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ARTICLE

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"Strongmen" Don't Redistribute: Illiberal Leaders on the Right and Worsening Economic Inequality

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Abstract

Illiberal leaders—sometimes called strongmen—often campaign on being more effective. The tradeoff presented to citizens is straightforward: they promise to cut through the indecisiveness and gridlock of democratic debate and give people what they want. Such leaders often use the rhetoric of economic grievances, corruption, and redistribution, but do they follow through on those promises? We answer this question using data from 38,557 speeches by 381 leaders in 120 countries between 1998 and 2024, combined with economic indicators from the World Bank and V-Dem measures on regime type and resource inequality. Utilizing a machine learning approach, we employ BERT language models that place leaders' speeches on two continuous dimensions measuring liberal–illiberal speech and left–right economic positions. We test whether illiberals are more effective at translating their economic preferences into material changes. We show that illiberal leaders do deliver the goods—but only when they are on the economic right and only in the direction of greater economic inequality. Illiberals resemble populists because they engage in the rhetoric of cultural exclusion, but they do not push a distributional policy that benefits most citizens. The policy preferences of illiberal leftists, on the other hand, have no apparent effect. This article makes methodological contributions by building a one-dimensional scale for measuring the economic left–right positions of political leaders. This article also contributes to our understanding of the pernicious effects of illiberal leaders in deepening economic inequality.

Keywords
authoritarian; BERT language models; democracy; economic inequality; illiberal; material distribution; populism; strong leader; strongman; text analysis

1. Introduction

Actors like Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, and Tayyip Erdoğan claim to be fighters on their supporters' behalf. They fight to protect culture, but also to battle corruption, inflation, and the regulatory and economic policies of out-of-touch elites. From the bottom-up, much work shows that citizens tend to turn to strong leadership in times of economic crisis (Chong & Gradstein, 2008; Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Schafer, 2021; Sprong et al., 2019; Weyland, 2003; Xuereb et al., 2021). People's behavior suggests that they believe the delegation of power to a less constrained executive can strengthen citizens' voices against the resistance of horizontal checks and competing elite interests (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Chong & Gradstein, 2008). The sources of the psychological appeal of illiberal "strongman" leadership—as a reaction to instability, uncertainty, and a sense of threat—are also well-established (Duckitt et al., 2002; Harms et al., 2018; Inglehart et al., 2006; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Stenner, 2005). The perception that illiberal "strongmen" can more effectively deliver economic results thus appears central to their appeal.

The rise of illiberal leaders who challenge democratic norms and institutions while claiming to fight for ordinary citizens presents a potential corrective to economic inequality in democracies. Economic inequality motivates support for illiberal types (Chong & Gradstein, 2008; Sprong et al., 2019), giving such leaders cover to weaken institutional checks on their power. Although such leaders are often labeled as "populists," we emphasize the distinction between populism—defined as a mode of politics that focuses on the conflict between "the people" and "the elites" (Funke et al., 2023; Mudde, 2017)—and illiberalism—characterized by the critique of liberal democratic norms and institutions of accountability, attacks on minority rights, the imposition of monolithic cultural standards, and the concentration of executive power (Enyedi, 2024). A rational political actor in this situation would have little reason to fix structural problems that they find politically advantageous. While such illiberal leaders clearly deliver on reinforcing the cultural standards of the majority, and on villainizing gender and ethnic minorities (Ergas et al., 2022; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), only a handful of studies explore their economic impact (Funke et al., 2023; Strobl et al., 2023). Therefore, this article asks: When it comes to economic policy, does illiberal leadership produce more effective redistribution?

The empirical evidence on whether illiberal leadership delivers economic benefits is mixed. While democracy is often assumed to reduce inequality through greater participation and redistribution, both Acemoglu et al. (2015) and Scheve and Stasavage (2017) find little evidence for a relationship between democratic institutions and improved economic equality. On the other hand, authoritarian leaders—who by definition are less subject to a wide variety of special interests—might be more able to act on their own preferences and, thus, reduce inequality if that is their goal. In this direction, leaders' personal backgrounds and ideological orientations do appear to matter, with Han and Han (2023) finding evidence that leaders from poorer backgrounds are more likely to pursue redistributive policies in authoritarian contexts—though they identify similar patterns in democracies as well (Han & Han, 2021). However, populist leaders, despite their anti-elite rhetoric, generally fail to reduce inequality (Strobl et al., 2023) and overall have a deleterious effect on GDP per capita and macroeconomic stability (Funke et al., 2023). Therefore, whether leaders' economic policy preferences are amplified by their style or constrained by institutions represents a gap in recent literature on the effects of illiberal governance. This article addresses this gap by testing the relationship between illiberal leaders' economic positions and subsequent economic inequality.

To answer this question, we draw on the speeches of political leaders in 120 countries over 25 years, from 1998 to 2024. We use quantitative text analysis methods and the assistance of LLMs to place these leaders on continuous economic left–right and liberal–illiberal scales based on the content of their public statements. Combined with economic indicators—such as GDP growth (World Bank, 2024) and the equal distribution of resources (Sigman & Lindberg, 2015)—we test whether leaders who have contempt for institutional constraints are more likely to get their way on economic policy. Because our methodological approach provides both left–right and liberal–illiberal scales for the same leaders, we can test the interaction between these variables and determine whether the direction of the effect is asymmetric. Our results show that illiberal leaders do have a greater influence on material inequality, but only those who are on the right. Using time-series models with country-fixed effects, we find that the combination of illiberal leadership and economically right-wing preferences is a significant predictor of future increases in inequality. On the other hand, the economic preferences of liberal leaders have no apparent effect, nor do those of leaders who are left and illiberal. Illiberal "strongmen" are more likely to deliver material changes, but only in the direction of greater inequality.

2. The Causes of Inequality

Economic inequality has numerous pernicious effects. Inequality can threaten the stability of democracy (Houle, 2009), incite higher levels of violence (Enamorado et al., 2016), hamper economic growth (Stiglitz, 2016), motivate anti-social behavior (Fehr, 2018), damage social cohesion (Barr et al., 2024), undermine health outcomes (Neckerman & Torche, 2007), reduce levels of political participation (Solt, 2008), diminish political equality (Houle, 2018), amplify polarization (Gunderson, 2022), decrease support for democracy (Krieckhaus et al., 2014), and motivate the desire for a strong leader (Sprong et al., 2019). Inequality can, therefore, propel political instability as citizens lose faith in democratic institutions' ability to deliver fair economic outcomes. If citizens instead turn to a strong leader to solve the problem of inequality it could also lead to democratic decline.

Some explanations for economic inequality emphasize the role of structural factors and slow-changing institutions. Structural explanations include globalization and technological change—which favors skilled, educated workers—the transformation of labor markets through declining unionization, and shifts in corporate structure toward financialization and maximizing shareholder value (Neckerman & Torche, 2007; Piketty & Saez, 2003). Boix (2010) presents a historical institutional approach. He shows that initial inequalities in wealth, land ownership, and political power lead to institutions that perpetuate economic disparities through restricted access to public goods and political participation. Such factors tend to be outside the power of governments to influence in the short or even medium-term but would need to be accounted for when interpreting the influence of individual political leadership.

Economic inequality is also the result of policy choices. Policies that can effectively reduce inequality include progressive taxation of income and inheritance, expansion of public education, universal welfare provisions, minimum wage guarantees, and labor market institutions that strengthen workers' bargaining power

(Bourguignon, 2018). In the other direction, deregulation and trade liberalization appear to increase inequality (Bergh & Nilsson, 2010). The effectiveness of these policies is evident in cross-national comparisons: European countries with more generous social welfare provisions and progressive tax systems have consistently lower levels of post-tax-and-transfer inequality than the United States (Scheve & Stasavage, 2017). We might expect policies that favor workers and redistribute downward to become law more often in regimes with citizen enfranchisement. However, the adoption of such policies is not necessarily more common in democratic systems.

