Do Trump Reminders Cause Cognitive Dissonance?

Experiments and Causality

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Introduction

In the uncharted world of the Donald Trump presidency, there is an abundance of division, misinformation, confirmation bias, and at times cognitive dissonance. While there is nothing new about partisan politics and presidential approval dividing along political lines, we suspect that Trump elicits a distinctive emotional response from many that transcends this typical political divide. For example, as mainstream media sources have been clear in their opposition–such as the Washington Post's post-inauguration slogan[1], "Democracy Dies in Darkness"–many conservative media and political pundits have reacted to the rise of Trump similarly, with National Review publishing an issue[2] titled "Against Trump," prior to election day. We wonder whether this strong emotional response is prevalent and felt outside of the media and political punditry and seek to test whether even a subtle reminder of Trump can cause a moment of cognitive dissonance (i.e. inconsistent beliefs triggered by emotion). Or, alternatively, do we observe that typical Americans are consistent in their levels of optimism about the most important aspects of their lives, irrespective of who is president?

Research Question

In this experiment, we seek to survey respondents who are representative of the American public to answer the following question:

Does a subtle reminder of Donald Trump cause an immediate change in the level of optimism toward key aspects of life, such as employment or retirement prospects?

We consider it important given the appearance of the current political climate. It is our hope that there is no strong effect across subjects, though we hypothesize that there could be heterogeneous effects for smaller segments of the population, including subsets of the political parties.

Hypothesis

Given the strong emotional response that Trump elicits from people across the political spectrum, we hypothesize that even a subtle mention of his name can momentarily affect the immediate level of optimism some Americans have on priorities that should be considered important and neutral across political lines, like employment, education, retirement, and cybersecurity. Whether the effect will be more positive or more negative, we assume it will be similar to the dividing attitudes in the news media. Conservatives will be more optimistic than liberals when it comes down to the association of Trump's name, but like the media in general, we expect the optimism will largely go downhill with the treatment of Trump applied to any topic.

Experiment

Research Design

Our experiment draws upon two sets of nearly identical surveys randomly assigned to one of two groups, our treatment and control. Both surveys contain four prompts on the subjects of employment, education, retirement and cybersecurity, followed by the questions:

- How do you feel about the general employment outlook for Americans over the next two decades?
- How do you feel about how the education system is preparing students to enter the workforce?
- How do you feel about your prospects for saving enough for retirement?
- How would you rate the threat of cyber-attacks to your security, private information or livelihood?

For those respondents who are assigned to treatment, they see all prompts with the same type of treatment, which we will call the "Trump treatment" hereafter; subjects assigned to control see no mentions of Trump, instead with a simple reference to the same period, such as "in 2018." An example prompt follows, with the treatment emphasized:

Now approaching a decade since the worst of the 2008 financial crisis, a steady recovery in the United States has brought a return of modest, sustained economic growth averaging roughly 2% annually, along with rising wage growth of over 3%. While rapid technological advancement has brought new efficiency and growth opportunities to many segments of the economy, many geographic areas and industries also face difficulties competing in global markets and continuing to provide economic opportunities. Overall, however, the unemployment rate has reached a decade-low of close to 4% **one year into the Donald Trump presidency**, *a level lower than pre-crisis unemployment and considered by some economists to be full employment.*

Education is the only prompt that does not contain any treatment in both control and treatment.

