abstract:

Explaining support for Donald Trump's presidential candidacy has become a key social-science challenge. An emerging literature highlights several important individual-level precursors of Trump support, including racial attitudes, sexism, and authoritarianism. In this report, we provide evidence for the role of a novel psychological factor: *collective narcissism*, an inflated, unrealistic view of the national ingroup's greatness contingent on external recognition. Using data from a recent national survey, we demonstrate that collective narcissism is a powerful predictor of 2016 presidential votes and evaluations of Trump, even after controlling for other variables known to predict candidate preferences in general and Trump support in particular.

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Donald Trump's candidacy and election defied the expectations of social scientists, leading to a scramble for explanations (Sides and Farrell 2016). Some are structural: a toxic combination of "weak parties and strong partisanship" makes it harder for elites to stop Trump-like insurgents while guaranteeing that they receive support once nominated (Azari 2016). Others—which we focus on here—deal with individual-level factors that attracted voters to Trump's candidacy. Explanations of this sort center on economic dissatisfaction, authoritarianism, sexism, and racial resentment (Gest 2016; MacWilliams 2016; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2017; Tesler 2016; Wayne, Valentino and Oceno 2016).

In the present study, we examine a factor that has not received much attention but provides a powerful explanation of the psychology behind mass support for Trump's candidacy: *collective narcissism*, an individual-difference variable reflecting an exaggerated belief in an in-group's greatness that requires constant external validation (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, and Jayawickreme 2009; Golec de Zavala 2017). The Trump campaign emphasized an alleged loss of national greatness and called for its restoration. Since collective narcissism provides a unique motivation to support leaders who promise to restore national greatness, we argue that it should predict electoral support for Donald Trump net of other variables known to predict vote choice in general and Trump support in particular. Data from a recent national survey provide strong support for these predictions.

Collective Narcissism

Collective narcissism (CN) is analogous to classical self-referential narcissism in that it involves emotional dependence on admiration by others (Morf and Rodhewalt 2001). Individuals high in CN seek admiration for their groups rather than themselves directly. They invest in exaggerated in-group greatness to compensate for self-weakness (e.g., low personal control, as

measured or manipulated; Cichocka et al. 2017; Golec de Zavala et al. 2009, 2017). While self-referential narcissists abandon groups that fail to boost their self-image (Bizumic and Duckitt 2008), collective narcissists aggressively seek to bolster the in-group's reputation. Collective narcissists constantly monitor their environment for validation and are hypersensitive to threats to the in-group's image (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka and Iskra-Golec 2013a; Golec de Zavala, Pekker, Guerra and Baran 2016). Moreover, experimental studies indicate that those high in CN respond with retaliatory aggression and rejoice in the out-group misfortune when the in-group is criticized or insufficiently recognized (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009, 2013a, 2016).

People can be collectively narcissistic about various groups, including national, ethnic, and even mundane student or worker groups (Galvin, et al. 2015; Golec de Zavala et al. 2013a, Golec de Zavala, Cichocka & Bilewicz 2013b). In the present study, we focus on CN with respect to national identity. National CN has been differentiated from other forms of national affinity. National CN predicts hypersensitivity to intergroup threat and retaliatory hostility even after controlling for centrality of national identity to the self and how positively the national group is evaluated (Cameron 2004; Leach et al. 2008), blind patriotism (uncritical admiration of a nation; Schatz, Staub and Lavine 1999), and nationalism (belief in national supremacy; Kosterman and Feshbach 1999). After their links with CN are controlled, other variables pertaining to national attitudes cease to explain out-group rejection in the context of intergroup threat (Golec de Zavala et al. 2013b, 2016), and experimental studies show that national CN uniquely predicts hostile retaliation to in-group criticism (Golec de Zavala et al. 2013a). Moreover, once national CN is accounted for, positive evaluations of the national ingroup do not predict hostility toward outgroups or hypersensitivity to intergroup threats (Golec de Zavala et al. 2016).

CN is also distinct from other predictors of intergroup and political attitudes, including right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. CN uniquely predicts intergroup hostility even after these variables are controlled for (Golec de Zavala, Guerra and Símão 2017). These variables predict outgroup hostility for different reasons. Those high in CN show bias when other groups undermine their ingroup's image. In contrast, authoritarians reject outgroups that threaten valued traditions, whereas those high in social dominance orientation are hostile towards outgroups with whom they compete for status (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009).