Democracies are not systematically more economically equal. While the median voter theorem suggests that democracies should reduce inequality through greater redistribution—since the median voter typically has below-average income and would benefit from redistributive policies—empirical research finds little systematic relationship between democratic institutions and reduced inequality (Acemoglu et al., 2015; Scheve & Stasavage, 2017). Two factors may explain this puzzle: First, citizens' preferences for redistribution are shaped not just by their economic position but also by beliefs about social mobility, the fairness of market outcomes, and other ideological factors (Piketty, 1995; Scheve & Stasavage, 2017). Second, even when popular demand for redistribution exists, democratic institutions may fail to translate these preferences into policy. This can occur through various mechanisms—electoral institutions may favor wealthy interests (Iversen & Soskice, 2006), policymaking may be captured by economic elites (Bartels, 2018; Gilens & Page, 2014), or democracy itself may be "captured" by wealthy elites who increase their investments in de facto power to offset their reduced de jure power under democratic institutions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008). Even if citizens in a democracy want redistribution, they may not have the political power to make it happen.

3. Do Illiberal "Strongmen" Redistribute? If So, For Whom?

We define the "strongman" leadership type as illiberal, rather than populist, because illiberalism provides a more coherent, internally consistent conceptualization that better describes the agenda of "strong" leaders. Populists may criticize elites, but they are not necessarily illiberal and can accommodate liberal democratic norms and institutions (Blokker, 2021; Canihac, 2022; Wolkenstein, 2019). On the other hand, illiberalism, insofar as it challenges key components of liberal democracy—such as constraints on executive power—has clearly defined political goals about how power should be organized. "Strong" leaders who display illiberal tendencies may or may not adopt populist rhetoric, but their willingness to break institutional constraints raises the possibility that they could be more effective at implementing their preferred economic policies, whether those policies increase or decrease inequality.

While illiberal leaders might campaign on economic grievances, their actual economic preferences, and ability to follow through on those preferences, is an empirical question. Certainly, there are leftist illiberals, such as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, or Evo Morales in Bolivia, who propose state interventions to relieve poverty and reduce inequality. However, in the time period covered by this article (1998 to 2024), such cases are limited geographically (to Latin America) and tend to be the exception. Most illiberal actors are on the right, and embrace nativist, cultural issues (Guasti, 2021; Margalit et al., 2022; Mudde, 2014; Pirro, 2023; Pirro & Stanley, 2022), to the extent that the terms far right and illiberal are often used interchangeably. Gender and immigration are central to illiberals' political messaging (Ergas et al., 2022; Halikiopoulou &

Vlandas, 2020; Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022), even if immigration is not exclusively a far-right issue (Carvalho & Ruedin, 2020). Illiberalism, thus, tends to be associated with the right and cultural intolerance:

H1: Illiberal leaders are more likely to be on the economic right than the economic left.

Some research suggests that left parties "neoliberalize" (Snegovaya, 2024) and that illiberals' economic left–right positions tend to be more ambiguous (Costello & Lilienfeld, 2021). Toplišek (2020) describes how illiberal right-wing parties like Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland adopt "heterodox" economic strategies, and both Bagashka et al. (2022) and Binev (2023) discuss how illiberal parties in Central and Eastern Europe take advantage of policy gaps vacated by traditional leftist parties. Yet, numerous illiberal leaders in very different countries—Erdoğan in Turkey, Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the US, Modi in India, or Bolsonaro in Brazil—also adopt some typically economic right positions, such as being pro-privatization, pro-business, and anti-unions (Chatterji et al., 2019; Fabry, 2019; Tansel, 2018). Such actors maintain neoliberal economics in practice while preserving a sizable role for the state—sometimes called "authoritarian neoliberalism." Although their economic positioning may be less salient than cultural issues, we expect that illiberal leaders systematically favor right-wing economic policies.

The economic policies of illiberals matter not only because of the recent political success of these leaders, but also because economic conditions can motivate popular support for their style of leadership. Economic and political instability can diminish popular support for democracy, and these factors, as well as economic growth under illiberals, can shore up support for non-democratic leaders (Bosco & Verney, 2012; Carlin & Singer, 2011; Guriev & Treisman, 2020; Kurlantzick, 2013; Schafer, 2021; Singer, 2018; Teixeira et al., 2014; Weyland, 2003). Furthermore, economic inequality specifically can motivate popular support for illiberals, with evidence showing that people see fewer checks and balances on the executive as a way to counter-balance the influence of unelected elites (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Chong & Gradstein, 2008; Sprong et al., 2019; Xuereb et al., 2021). People are willing to delegate away democracy to leaders they see as potentially being more effective in addressing economic issues like inequality. However, while illiberal leaders might indeed be able to propel the economy due to their cutback of institutional checks on their power, they are unlikely to do this in favor of the disadvantaged. As illustrated by Rathgeb (2024, p. 7), illiberal leaders might pursue some left-wing economic policies to please their working-class voters, yet, such selective status protection does typically not include inequality-reducing policies in the sense of addressing vertical inequalities between the rich and the poor, between labor-market insiders and outsiders, or between native and alien workforces. In other words, while illiberals might claim in their speeches to reduce inequality to attract voters, there is a high likelihood of seeing an increase in inequality under their rule:

H2: Illiberal leaders have a negative impact on inequality.

Are illiberal leaders more effective at translating their economic preferences into material outcomes? The failure of leaders in democracies to address economic inequality (Scheve & Stasavage, 2017) suggests that adherence to liberal democratic norms may constrain leaders' ability to implement their preferred policies. Political elites' capacity to address economic inequality in democracies could be particularly constrained if policymaking is captured by unelected elites (Bartels, 2018; Gilens & Page, 2014; Winters, 2011) or if democratic institutions themselves have been co-opted (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008). Leaders who are willing to concentrate power in the executive and bypass institutional constraints should therefore have greater capacity to implement their economic agenda, whether that agenda increases or decreases inequality. This leads to our third hypothesis:

> *H3: The relationship between leaders' economic left–right position and inequality is stronger for illiberal leaders than for liberal leaders.*

This hypothesis proposes to test whether disregard for liberal democratic norms enables leaders to more effectively translate their economic preferences into material results. A significant interaction between leaders' economic position and their liberal–illiberal stance would indicate that illiberals do indeed "deliver the goods"—though not necessarily in the redistributive direction that their supporters might expect.

4. Data

To test the above hypotheses, this study uses political leaders' speeches. We focus on speeches that are representative of leaders who wield executive power (prime ministers, presidents, or sometimes monarchs, when appropriate). The speech data combines several existing datasets of public-facing speeches (Hawkins et al., 2022; Maerz & Schneider, 2020, 2021; Wagner & Enyedi, 2024). Additionally, the authors scraped the websites and YouTube channels of executives. The choice of speeches is intended to capture leaders' public-facing persona as presented to domestic audiences. For this reason, we did not use speeches that were given at the United Nations (Dasandi et al., 2023), for example. Overall, the data used to calculate leaders' positions comprises 38,557 speeches by 381 leaders in 120 countries over 25 years, from 1998 to 2024, for a total of 2,080 country-year observations, with 66 percent of the observations from democratic regimes, and 34 percent from authoritarian regimes. Figure 1 summarizes the time series data for our two dimensions of interest: economic left–right and liberal–illiberal positions of political leaders.

