

Media, Pulpit, and Populist Persuasion: Evidence from Father Coughlin[†]

By TIANYI WANG*

I study the political impact of the first populist radio personality in American history. Father Charles Coughlin blended populist demagoguery, anti-Semitism, and fascist sympathies to create a hugely popular radio program that attracted 30 million weekly listeners in the 1930s. I find that exposure to Father Coughlin's anti-Roosevelt broadcast reduced Franklin D. Roosevelt's vote share in the 1936 presidential election. Coughlin's effects were larger among Catholics and persisted after Coughlin left the air. Moreover, places more exposed to Coughlin's broadcast were more likely to form a local branch of the pro-Nazi German-American Bund and sold fewer war bonds during World War II. (JEL D72, L82, N32, N42, Z12)

New media and communication technologies make it easier for charismatic individuals to gain influence. The 2016 US presidential election and the rise of populist leaders across the world in recent years heighten the concern that individuals, through their charisma and media savviness, can manipulate public opinions for political gain. How and to what extent can charismatic individuals exploit the media to shape political outcomes? This paper studies the political impact of the first populist radio personality in American history. Father Charles Coughlin blended populist demagoguery, anti-Semitism, and fascist sympathies to create one of the first loyal mass audiences in broadcasting history, attracting tens of millions of listeners throughout the 1930s (Warren 1996). This paper assembles a unique dataset to evaluate the impact of exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program.

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Roman Catholic priest Charles Coughlin embraced radio broadcasting when radio was a new and rapidly exploding technology during the 1920s. For the first time one could broadcast to a mass audience over long distances. He initially aired religious sermons but switched to broadcasting almost exclusively his opinions on social and economic issues following the onset of the Great Depression. In a nation mired in its worst economic crisis, Coughlin became the voice of the people against the nation's economic and financial elites. A charismatic orator, Coughlin became seen as the champion of the common man and referred to as the "Radio Messiah" (Warren 1996). By the mid-1930s, Coughlin had developed a weekly national audience of 30 million, making Father Coughlin the most listened to regular radio speaker in the world during the 1930s (Brinkley 1982).

A supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) and the New Deal during FDR's early presidency, Coughlin grew disillusioned with the Roosevelt administration over time and became its harsh denouncer by 1936, largely because FDR did not follow Coughlin's proposal to address the Depression (Tull 1965). Accusing FDR of being "anti-God" and a puppet controlled by both international bankers and communists, Coughlin cofounded a third political party, which proposed a populist alternative to challenge FDR in the 1936 presidential election. By the late 1930s, Father Coughlin had become more extreme in his broadcast and transformed into a major anti-Semitic icon, fascist sympathizer, and isolationist in prewar America.

The episode of Father Coughlin provides a unique opportunity to study the impact of media manipulation by a charismatic individual. My baseline analysis examines the impact of exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program on voting outcomes in the presidential election of 1936, the year in which Coughlin harshly attacked the Roosevelt administration. I collect unique data on the location and technical details of Coughlin's transmitters in 1936, which allow me to predict the signal strength of Coughlin's radio program across space. Notably, Coughlin's transmitters changed little over time since 1933, when he was supporting FDR. It is therefore unlikely that the transmitter location in 1936 was directly functional to Coughlin's opposition to FDR.

Nonetheless, reception of Father Coughlin's broadcast could be correlated with other county characteristics that might influence voting. To address this concern, I employ a strategy pioneered by Olken (2009) to exploit the variation in Coughlin's signal strength resulting from topographic factors. Specifically, I regress the outcomes on the signal strength of Coughlin's radio program, while controlling for the hypothetical signal strength when there is no geographic or topographic obstacles such as mountains and hills. Hence, identification comes from the residual variation in signal strength as a result of idiosyncratic topographic factors along the signal transmission route, which I find to be uncorrelated with past voting outcomes and a large set of preexisting county socioeconomic variables.

I find that counties more exposed to Father Coughlin's radio program displayed lower support for FDR in the 1936 presidential election. Specifically, a 1 standard deviation increase in Coughlin signal strength reduced FDR's vote share by 2.4 percentage points, or about 4 percent relative to the mean. The effect was larger in counties with more Roman Catholics, consistent with Father Coughlin's greater influence on Catholics.

To show that the results did not reflect the effect of exposure to radio programs in general, I run a falsification test using exposure to national radio network stations that did not carry Coughlin's program. In a statistical horse race between Coughlin and non-Coughlin exposure, I find that what mattered was exposure to Coughlin's stations and not exposure to other stations, suggesting that the effect was unique to Coughlin's radio program.

To better understand the magnitude of the effect, I follow previous studies (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; DellaVigna et al. 2014; Adena et al. 2015) and calculate the persuasion rate of Father Coughlin's radio program. I find that Father Coughlin's radio program had a persuasion rate of about 28 percent, which is considerably larger than the typical persuasion rates of the media found by previous studies (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010). Exploring potential channels, I provide evidence consistent with the view that religion and an electorate of lower education and economic status likely have contributed to Father Coughlin's persuasiveness. The baseline findings thus show that under certain conditions the media can have especially large effects.

Moreover, as an alternative empirical strategy, I exploit Coughlin's switch in attitude towards FDR during 1932–1936 and panel data in a difference-in-difference framework. Exploiting within-county variation, the difference-in-difference strategy controls for any time-invariant differences across counties and for statewide shocks to counties. Findings from this strategy confirm the baseline results, which also hold under a series of additional robustness checks, further strengthening the causal interpretation of the results.

Because of Father Coughlin's more extreme stance in the late 1930s, I turn to examine the effects of Coughlin exposure in the late 1930s on anti-Semitism and civilian support for America's involvement in World War II (WWII). I collect unique data from Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) records, which allow me to identify all cities with a local branch of the pro-Nazi German-American Bund in 1940. I find that cities with a 1 standard deviation higher exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program in the late 1930s were about 10 percentage points more likely to have a local branch of the pro-Nazi German-American Bund.

Furthermore, using county-level WWII war bond sales data, I find that higher exposure to Coughlin's radio program in the late 1930s was also associated with lower per capita purchase of war bonds. Specifically, a 1 standard deviation higher Coughlin exposure was associated with 15 percent lower per capita purchase of war bonds in 1944, suggesting that Father Coughlin's isolationist stance likely dampened public support for the war effort.

This paper contributes to the literature on the political effects of the media (for surveys of this literature, see DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010; Prat and Strömberg 2013; Enikolopov and Petrova 2015; Zhuravskaya, Petrova, and Enikolopov 2020). In particular, my paper is closely related to the seminal work by Strömberg (2004), who finds that US counties with more radio listeners during the 1930s saw greater New Deal relief funds and higher voter turnout. Previous work has also studied media backed by large institutions, such as the state or major media organizations.¹

¹For instance, Adena et al. (2015) finds that radio controlled by Nazi Germany contributed to the support for the Nazi Party and anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) finds that the entry of

In contrast, this paper focuses on media used by a charismatic individual, and in particular, a charismatic leader. The political influence of charismatic individuals, such as politicians, opinion leaders, and media personalities across a variety of media platforms, has become increasingly evident in recent years, including during the 2016 US presidential election (Marwick and Lewis 2017). For instance, the use of Twitter by Donald Trump is widely considered (even by Trump himself) to have contributed to his election in 2016. Yet, there exists little empirical evidence on the political impact of media wielded by charismatic individuals.

I study the extent to which an individual charismatic leader can manipulate the media to influence voting behavior. Related to my work is that of Garthwaite and Moore (2013) which studies the effects of political endorsements by celebrities. They show that Oprah Winfrey's endorsement of Barack Obama brought approximately 1 million additional votes to him during the 2008 US Democratic Presidential Primary. Instead of examining political endorsements by celebrities, I focus on the impact of a charismatic demagogue (O'Toole 2019, Brinkley 1982, Bennett 1969, Lee and Lee 1939) who uses the media to spread propaganda and misinformation.² To my knowledge, this paper is the first in the literature to empirically document how a charismatic leader, as an individual, can manipulate the media to influence voting and political preferences. In this regard, the paper also adds to the small but growing literature on the effects of leaders, where empirical evidence so far is still limited.³ Moreover, this paper to my knowledge is also the first in the media and politics literature to empirically examine media with a strong leaning on religion and to show the possibility for religion to generate large media impacts. The findings of this paper therefore underscore the substantial influence of charismatic leaders with access to modern media and the potential for religion to enhance that influence.

By exploring arguably the darkest episode of anti-Semitism in American history, this paper also adds to the literature on media and intergroup animosity (Bursztyn et al. 2019; Müller and Schwarz 2020, forthcoming; Adena et al. 2015; DellaVigna et al. 2014; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), on religious extremism (Iannaccone and Berman 2006), and more specifically, on anti-Semitism (Becker and Pascali 2019; Johnson and Koyama 2019; Finley and Koyama 2018; Anderson, Johnson, and Koyama 2017; Voigtländer and Voth 2012). Previous work on anti-Semitism has almost exclusively focused on the European context. Organized anti-Semitism reached unprecedented levels in interwar America, and Father Coughlin is widely

Fox News increased Republican vote shares in both US presidential and senatorial elections. Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya (2011) finds that the only independent national TV channel in Russia increased votes for opposition parties and reduced support for the government party in the 1999 parliamentary election. Besides, Durante, Pinotti, and Tesi (2019) shows that exposure to Italy's Mediaset all-entertainment TV program increased support for Silvio Berlusconi's party and for populism in general. An exception, however, is Xiong (forthcoming), who studies the political premium of TV celebrity and finds that Ronald Reagan's tenure as the host of a 1950s entertainment TV program translated into electoral support during his presidential campaign in 1980.

²I consider misinformation as statements that ex post turn out to be false (Bursztyn et al. 2020). For an analysis on Coughlin's propaganda techniques, see Lee and Lee (1939).