Collective Narcissism and the Trump Candidacy

With this background in mind, the relevance of collective narcissism to the 2016 election is clear. Donald Trump's campaign dwelled extensively on concerns expressed by collective narcissists. Consider Trump's revival of classic slogans like "America First" and "Make America Great Again." They suggest that America's greatness has been threatened and needs to be restored. Those high in national CN are likely to be mobilized by calls to restore the in-group's greatness because they fear that others do not recognize it—and because they may doubt its greatness themselves (Golec de Zavala, et al. 2009). Collective narcissists are also likely to have been attracted to Donald Trump's promises of aggressive action against targeted out-groups (e.g., Muslims), given that CN predicts hostility towards minorities (Golec de Zavala et al. 2013b).

Results from other national contexts confirm that collective narcissists support political initiatives ostensibly aimed at countering threats from disliked out-groups. This has been evident in the context of the recent global resurgence of nationalist populism. For example, Britons high in national CN were more likely to vote in favor of leaving the European Union, a relationship that was mediated by perceptions of threat from foreign immigration (Golec de Zavala et al.

2017). These findings suggest that CN may also predict support for Donald Trump's candidacy. Nevertheless, research has not examined the role of CN in support for Trump or nationalist/populist political figures more generally. Thus, the present study represents an opportunity to look beyond CN as a predictor of intergroup attitudes and explore its relevance to candidate preferences.

Hypotheses

We have two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: National collective narcissism should predict respondents' votes in the 2016 election, with those high in CN being more likely to prefer Trump.

Hypothesis 2: National collective narcissism should predict respondents' evaluations of Trump, with those high in CN evaluating Trump more positively and attributing more positive traits to Trump.

We examine these hypotheses using a large national survey conducted over the course of the 2016 presidential campaign, controlling for several other explanations for Trump support.

Data and Methods

Our data came from a national four-wave internet panel study fielded by the University of Minnesota's Center for the Study of Political Psychology. The data were collected through Survey Sampling International. We use data from Waves 1 (July 2016), 3 (October 2016), and 4 (November 2016, post-election) of the survey, N=1,730. The sample is representative when weighted. Details about the sample and measures can be found in the online appendix. Correlations between all variables but the demographics are shown in Table 1.

Dependent Variables

We examined three dependent variables. Self-reported *vote choice* was assessed in Wave 4. Respondents who voted for Trump were given a score of 1; all others who cast a presidential vote were given a score of 0. We also obtained two evaluations of Donald Trump in Wave 3. A *Trump thermometer rating* was assessed using a standard 101-point scale. A composite *Trump trait evaluation* was constructed from responses to five items asking respondents how "competent," "honest," "reckless," "insincere," and "warm" Donald Trump was. After reversing responses to "reckless" and "insincere," all items were averaged (α=0.90). Both variables were recoded to run from 0-1; higher scores indicate more positive evaluations (*M*=0.41, *SD*=0.38, for the thermometer; *M*=0.38, *SD*=0.32, for the traits). The final *N* for the analyses using these variables was smaller due to reduced overlap between the subsets of respondents who completed Waves 1, 3, and 4 (*N*=862).

Independent Variables

Collective narcissism. CN was measured in Wave 4 using a five-item version of the Collective Narcissism Scale (Golec de Zavala et al. 2009, 2013b). The items were: "If the United States had a major say in the world, the world would be a much better place," "The United States deserves special treatment," "It really makes me angry when others criticize the United States," "Not many people seem to fully understand the importance of the United States," and "I will never be satisfied until the United States gets the recognition it deserves." All items used a seven-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Responses were rescaled to run 0-1 and averaged; higher scores indicate greater CN (α=0.83, *M*=0.56, *SD*=0.20). In the online appendix, we provide additional information regarding CN's properties.