Sources for the speech data cover many languages. We chose to translate the speeches into English because it allowed us to read the speeches. Original languages include, for example, Turkish, Danish, Armenian, and Hungarian. Machine translation methods such as the Google Translate API have been shown to produce high-quality translations that compare well to human translation (de Vries et al., 2018). By translating the speeches into English, we can assess the content of the original speeches as well as the classification results of the text analysis.

We break the speeches into shorter, semantically coherent chunks roughly a paragraph in length. We did this for both practical and conceptual reasons. Large Language Models (LLMs) based on the Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers (BERT) architecture can only process text of 512 tokens or less (roughly 400 words). The speeches used for this analysis are often several thousand words or longer. We split speeches into shorter sections of no longer than 200 words using the semantic text splitter Python package (Brandt, 2023). We chose 200 words because we found that to be the optimal length for capturing meaningful parts of speeches that addressed only one idea or topic. Using topic classification, we further refined the paragraphs to only those about the economy, resulting in a total of 109,374 paragraph-length parts of speech.

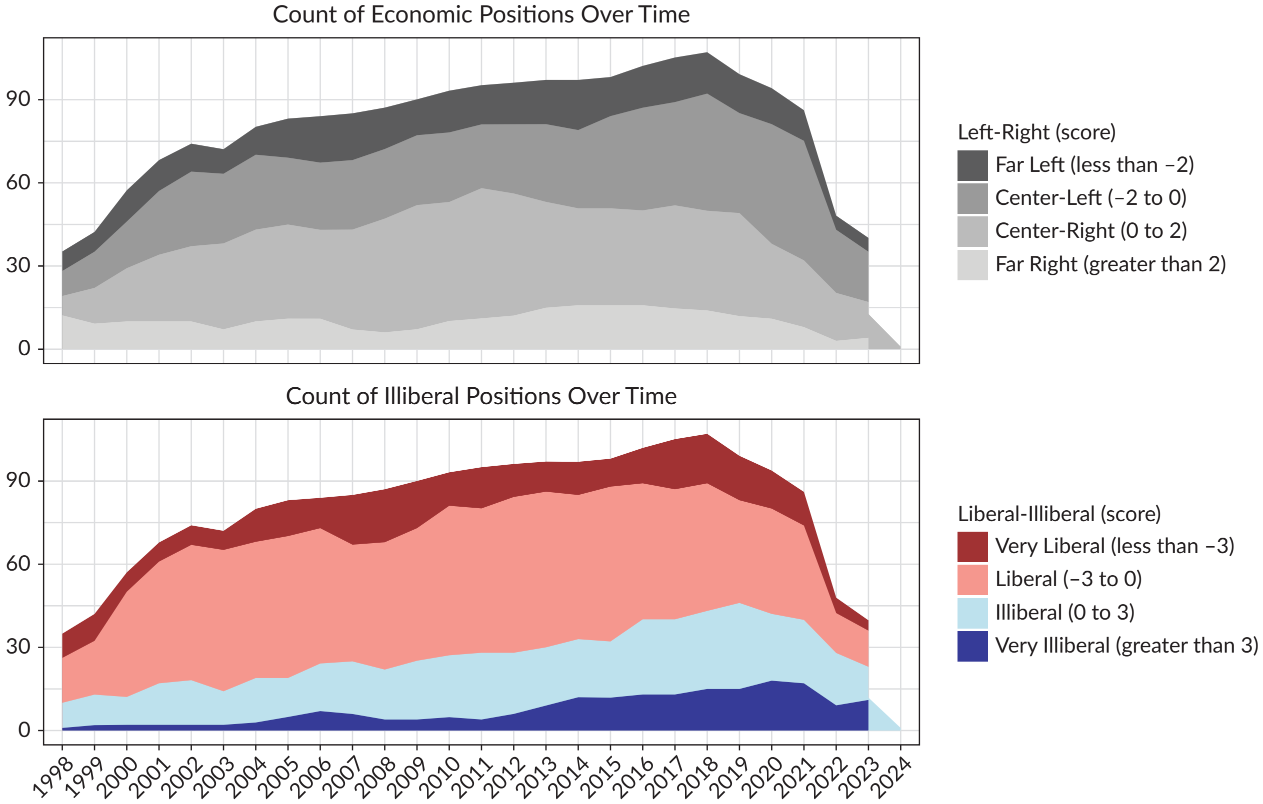

Figure 1. Description of time series data of economic left–right and liberal–illiberal positions of political leaders. Note: Each scale is continuous but has been divided into four levels for descriptive purposes.

5. Research Design

5.1. Measuring Leaders' Positions Using Speech Data

We use LLMs fine-tuned on hand-coded text examples to build a left–right economic scale based on leaders' speeches. The LLMs identify when leaders take leftist positions—such as supporting universalistic welfare spending or taking pro-labor stances—or rightist positions—such as encouraging a pro-business environment and opposing government spending—and track whether leaders more frequently take economically left or right positions. The scale places leaders on a left–right position ranging from −10 (for very leftist) to 10 (for very economically right). A score of 0 indicates an economically centrist position.

Training data used to fine-tune the LLMs was checked by hand. Strong leftist positions were defined by support for a robust social safety net, government welfare spending, economic redistribution, unions, or labor rights. Leftist positions are also defined by criticism of structural economic disadvantages, economic inequality, and the role of government in addressing these. Rightist positions are defined by strong support for free market principles, small government, and minimal regulation. Statements opposing unions and workers' protections, and the belief that government should play no role in correcting economic inequalities, were also indicative of an economically right position.

During the hand-coding process, we scored statements on an economic left–right scale from −10 to 10. Statements that were clear and strong demonstrations of a leftist position were given a score of −10. Statements that contained leftist positions but were less clear or less strong were given a lower score such as −6 or −3. We gave a score of 0 to statements that were about the economy but did not clearly take a left–right position. On the other hand, strong, clear statements of rightist positions were given a score of 10. If statements contained rightist positions but with some ambiguity, then they were given a score somewhere between 1 and 10 depending on the strength and clarity of the rightist position in the statement. Using this approach, we hand-coded 3,088 real examples drawn from the speeches of political leaders, which we used to fine-tune a BERT model to score speeches on a −10 to 10 left–right economic scale.

Language modeling through word embeddings enables a more nuanced approach to text classification by capturing the contextual relationships between words. In this study, we leveraged the BERT architecture (Devlin et al., 2018), which embeds words within their surrounding linguistic context, allowing for a more sophisticated interpretation of semantic subtleties like illiberalism and economic left–right positions. In particular, we used the DistilBERT model because it is computationally more efficient, but retains 97 percent of the language understanding capabilities of larger BERT models (Sanh et al., 2020). We fine-tuned a DistilBERT model on the 3,088 hand-checked examples using PyTorch (Paszke et al., 2019). The model architecture consists of the DistilBERT transformer base with an additional linear regression layer to output scores on a continuous −10 to 10 left–right economic scale.

We also score the same leaders on a liberal–illiberal scale—using parts of their speeches that were about group identity, institutions, or accountability. This speech corpus, thus, covers the same leaders but is distinct from their speech chunks about the economy—with only a 10 percent overlap, for example when leaders address topics such as social spending that helps minorities or invokes feelings of national pride over economic achievements. The liberal–illiberal scale is first introduced by Maerz et al. (2025), and draws on a similar approach to the one we use in this article based on work by Maerz (2019), Maerz and Schneider (2020, 2021), and Schafer et al. (2025). Like the left–right economic scale, the liberal–illiberal scale also ranges from –10 to 10, with –10 indicating very liberal speech and 10 indicating very illiberal speech.