³For instance, previous studies have examined leaders' impacts on economic growth (Jones and Olken 2005; Besley, Montalvo, and Reynal-Querol 2011), fertility-related beliefs and behavior (Bassi and Rasul 2017), the diffusion of radical and innovative ideas (Becker et al. 2020), and war (Dippel and Heblich 2021, Cagé et al. 2020). In particular, Bassi and Rasul (2017) finds that the papal visit to Brazil in 1991 had large effects on the households' fertility-related beliefs and behavior, consistent with the large influence of religious authorities on their followers. My paper provides novel empirical evidence on the political influence of a religious leader.

considered its foremost proponent (Strong 1941, Lee and Lee 1939). This paper studies an important episode of anti-Semitism in America, which has received little attention in the literature.

Furthermore, this paper contributes to the growing literature on populism and political extremism. Existing work has focused on the economic and cultural roots of populism and political extremism (Inglehart and Norris 2019; Colantone and Stanig 2019; Noury and Roland 2020; Autor et al. 2020; Golder 2016; de Bromhead, Eichengreen, and O'Rourke 2013). There is still little empirical evidence on the extent to which media matter to populist and extremist leaders. The findings of this paper are particularly relevant to today's ongoing debate on the role of media in the rise of populism (Couttenier et al. 2019; Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei 2019; Zhuravskaya, Petrova, and Enikolopov 2020). Lastly, this paper also contributes to the social science literature examining Father Coughlin (Warren 1996, Brinkley 1982, Bennett 1969, Tull 1965).

I. Historical Background

Radio as a new communication technology entered American households in the early 1920s. Providing a variety of music, shows, and information, radio soon became a popular form of household entertainment. Online Appendix Figure A1 shows that the share of American families owning a radio set rose from 0 in 1920 to approximately 40 percent by 1930, and it further increased to about 80 percent by 1940; the number of radio stations also increased rapidly during 1920–1940 (Broadcasting Publications, Inc. 1940). As a result, the period is often dubbed the Golden Age of Radio.

Radio was central to the rise of Father Coughlin from a local Roman Catholic priest to a national figure. In 1926, Coughlin started as a priest at the National Shrine of the Little Flower church in Royal Oak, Michigan, just outside of Detroit. He quickly embraced radio to broadcast his weekly theological teachings from the Detroit station WJR. A charismatic orator on the radio, Coughlin soon attracted a loyal audience in the Midwest and became known as the “radio priest.” Indeed, one listener claimed that Coughlin possessed such a mesmerizing voice “that anyone turning past it almost automatically returned to hear it again” (Bennett 1969).

The onset of the Great Depression and the ensuing human suffering, however, convinced Father Coughlin to switch to broadcasting almost exclusively social and economic commentaries. He described American society as controlled by powerful “banksters,” “plutocrats,” “atheistic Marxists,” and “international (commonly understood to mean Jewish) financiers,” whom Coughlin blamed for the catastrophe of ordinary American citizens (Warren 1996). Coughlin's outspokenness on the nation's economic plight brought him fame as a champion of the common man, but his controversial statements were often considered demagogic by others (Bennett 1969, Tull 1965, Brinkley 1982).

The CBS national network picked up Coughlin's radio program in 1930, making Father Coughlin a household name. Coughlin's increasingly controversial statements about the economic and financial elites as well as his refusal to tone down his rhetoric, however, led CBS to drop his program a year later (Warren 1996). In response, Father Coughlin purchased airtime from individual stations and formed his own radio network, and his weekly radio show was

soon broadcast again every Sunday afternoon to a national audience. The Gallup Poll in April 1938 estimated retrospectively that 26.5 percent of Americans listened regularly to Father Coughlin's radio program before the 1936 presidential election.⁴ This would put Coughlin's listenership at above 30 million in the mid-1930s. During the same period, Coughlin also received on average more than 10,000 unsolicited letters a day from his listeners, often with a small donation enclosed (Warren 1996). This would make Father Coughlin the most listened to regular radio speaker as well as the person receiving the most letters in the world during the 1930s (Brinkley 1982). It is therefore not surprising that many contemporary observers regarded Father Coughlin as the second most influential public figure in the United States, next only to President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Brinkley 1982).

Initially a supporter during FDR's early presidency, Father Coughlin coined the phrase "Roosevelt or Ruin" in 1933 following FDR's election (Tull 1965).⁵ Coughlin, however, grew disillusioned with Roosevelt over time and deemed the New Deal administration unsuccessful at addressing the nation's social and economic problems. In November 1934 Coughlin founded his own organization, the National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ), to promote ideologies and policies that he believed would lead to greater prosperity and social justice.⁶ The Roosevelt administration, however, did not follow Coughlin's proposals. By 1936, Coughlin had become a harsh denouncer of the Roosevelt administration (Tull 1965). With the new slogan "Roosevelt and Ruin," Coughlin accused FDR of being "anti-God" and a "great betrayer and liar" controlled by both international bankers and communists.⁷

In 1936, Coughlin cofounded a third political party, the Union Party, together with old-age pension advocate Francis Townsend and Gerald L. K. Smith, who replaced Huey Long as the head of the Share Our Wealth movement following Long's assassination in 1935. The Union Party chose Republican Senator William Lemke from North Dakota as its candidate and proposed a populist alternative to challenge FDR in the 1936 presidential election.⁸

Father Coughlin had become more extreme by the late 1930s. Throughout 1938–1939, Coughlin's radio broadcast and weekly newspaper, *Social Justice*, were overtly anti-Semitic (Warren 1996). He portrayed Jews as malicious aliens associated with communism, claimed that Nazism was a necessary defense mechanism against communism, and made bitter personal attacks on leading rabbis and Jewish organizations (O'Toole 2019, Tull 1965). He blamed Jews for inciting the European conflicts, supported pro-Nazi organizations in America such as the German-American Bund, and serialized in his weekly newspaper the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the notorious fake document purporting Jewish plans for world domination (O'Toole 2019). Some of Father Coughlin's writings in his newspaper even followed Joseph Goebbels' speeches verbatim (Warren 1996). In 1938, Coughlin

⁴The number is calculated by the author based on the April 1938 Gallup Poll data (Gallup Organization 1938a).

⁵In 1932, FDR defeated incumbent Republican President Herbert Hoover, who was first elected in 1928.

⁶Online Appendix B provides the 16 principles of the NUSJ that Father Coughlin outlined at its founding in November 1934.

⁷Online Appendix C and Appendix Figure A2 use Father Coughlin's radio transcripts (Coughlin 1936a) and compare Coughlin's attitudes towards FDR between 1933 and 1936.

⁸The Republican presidential candidate in 1936 was Governor Alf Landon of Kansas.

also played an instrumental role in forming a paramilitary and anti-Semitic organization, the Christian Front, which specialized in harassing and beating up Jews and vandalizing Jewish property across major US cities (O'Toole 2019). In addition, Coughlin was also a staunch supporter for American isolationism. Calling FDR "the world's chief warmonger," Coughlin vehemently opposed America's entry into WWII and endorsed the leading US isolationist organization, the American First Committee. Coughlin also claimed that FDR was using the war as an opportunity to turn the US into a dictatorship (Warren 1996).

Father Coughlin's controversial activities eventually led to his downfall. In late 1939, the National Association of Broadcasters introduced a new self-regulation code that prohibited radio stations from discussing controversial issues in sponsored programs, a rule that many believe was introduced specifically to rein in Father Coughlin (Warren 1996). Following this new rule, almost no station was willing to sell Coughlin airtime, which forced him off the air in 1940. Shortly following the Pearl Harbor attack, the federal government further invoked the Espionage Act of 1917 and banned postal circulation of Coughlin's weekly newspaper in 1942 because of its seditious content. Church superiors also ordered Coughlin to relinquish any political involvement or to give up his priesthood. Father Coughlin chose to return to his parish duties in 1942 and refrained from the public sphere thereafter.

II. Data

My baseline empirical work relates exposure to Father Coughlin's anti-FDR broadcast in 1936 to voting outcomes in the 1936 presidential election. In this section, I describe the data employed in the baseline analysis.

A. Exposure to Father Coughlin's Radio Program

A challenge to study Father Coughlin's impact on the 1936 presidential election is the lack of data measuring exposure to Coughlin's radio program at a fine-grained geographic level. For this project, I assemble a unique dataset from several sources that is particularly suited to measure the political impacts of Father Coughlin. To proceed, I identify all the radio stations that Coughlin used for his weekly broadcasts in 1936 from the historical magazine *Broadcasting* (Broadcasting Publications Inc. 1935). Online Appendix Figure A3 displays the location of the stations, showing a total of 33 stations. For each of Coughlin's stations, I collect technical details, including the transmitter frequency and power, from the 1936 *Broadcasting Yearbook* (Broadcasting Publications, Inc. 1936). I then use this information to calculate the signal strength of Father Coughlin's radio program across US counties in 1936.

Radio signal transmission obeys the laws of electromagnetic propagation. In free space (i.e., assuming the earth is smooth and without any geographic or topographic obstacles), signal strength is inversely proportional to the square of the distance from the transmitter (Olken 2009). In actual transmission, however, the presence of geographic or topographic obstacles, such as mountains or hills, would lead to diffraction and greater transmission loss in signal. I calculate the signal transmission loss with a professional radio propagation software based on the irregular terrain

model (ITM). The ITM was developed by the US government in the 1960s and typically used by radio and TV engineers to predict signal strength of broadcasts.⁹

Following Olken (2009), I calculate the transmission loss for each transmitter-county pair using the ITM algorithm.¹⁰ I then deduct the transmission loss from the power of the transmitter to get the predicted signal strength, where signal strength is measured in decibel-milliwatts (dBm). Finally, for each county I use the maximum predicted signal strength across all transmitters as the predicted signal strength in that county.