Controls. We include several controls, measured in Wave 1 and rescaled to run from 0 to 1. First, several demographics were included: *age* (in its original metric), *income* (rescaled from

0 to 1), *gender* (0=female, 1=male), *education* (seven ordered categories), and *race* (0=nonwhite, 1=white). Second, following other research on CN (Golec de Zavala 2017), a control for basic in-group attachment was included: *American identification*. This was assessed using one item: "I generally consider myself to be (1) like most other Americans or (0) different than most other Americans." We also controlled for two political predispositions: seven-point measures of *ideology* (M=0.53, SD=0.28) and *partisanship* (M=0.46, SD=0.38). Higher scores indicated greater conservatism and GOP identification. The remaining predictors were variables identified as predictors of support for Trump and other populist figures: Kinder and Sanders' (1996) *racial resentment* scale (Tesler 2016; α=0.84, M=0.58, SD=0.27), a version of Glick and Fiske's (1996) *hostile sexism* scale (Schaffner et al. 2017; α=0.85, M=0.41, SD=0.25), Stenner's (2005) *authoritarianism* scale (MacWilliams 2016; α=0.60, M=0.55, SD=0.32), one *economic dissatisfaction* item focused on personal finances over the previous four years (Schaffner et al. 2017; M=0.51, SD=0.23), and a measure of *trust* in institutions, leaders, and other people (α=0.75, M=0.45, SD=0.16). Higher scores indicate greater levels of each construct.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Results

Collective Narcissism Among Different Voter Groups

We first compared the average CN scores of individuals who voted for Trump (n=668) with those who voted for other candidates (n=869) and those who abstained (n=171). Survey weights were used. Consistent with expectations, Trump voters scored higher in CN (M=0.64) than those who voted for other candidates (M=0.52), $t(1707)=6.34$, $p<0.001$; and those who abstained (M=0.51), $t(1707)=4.75$ $p<0.001$. Those who voted for candidates other than Trump and abstainers did not differ in CN, $t(1707)=0.39$, $p>0.250$.

Collective Narcissism and the 2016 Presidential Vote

We examined Hypothesis 1 using a binary-probit regression model in which vote choice was regressed on the demographics, other controls, and CN (Table 2). Survey weights were applied. Table 2. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, those high in CN were significantly more likely to vote for Trump (b=1.52, p<0.001). Multiplying the probability change in the "Δ*Pr*" column by 100, this indicates that going from the lowest to the highest CN level is associated with a 30% increase in the probability of voting for Trump. Men, whites, conservatives, Republicans, those higher in racial resentment, and economically-dissatisfied respondents were also more likely to vote for Trump (ps<0.05). However, the only predictor with a stronger effect than CN was partisanship. Going from the most Democratic to the most Republican partisanship was associated with a 41% increase in the probability of a Trump vote. For illustration, Figure 1 plots Trump vote probability as a function of CN and seven other key vote predictors.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Collective Narcissism and Evaluations of Donald Trump

We examined Hypothesis 2 using two ordinary least-squares regression models: one for the Trump thermometer rating and one for the Trump trait evaluation (Table 3). These models used the same specification as above, except for the different estimator. Survey weights were applied. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, there was a significant relationship between CN and Trump ratings (b=0.27, p=0.001). Given the 0-1 variable codings (recall that the variable was rescaled from its original 0-100 degree-based metric), this indicates that going from the lowest to the highest CN level was associated with a 27% increase in positivity toward Donald Trump. Partisanship was the only other predictor that reached significance—and the only one that had a

stronger relationship with Trump ratings (b=0.54, p<0.001); going from the most Democratic to the most Republican position was associated with a 54% increase in positivity toward Trump. For illustrative purposes, Figure 2 plots thermometer ratings as a function of CN and seven other key predictors.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

In turn, CN was again related to trait evaluations of Trump (b=0.22, p=0.001), corresponding to a 22% increase in positive trait attributions as one goes from the lowest to the highest level of CN. Less-educated respondents, conservatives, Republicans, and hostile sexists also attributed more positive traits to Trump (ps<0.05). Again, partisanship was the only variable whose predictive power was stronger than CN's (b=0.37, p<0.001). Compared to the most Democratic respondents, the most Republican respondents are 37% more positive in their attribution of positive traits to Trump. To illustrate these relationships, Figure 3 plots trait evaluations as a function of CN and seven other key predictors.