The liberal–illiberal scale is composed of two dimensions: inclusive–exclusive values and power concentration–dispersion. The inclusive–exclusive values dimension captures the extent to which speakers support political exclusion or inclusion based on group identity. Statements representing exclusive values might suggest imposing monolithic cultural standards, disliking universalism, disregarding principles of human equality, and condoning the curtailment of rights. Inclusive values are represented by celebrations of diversity, multiculturalism, cooperation, and tolerance.

The power concentration–dispersion dimension refers primarily to institutional accountability and checks on the use of power. Illiberal statements on this dimension include suggesting that the executive should not be limited in their exercise of power, attacks against the legitimacy of institutions responsible for horizontal accountability, and accusations that political opponents or the media are enemies of the nation. Liberal statements on the power concentration–dispersion dimension, on the other hand, support transparency and accountability, and praise the institutions responsible for enforcing accountability in democracies (such as the media and judiciary). These two dimensions—inclusive–exclusive values and power concentration–dispersion—measure leaders' commitment to two key aspects of liberal democracy.

These two measures—economic left–right and liberal–illiberal stances on group identity and institutions—describe two of the most fundamental ideological positions that leaders can take on economic and socio-political issues. Our approach utilizing BERT language models allows us to map leaders on continuous −10 to 10 scales based on their declared positions to domestic audiences. In Section 6 we present descriptive statistics demonstrating the face-validity of these measures. We also use these measures to show whether leaders we might typically describe as "strongmen" are indeed more economically on the right and to test whether their attitudes predict subsequent changes in redistributive policy and inequality within a country.

5.2. Modeling the Impact of Leaders' Positions on Inequality

Leaders' positions—even very powerful leaders—take time to produce changes in government policy and actual material redistribution. Therefore, to test our argument about the impact of strong leaders' economic ideology, we model the effect of their positions as having a two-year lag on inequality. This two-year lag allows time for leaders to influence existing policy and for the effects of policy changes to percolate through the economic system.

We also control for structural and historical institutional factors that might influence inequality independent of policy choices by leaders. We do not control for factors such as the regulation of unions or tax rates, which while certainly influencing inequality (Neckerman & Torche, 2007), are downstream of leaders' preferences. In more wealthy countries—as measured by high GDP per capita—there is more opportunity for greater economic disparity. Likewise, GDP growth and decline can increase or flatten economic inequality. Thus, we control for these structural factors. GDP per capita and growth data are drawn from the World Bank (2024). The presence of democratic institutions could facilitate greater levels of accountability, and we control for this using two different variables: V-Dem's Regimes of the World index (RoW), which has four levels: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy (Lührmann et al., 2018) and V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). Historical trends shaped by the choice of economic institutions at critical early moments or by the timing of technological change can also determine levels of economic inequality (Boix, 2010). Thus, we include country-fixed effects, γ_i, to control for time-invariant structural factors and cluster the standard errors by country. The country-fixed effects model is provided below:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{it} &= \beta_0 + \beta_{1\text{EconLeftRight}_{i(t-2)}} \times \beta_{2\text{Liberal-Illiberal}_{i(t-2)}} + \beta_{3\text{EconLeftRight}_{i(t-2)}} + \beta_{4\text{Liberal-Illiberal}_{i(t-2)}} + \beta_{5\text{Regime}_{it}} + \beta_{6\text{GDPpc}_{it}} \\ &\quad + \beta_{7\text{GDP growth}_{i(t-1)}} + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{it} \end{aligned}$$

The dependent variable, Y_{it}, is inequality as measured by V-Dem's equal distribution of resources index, *v2xeg_eqdr*, that measures the equal distribution of resources using a four-part index comprised of indicators for particularistic vs. public goods, means-tested vs. universalistic welfare policies, educational equality, and health inequality (Coppedge et al., 2024; Sigman & Lindberg, 2015). As an additional robustness check, we use the Gini index from Solt's World Income Inequality Database, which is in Section 3 of the Supplementary File (Solt, 2021). We include an interaction of leaders' economic left–right position and their liberal–illiberal position to test whether the effect of leaders' economic ideology is conditioned by their regard for liberal norms and institutional checks. This interaction allows us to understand whether illiberals do indeed redistribute more effectively. This model allows us to test whether leaders' economic left–right position is a significant predictor of future levels of inequality.

6. Results

6.1. Description of Leaders' Positions

As an initial validity check, we examine the economic left–right positions of some prominent world leaders. Figure 2 aggregates all statements in our dataset about the economy by leaders such as Tayyip Erdoğan, Donald Trump, and Emmanuel Macron. We provide the point estimates and standard errors around those points. Wide standard errors are primarily due to few observations for some leaders, though could also indicate variation in leaders' position over time. While individual parts of speeches could potentially receive a score ranging from −10 (very left) to 10 (very right), statements receiving extreme scores are rare. Rather, averaging across many speeches, leaders' left–right position tends to fall between a narrower band, ranging from approximately −4 to 4.

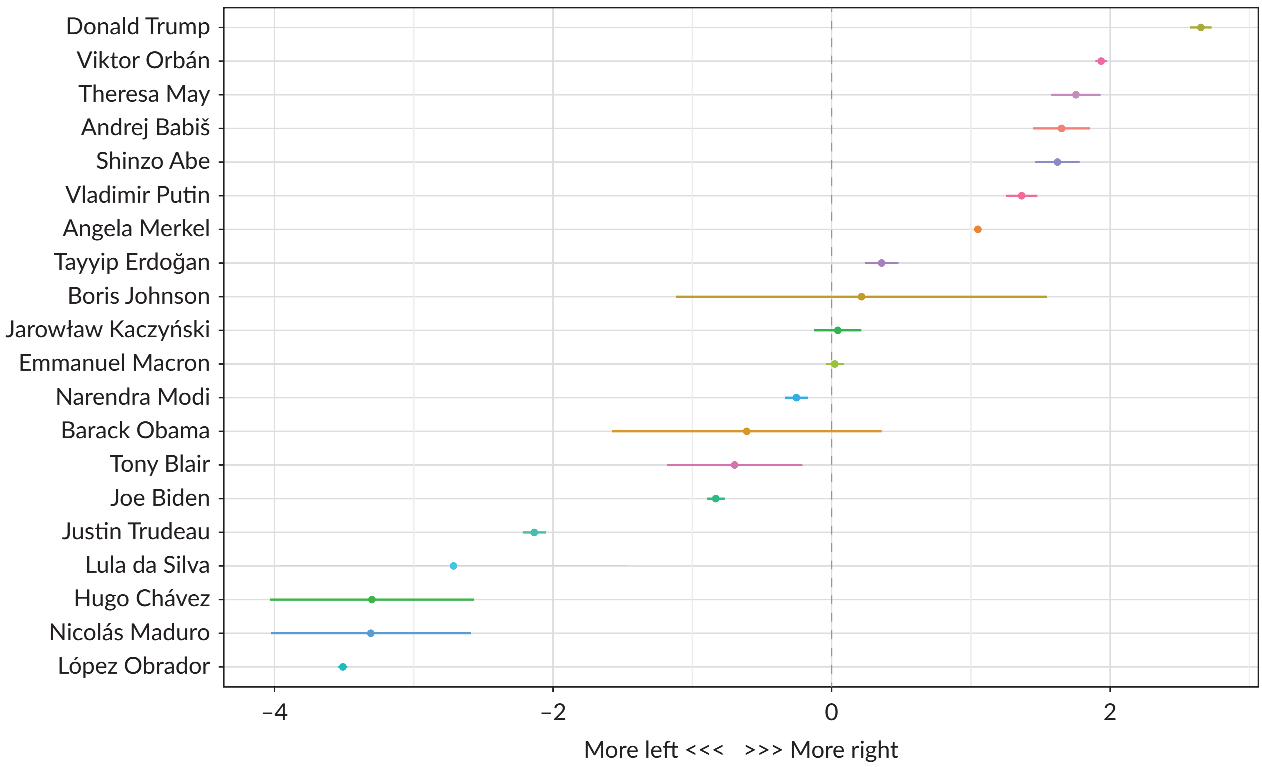

Figure 2. Economic left–right scores of world leaders. Point estimates average over leaders' entire tenure.

