

Science & Society

Did Donald Trump's presidency reshape Americans' prejudices?

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Did the presidency of Donald Trump affect Americans' intergroup attitudes? Converging evidence from recent experimental and longitudinal studies suggests that Trump's political rise led his supporters to increase their reported prejudice toward traditionally minoritized racial and religious groups in the USA.

We are currently witnessing a historic rise in populist, right-wing leaders around the globe^{i,ii} (Box 1). The political rhetoric of many of these leaders – particularly towards minoritized racial, religious, and cultural groups – has often been notably counternormative, defying modern conventions regarding acceptable political discourse and frequently being labeled as bigotedⁱⁱⁱ.

One particularly well-studied counternormative political figure is US President Donald Trump. Throughout his candidacy and subsequent presidency, Trump used rhetoric that was widely characterized as prejudiced against minoritized groups^{iv}. He also retained ties to far-right nationalist groups and has received open support from White nationalists such as Richard Spencer and David Duke^v. His supporters also consistently tend to express far greater racial and religious prejudice than do supporters of other major US political figures^v.

These trends have led commentators to ask whether Trump's presidency has

changed how Americans feel about minoritized racial and religious groups. Did Trump's controversial rhetoric unleash prejudice among the American people? Several broad areas of research shed light on this question. These findings suggest that discrimination (particularly hate crimes) increased following Trump's election, and that Trump's rhetoric emboldened people to express prejudices they previously kept hidden, and may even have shifted their privately held attitudes. Together, these lines of work demonstrate that Trump's election reshaped the topography of prejudice in the USA.

Hate crimes

Evidence suggests that hate crimes increased substantially during Trump's presidency. For example, anti-Semitic incidents in the USA increased 86% in the first quarter of 2017 (post-election) compared with the same time period in 2016 (pre-election)^{vi}. Similarly, there was a 91% increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes in the first half of 2017, compared with the same time period in 2016 (pre-election)^{vii}. These trends continued throughout Trump's presidency, with annual hate crimes remaining around 20% higher during his administration^{viii}. Other research specifically tied these increases in hate crimes to Trump himself, finding that counties that hosted a Trump rally showed hate crime rates almost double those of similar counties with no rally [1]. These findings suggest that discrimination increased following Trump's election.

Experimental studies

Yet these increases in hate crimes – as troubling as they are – represent the acts of an exceedingly small proportion of Americans and therefore cannot decisively tell us whether Trump's presidency affected the attitudes and behavior of the average American. However, a second body of research provides experimental support for the contention that Trump's rhetoric can increase expressions of prejudice among citizens.

One such investigation found that even brief exposure to Trump's prejudiced rhetoric (a single statement embedded among other political quotes) led participants – particularly those who personally supported Trump – to express greater prejudice towards a minoritized group [2]. Similarly, a second investigation found that exposure to Trump's rhetoric had an emboldening effect for prejudiced individuals, leading them to express greater acceptance of others' prejudiced behavior, as well as to personally be more willing to disparage a member of a minoritized group [3].

Real-world societal attitudes

These findings demonstrate that exposure to Trump's rhetoric can influence people's intergroup attitudes and behavior, at least temporarily and under carefully controlled conditions. However, they cannot tell us whether Trump's presidency led to lasting and large-scale changes in Americans' expressions of prejudice.

Early work on this question provided mixed evidence for short-term effects. On one hand, multiple lines of research suggested that Americans' levels of prejudice did not increase following Trump's election—and, in fact, may even have decreased. For example, nationally representative surveys documented a mean-level decrease in prejudice against Black individuals from pre- to post-election [4]. On the other hand, one study examining voters' attitudes during the week of the November 2016 election showed an increase in sexism among Trump supporters from the days immediately before the election to the days immediately after [5].

Taking a broader view, subsequent research provided a wider-ranging examination of whether, why, and among whom prejudice increased during Trump's presidency. We examined Americans' attitudes towards Muslims, African Americans, Mexicans, women, gay and lesbian individuals, immigrants, and many other groups

Box 1. Broader context

Americans have become less likely to express blatant prejudice toward racial and religious minoritized groups over the last several decades [10,11]. Although evidence of prejudice and discrimination is still plentiful [12], scholars have increasingly focused on how prejudice might exist (and potentially affect outcomes) in more subtle and indirect forms: for example, implicit bias and prejudiced sentiments disguised as principled conservatism (e.g., [11]). However, recent events such as Trump's election and the rise of similar populist and far-right extremists around the globe raise the question of whether blatant prejudice is making a comeback, and what this portends for the safety and wellbeing of groups that have been minoritized and marginalized in the USA and around the world.

that have been historically marginalized in the USA [6]. We surveyed 1000 American participants prior to Trump's election and then followed up with these same participants using the same measures following Trump's election in 2016.

