Paper Proposal: Media and Politics

Nikolaos Vichos

Proposal

My paper asks: *Does entering political life during a norm-questioning and polarizing election shape long-term media trust?* Specifically, I examine whether coming of age politically in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a moment marked by intense polarization, visible norm erosion and media attacks, has lasting effects on individuals' trust in media and support for media freedom.

Building on theories of political socialization and sensitivity to political context, I develop three hypotheses. The *first-time sensitivity hypothesis* (H1) draws on research showing that early adulthood is a formative period for political learning. What young people experience when they first engage with democracy tends to leave durable marks on their attitudes [@dinas2012; @franklin2004] . For many in the 2016 cohort, their first encounter with electoral politics occurred amid open challenges to pluralism and institutional legitimacy. I therefore expect that being a first-time voter in 2016, when media objectivity and freedom were being questioned, will be associated with weaker long-term media trust and support for media freedom.

The *non-partisan insensitivity hypothesis* (H2) builds on research showing that partisans are more psychologically and behaviorally responsive to political stimuli than independents. Strong identifiers tend to absorb elite cues and adjust their attitudes to align with their party, while independents are less emotionally affected by political shifts [@magleby2011; @mandel2014]. Because of this difference, I expect the norm-violating context of 2016 to have left a stronger imprint on partisans than on independents, who may have been more detached and less likely to internalize such cues.

Finally, the a*symmetric sensitivity hypothesis* (H3) extends this logic to partisan differences. Prior research suggests that conservatives—and by extension Republicans—are more attuned to affective and threatening political information. Republicans tend to react more strongly to environmental changes and are more likely to integrate elite signals into their evaluations of democracy [@mandel2014; @graham2012]. In the context of 2016, this suggests that Republican first-time voters, more so than Democrats, may have been especially susceptible to norm-violating messages, internalizing them as acceptable rather than rejecting them.

Research Design

For my design, I use the 2020[1] American National Election Studies (ANES) cross-sectional survey, which offers a large, nationally representative sample and includes a relatively broad set of items on attitudes toward the media.

I use a sharp RDD to identify the long-term causal impact of being first eligible to vote during a 'conventional' versus 'unconventional' period and political environment on citizens' attitudes toward the media. The core idea is that young people who were just old enough to vote in the 2012 U.S. presidential election (i.e., age 18 by November 2012) experienced a fundamentally different initial political environment than those who were just too young. While the former 'came of age' politically during the 2012 election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, the latter were first eligible to vote in 2016, during the highly polarized Trump era.

This design translates into a cutoff at age 26 in 2020 (the year for which data is used): respondents who were 26 or older in 2020 were just old enough to vote in 2012, while those under 26 were not. The assumption underlying the RDD is that, within a narrow bandwidth around this cutoff, the 'treatment' (being born after November 6, 2012) is as-good-as-randomly assigned. The local comparison around the threshold thus simulates an experiment where this 'treatment' is assigned by birth timing.

Since linear models estimated via ordinary least squares may miss subtle non-linearities in how the outcome evolves with age, I estimate a more flexible version of the RDD.[2] This can be expressed as:

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

Where:

- Y_i is the outcome, a continuous index measuring attitudes toward the media (as well as the specific items making up the index).
- 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.[3]
- τ 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.

[1] Although the 2024 ANES is available, it currently includes only pre-election respondents, limiting the number of complete cases for key outcome variables. The 2020 dataset is therefore the most suitable for estimating meaningful effects using the proposed design.

[2] Of course, this version can take a linear form; however, it is also generalizable to higher polynomial degrees.

[3] This might seem counter-intuitive, since the group of interest (young voters) becomes, in a sense, the 'control group'. This is due to the specific design of the R package used (rdrobust), which estimates causal effects when the running variable crosses the cut-off.

- $c = 26$ is the cutoff point, so $X_i - c$ represents the running variable centered at the threshold.
- ε_i is an error term.

To capture individual-level attitudes toward the media, I will construct a composite index (0-1 range) from items in the 2020 ANES, such as support for a free press, concern over the freedom of the media, or the principle that journalists should have access to government officials.

I then estimate a series of sharp RD models using local polynomial regression. My analysis is organized around running separate regressions for different subgroups to test the three hypotheses outlined in the theoretical framework:

- **Entire Sample (H1):** To test the *first-time sensitivity* hypothesis, I first estimated the RD using the full 2020 sample.
- **Partisans vs. Independents (H2):** To test the *non-partisan insensitivity* hypothesis, I split the sample into partisans (self-identified Democrats and Republicans) and independents. If partisans are more responsive to political environments, I expect the causal effect τ to be stronger for them than for Independents.
- **Republicans vs. Democrats (H3):** Finally, to test the *asymmetric sensitivity* hypothesis, I ran separate models for Republicans and Democrats. I expect τ to be greater among the Republican sample.

For the full sample and each of the four subgroups (partisans, independents, Democrats, and Republicans), I estimated two model specifications:

- A simple model without covariates.
- A model that includes gender, education, and income as control variables.