Leaders' positions, based on speech scored by our DistilBERT model, fall approximately where we would expect. Donald Trump, Theresa May, and Andrej Babis are on the right end of the economic spectrum. In their professional career, all three worked in business or finance and were leaders of explicitly pro-business, pro-free market parties. On the other hand, Latin American leaders suspicious of the free market who, while in government, led state interventions aimed at correcting market inequalities, are furthest on the left. "Third-way" politicians like Tony Blair and Barack Obama are on the center left. Perhaps surprisingly, Viktor Orbán falls considerably to the right. Despite preserving a strong role for the state, Orbán regularly expresses pro-business, anti-union sentiment—and has passed regressive policies such as reducing unemployment benefits and criminalizing homelessness (Fabry, 2019). Granted, this figure flattens any variation these leaders may express in their economic left–right position over time. But our purpose in

Figure 2 is demonstrative. By using our DistilBERT model to score paragraphs from leaders' speeches on an economic left–right scale and taking the average of those scores, we can get a reliable and comparative picture of leaders' public positions.

We are also interested in the correlation between illiberal "strong" leaders and economic left–right positions. Here, we define an illiberal "strongman" type as a leader who attacks cultural and institutional norms, which we operationalize using earlier work by Maerz and Schneider (2020, 2021) and Schafer (2024). Applying their scaling approach to the same speeches of these leaders, we can examine whether leaders who take positions supportive of economic redistribution are also more likely to attack liberal norms and constraints on their exercise of power. Figure 3 shows the correlation between leaders' economic left–right positions and between leaders' inclusive–exclusion values and preferences for power dispersion–concentration. Do strong leaders in fact take more redistributive positions?

Figure 3.

Illiberal "strongmen" are not economic leftists. We find support for H1. The evidence provided in Figure 3 therefore pushes back against the conflation between illiberalism and populism. Illiberal leaders—which include Trump, Orbán, and Erdoğan, but also many more—are, on average, economically on the right. Specifically, illiberal leaders who grab onto group identity issues, and push exclusive, intolerant values, are more likely to be on the right economically. On the other hand, there is no correlation between a leader's attitude about power dispersion or institutional accountability and their economic left–right position.

These findings accord with other research showing that pro-business parties tend to rely on cultural cleavages to expand their popular appeal (Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Rodrik, 2021). Explicit attacks by politicians on institutions that enforce democratic accountability are generally not popular (Graham & Svolik,

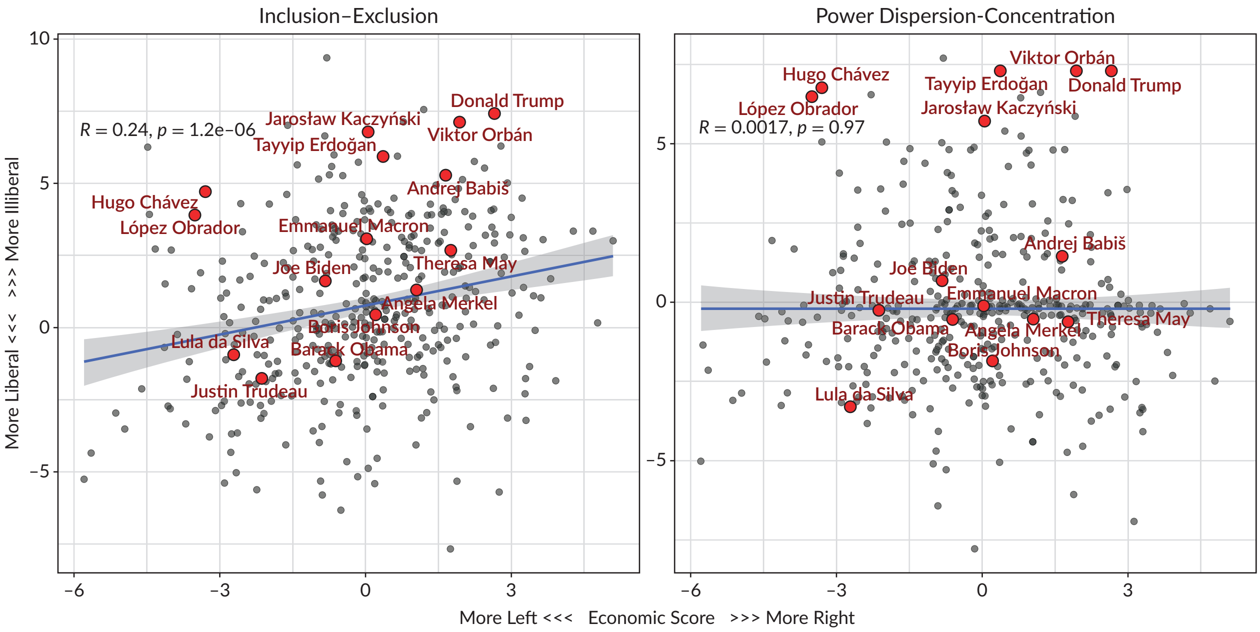

Figure 3. Correlation between economic left–right and liberal–illiberal positions. Each dot represents one political leader.

2020), but attacks on liberal norms and minority outgroups can facilitate the consolidation of power by illiberal leaders when economic appeals are less available due to their party's ideology or past policy positions (Mukand & Rodrik, 2018; Schafer, 2021). Thus, we find evidence that strong leaders—despite their image as populists and speaking about issues like inflation—are less likely to consistently support policy positions that facilitate a reduction in economic inequality.

6.2. Do Leaders' Positions Impact Inequality? Do "Strong" Leaders Have a Stronger Impact?

Next, we use the measures of leaders' positions to test whether strong leaders redistribute more effectively. The regression is the country fixed effects model described in Section 5.2. The data is structured as panel data with country-year as the unit of analysis and the speaker is the head of the executive branch of a country in a given year. Speakers' left–right and liberal–illiberal positions lagged two years behind the dependent variable—inequality—to allow time for each leader's influence to be felt on the economy. For the illiberalism scale, we initially merge the two subdimensions—inclusive–exclusive values and power concentration–dispersion—by taking the higher of either score for a speaker in a given year. To control for institutional effects, Model 1 uses RoW and Model 2 uses EDI. Figure 4 shows the results of the regression (see full table in Supplementary File). The leftmost side of the figure shows the predicted effect of a leader's economic left–right position on inequality without conditioning on their liberal–illiberal position. The middle and right sections of the figure show the effect of economic left and right positions interacted with the speaker's illiberalism.