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

Robustness Checks

In the online appendix, we provide several robustness checks: (1) a replication of the thermometer and trait-rating results using residualized versions of the variables that account for Clinton support; (2) analyses entering education as a series of dummy variables; and (3) analyses correcting for measurement error in core predictors. Results were similar in all cases.

Discussion

Research has offered several explanations for the appeal of Donald Trump's candidacy. In the present article, we argue for the role of a factor broadly implicated in intergroup hostility:

collective narcissism. Consistent with our hypotheses, our data revealed that collective narcissists were more likely to vote for and positively evaluate Donald Trump, net of other relevant predictors. In fact, CN was more strongly related to our dependent variables than almost all controls.

One limitation of our study is that it does not allow us to firm conclusions about directionality of the relationship between CN and candidate preferences. We follow previous work in positing that CN is prior to judgments about specific figures, groups, and issues, but it also possible that individuals gravitated toward Trump first and then followed him in adopting beliefs characteristic of CN (Zaller 1992). We doubt this alternative explanation for several reasons. First, research typically suggests that group-related individual differences (such as authoritarianism and CN) constrain specific attitudes and actions, such as candidate evaluations and voting (rather than vice versa; Cohrs, Moschner, Maes, and Kielmann 2005; Duckitt 2006; de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003). Second, CN is conceptualized as a relatively-stable individual difference. Consistent with this, longitudinal studies indicate that CN is a stable construct (with raw test-retest correlations from r=.59 to r=.73; see Cichocka et al. 2017; Golec de Zavala, et al. 2017; see the online appendix for further detail), and CN in earlier time periods constrains specific out-group attitudes in later time periods (Cichocka et al. 2017).

Though we cannot rule out the reverse pattern, we believe that our finding of a strong net relationship between CN and Trump support is significant in and of itself, regardless of whether CN motivated Trump support or vice versa. Either way, our result sheds light on the broader network of beliefs surrounding Trump support in the mass public by demonstrating the centrality of CN to that belief system even after other factors are accounted for. Indeed, the presence of an influential group of citizens motivated by CN—with a strong attachment to a particular leader—

may have serious consequences for intergroup relations at home and abroad. Decision makers and citizens motivated by collective narcissism may make unrealistic demands on other countries and support war more readily (Golec de Zavala et al 2013a). Moreover, the alliances they form may be short-lived and abandoned when inconvenient. Moreover, given the inclination to conspiratorial ideation among those high in CN, conspiracy theories may become a more prominent part of political discourse as collective narcissism becomes more pronounced among elites (Cichocka et al. 2016). In domestic affairs, leaders high in CN may be especially likely to aggravate intergroup tensions, since collective narcissists rely on a narrow definition of what constitutes a nation. In particular, minorities are likely to become the targets of greater hostility and derogation (Golec de Zavala et al. 2013; Golec de Zavala and Cichocka 2012). In short, leadership marked by CN carries with it higher risk that invidious distinctions between "true" members of the national in-group and various outsiders may be legitimized. Of course, none of these consequences of CN are unique to the incipient Trump era. Nevertheless, given the strong relationship between CN and Trump support, attention to the implications of collective narcissism for contemporary mass politics in the United States seems well-advised.

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Table 1. Intercorrelations for Key Variables

	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*
1. Trump vote	1.00										
2. Trump thermometer	0.82***	1.00									
3. Trump traits	0.79***	0.91***	1.00								
4. American identification	0.10***	0.04	0.01	1.00							
5. Ideology	0.53***	0.53***	0.54***	0.12***	1.00						
6. Partisanship	0.66***	0.64***	0.62***	0.13***	0.58***	1.00					
7. Racial resentment	0.47***	0.42***	0.40***	0.16***	0.42***	0.41***	1.00				
8. Hostile sexism	0.15***	0.28***	0.32***	-0.12***	0.22***	0.13***	0.17***	1.00			
9. Authoritarianism	0.20***	0.18***	0.20***	0.08***	0.23***	0.16***	0.18***	0.22***	1.00		
10. Economic dissatisfaction	0.23***	0.21**	0.25***	0.01	0.19***	0.15***	0.14***	0.10***	0.09***	1.00	
11. Trust	-0.12***	-0.20***	-0.21***	0.15***	-0.07**	-0.05*	-0.04	-0.07**	-0.06*	-0.25***	1.00
12. Collective narcissism	0.28***	0.29***	0.32***	0.13***	0.27***	0.16***	0.26***	0.33***	0.29***	0.12***	0.12***

Note. Entries are point-biserial correlations for all pairs involving the Trump-vote variable and Pearson correlations in all other cases.