In these studies, we found that how people's expressed prejudice changed over this time period depended on the political group to which they belonged. People in Donald Trump's political base, on average, became increasingly willing to declare their disdain toward minoritized ethnic, religious, and cultural groups, both foreign groups and their fellow Americans. Following Trump's election and during his presidency, Trump supporters on average increased in their expressed prejudice toward Muslims, immigrants, and African Americans. At the same time, their evaluations of White people and Christians became more positive.

By contrast, progressives, and even conservatives and Republicans who did not support Trump, remained stable in – and in some cases decreased – their expressions of prejudice over this same time period. Critically, we also replicated this pattern of results with over 7700 Americans from a nationally representative sample. These results suggest that the aggregate increase in expressed prejudice appears to emerge among Trump voters, rather than among Americans more generally.

These findings provide a more nuanced picture of how prejudice changed after the rise of Trump. Moreover, they also help to reconcile previous findings suggesting that

Americans decreased in prejudice. Because the increase in prejudice among Trump supporters was counterbalanced by a corresponding decrease among many non-Trumpers, and because Trump supporters are (at least according to the popular vote) generally outnumbered in the population, overall mean levels of prejudice in the USA may have decreased even as one subgroup of Americans, Trump's supporters, increased in prejudice.

Mechanisms of rising prejudice

But why have Trump voters increased in prejudice? Research suggests that these changes can be traced back to shifting social norms, that is, beliefs about the acceptability of expressing prejudice. One line of work [7] showed that people felt that expressing prejudice towards certain minoritized groups was more acceptable in the week following (vs. the week before) the election. We further found that these perceptions of shifting norms were strongest among supporters of Trump; they tended to feel that Americans – particularly Americans who, like them, personally supported Trump – became more accepting of prejudicial attitudes following Trump's election [6]. This perception that expressing prejudice had become more acceptable, in turn, led Trump voters to themselves feel more comfortable doing so.

Emboldenment versus 'real' attitude change

One question this past research could not fully answer is whether people's authentic views have changed, or just their willingness to express those views. In other words, do these changes simply represent

Trump supporters being more willing to express prejudices that they previously felt the need to keep hidden? Or have their attitudes in fact been altered as a result of Trump's presidency?

Recent research provides tentative insight into these questions, showing that these attitude shifts went beyond straightforward explicit expressions of prejudice, emerging even in people's immediate and automatic responses to minoritized groups [8]. This work documented an increase in 'implicit bias' (i.e., attitudes assessed indirectly, which are largely spontaneous and hard to control) towards Black people that corresponded precisely to Trump's early candidacy. This increase in bias also extended to other groups frequently targeted by Trump's rhetoric – in particular, disabled people and overweight people – and lasted approximately 1 year before returning to baseline. Moreover, this increase in implicit bias was particularly concentrated among conservatives and those living in states that voted for Trump. These findings provide additional evidence that some Americans' attitudes toward marginalized groups became more negative during Trump's presidency.

Implications

From a more practical perspective, however, the question of whether these changes represent 'real' changes in prejudice versus differences in willingness to express it may be only a secondary concern. In the real world, both may have similar effects. Indeed, in our own data [6], the changes in expressed prejudice that we documented uniquely predicted policy attitudes, such that those who increased in expressed prejudice were particularly willing to support concrete policies excluding and derogating minoritized groups (e.g., banning Muslims from the USA, restricting immigration, opposing affirmative action). Moreover, these increases in discrimination and expressed prejudice – whether representing real attitude change or simple

Box 2. International spillover effects?

Given Trump's prominence on the global stage, is it possible that his controversial rhetoric may have served to embolden prejudice even beyond the USA? Some research supports this possibility. Using a quasi-experimental approach, one paper [13] compared the racial bias of participants who completed the European Social Survey (ESS) shortly before versus shortly after (± 15 days) Trump's election. They found significantly higher levels of bias in the immediate aftermath of Trump's election, with participants expressing greater opposition to immigration from members of other racial and ethnic groups. The authors interpret their findings as indicating that the election of Trump sent a global signal about the acceptability of prejudice that crossed national borders.

emboldenment – are likely to have similarly devastating effects for minoritized social groups. Supporting this, during Trump's administration members of minoritized groups who felt targeted by Trump's rhetoric experienced greater expectations of day-to-day discrimination [9], and a majority of Asian Americans reported in April 2022 that violence against them is increasing in the USA, with a third reporting that they have altered their daily activities because of fears of being attacked or threatened^{ix}.

Regardless of the nature of these changes in prejudice, at this particular sociopolitical moment perhaps the more pressing question is: what will happen to citizens' attitudes if Trump – and other counter-normative political figures like him – gain further power and visibility? Our findings suggest that as these leaders continue to ascend on the global political stage, this may further amplify prejudice among their followers (Box 2). If voters continue to (re)elect these leaders – particularly figures such as Trump whose controversial views are by now well known – this will likely cast a further veneer of acceptability to expressing intergroup disdain.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported in part by an NSF grant awarded to M.J.F. (National Science Foundation BCS-1252040).

Declaration of interests

No interests are declared.

Resources

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2022.12.013>

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