Panel A of Figure 1 shows the predicted signal strength of Father Coughlin's radio program across counties, where stronger signals are shown with darker colors.¹¹ Previous studies (Olken 2009; Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; Adena et al. 2015) have shown that signal strength is a strong predictor for the actual audience size. Because county-level listenership data of Coughlin's radio program are not available, I follow Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei (2019) and use the continuous measure of signal strength as the explanatory variable.¹²

Online Appendix Figure A3 also shows that Father Coughlin had no station in the geographic South, which has been attributed to the fact that Coughlin would not have been able to attract a substantial audience in the South as a Catholic priest of Irish descent (Tull 1965). Indeed, online Appendix Figure A5 maps the spatial distribution of the Catholic population in 1926 and shows that the location of Coughlin's stations largely followed the preexisting spatial distribution of Catholics, of which the South had few. In addition, the South had fewer radio owners than the rest of the nation (see online Appendix Figure A6) and a much more homogeneous support for the Democratic Party in the 1930s (Strömberg 2004).

The lack of variation in support for FDR and the much lower Coughlin listenership in the South make it harder to identify the effect of exposure to Coughlin on voting outcomes in this region. I therefore focus my analysis on states outside of the geographic South to improve the precision of my estimates.¹³ The central results are qualitatively similar when I include all states in my analysis.

I use the ITM software to also generate the hypothetical signal strength in free space, assuming the earth is free of any geographic or topographic obstacles that

⁹I am grateful to Benjamin Olken for sharing the ITM software. ITM has also been used to calculate radio signal strength in other historical settings, such as by Adena et al. (2015) in the context of Nazi Germany and by Gagliarducci et al. (2020) in the context of Italy during WWII.

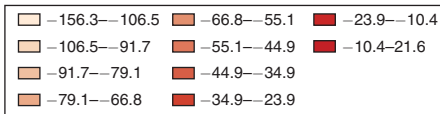
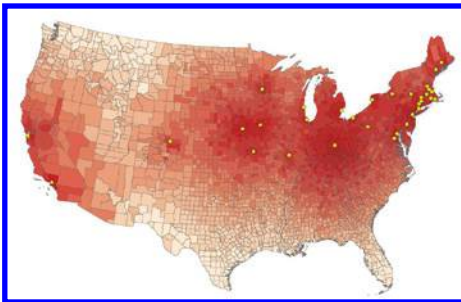
¹⁰I use the centroid of each county as the receiving location.

¹¹Evidently the Cincinnati station is the most powerful station, with its signal dominating a large number of counties. This is because the Cincinnati station WLW was chosen by the federal government to experiment with high power broadcasting and authorized to broadcast at 500 kilowatts (kW) between 1935 and 1939, while all other stations were operating at 50 kW or less. WLW was one of Coughlin's stations in 1936. My results are robust to simply removing this station from Coughlin's radio network or using 50 kW as its power, which was its original power before 1935, to calculate the signal strength. Hence, my results are not driven by the Cincinnati station.

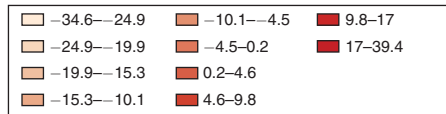
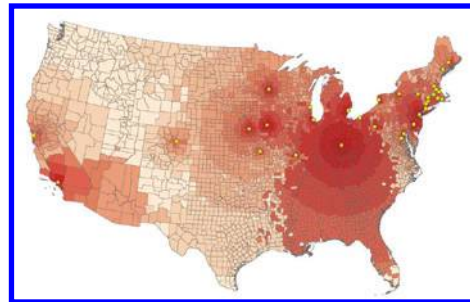
¹²The Gallup Poll in April 1938 asked retrospectively about Coughlin listenership before the 1936 election. The data unfortunately do not contain county identifiers for individual respondents. Online Appendix Figure A4 provides evidence that the share of population who regularly listened to Coughlin before the 1936 election was highly correlated with the location of his stations and with the predicted signal strength across regions. In addition, I show in online Appendix D that Coughlin signal averaged at the state-level strongly predicts actual listenership. As a robustness check, I also use an indicator variable that equals one if a county's signal strength is above median and zero otherwise in Section IVE.

¹³Indeed, online Appendix Figure A4 shows that the South had the lowest Coughlin listenership among all regions before the 1936 election. The 11 Southern states excluded are Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, Texas, Louisiana, Missouri, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina. I show as a robustness check that the results are qualitatively similar when these states are included.

Panel A. Predicted signal strength



Panel B. Signal strength in free space



Panel C. Changes in FDR's vote share, 1932–1936

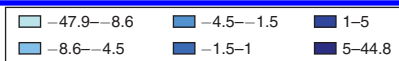
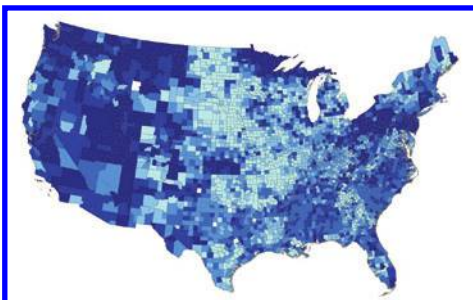


FIGURE 1. COUGHLIN SIGNAL STRENGTH IN 1936 AND CHANGES IN FDR'S VOTE SHARE, 1932–1936

Notes: Panel A shows the predicted (actual) signal strength of Father Coughlin's radio program in 1936. The dots are the location of Coughlin's radio stations, and darker colors represent stronger signals. Panel B shows the signal strength in free space. Panel C shows the changes in FDR's vote shares between the 1932 and the 1936 presidential elections. Data on Coughlin's radio network are drawn from the magazine *Broadcasting* (1935) and the 1936 *Broadcasting Yearbook* (Broadcasting Publications, Inc. 1936). Signal strength is calculated based on the ITM and measured in dBm. Data on FDR's vote shares are drawn from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) 8611 dataset (Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 2006).

may hinder signal transmission. This is important to my baseline identification strategy which exploits the varying topography along the signal transmission route to provide plausibly exogenous variation in signal strength, a point I will return to in Section III.

B. Voting Data and County Characteristics

The main outcomes of interest in my baseline analysis consist of county-level vote shares (in percentage points) of FDR (Democratic Party), Landon (Republican Party), and Lemke (Union Party) in the 1936 presidential election. The data come

from the ICPSR Study 8611 dataset (Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 2006).¹⁴ Online Appendix Figure A7 shows FDR's vote share across counties in 1936.

From the ICPSR 2896 dataset (Haines and ICPSR 2010), I obtain a rich set of 1930 county demographics, measuring county population and population by gender, race, birth place, age, literacy, employment status, radio ownership, and farm characteristics. I use the 1930 census IPUMS microdata (Ruggles et al. 2020) to compute for each county its mean occupational income score and shares of employment in manufacturing and in agriculture. The 1926 *Census of Religious Bodies* (Haines and ICPSR 2010) provides me with the Roman Catholic population across counties. I use ArcGIS to generate additional county-level geographic characteristics, including area, elevation, and terrain ruggedness.¹⁵

III. Empirical Strategy

My baseline empirical work examines the impact of exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program on voting outcomes in the 1936 presidential election. Notably, the location of Father Coughlin's stations in 1936 were mostly the same as that in 1933, when Coughlin was in favor of FDR. Online Appendix Figure A3 maps Coughlin's stations in 1936, which shows that 25 out of the 33 (or about 76 percent) stations in 1936 were already in Coughlin's network in 1933, when Coughlin was still a strong supporter for FDR. It is therefore unlikely that station location in 1936 was intentionally driven by Coughlin's opposition to FDR.¹⁶

Nonetheless, reception of Coughlin's broadcast might have been correlated with other local characteristics (e.g., distance to major cities) that could have influenced voting behavior in 1936. To address this concern, I employ an empirical strategy pioneered by Olken (2009) and exploit plausibly exogenous variation in Coughlin's signal strength resulting from topographic factors.¹⁷ Specifically, I regress the outcomes of interest on the actual signal strength (*Signal*), while controlling for the hypothetical signal strength in free space (*SignalFree*) where the earth is assumed to be free of any topographic obstacles, such as mountains or hills, that diffract and weaken radio signal transmission. Crucially, the variable *SignalFree* controls for a county's proximity to a transmitter as well as the power of the transmitter. Therefore, once controlling for *SignalFree*, identification of the coefficient of *Signal* comes from variation in diffraction patterns caused by topographic obstacles along the

¹⁴Data on Lemke's vote share is missing for several states in the ICPSR 8611 dataset; for these states, I have obtained data on Lemke's vote share from the ICPSR 1 (United States Historical Election Returns) dataset (ICPSR 1999).

¹⁵I obtain 1/3 arc-second (10 meters) digital elevation models (DEM) data (US Geological Survey 2018) from the Geospatial Data Gateway of Natural Resource Conservation Service at the United States Department of Agriculture. The data were originally sourced from the National Elevation Database developed by the US Geological Survey. I process the DEM data in ArcGIS to calculate each county's mean elevation and mean ruggedness (measured by the variance of elevation). I obtain 1930 state and county shapefiles from IPUMS NHGIS (Manson et al. 2020).

¹⁶While Coughlin's radio network clearly expanded westward between 1933 and 1936, the results are robust to restricting the sample to counties only in the Northeast and the Midwest (i.e., states east of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas), where station location changed little over time.

¹⁷A similar strategy has also been used by Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei (2019); DellaVigna et al. (2014); and Yanagizawa-Drott (2014).

signal transmission route. Figure 1 shows the actual (ITM-predicted) signal strength of Coughlin's radio program and the hypothetical signal strength in free space.