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

Table 2. Trump Vote as a Function of Collective Narcissism (2016 CSPP)

	Trump Vote			
Predictor	*b*	*95% CI*	Δ*Pr*	*p*
Age	0.16	(-0.49, 0.80)	0.03	>0.250
Income	-0.07	(-0.78, 0.64)	-0.01	>0.250
Gender (1 = male)	0.40	(0.11, 0.68)	0.08	0.007
Education	0.06	(-0.51, 0.64)	0.01	>0.250
Race (1 = white)	0.40	(-0.001, 0.80)	0.08	0.050
American identification	-0.03	(-0.39, 0.32)	-0.01	>0.250
Ideology	0.77	(0.07, 1.47)	0.16	0.031
Partisanship	2.19	(1.70, 2.67)	0.41	<0.001
Racial resentment	1.40	(0.80, 2.00)	0.28	<0.001
Hostile sexism	0.12	(-0.53, 0.76)	0.02	>0.250
Authoritarianism	0.04	(-0.45, 0.52)	0.01	>0.250
Economic dissatisfaction	0.72	(0.06, 1.37)	0.15	0.032
Trust	-0.68	(-1.57, 0.21)	-0.13	0.132
Collective narcissism	**1.52**	**(0.79, 2.26)**	**0.30**	**<0.001**
Intercept	-4.04	(-5.10, -2.98)		<0.001
F (df)	19.22 (14, 1445), *p*<0.001			
N	1,459			

Note. Entries are binary probit regression coefficients. Survey weights are applied. "Δ*Pr*" indicates the change in the probability of a Trump vote associated with (1) going from the minimum to the maximum value of the predictor for continuous predictors; and (2) going from the group coded "0" to the group coded "1" for categorical predictors.

Table 3. Trump Thermometer Rating and Trump Trait Evaluation as a Function of Collective Narcissism (2016 CSPP)

	Trump Thermometer Rating			Trump Trait Evaluation		
Predictor	*b*	*95% CI*	*p*	*b*	*95% CI*	*p*
Age	0.05	(-0.13, 0.23)	>0.250	0.01	(-0.16, 0.17)	>0.250
Income	0.09	(-0.05, 0.23)	0.190	0.04	(-0.08, 0.16)	>0.250
Gender (1 = male)	0.02	(-0.05, 0.08)	>0.250	0.05	(-0.004, 0.11)	0.069
Education	-0.13	(-0.26, 0.004)	0.057	-0.13	(-0.25, -0.01)	0.031
Race (1 = white)	0.004	(-0.08, 0.09)	>0.250	0.01	(-0.06, 0.08)	>0.250
American identification	-0.03	(-0.10, 0.05)	>0.250	-0.02	(-0.08, 0.04)	>0.250
Ideology	0.05	(-0.09, 0.20)	>0.250	0.15	(0.02, 0.29)	0.026
Partisanship	0.54	(0.44, 0.64)	<0.001	0.37	(0.28, 0.47)	<0.001
Racial resentment	0.08	(-0.07, 0.23)	>0.250	0.02	(-0.12, 0.15)	>0.250
Hostile sexism	0.09	(-0.03, 0.22)	0.139	0.12	(0.02, 0.23)	0.023
Authoritarianism	-0.01	(-0.13, 0.10)	>0.250	-0.04	(-0.14, 0.06)	>0.250
Economic dissatisfaction	0.05	(-0.10, 0.19)	>0.250	0.07	(-0.04, 0.18)	0.204
Trust	-0.13	(-0.32, 0.05)	0.143	-0.14	(-0.30, 0.003)	0.056
Collective narcissism	**0.27**	**(0.11, 0.43)**	**0.001**	**0.22**	**(0.09, 0.36)**	**0.001**
Intercept	-0.08	(-0.25, 0.09)	>0.250	0.01	(-0.15, 0.16)	>0.250
R^2	0.515			0.497		
F (df)	41.72 (14, 787), $p<0.001$			34.38 (14, 792), $p<0.001$		
N	801			806		

Note. Entries are ordinary least-squares regression coefficients. Survey weights are applied.