At first, leaders' economic left–right position appears to influence inequality. However, after conditioning on leaders' illiberalism, the effect on liberal leaders disappears. We can see the point estimates and confidence intervals for the predicted effects of leaders on inequality broadly overlap for leaders who are left + liberal, left + illiberal, and right + liberal. For liberal leaders, their stated economic policy is not a significant predictor

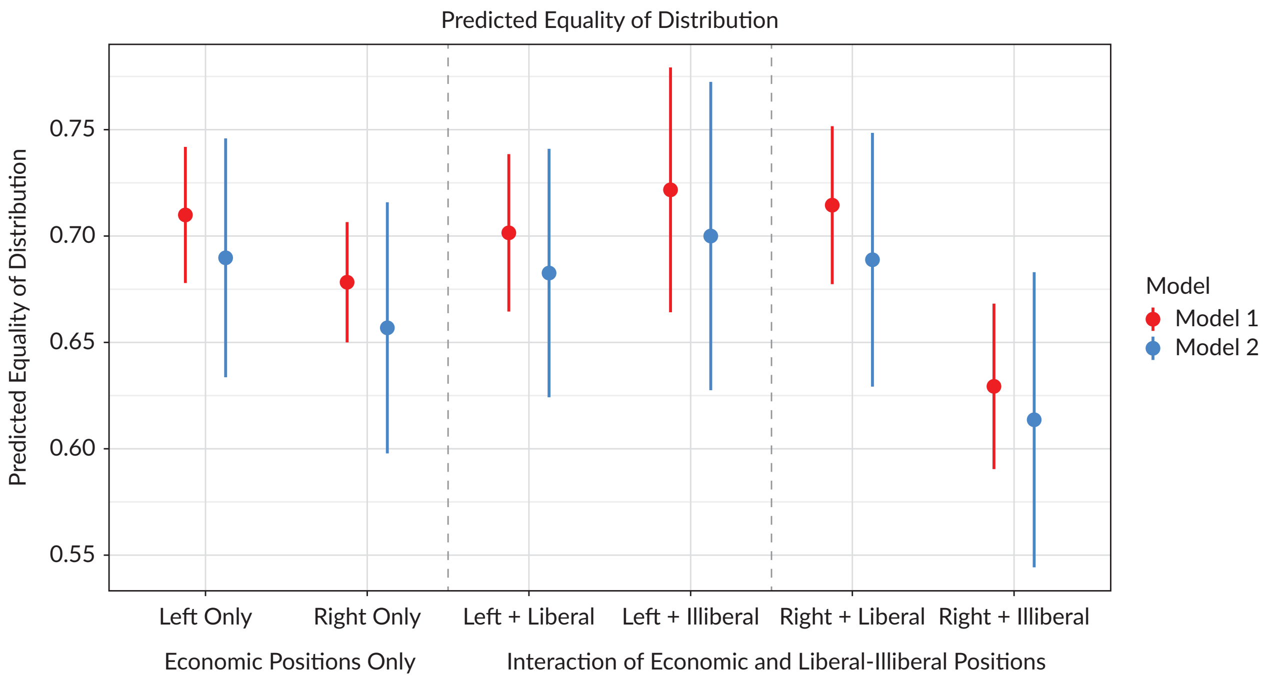

Figure 4. Predicted effect of economic left–right position on inequality and interaction with illiberalism.

of future levels of economic inequality. On the other hand, if we look at the estimates for illiberal leaders, the effect of illiberal leaders persists, but primarily in the direction of greater levels of inequality when a leader is right + illiberal. When illiberal leaders adopt free market, anti-regulation rhetoric, their preferences appear to have an effect that is clearly distinguishable from their more liberal counterparts. But when illiberal leaders are also leftists, the effect of their economic position is statistically indistinguishable from liberal left leaders. Illiberal leaders are indeed better at getting things done. Such so-called "strongmen," far from being economic populists, are more effective when they are on the right and prefer to distribute more unequally.

The significance of the predicted influence of right illiberal leaders—and left illiberals' lack of influence—does not appear to be an artifact of sample size. While there are considerably more observations of liberal leaders (666 left liberal leaders and 627 right liberal), there are also a substantial number of observations of illiberal leaders (251 left illiberal and 374 right illiberal; see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File for scatterplot of observations). This number of observations (251 illiberal leftist) is generally considered adequate for detecting even modest effect sizes in panel data analysis. Therefore, we have enough observations to detect a significant effect on the left illiberals, if there was one to be found. The influence of right illiberals—in contrast to the left—clearly appears to be one-sided.

The influence of leaders on the economic right persists across both types of illiberalism: exclusive values and power concentration (Figure 5). For leftist leaders, only those who expressly aim to concentrate institutional power in the executive manage to move economic policy in their desired direction. Perhaps not surprisingly, identity politics does not appear to be a tool of leaders on the economic left.

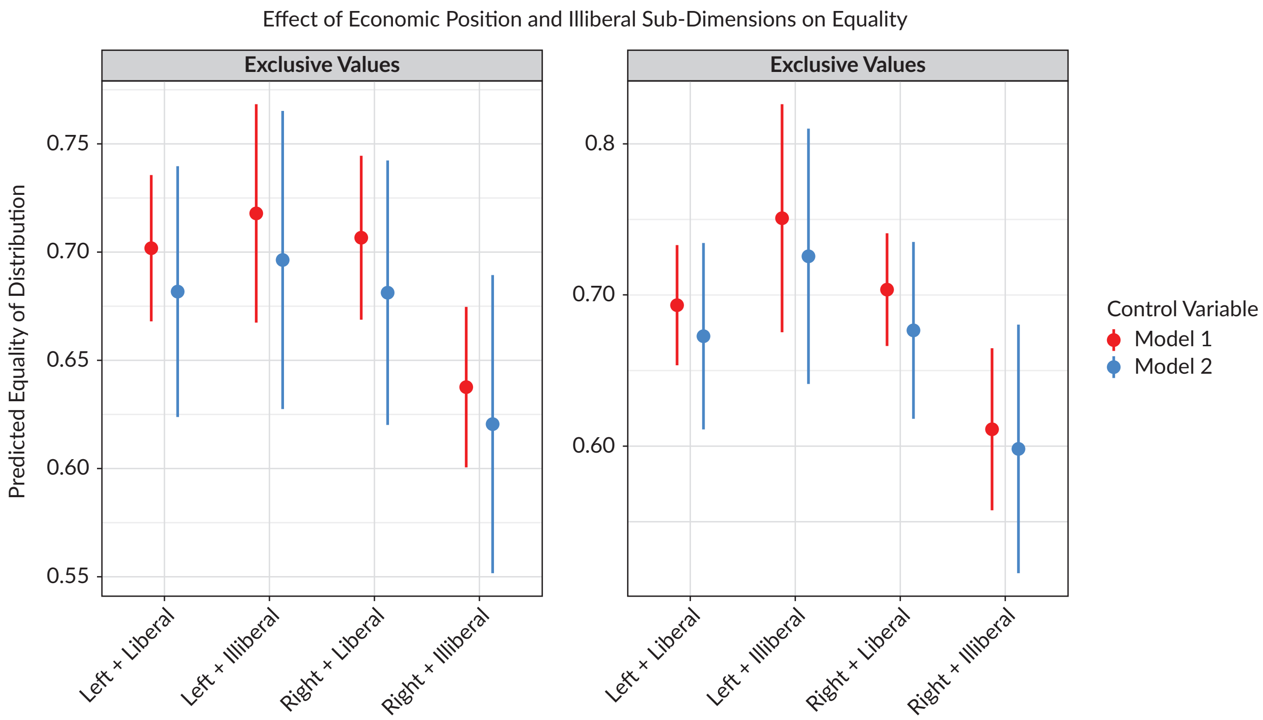

Figure 5. Predicted effect of each subdimension of illiberalism on inequality interacted with economic left–right.

Leaders on the right appear to strategically use both cultural issues and real institutional changes to influence the economic policy in a way that lines up with their expressed economic preferences. Such leaders are more likely to take illiberal positions on both dimensions, with a correlation of 0.773. Expressions by leaders on the left show a lower correlation of 0.596 between their positions on these two illiberal dimensions (see Figure A2 in the Supplementary File for scatterplots showing correlation). It remains beyond the scope of this article to analyze how these two dimensions reinforce each other as a political strategy, but these findings suggest that the choice of far-right leaders to leverage cultural grievances and attack democratic constraints is effective and linked to their economic preferences.