Because a county's own topography could also potentially influence its political outcomes, I control for various local geographic characteristics of the county, including the county's surface area, altitude, and terrain ruggedness as well as the square terms of each of these geographic variables. Therefore, I only exploit residual variation in signal strength resulting from the topography along the signal transmission route *outside* the county, which is arguably more exogenous.¹⁸ Furthermore, I include state fixed effects to compare counties within the same state in all my analyses.

I run the following regression for my baseline analysis:

$$(1) \quad \text{Vote}_c = \beta \text{Signal}_c + \gamma \text{SignalFree}_c + \delta' X_c + \eta_s + \epsilon_c,$$

where Vote_c is the vote share (in percentage points) received by a party in county c in the 1936 presidential election; Signal_c is the actual signal strength of Father Coughlin's radio program in county c in 1936; SignalFree_c is the hypothetical signal strength in free space; X_c is a vector of county baseline controls for local geographic characteristics, socioeconomic characteristics, and past voting outcomes; η_s are state fixed effects, controlling for any differences across states that might influence voting; ϵ_c is the error term. Standard errors are corrected for clustering at the state level.¹⁹ To ease the interpretation of the results, I standardize signal strength such that it has a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one.

The coefficient β provides the reduced-form estimate of the effect of exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program. The identification assumption is that Signal is not correlated with unobserved factors that influence voting outcomes, conditional on all the covariates in equation (1). While the assumption is ultimately untestable, I support the conditional exogeneity assumption through balance and placebo tests by examining the correlation of Signal with preexisting county socioeconomic characteristics and past voting outcomes.

In Table 1, I examine the correlation between Coughlin's signal strength in 1936 and 1930 county socioeconomic characteristics. As seen in column 2, Signal is significantly correlated with quite a few socioeconomic variables in the univariate regression. This is not surprising given that Father Coughlin's stations were mostly in large cities in the Northeast and the Midwest. However, Signal becomes more balanced across the set of 17 socioeconomic characteristics after I control in column 4 for the "free space" variable, state fixed effects, and local geographic characteristics. In fact, SignalFree , state fixed effects, and local geographic characteristics explain about 30–60 percent of the overall variation of most of the socioeconomic variables. Conditional on the additional covariates, Signal is no longer correlated with most

¹⁸The exceptions are the counties that contained Coughlin stations. I provide robustness checks by dropping these counties as well as the areas surrounding them.

¹⁹I test the robustness of my baseline estimate to alternative ways of adjusting for spatial correlation in error terms in online Appendix Table A1, such as allowing for spatial correlation in error terms following Conley's (1999) approach with different distance cutoffs, using the wild cluster bootstrap procedure suggested by Cameron, Gelbach, and Miller (2008) and Cameron and Miller (2015) to deal with the relatively small number of states (37 in total) as clusters, and clustering standard errors at Coughlin's station level.

TABLE 1—EXPOSURE TO FATHER COUGHLIN AND 1930 COUNTY CHARACTERISTICS (BALANCE TESTS)

	Mean (standard deviation) (1)	Univariate		<i>SignalFree</i> , state fixed effects and geographic controls	
		Coefficient (2)	R^2 (3)	Coefficient (4)	R^2 (5)
ln(population)	9.829 (1.137)	0.509 (0.101)	0.168	0.133 (0.123)	0.479
Percent male	52.169 (2.396)	-1.316 (0.130)	0.253	-0.080 (0.214)	0.561
Percent native-born Whites	87.539 (11.415)	2.339 (0.928)	0.035	1.775 (1.257)	0.509
Percent foreign-born Whites	6.935 (6.328)	-1.331 (0.705)	0.037	-0.478 (0.675)	0.629
Percent Blacks	3.413 (8.953)	1.302 (0.365)	0.018	0.292 (0.676)	0.685
Percent urban	24.338 (27.526)	5.786 (1.995)	0.037	-0.858 (2.844)	0.227
Percent age \geq 65	6.647 (2.139)	0.834 (0.199)	0.128	0.585 (0.227)	0.450
Percent Catholics (1926)	10.819 (12.051)	-0.411 (1.144)	0.001	1.065 (1.313)	0.361
Percent illiterate	2.414 (2.804)	0.165 (0.337)	0.003	0.008 (0.323)	0.574
Percent unemployed	6.686 (4.929)	0.054 (0.299)	0.000	-1.364 (0.368)	0.223
Occupational income score	7.344 (1.825)	0.096 (0.186)	0.002	0.088 (0.207)	0.402
Percent radio owners	34.718 (15.002)	3.027 (2.045)	0.034	5.505 (1.837)	0.651
Percent manufacturing workers	12.036 (12.121)	2.416 (1.245)	0.033	-0.432 (1.293)	0.411
Percent agricultural workers	42.080 (21.734)	-3.636 (2.132)	0.023	1.683 (2.011)	0.381
ln(average farm size)	7.457 (0.931)	-0.560 (0.098)	0.303	0.025 (0.086)	0.693
ln(land value per acre)	3.528 (0.909)	0.396 (0.106)	0.158	0.134 (0.100)	0.539
Percent tenant acres	27.561 (15.493)	3.844 (1.177)	0.052	-0.722 (1.232)	0.573

Notes: This table shows the mean of 1930 county characteristics (column 1) and their correlation with exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program in 1936 (columns 2 and 3). Specifically, columns 2 and 3 report the coefficient and R^2 of the univariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression of each variable on Coughlin signal strength in 1936 (*Signal*). In columns 4 and 5, I include controls for the hypothetical signal strength in free space (*SignalFree*), state fixed effects, and county geographic characteristics (area, elevation, and terrain ruggedness as well as their squared terms). The sample consists of all counties outside of the geographic South. Standard errors, shown in parentheses, are corrected for clustering at the state level.

preexisting demographic or industrial characteristics, although it is still correlated with the share of elderly, unemployment rate, and radio ownership. To be conservative, I control for all the socioeconomic characteristics in Table 1 in equation (1).

In Table 2, I perform a series of placebo tests by examining the correlation between *Signal* and Democratic and Republican vote shares in past presidential elections before 1936. Conditional on the full set of baseline controls, *Signal* is not significantly correlated with any of the past electoral outcomes during the period

TABLE 2—EXPOSURE TO COUGHLIN AND VOTING IN PAST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS (PLACEBO TESTS)

	1932 (1)	1928 (2)	1924 (3)	1920 (4)	Δ 1928–1932 (5)
<i>Panel A. Democratic vote shares</i>					
<i>Signal</i>	0.315 (0.471)	0.698 (0.620)	−0.327 (0.262)	−0.371 (0.551)	−0.384 (0.548)
Observations	1,978	1,978	1,978	1,978	1,978
Full baseline controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.882	0.886	0.980	0.955	0.665
Mean of dependent variable	58.37	37.29	28.66	33.77	21.07
Standard deviation of dependent variable	11.23	11.22	18.20	14.94	7.74
<i>Panel B. Republican vote shares</i>					
<i>Signal</i>	−0.310 (0.439)	−0.670 (0.605)	0.014 (0.264)	0.656 (0.597)	0.360 (0.599)
Observations	1,978	1,978	1,978	1,978	1,978
Full baseline controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.890	0.889	0.957	0.929	0.682
Mean of dependent variable	39.35	61.94	51.80	61.74	−22.60
Standard deviation of dependent variable	11.19	11.13	13.70	13.59	8.10

Notes: This table shows the correlation between exposure to Father Coughlin’s radio program in 1936 and voting outcomes in past presidential elections. Each column represents the results from a separate OLS regression following equation (1), where each observation is a county. The sample consists of all counties outside of the geographic South. Panel A shows the results for the Democratic Party, and panel B does so for the Republican Party. In each panel, the outcome variables are the vote shares of the party in each presidential election during 1920–1932 (columns 1–4) and the change in vote shares during 1928–1932 (column 5). The explanatory variable is the signal strength of Coughlin’s radio program in 1936. Each regression controls for all the baseline controls as in column 5 of Table 3. Standard errors, shown in parentheses, are corrected for clustering at the state level.

1920–1932 (columns 1–8) or with changes in electoral outcomes between 1928 and 1932 (columns 9 and 10); the estimated coefficients are also generally small.²⁰ The results suggest that exposure to Father Coughlin’s radio program in 1936 was not systematically correlated with preexisting political preferences in either levels or trends, providing support to the conditional exogeneity assumption of equation (1).

IV. Father Coughlin and Presidential Elections

In this section, I present the results on the impact of exposure to Father Coughlin’s radio program on presidential election voting outcomes. I focus on the presidential election of 1936, the year in which Father Coughlin harshly attacked FDR in his radio broadcasts and cofounded the Union Party to challenge FDR in the presidential race.

²⁰ Although Father Coughlin favored FDR in 1932, he did not broadcast his support for FDR during the 1932 campaign. As a priest, he believed he should not publicly show favoritism during an election (Brinkley 1982, Tull 1965). It was not until 1933, after FDR became president, that Coughlin began broadcasting his support (Brinkley 1982). Consistent with historical accounts and based on Father Coughlin’s radio transcripts (Coughlin 1936a), online Appendix Figure A8 shows the average number of times that Coughlin mentioned the name “Roosevelt” during each broadcast between 1931 and 1936. The figure shows that Coughlin essentially did not mention “Roosevelt” during 1931–1932. In fact, the only time he mentioned “Roosevelt” during 1931–1932 was a reference to Theodore Roosevelt. The figure is therefore consistent with historical accounts that Coughlin did not broadcast his support for FDR in 1932.