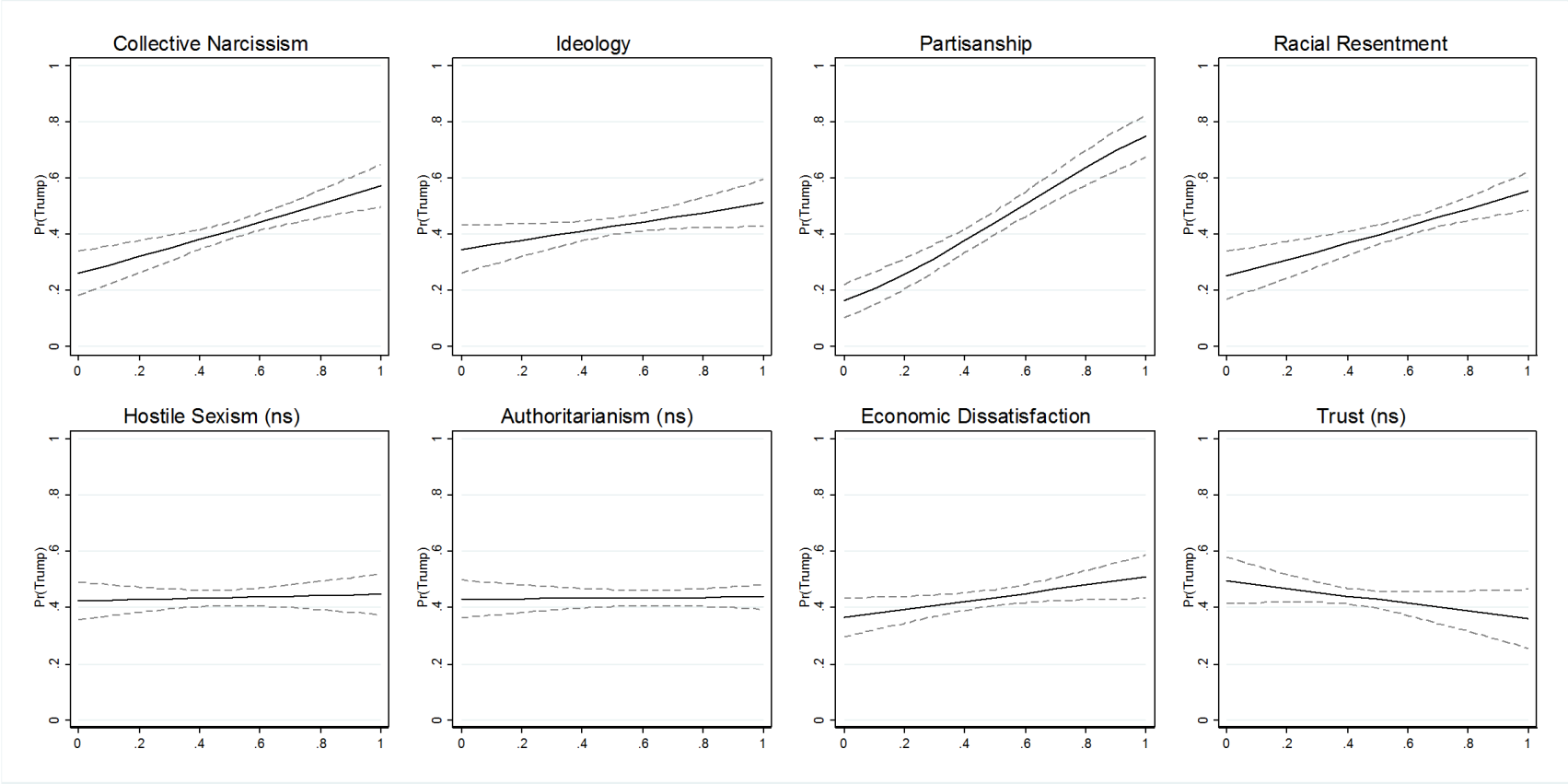

Figure 1. Probability of self-reported vote for Donald Trump as a function of selected independent variables. Predicted probabilities based on estimates from Table 2. Panels marked "ns" indicate a non-significant coefficient (p>0.05 or higher).

