

# Coming of Age Under Trump

The Effect of First Electoral Exposure in a Trump Election on  
Future Media Trust

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# Overview

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Context

# 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

- The 2016 election was an unprecedented rupture, marked by extreme polarization and norm violations.
- Trump's campaign used racialized appeals, anti-immigration rhetoric, and, most importantly, attacks on institutions and the media.
- Long-standing political norms—transparency, restraint, constitutional conventions—were openly disregarded.
- Young voters entering political life in 2016 faced a uniquely antagonistic and norm-breaking environment.

## Research question

*Does coming of age during this disruptive election affect long-term media trust?*

# Literature Review

# Literature Review (Formative Periods & Political Development)

## Early Life & Early Adulthood

- Early adversity shapes long-term attitudes/behaviors (Shonkoff et al. 2012; Bellucci, Fuochi, and Conzo 2020)
- Early adulthood = second sensitive period; identities remain malleable (Masten et al. 2004; Arnett 2000)

## Political Development

- First political encounters crystallize worldviews (Mannheim 1928)
- Civic experiences and social environment shape long-term engagement (Wray-Lake and Ballard 2023; Sagawa 2010)
- Cohort effects: political climate of youth has lasting influence (Ghitza, Gelman, and Auerbach 2023; Grasso 2014)

## First Election Effects

- First elections form lasting turnout habits and shape partisanship (Plutzer 2002; Dinas 2012; Meredith 2009)

# Literature Review (Elite Norms & Democratic Backsliding)

## Elite Cues & Public Response

- Citizens respond to elite norm violations, legitimizing or resisting them (Druckman 2024)
- Fear of opposing party subversion increases tolerance for undemocratic actions (Braley et al. 2023)
- Polarization reduces willingness to punish copartisans for violations (Graham and Svobik 2020)

## Relevance to 2016

- Trump era = major elite norm breach.
- Exposure during coming-of-age may shape long-term support for media freedom.
- Study examines whether ages 18–25 in this context altered media attitudes.

## Theoretical Framework



# Theory and Hypotheses

## First Encounters with Democracy

- **H1:** Negative effect on media attitudes (*'first-time sensitivity'*).

## Partisan Sensitivity

- Partisans more responsive to political cues; independents less engaged and influenced (Magleby, Nelson, and Westlye 2011; Mandel and Omorogbe 2014)
- **H2:** First-time voting effect stronger for partisans than independents (*'non-partisan insensitivity'*).

## Asymmetric Sensitivity

- Republicans more affectively sensitive to political context than Democrats (Carraro, Castelli, and Macchiella 2011; Mandel and Omorogbe 2014) (and more to Trump cues)
- **H3:** Within partisans, effect stronger for Republicans than Democrats (*'asymmetric sensitivity'*).

# Research Design

# Methodology and Data

## Data

- 2020 ANES

## Outcome: Media Trust Index

- Constructed from 2020 ANES items on media trust, journalist access, and concerns about media freedom.
- 0–1 continuous index (factor analysis)

## Design

- Sharp RDD compares those eligible to vote in 2012 vs. 2016 (age 26 cutoff in 2020).
- Simulates as-if random assignment to “conventional” vs. “unconventional” political environment

# RDD Equation

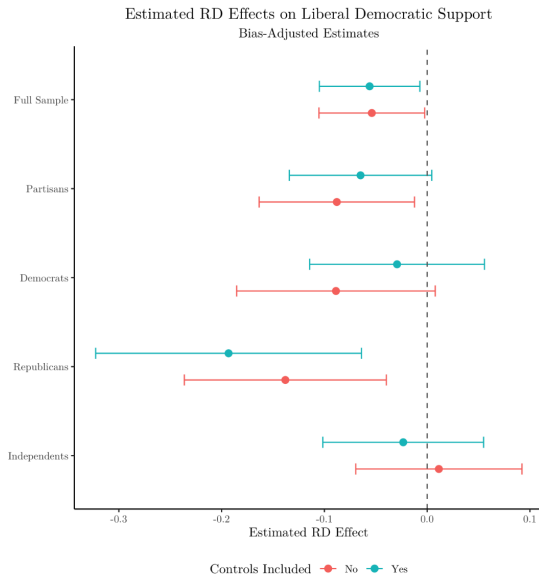
$$Y_i = \alpha + \tau D_i + f(X_i - c) + \varepsilon_i$$

Where:

- $Y_i$  is the outcome, a continuous index measuring liberal attitudes.
- $D_i$  is an indicator equal to 1 if individual  $i$ 's age *exceeds* the cutoff (i.e., they were just *eligible* to vote in 2012), and 0 otherwise.<sup>[3]</sup>
- $\tau$  is the parameter of interest, capturing the size of the discontinuity at the threshold—that is, the causal effect of being first eligible to vote in 2012 rather than in 2016.
- $X_i$  is the running variable, the respondent's age in years in 2020.
- $f(X_i - c)$  denotes a flexible function (e.g., first- or second-order polynomial) of the centered running variable—distance from the cutoff  $c$ .
- $c = 26$  is the cutoff point, so  $X_i - c$  represents the running variable centered at the threshold.
- $\varepsilon_i$  is an error term.

## Preliminary Results

# Results for Similar Index (Liberal Democracy)



# Questions/Concerns

- Sharp RDD according to eligibility or Fuzzy RDD according to first-time voting?

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