TABLE 3—EXPOSURE TO FATHER COUGHLIN AND 1936 VOTING OUTCOMES

	Vote shares (percentage points) in the 1936 Presidential election for							
	FDR (Democrat)					Landon (Republican)	Lemke (Union)	Voter turnout
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
<i>Signal</i>	-3.799 (0.540)	-2.120 (1.144)	-3.018 (1.301)	-2.779 (0.835)	-2.399 (0.581)	1.976 (0.609)	0.402 (0.373)	0.670 (0.637)
Observations	2,007	2,007	2,007	1,996	1,978	1,978	1,646	1,978
State fixed effects		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>SignalFree</i>			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
County characteristics				Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past electoral controls					Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.091	0.391	0.393	0.548	0.818	0.854	0.642	0.907
Mean of dependent variable	57.11	57.11	57.11	57.03	56.95	40.34	2.70	72.03
Standard deviation of dependent variable	11.51	11.51	11.51	11.46	11.45	11.77	3.71	15.69

Notes: This table shows the estimated effects of exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program in 1936 on voting in the 1936 presidential election. Each column represents the results from a separate OLS regression following equation (1), where each observation is a county. The sample consists of all counties outside of the geographic South. The outcome variables are the vote shares for FDR (columns 1–5), Landon (column 6), Lemke (column 7), and voter turnout (column 8), all measured in percentage points. The explanatory variable is the signal strength of Coughlin's radio program in 1936. *SignalFree* is the hypothetical signal strength in free space. County characteristics include the socioeconomic variables listed in Table 1 (i.e., natural log of the population, the population shares of males, Blacks, native-born Whites, foreign-born Whites, urban population, population aged 65 or above, Catholics, illiterate, unemployed, families with a radio, mean occupational income score, share of employment in manufacturing, share of employment in agriculture, natural log of average farm size, natural log of farm land value per acre, and share of farm land by tenant farmers) and the county's own geographic characteristics (area, elevation, terrain ruggedness, as well as their squared terms). Past electoral controls include average vote shares of the Democratic Party and of the Republican Party as well as average voter turnout during 1920–1928. Standard errors, shown in parentheses, are corrected for clustering at the state level.

A. Baseline Results

Table 3 shows the estimated effects of exposure to Father Coughlin's broadcast on voting in the 1936 presidential election. I find that exposure to Coughlin's radio program had a large negative effect on the support for FDR in the 1936 presidential election. Based on column 1, without any controls, a 1 standard deviation increase in exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program was associated with a reduction in FDR's vote share by about 3.8 percentage points. The results are robust and of similar magnitudes when adding in different controls in subsequent columns, including state fixed effects, the "free space" variable, and county socioeconomic and geographic characteristics. In column 5, after further controlling for past electoral outcomes, the estimated coefficient changes little. Based on column 5, which is my preferred specification that includes all baseline controls, a 1 standard deviation increase in exposure to Coughlin's radio program reduced FDR's vote share by about 2.4 percentage points, which is about 4 percent relative to the mean of FDR's vote share.

Column 6 of the table shows that most of the reduction in FDR's vote share as a result of exposure to Coughlin went to the Republican Party. A 1 standard deviation increase in exposure to Coughlin's radio program increased the Republican vote share by about 2 percentage points. Column 7 shows that exposure to Father Coughlin increased Lemke's vote share by about 0.4 percentage points (about

15 percent relative to the mean), although the estimate is statistically insignificant.²¹ The statistically insignificant effect on Lemke's vote share is not entirely surprising, given historical accounts that Father Coughlin was more focused on attacking FDR than on advancing Lemke's candidacy in 1936 (Bennett 1969, Warren 1996). In fact, through a simple word count, online Appendix Figure A9 shows that Father Coughlin mentioned the name "Roosevelt" about 8.8 times as often as he did for "Lemke" in his radio broadcasts in the months before the 1936 election (Coughlin 1936b). Moreover, column 8 of Table 3 shows that exposure to Coughlin had little effect on voter turnout. Taken as a whole, Table 3 suggests that exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program reduced support for FDR in the 1936 presidential election.

Next, I turn to examine the role of religion in Father Coughlin's persuasion. As a Roman Catholic priest, Father Coughlin likely had greater influence among the Catholic population. Indeed, based on a Gallup Poll survey (Gallup Organization 1938b) in December 1938, panel B of online Appendix Figure A10 shows that close to 70 percent of Catholics approved of what Father Coughlin said in general, much higher than other religious groups did. I therefore expect exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program to have a larger effect in counties with more Catholics. To test this hypothesis, I include in my regression interaction terms between *Signal* and an indicator variable that equals one if a county's population share of Catholics was in the top quartile of the distribution among all counties and zero otherwise.²²

Panel A of Table 4 reports the estimates based on this regression. Consistent with the expectation, the effects estimated are larger in highly Catholic counties. Here the effect of *Signal* in highly Catholic counties is equal to the sum of the coefficient on *Signal* and that on the interaction term $Signal \times Catholic$. Based on column 1, a 1 standard deviation increase in Coughlin exposure reduced FDR's votes by about 3.4 percentage points in highly Catholic counties. While column 2 shows that there was no differential effect on the Republican vote share in highly Catholic counties, column 3 shows that a 1 standard deviation increase in Coughlin exposure increased the support for Lemke by about 1.6 percentage points. Taken together, panel A of Table 4 is consistent with Father Coughlin having a greater influence on Catholic voters and suggests the possibility for religion to be exploited for political persuasion.²³

A potential concern remains that the baseline results may simply reflect exposure to radio programs in general instead of exposure to Father Coughlin. To address this concern, I collect data on NBC and CBS network radio stations that did not carry Coughlin's broadcast and run a falsification test. Specifically, I use the same method

²¹ The number of observations is smaller because the Union Party was not on the ballot in several states, namely California, Kansas, Maryland, Nevada, New York, Vermont, and West Virginia. This was primarily because the Union Party was formed relatively late in the summer of 1936 and missed the deadlines in several states to register itself as a party in the 1936 election (Bennett 1969). Even in states where the Union Party registered, its name did not appear on the ballot as "Union Party" in several states (Tull 1965). From the November 2, 1936, issue of *Social Justice*, I identify states where the Union Party's name appeared on the ballot. The result is similar when I restrict the sample to these states.

²² Results based on a continuous measure of the population share of Catholics are similar and shown in online Appendix Table A2.

²³ I also examine how exposure to Coughlin's radio program interacts with the 1930 county-level radio listenership, which is the key explanatory variable of interest in Strömberg (2004). One would expect Father Coughlin to have had a pronounced effect in areas with a greater radio audience. Online Appendix Table A3 shows evidence consistent with this expectation.

TABLE 4—ADDITIONAL BASELINE RESULTS

1936 vote shares:	FDR (Democrat) (1)	Landon (Republican) (2)	Lemke (Union) (3)
<i>Panel A. Effects in counties with large shares of Catholics</i>			
<i>Signal × Catholic</i>	−1.341 (0.460)	−0.096 (0.352)	1.574 (0.352)
<i>Signal</i>	−2.051 (0.607)	2.014 (0.625)	0.006 (0.405)
<i>Catholic</i>	−0.708 (0.696)	0.756 (0.579)	0.257 (0.403)
Observations	1,978	1,978	1,646
Full baseline controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.820	0.854	0.663
<i>Panel B. Coughlin and non-Coughlin (CBS and NBC) stations</i>			
<i>Signal</i>	−2.280 (0.546)	1.773 (0.559)	0.483 (0.439)
<i>Non-Coughlin signal</i>	−0.143 (0.378)	0.270 (0.267)	−0.146 (0.260)
Observations	1,978	1,978	1,646
Full baseline controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.818	0.854	0.643
Mean of dependent variable	56.95	40.34	2.70
Standard deviation of dependent variable	11.45	11.77	3.71

Notes: The table shows additional baseline results, where the outcome variables are the vote shares for FDR (column 1), Landon (column 2), and Lemke (column 3) in the 1936 presidential election. The sample consists of all counties outside of the geographic South. Each column represents the results from a separate OLS regression where each observation is a county. *Signal* is the signal strength of Coughlin’s radio program in 1936. Panel A shows the estimated effects of Coughlin exposure in counties with high and low shares of Catholic population. *Catholic* is a dummy variable that equals one if the county’s population share of Roman Catholics was in the top quartile of the distribution and zero otherwise. Panel B shows the estimated effects of exposure to Coughlin and non-Coughlin (i.e., CBS and NBC) stations. *Non-Coughlin signal* is the highest CBS or NBC radio signal strength received in the county in 1936. For both panels, the regressions include all the baseline controls as in column 5 of Table 3. Standard errors, shown in parentheses, are corrected for clustering at the state level.

to predict the signal strengths from the non-Coughlin stations and then include the non-Coughlin signal strengths (including the “free space” variable) in my baseline regression to perform a statistical horse race. Panel B of Table 4 shows that the estimated effects of exposure to non-Coughlin stations are much smaller in magnitude and statistically insignificant, while the estimates for exposure to Coughlin’s stations remain strong and similar as in the baseline. The statistical horse race between Coughlin’s and other stations therefore suggests that Father Coughlin’s radio program had a unique and independent effect on support for FDR in 1936.²⁴

²⁴The finding that exposure to radio in general did not affect FDR’s vote share in 1936 may reflect a mixed effect: a positive effect from receiving greater New Deal relief funds (Strömberg 2004) and a negative effect from a potential substitution away from newspapers or other alternative sources of information (similar to what Gentzkow 2006; Gavazza, Nardotto, and Valletti 2019; and Angelucci, Cagé, and Sinkinson 2020 find for other media in later years).

B. Persuasion Rate

To better understand the magnitude of the effects of Father Coughlin's radio program, I calculate the persuasion rate, which was pioneered by DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007), and a standard way to measure the effectiveness of media persuasion (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010, Jun and Lee 2019). In my case, the persuasion rate measures the fraction of Father Coughlin's listeners who were convinced to vote against FDR in 1936 as a result of exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program. I follow previous studies (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011; DellaVigna et al. 2014; Adena et al. 2015) to calculate the persuasion rate and provide the detailed steps of its calculation in online Appendix D.