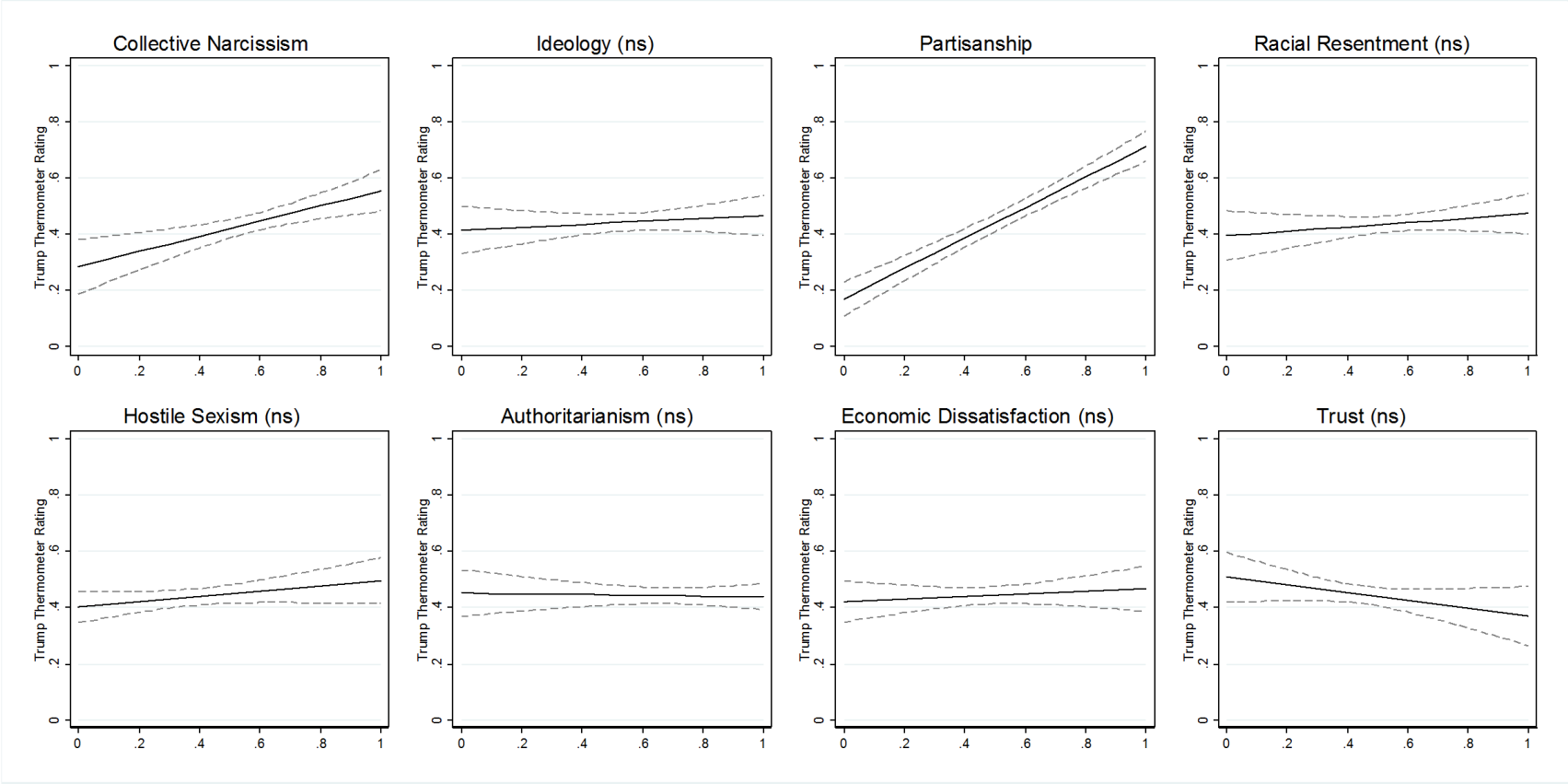

Figure 2. Thermometer rating of Donald Trump as a function of collective narcissism. Predicted values based on estimates from Table 3. Panels marked "ns" indicate a non-significant coefficient (p>0.05 or higher).