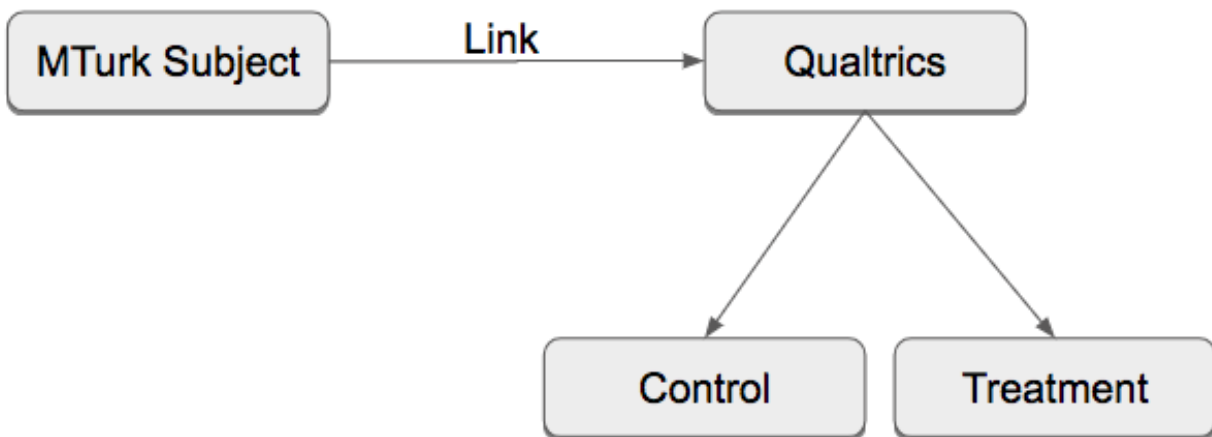## Randomization Engineering

We employ Mechanical Turk

Figure 1: Figure 1. Random Assignment

Out of 688 subjects, 580 reside in the United States, 108 reside outside of the United States.
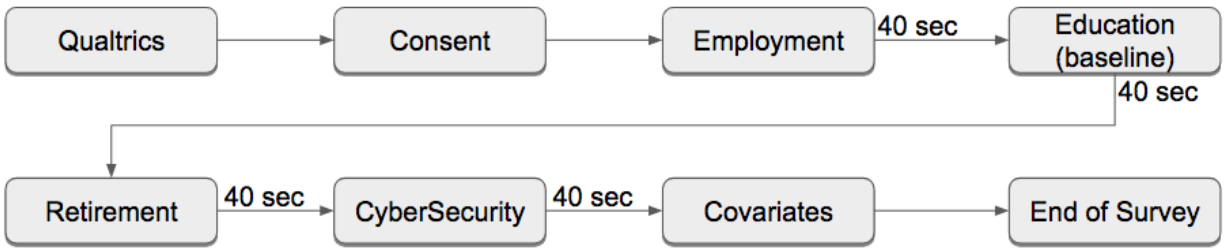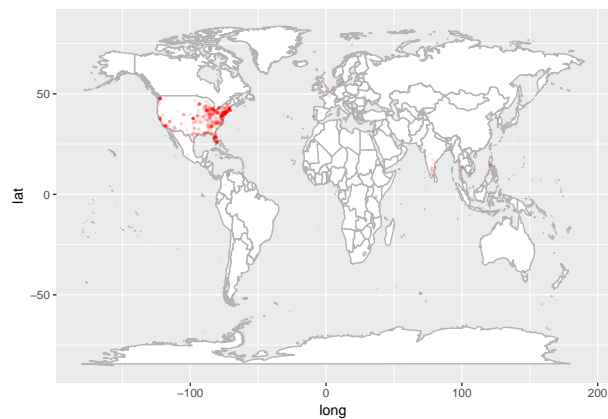
```
## # A tibble: 1 x 1
##       n
##   <int>
```

Figure 2: Figure 2. Survey Flow

```
## 1    580
```

```
## # A tibble: 1 x 1
##       n
##   <int>
## 1   108
```

```
## Warning: Ignoring unknown aesthetics: x, y
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## Warning: Removed 50 rows containing missing values (geom_point).
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Remove repeater, same IP different zip codes

Show

Experimental Materials

Measurement of variables

Modeling choices

Result

Clean, clear, well articulated relationships between your theory, your hypotheses, the numbers that your models produce, and the figures you present

- power analysis
-

References

1. "The Washington Post: 'Democracy dies in darkness' | TheHill." The Hill - covering Congress, Politics, Political Campaigns and Capitol Hill, 22 Feb. 2017, www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider.

2. "Donald Trump – Conservative Movement Shouldn't Support Him | National Review." National Review: Conservative News, Opinion, Politics, Policy, & Current Events, 22 Jan. 2016, www.nationalreview.com/2016/01/donald-trump-conservative-movement-menace.

3. Borick, Christopher. "Capital - Are American Workers More Optimistic under Trump?" BBC, BBC, 8 Nov. 2017, www.bbc.com/capital/story/20171108-are-american-workers-more-optimistic-under-trump.