Based on the estimates, I find that Father Coughlin's radio program had a persuasion rate of about 28.1 percent (with a standard error of 8.9 based on the delta method).²⁵ The persuasion rate of Father Coughlin's radio program is on the higher end of persuasion estimates found in the literature (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010). For instance, DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007) finds that Fox News has a persuasion rate of about 11.6 percent, and other studies find that news media's persuasion rates typically range between 6 and 20 percent (DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010).²⁶ The evidence therefore suggests that Father Coughlin's radio program had especially large persuasive effects.

C. Channels

Having documented Father Coughlin's substantial effects, I now turn to explore potential channels that might explain his persuasiveness.

Religion.—One potential channel that might have contributed to Father Coughlin's persuasiveness is religion, which has been documented to have strong influence on individuals and their minds (Iyer 2016). In his broadcasts, Father Coughlin frequently claimed that his teachings were consistent with those of God and the popes (i.e., Leo XIII and Pius XI) and that he was nonpartisan and speaking of the truth only (Warren 1996). His superior, Bishop Michael Gallagher of Detroit, also frequently defended Coughlin's stance. In fact, many of Coughlin's listeners thought Coughlin was a mouthpiece of the Church and his broadcasts "the words of God" (Bennett 1969). Coughlin's status as a religious authority and his appeal to religion could have increased his credibility and persuasiveness. The baseline findings that the effects of Coughlin's radio program were larger in counties with more Catholics (panel A of Table 4) are consistent with religion being a potential channel for his persuasiveness.

²⁵The persuasion rate captures the average instead of the marginal effect of persuasion, and it can be highly heterogeneous across different subgroups of the population (Jun and Lee 2019, DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010). Online Appendix D estimates that Father Coughlin's persuasion rate among Catholics was likely above 38 percent.

²⁶Father Coughlin's persuasion rate, however, is comparable in magnitude to that of the Weimar government (a persuasion rate of 36.8 percent), which broadcast radio messages against voting for extremist parties such as the Nazis in 1930 (Adena et al. 2015). Online Appendix Table A4 provides a summary of persuasion rates found in previous studies.

TABLE 5—EXPLORING POTENTIAL CHANNELS

	FDR's vote share in 1936				
	<i>X</i> = other radio signal, 1936 (1)	Rural county, 1930 (2)	Percent illiterate, 1930 (3)	Occupational income score, 1930 (4)	Percent unemployed, 1930 (5)
<i>Signal</i> × <i>X</i>	−0.023 (0.163)	0.008 (0.369)	−1.577 (0.570)	0.446 (0.192)	0.467 (0.155)
<i>Signal</i>	−2.194 (0.522)	−2.381 (0.621)	−3.222 (0.559)	−2.611 (0.537)	−2.518 (0.539)
<i>X</i>	−0.270 (0.360)	−0.269 (0.508)	0.743 (1.216)	−0.124 (0.363)	−0.134 (0.215)
Observations	1,978	1,978	1,978	1,978	1,978
Full baseline controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>R</i> ²	0.818	0.818	0.819	0.819	0.819
Mean of dependent variable	56.95	56.95	56.95	56.95	56.95
Standard deviation of dependent variable	11.45	11.45	11.45	11.45	11.45

Notes: This table explores potential channels for Father Coughlin's persuasiveness. Each column represents the results from a separate OLS regression, where each observation is a county. The sample consists of all counties outside of the geographic South. The outcome variable is FDR's vote share in the 1936 presidential election. *Signal* is the signal strength of Coughlin's radio program in 1936. Each column examines an interaction between *Signal* and another county characteristic *X*, where *X* is the highest CBS or NBC radio signal strength received in the county in 1936 (column 1), a dummy variable that equals one if the county had only rural households in 1930 (column 2), the share of the illiterate among native population aged ten or above in 1930 (column 3), the average occupational income score (column 4), and the population share of the unemployed in 1930 (column 5). Each regression includes all the baseline controls as in column 5 of Table 3. Standard errors, shown in parentheses, are corrected for clustering at the state level.

Media Saturation.—Another possible explanation for Father Coughlin's large effects is that the media landscape was less saturated in the 1930s, which might have afforded greater influence to an impressive media program like Coughlin's. To test this hypothesis, I examine the interaction between the signal of Coughlin's radio program and those of other radio stations (i.e., NBC or CBS stations) that did not carry Coughlin's program. Column 1 of Table 5 shows that the interactive effect is small in magnitude and statistically indistinguishable from zero.²⁷

In addition, following Strömberg (2004), I use a dummy variable that equals one for counties with only rural population and zero otherwise as an alternative measure of access to information. Rural counties in the 1930s had lower access to alternative sources of information, such as newspapers (Brunner 1935, Strömberg 2004). Column 2 of Table 5 again shows little evidence that Coughlin's broadcasts had differential effects in rural counties. Columns 1 and 2 of the table therefore suggest that a less saturated media landscape was unlikely to explain Father Coughlin's persuasiveness.²⁸

²⁷For the ease of interpretation, I also standardize other radio signal strengths such that they have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. I do the same also for the other continuous variables used to interact with exposure to Coughlin in Table 5, except for column 2 that uses a dummy variable.

²⁸Using individual survey data from the April 1939 Gallup Poll (Gallup Organization 1939), I, however, find suggestive evidence that individuals more exposed to Coughlin were less likely to listen to news broadcasts regularly or read daily newspapers regularly. Online Appendix Table A5 presents these results. To the extent that the news media likely covered FDR more objectively than Coughlin did, a substitution away from them could also negatively affect the support for FDR.

Demographics of the Electorate.—To explore potential channels further, I consider the demographics of the electorate in the 1930s. Previous studies document that less-educated (or less-cognitively sophisticated) voters and the lower class are more susceptible to populist rhetoric (Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei 2019; Arzheimer 2009; Spruyt, Keppens, and Droogenbroeck 2016). At a time when a relatively larger proportion of the electorate were of lower education and economic status, Father Coughlin’s populist rhetoric could have a stronger appeal.²⁹ Consistent with this view, columns 3 and 4 of Table 5 show that the effects of Coughlin’s radio program were larger in counties with worse measures of education and income levels.³⁰ The evidence therefore suggests that an electorate of relative lower education and economic status likely have contributed to Father Coughlin’s persuasiveness.

Economic Plight from the Depression.—Moreover, the Great Depression could also have made Coughlin’s message more attractive, as populist movements tend to rise during times of economic hardship (Inglehart and Norris 2019, Algan et al. 2017). To explore this channel, I examine the interactive effect between *Signal* and the 1930 unemployment rate, which has also been used by previous studies to measure local economic hardship during the Depression (Strömberg, 2004; Fishback, Kantor, and Wallis 2003). As reported in column 5 of Table 5, the result, however, suggests that Coughlin had a smaller effect in counties hit harder by the Depression. The result is consistent with what Strömberg (2004) and Fishback, Kantor, and Wallis (2003) find—that counties hit harder by the Great Depression also received more New Deal relief funds from the Roosevelt administration, which might have increased the appeal of the Roosevelt presidency and made Coughlin’s attacks less effective.

Overall, the evidence suggests that religion and an electorate of lower education and economic status likely have contributed to Father Coughlin’s persuasiveness.

D. Evidence from a Difference-in-Difference Strategy

A unique feature of my empirical setting is Father Coughlin’s switch in his attitude towards FDR between 1932 and 1936. Although Father Coughlin favored FDR in the 1932 campaign, Coughlin believed that he should not take side in an election as a priest and therefore did not broadcast his support for FDR until FDR had taken over the presidency in 1933 (Warren 1996, Brinkley 1982, Tull 1965). Yet, by 1936, Coughlin had taken an explicit stand against FDR and made that public through his radio program. Therefore, I would expect places more exposed to Father Coughlin’s

²⁹ According to the US Census Bureau (2006), only 24.5 percent of the US population aged 25 or above had a high school degree in 1940, as compared to 80.4 percent of the same population group in 2000. Piketty and Saez (2003) also show that the average real income (in 1998 dollars) in the United States was \$12,542 in 1928, which was about one-third of that in 1998 (\$38,739).

³⁰ Data on education attainment and income are not available until the 1940 census. I therefore use data from Haines (2010) that measure the 1930 share of illiterate among native-born population aged ten and above to proxy for the preexisting education level of the local electorate. For preexisting local income level, I use the county average of 1930 occupational income scores (averaged across individuals using the 1930 census microdata from IPUMS), which was commonly used by previous studies interested in pre-1940 labor market outcomes (Saavedra and Twinam 2020); the results are qualitatively similar when using the natural log of average retail wage to proxy for income as in Strömberg (2004).

radio program in 1936 to display a greater *reduction* in support for FDR between 1932 and 1936.³¹

To exploit the change in Father Coughlin's attitude between 1932 and 1936, I turn to a difference-in-difference specification using the 1932–1936 panel and exploit only within-county variation over time. Specifically, I run the following regression:

$$(2) \quad \text{Vote}_{ct} = \beta \text{Signal}_c \times \text{Post}_t + X_c \times \text{Post}_t + \sigma_c + \eta_{st} + \epsilon_{ct},$$

where Signal_c is the predicted signal strength of Father Coughlin's radio program in county c in 1936; Post_t is an indicator for post-1932, which equals one in 1936 and zero in 1932; σ_c are county fixed effects, controlling for any time-invariant county characteristics; η_{st} are state-by-year fixed effects, controlling for statewide shocks to all counties in each state. In some specifications, I further control for the interactions between all my baseline county characteristics X_c (including the signal in free space) and Post_t , which allows each baseline county characteristic to have a differential effect on voting over time. The standard errors are corrected for clustering at the state level.