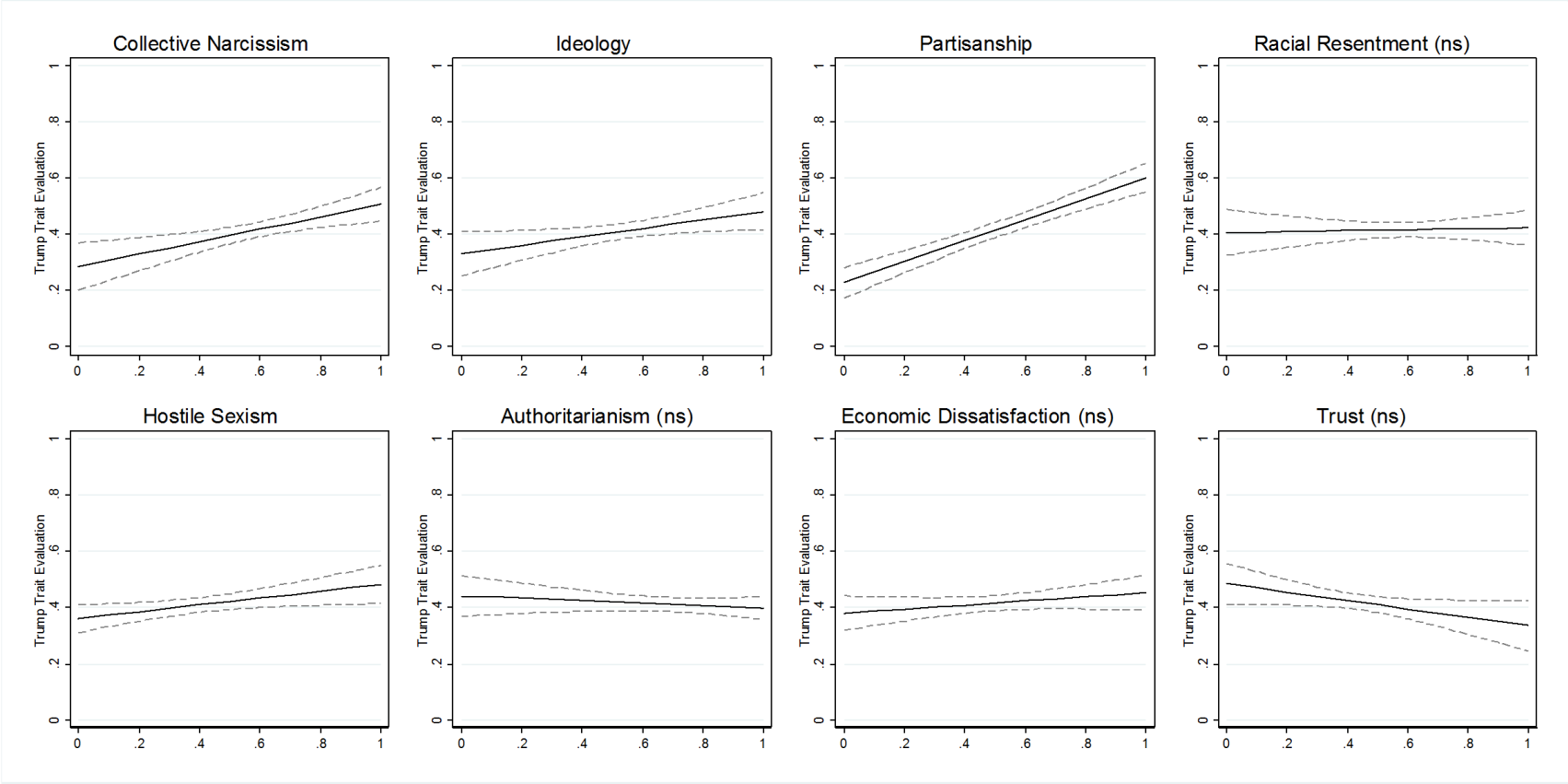

Figure 3. Trait evaluation of Donald Trump as a function of collective narcissism. Predicted values based on estimates from Table 3. Panels marked "ns" indicate a non-significant coefficient (p>0.05 or higher).