6.3. Leaders' Influence on Subcomponents of Inequality and the Mechanisms of Illiberalism

Illiberal leaders on the economic right appear to influence multiple aspects of inequality at once. We can see this by breaking down V-Dem's equality of distribution index to its subcomponents. Leftist illiberals, on the other hand, influence one area only: the implementation of means-tested vs. universalistic welfare policy.

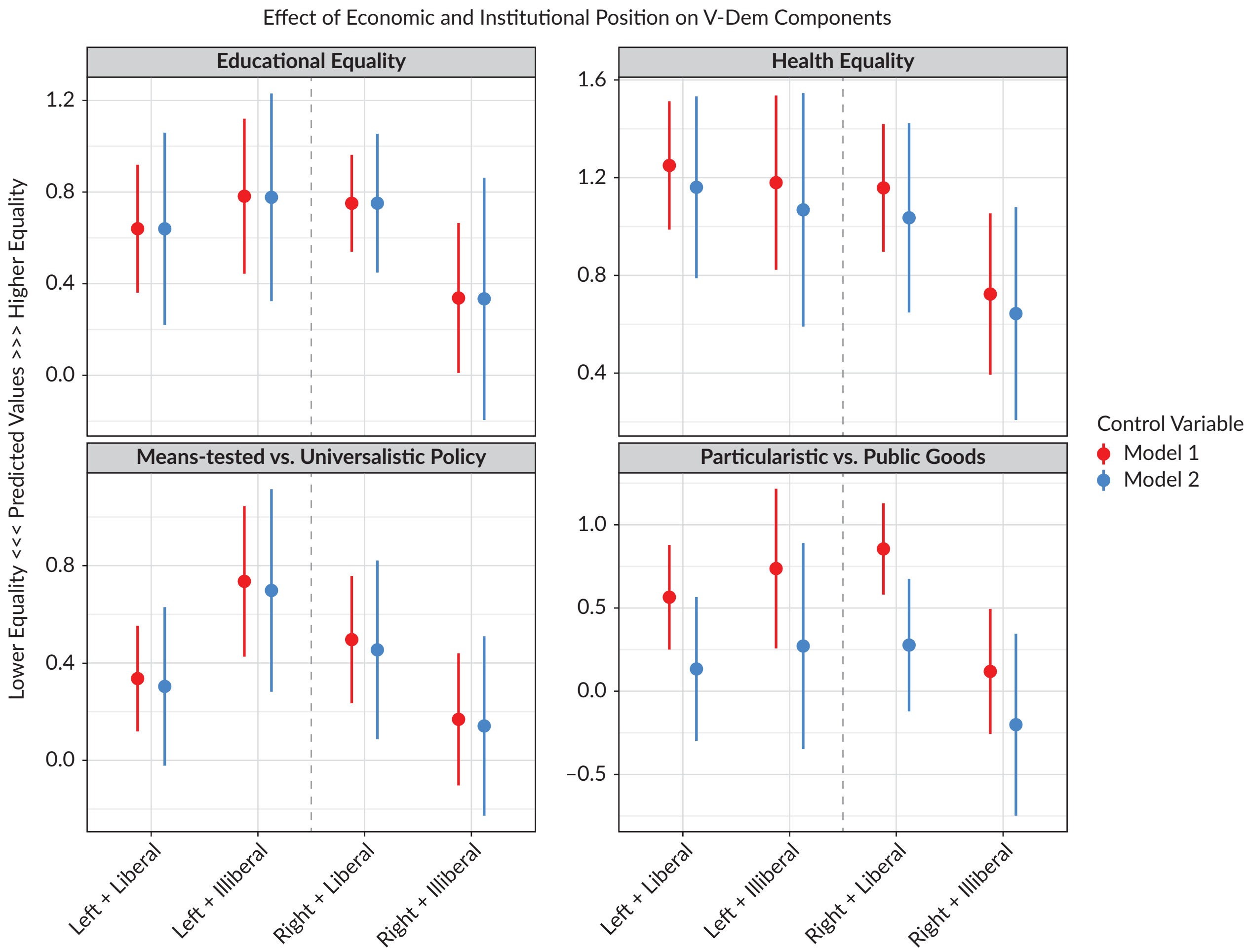

Figure 6. Predicted effect of economic left–right on subcomponents of inequality, interacted with illiberalism.

These results reinforce the findings above about the effectiveness of "strongman" leaders on the economic right. Such leaders are more likely to engage in particularistic and means-tested distribution and their tenure predicts worsening educational and health equality. The effect of other leaders' economic preferences is indistinguishable from zero, except for leftist illiberals, who are more likely to pass universalistic welfare policies.

Executives who express illiberal values may be more effective because they undermine constraints on their power. In particular, they might undermine judicial and legislative constraints. To test this possibility, we run additional regressions with the same controls, interactions, and country-fixed effects, but using two different dependent variables—judicial constraints, or *v2x_jucon*, and legislative constraints, or *v2xlg_legcon*. The aim is to assess whether strongmen on the right are more likely to undermine the independence of the parliament and courts.

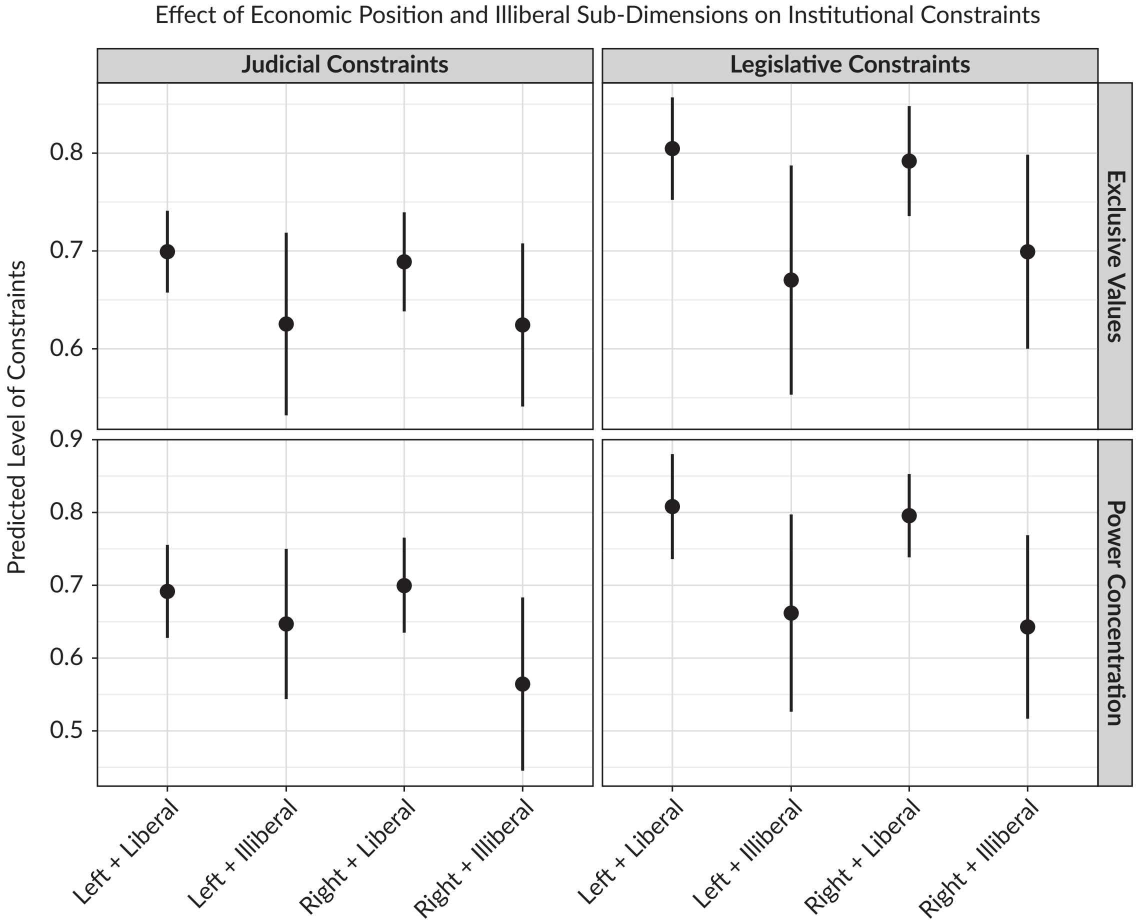

Figure 7. Predicted effect of each subdimension of illiberalism on executive constraints.