Table 6 reports the results from the difference-in-difference specification, which substantially confirm the baseline results. Column 1 of Table 6 shows that, controlling for county fixed effects and year fixed effects, a 1 standard deviation increase in exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program decreased FDR's vote share by about 1.5 percentage points. The estimated effects remain robust after controlling for state-by-year fixed effects in column 2 and, if anything, become slightly larger when controlling for the interactions between baseline county characteristics and the Post dummy in column 3.³² Columns 4 and 5 of the table show that the estimated effects for the Republican Party and for other parties remain similar as found in the baseline.

The identifying assumption of the difference-in-difference specification is that vote shares in counties with different levels of exposure to Father Coughlin would have followed parallel trends absent of Father Coughlin's radio program. To check whether the parallel trends assumption is plausible, I use an event study on a longer panel. Specifically, I run equation (2) on the panel of 1912–1944, replacing Post_t with year dummies and using 1932 as the omitted category. The period of 1912–1944 covers all four presidential elections (1932–1944) involving FDR as well as five elections before. Online Appendix Figure A11 presents the event study figure and shows a sharp decrease in FDR's vote share in 1936 with no pre-trend, supporting the parallel trends assumption.

Moreover, online Appendix Table A6 presents the results from a triple-difference specification (i.e., $\text{Signal} \times \text{Post} \times \text{Catholic}$, where Catholic is defined in the same way as in panel A of Table 4). The triple-difference specification provides consistent evidence that Father Coughlin's broadcasts had larger effects in counties with more

³¹ Panel C of Figure 1 provides visual evidence that counties more exposed to Coughlin in 1936 saw greater reductions in FDR's vote shares between 1932 and 1936.

³² The results are also robust to controlling for the interaction between the 1932 signal strengths of Coughlin's radio program and the Post dummy.

TABLE 6—EXPOSURE TO FATHER COUGHLIN AND VOTING OUTCOMES, 1932–1936 PANEL

	Vote shares in presidential elections				
	FDR (Democrat)			Republican (4)	Others (5)
	(1)	(2)	(3)		
<i>Signal</i> × <i>Post</i>	−1.548 (0.914)	−1.967 (0.929)	−2.713 (0.795)	2.286 (0.689)	0.427 (0.333)
Observations	4,012	4,012	3,956	3,956	3,956
County fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes				
State-by-year fixed effects		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Baseline controls × <i>Post</i>			Yes	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.867	0.919	0.948	0.965	0.829
Mean of dependent variable	57.79	57.79	57.66	39.85	2.49
Standard deviation of dependent variable	11.39	11.39	11.36	11.49	3.04

Notes: This table shows the estimated effects of exposure to Coughlin on voting in presidential elections during 1932–1936. Each column represents the results from a separate OLS regression following the difference-in-difference specification in equation (2), where each observation is a county-year. The sample consists of all counties outside of the geographic South. The outcome variables are FDR’s vote shares in columns 1–3, the Republican vote share in column 4, and other parties’ vote share in column 5. The explanatory variable is the interaction between Coughlin signal strength in 1936 and a dummy variable *Post* that equals one for the year of 1936 and zero for the year of 1932. Each regression controls for county fixed effects. Column 1 controls for year fixed effects; column 2 controls for state-by-year fixed effects; and column 3 further controls for the interactions between each of the baseline county characteristics (*SignalFree*, socioeconomic, geographic, and past electoral outcomes, as in column 5 of Table 3) and *Post*. Columns 4 and 5 follow the same specification as in column 3. Standard errors, shown in parentheses, are corrected for clustering at the state level.

Catholics. Online Appendix Figure A12 also shows an event study version of the triple-difference specification, supporting the parallel trends assumption.

E. Additional Results and Robustness Checks

Besides attacking FDR, Father Coughlin also described the New Deal as an “economic failure” and that it was surrounded by “atheists” and “communists” (Warren 1996). Coughlin’s denunciation of the New Deal might have also negatively affected the Democratic Party in congressional elections. Consistent with this expectation, online Appendix Table A7 shows that a 1 standard deviation increase in exposure to Coughlin reduced Democratic vote shares by about 2.3 percentage points (4.6 percent of the mean) in the 1936 House election.

While the evidence so far comes from the 1930s and the 1940s, Figure 2 plots the estimated effects of exposure to Coughlin on Democratic vote shares in subsequent presidential elections up to 1972, the last year covered by the ICPSR Study 8611 dataset (Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 2006).³³ The conditional exogeneity assumption underlying my baseline analysis could be harder to satisfy in the long run. I therefore cautiously interpret the results as suggestive evidence that Coughlin’s

³³ As discussed in Section I, Coughlin was taken off the air in Fall 1940 and *Social Justice* was banned in 1942; he ceased public political activities at the order of the Church in 1942.

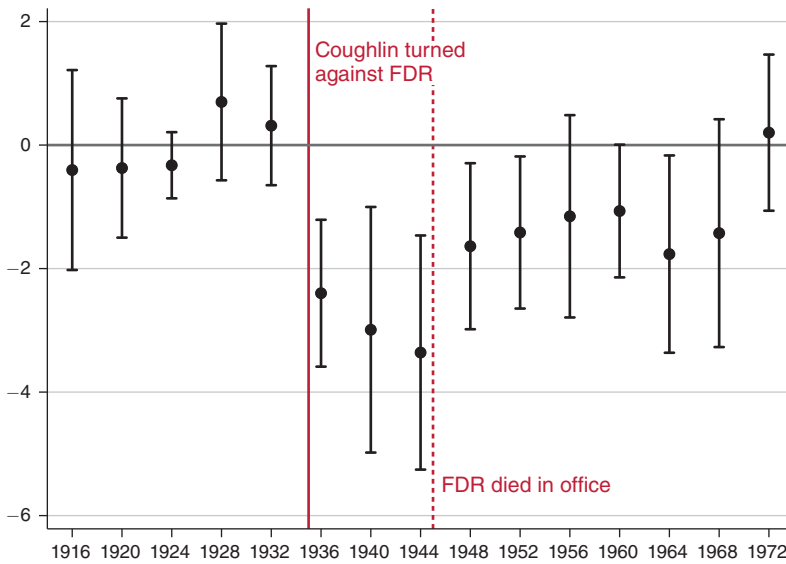


FIGURE 2. EXPOSURE TO COUGHLIN AND DEMOCRATIC VOTE SHARES, 1916–1972

Notes: This figure shows the estimated effects of exposure to Father Coughlin’s broadcast in 1936 on Democratic vote shares in each presidential election during 1916–1972. The estimates come from separate OLS regressions following equation (1) with the Democratic vote share in each presidential election as the outcome variable. The sample consists of all counties outside of the geographic South. The explanatory variable is the signal strength of Coughlin’s radio program in 1936. Each regression includes all baseline controls as in column 5 of Table 3. Standard errors are corrected for clustering at the state level. The dots are the estimated coefficients and the vertical lines represent the 95 percent confidence intervals. The vertical solid line in 1935 denotes the year in which Coughlin explicitly turned against FDR. The vertical dashed line in 1945 indicates the year in which FDR died during his last term in office.

radio program might have lasting effects, which appear to decrease after FDR died in office in 1945 and decline over time.³⁴

Besides, I perform additional robustness checks in online Appendix Table A8, which shows that the baseline result is robust to (i) using a binary measure of signal that equals one if the signal strength was above the median and zero otherwise (column 1); to (ii) restricting the sample to counties more than 100 miles from any of Coughlin’s stations, where the population tended to be smaller and the exposure to Coughlin was more likely exogenous (column 2);³⁵ to (iii) controlling for the “free space” variable more flexibly by including its squared and cubic terms as

³⁴I have explored potential mechanisms underlying the persistence in effects. Using individual survey data from the American National Election Studies from the 1950s onwards, I find that individuals from counties with greater exposure to Coughlin were more likely to associate the Democratic Party with war, socialism, and communism in the later years, consistent with Coughlin’s attacks on Democrats on these matters. Moreover, the effects were present among older cohorts of people directly exposed to Coughlin’s broadcasts but not among younger cohorts born after Coughlin had left the air, suggesting that direct exposure, instead of intergenerational transmission of values, was likely to explain the persistent effects. These results are available upon request. In addition, the persistence in effects was unlikely driven by future television stations that might have co-located with the 1936 Coughlin radio stations. In fact, online Appendix Figure A13 shows that the long-run estimates are similar when I focus on counties more than 100 miles away from any of the Coughlin stations, which would have been beyond the reach of TV signals originating from the location of Coughlin stations (Angelucci, Cagé, and Sinkinson 2020).

³⁵The results are qualitatively similar when focusing on counties that were 150, 200, 250, or 300 miles away from any of Coughlin’s stations.

additional controls (column 3); to (iv) controlling for per capita New Deal expenditures (grant, relief, and loans) using data from Fishback, Kantor, and Wallis (2003) (column 4); to (v) including southern counties in the sample (column 5);³⁶ and to (vi) weighting the regression with county population (column 6). In addition, I find similar results from an exercise exploiting the spatial discontinuity in exposure to Coughlin between neighboring and otherwise identical county pairs, as detailed in online Appendix E. The robustness of the results to this series of additional checks further supports the causal interpretation of the results.

V. Father Coughlin, Anti-Semitism, and Civilian Support for WWII

By the late 1930s, Father Coughlin had become a leading anti-Semitic icon, fascist sympathizer, and isolationism advocate in prewar America (Tull 1965, Brinkley 1982, Warren 1996). I now turn to examine the impact of Coughlin's radio broadcast on measures of anti-Semitism, fascist sympathies, and civilian support for the war effort in the United States.