All illiberal leaders appear to undermine executive constraints regardless of their economic position. The tenure of both leftist and rightist illiberals predicts the weakening of judicial and legislative checks on their power. If we look at the power concentration–dispersion dimension specifically (bottom left panel of Figure 7), we see a considerable difference between right-wing illiberals and their liberal counterparts on judicial constraints. The difference in the marginal effect of right + illiberals vs. right + liberal is greater than 0.1 on a continuous scale from 0.0 to 1.0. Right-wing illiberals appear to be particularly successful at undermining judicial constraints on their power. This is particularly consequential not only because the judiciary enforces horizontal accountability, but also because of the necessity of an independent judiciary for maintaining economic fairness.

7. Discussion

Illiberal leaders do deliver. Such “strongman” types tend to be on the economic right and embrace cultural illiberalism—advocating for political exclusion based on group identity and the imposition of monolithic cultural standards. These leaders are also more effective than their liberal counterparts at translating their economic preferences into material changes. The result of their pro-privatization, anti-regulation, and anti-union positions is increased levels of economic inequality. This economic outcome appears to reinforce the political conditions that enabled their rise to power in the first place.

There is potential for a vicious feedback loop when illiberals come into power. Their economic policies increase economic inequality, which in turn generates more economic grievances and uncertainty among voters. These conditions, as shown by Sprong et al. (2019), tend to increase popular demand for strong leadership, creating fertile ground for future illiberal leaders. Meanwhile, the concentration of wealth strengthens the political power of economic elites (Houle, 2018), who can support illiberal leaders’ cultural messaging while benefiting from their economic policies.

Illiberal leaders appear to benefit from the gap vacated by traditionally leftist parties. Social democratic and mainstream left parties—both in advanced industrial economies and Latin America—moved to the center on economic issues and there is considerable evidence that they lost the support of many voters as a result (Evans & Tilley, 2012; Lupu, 2016; Polacko, 2023; Spoon & Klüver, 2019). These parties’ shifts to the center limited voters’ choices while economic inequality increased in many of the same countries. Limited choices combined with inequality’s negative effects on financial stability, social cohesion, and democratic trust fuel popular support for illiberal leaders (Chong & Gradstein, 2008; Sprong et al., 2019), who do little to improve people’s underlying material conditions.

Cultural issues effectively mask the economic agenda of illiberal leaders. While illiberalism is not historically new (Guasti, 2021; Mudde, 2014), what has changed is how successfully these leaders have leveraged cultural issues like immigration and globalization to expand their appeal despite implementing policies that increase economic inequality (Hacker & Pierson, 2020; Rodrik, 2018). The growing concentration of wealth creates a mutually reinforcing relationship between illiberal leaders and economic elites: the leaders emphasize cultural grievances rather than economic redistribution and their wealthy supporters have strong economic incentives to help amplify that cultural messaging (Mukand & Rodrik, 2018). This strategy allows illiberal leaders to implement policies that reward their wealthy supporters while maintaining popular support through cultural appeals rather than economic redistribution.

The asymmetric effectiveness of illiberal leaders provides insight into why democracy often fails to reduce inequality. Our findings show that when illiberal leaders pursue right-wing economic policies, they achieve their goals more effectively than liberal leaders, but this advantage largely disappears for left-wing economic policies. This asymmetry suggests that bypassing democratic institutions is not sufficient on its own to implement policy changes—leaders also need the cooperation of economic elites. This aligns with research showing how wealthy interests can maintain their influence even under democratic institutions through increased investment in de facto power (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2008) and the capture of policymaking by economic elites (Bartels, 2018; Gilens & Page, 2014). While democratic institutions may constrain both left and right policy agendas, illiberal leaders can more effectively pursue right-wing policies because they align with existing economic power structures. This helps explain both why illiberal leaders who campaign on economic grievances ultimately fail to deliver redistribution and why democratic institutions alone are insufficient to ensure more equal economic outcomes.

Coalition dynamics and elite power concentration, thus, appear crucial for understanding why some illiberal leaders succeed in undermining both political and economic equality, while others fail. Jacob (2025) shows that citizens' disappointment with democracy—which can be driven by economic inequality and poor government effectiveness—can reduce constraints on illiberal behavior and open the way for illiberals like Orbán to win supermajorities. Benasaglio Berlucchi and Kellam (2023) show that the latter is particularly consequential for democratic backsliding. Similarly, Rathgeb (2024) demonstrates how radical right parties' capacity to implement welfare chauvinism, economic nationalism, or trade protectionism depends on their ability to manage social coalitions that support their political project. Future work could explore how coalition politics can drive the vicious feedback loops linking inequality, the rise of illiberal far-right "populists," and democratic backsliding.

The methodological approach developed in this article provides new insights into the relationship between economic and cultural politics. By using BERT language models to simultaneously measure leaders' positions on both dimensions, we can reveal patterns in how leaders carefully coordinate their positions. Our findings challenge the argument that illiberal leaders have ambiguous economic positions (Binev, 2023; Toplišek, 2020). On average, cultural illiberalism and right-wing economic positions tend to co-occur. This suggests that economic ambiguity could reflect strategic communication rather than genuine policy uncertainty and that this uncertainty is stripped away when we look at the dominant pattern of leaders' speeches. Our approach also demonstrates that by measuring what leaders say, we can anticipate more clearly what they do.

8. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that illiberal leaders do not redistribute downward. Their economic preferences do not benefit most citizens. We build a novel measure of leaders' economic left–right positions based on their speeches—covering 120 countries over 25 years, from 1998 to 2024. We show that illiberal leaders tend to be economically right-wing and are more effective than their liberal counterparts at translating these preferences into material outcomes—but only when pursuing policies that increase inequality. This finding challenges the idea that illiberal "strongmen" behave like economic populists and helps explain why democratic institutions often fail to reduce inequality: economic elites retain significant influence over policy and weakened horizontal accountability might only amplify their power.

Our results suggest a troubling dynamic in contemporary politics. Economic inequality creates a demand for strong leadership, but illiberal leaders who gain power by appealing to these grievances implement policies that further increase inequality. These leaders appear to maintain popular support by emphasizing cultural anxieties over economic issues, creating conditions favorable to future illiberal leaders. This pattern, combined with the retreat of traditional left parties from redistributive positions, points to the difficulties of addressing inequality through existing political channels. The effectiveness of illiberal right-wing leaders contrasted with the ineffectiveness of both liberal leaders and illiberal leftists, reveals how economic power shapes political outcomes, especially when democratic institutions are undermined.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Zsolt Enyedi (Central European University), Petra Guasti (Charles University), and Bálint Mikola (CEU Democracy Institute).

Data Availability

Data used for analysis is available upon request.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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