A. Civilian Support for America's War Effort

First, I examine whether exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program affected civilian support for America's war effort during WWII. Specifically, I use data on county-level WWII bond sales in 1944, which come from the 1947 *County and City Data Book* (US Census Bureau 2012). I divide total bond sales by county population to obtain per capita sales of WWII bonds in each county. For the ease of interpretation, I use the natural log of per capita war bond sales as the outcome variable. To measure exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program, I collect data on Coughlin's stations in 1939 (Broadcasting Publications, Inc. 1939) and use the ITM software to measure their signal strengths across counties as I did in the baseline analysis.³⁷ I then run a similar regression as in equation (1), regressing war bond sales in 1944 on the signal strength of Coughlin's radio program in 1939. To be consistent with my baseline analysis, I again focus on regions outside of the geographic South.³⁸

Panel A of Table 7 shows that exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program in 1939 was associated with lower per capita war bond sales in 1944. Based on column 5, conditional on the baseline controls and per capita New Deal spending in the county, a 1 standard deviation increase in Coughlin signal was associated with

³⁶The coefficient in column 5 is somewhat smaller and less precisely estimated (p -value = 0.104), possibly because of Coughlin's much lower listenership in the South as well as the region's homogeneous support for Democrats during the 1930s (Strömberg 2004). The results, however, are qualitatively similar and statistically significant (p -value = 0.012) when I use the difference-in-difference specification with the whole country.

³⁷I identify Coughlin's 1939 stations from the magazine, *Broadcasting*, July 1, 1939. <https://worldradiohistory.com/Archive-BC/BC-1939/1939-07-01-BC.pdf>. Previous historical work on Father Coughlin generally agrees that Coughlin's broadcasts did not concentrate on isolationism or anti-Semitism until the late 1930s (Tull 1965, Brinkley 1982, Warren 1996). Online Appendix Figure A14 documents significant changes in exposure to Coughlin's broadcasts across counties between 1936 and 1939. This means that the 1936 signal, when used to measure exposure to Coughlin's isolationist or anti-Semitic broadcasts in the late 1930s, is likely to contain large measurement errors. I therefore use the 1939 signal to measure exposure to Coughlin's isolationist and anti-Semitic broadcasts.

³⁸Results based on the full sample of counties are qualitatively similar and remain statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

TABLE 7—EVIDENCE FROM WWII BOND SALES AND THE GERMAN-AMERICAN BUND

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Panel A. ln(WWII bond sales per capita in 1944)</i>					
<i>Signal</i>	−0.378 (0.073)	−0.195 (0.060)	−0.185 (0.056)	−0.169 (0.065)	−0.149 (0.060)
Observations	1,993	1,979	1,961	1,961	1,960
<i>SignalFree</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic controls		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Past electoral controls			Yes	Yes	Yes
State fixed effects				Yes	Yes
New Deal expenditure					Yes
R^2	0.180	0.516	0.522	0.558	0.576
<i>Panel B. Having a local branch of the Bund</i>					
	OLS				Probit
<i>Signal</i>	0.161 (0.075)	0.148 (0.059)	0.099 (0.045)	0.085 (0.049)	0.010 (0.005)
Observations	752	752	743	494	589
<i>SignalFree</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Geographic controls		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socioeconomic controls			Yes	Yes	Yes
Sample	Full	Full	Full	50 miles away	Full
R^2	0.121	0.140	0.390	0.377	0.560
Mean of dependent variable	0.068	0.068	0.061	0.047	0.076
Standard deviation of dependent variable	0.252	0.252	0.239	0.211	0.266

Notes: Each column represents the results from a separate OLS regression, where each observation is a county in panel A and a city in panel B. *Signal* is the signal strength of Coughlin's radio program in 1939 in the county (panel A) or city (panel B), and *SignalFree* is the the hypothetical signal strength in free space in 1939 in the respective geographic unit. In panel A, the sample consists of all counties outside of the geographic South. The outcome variable is the natural log of per capita purchase of WWII bonds in 1944. The county geographic, socioeconomic, and past electoral controls are the same as those included in column 5 of Table 3. Column 5 also controls for per capita New Deal grant, relief, and loans. In panel B, the sample consists of all identifiable cities in the 1930 census that were outside of the geographic South and had a population above 10,000. The outcome is a binary variable that equals one if the city had a branch of the German-American Bund in 1940 and zero otherwise. City geographic controls include elevation and terrain ruggedness as well as their squared terms. City socioeconomic controls include population, percent unemployed, average occupational income score, percent owning a radio, percent of Jewish descent, percent of recent German immigrants, percent native, and an indicator for large city (having a population above 100,000). Column 4 restricts the sample to cities more than 50 miles away from any of Coughlin stations in 1939. Column 5 uses a probit model and shows the marginal effect at the mean of the covariates; the pseudo R^2 from the probit regression is reported. Standard errors, shown in parentheses, are corrected for clustering at the state level in both panels.

about a 15 percent decrease in per capita WWII bond sales.³⁹ The results suggest that exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program in the late 1930s might have lowered civilian support for America's war effort.

B. Evidence from the German-American Bund

In a broadcast following Nazi Germany's Kristallnacht in November 1938, Father Coughlin notoriously labeled the attacks on Jews as a defense against communism (Warren 1996). Based on the December 1938 Gallop Poll, panel B of online

³⁹Caprettini, Schmidt-Fischbach, and Voth (2020) finds that welfare support from the New Deal increased patriotism in the United States during WWII.

Appendix Figure A10 shows that while close to 70 percent of Catholics approved of what Coughlin said in general, only about 20 percent of Jews did. It is natural to wonder whether exposure to Father Coughlin's anti-Semitic broadcasts throughout the period of 1938–1939 affected anti-Semitism in America.

A challenge to study anti-Semitism or fascist sympathies in prewar America, however, is the lack of data measuring these outcomes. To overcome the challenge, I collect new data from the FBI records (FBI 1940) on the German-American Bund, the leading anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi organization in prewar America (Strong 1941). The data allow me to identify all the cities with a local branch of the Bund in 1940, a total of 54 cities.

I conduct a similar exercise as in the baseline analysis at the city level, where the outcome is a binary variable that equals one if a city had a local branch of the Bund in 1940 and the explanatory variable is city-level signal strength of Coughlin's radio program in 1939.⁴⁰ Panel B of Table 7 reports the results from this exercise. Based on column 3 of the table, conditional on the full set of controls, a 1 standard deviation increase in Coughlin exposure was associated with about a 9.9 percentage point higher likelihood of having a local branch of the German-American Bund.⁴¹ The estimate changes little in column 4 when I further restrict my sample to only those cities more than 50 miles away from a Coughlin station, whose exposure to Coughlin was more likely to be exogenous. The last column uses a probit model and reports the marginal effect at the mean of the covariates.⁴² The result from the probit model is qualitatively similar.

As a placebo test, I examine the presence of the Friends of New Germany, which was pro-Nazi and the immediate predecessor of the German-American Bund before the latter's founding in 1936 (Strong 1941).⁴³ Column 1 of online Appendix Table A9 shows that, conditional on the same set of city controls used for the Bund analysis, exposure to Coughlin in the late 1930s was not significantly correlated with the presence of the Friends of New Germany in 1934, before Coughlin's broadcasts turned anti-Semitic. The finding holds when I further control in column 2 for the full set of baseline county socioeconomic and political characteristics. In contrast, I find that the results on the German-American Bund are robust to controlling for the full set of baseline county characteristics (column 3) and for the presence of the Friends of New Germany in 1934 (column 4). Overall, the results suggest

⁴⁰Since the smallest city with a local branch of the Bund had a population of 11,710, I define the sample to consist of all identifiable cities in the 1930 census that had a population of 10,000 or above.

⁴¹The controls included are the "free space" variable, state fixed effects, geographic characteristics (i.e., elevation, terrain ruggedness, and their squared terms), and 1930 city socioeconomic characteristics (i.e., population, percent unemployed, average occupational income score, percent owning a radio, percent of Jewish descent, percent of recent German immigrants, percent native-born, and an indicator for having a population above 100,000) generated from the 1930 census IPUMS microdata (Ruggles et al. 2020). I measure population of Jewish descent by counting individuals whose mother tongues were either Yiddish or Hebrew in the 1930 census. I measure population of recent German immigrants by counting individuals whose mother tongues were German or who had at least one parent born in Germany in the 1930 census.

⁴²The sample size is smaller for column 5, because the inclusion of state fixed effects in the probit regression drops any state that did not have a branch of the Bund.

⁴³I obtain the location of branches of the Friends of New Germany from the June 7, 1934 issue of the *New York Times*, which covered the effort by the McCormack-Dickstein Special Committee on Un-American Activities to investigate Nazi propaganda activities in America. A caveat is that 5 out of the 21 local branches of the Friends of New Germany were not named by the *Times* and hence are not included in the data.

that Father Coughlin's radio program likely have increased fascist sympathies and anti-Semitic sentiment in prewar America.⁴⁴

VI. Conclusion

New media and information technologies make it easier for charismatic individuals to gain influence. Yet, the possibility that a charismatic individual can shape political outcomes with the media remains little studied. This paper assembles a unique dataset to study the political impacts of the first populist radio personality in American history. I find that exposure to Father Coughlin's radio program attacking the New Deal administration decreased support for FDR in the 1936 presidential election. The results suggest that Father Coughlin had a high persuasion rate of about 28 percent and that religion likely played an important role in his persuasiveness. Moreover, I find evidence that places more exposed to Father Coughlin's anti-Semitic and isolationist broadcasts in the late 1930s were more likely to form a local branch of the pro-Nazi German-American Bund and sold fewer war bonds during WWII.

My findings provide the first systematic evidence that a charismatic individual can manipulate the media to influence voting behavior. Although specific to the episode of Father Coughlin, the results provide more general insights on the substantial influence of charismatic leaders with access to modern media and the potential for religion to enhance that influence.

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⁴⁴Using individual survey data from the Gallup Poll in November 1938, I also find suggestive evidence that individuals more exposed to Coughlin were more likely to approve Nazis' treatment of Jews and less willing to accept Jewish exiles from Germany into the United States. The results are available upon request.

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