

# The Trump Election and Attitudes toward the United States in Latin America<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Did the election of Donald Trump have an immediate effect on trust in the US government in Latin America? While on the campaign trail, the Republican candidate used strong and derogatory language to describe Latin American countries and people and made policy proposals that could deteriorate US-Latin American relations. However, the effect of the Trump election on attitudes toward the United States might be null or minimal if Latin American citizens have strong priors and/or if they do not pay attention to political information. Therefore, it is not clear whether the 2016 election led to a rapid decline in trust in the US government in Latin America. Leveraging the timing of the field implementation of the 2016 wave of the AmericasBarometer in five Latin American countries, we estimate the effect of the 2016 presidential election on respondents' attitudes using a regression discontinuity design in time. We find that the election of Trump substantively decreased respondents' trust in the US government.

**Keywords:** trust in the US government, political attitudes, Latin America.

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## **Introduction**

A political commentator in the United States concluded a piece on Donald Trump by stating that “abroad, anti-Americanism sleeps lightly when it sleeps at all, and it is wide-awake as decent people judge our nation’s health by the character of those to whom power is entrusted” (Will 2020). This line of thinking implies that people in other countries change their views of the United States when leaders they dislike are elected. In this paper, we analyze how the surprising election of a controversial political leader, Donald Trump, influenced attitudes toward the United States in Latin America. This question is important because views of the United States can have direct effects on political processes in the region and for US-Latin American relations (Datta 2014, Kocher and Minushkin 2007, Remmer 2012)

The research question we explore echoes recent debates in social and political psychology. Over the past two decades, the literature on attitude change has shifted from a focus on individual information processing to an approach that recognizes the importance of the broad sociohistorical context (Albarracin and Shavitt 2018). In particular, changes in political and policy attitudes have been linked to significant climatic, political, and economic events (Margalit 2013, Carlin, Love, and Zechmeister 2014, Enos 2016, Merolla and Zechmeister 2009).

Building on this theoretical scaffolding, we analyze whether the election of Donald Trump produced a change in attitudes towards the United States in Latin America. We know that US presidential elections are salient in Latin America given the history of US-Latin American relations. During the run-up to the 2016 election, Trump used derogatory language toward Latin American countries (and people) and committed to policies hurtful to Latin American interests. It is therefore plausible that his election produced an immediate decline in trust in the US government in Latin America.

Nevertheless, previous research on anti-American attitudes has highlighted the impact of structural and slow-moving variables, such as the type of economic exchanges with the United States; and individual-level variables, such as ideology and the receipt of remittances (Baker and Cupery 2013, Azpuru and Boniface 2015).

If Latin Americans have strong priors and attitudes towards the United States are overdetermined by individual and structural factors, we would not expect political changes in Washington to lead to rapid shifts in US favorability. Other factors that might contribute to null or minimum effects include the lack of political information many Latin American citizens have (Salzman 2011) and the fact that any Trump effect might have already taken hold during his campaign.

We leverage the unexpected results of the 2016 US presidential election to construct a regression discontinuity design in time (RDiT) and assess which of these hypotheses provides a better description of reactions to the 2016 US presidential elections in Latin America.

The outcome of the 2016 US election was unexpected in Latin America (see appendix A), which allows us to rule out an anticipation effect when comparing respondents who participated in the survey just before and just after that election. We provide estimates producing consistent results across 32 different bandwidths (i.e., days until/from the election). Our findings indicate that the election of Trump generated a substantive and rapid decline in trust in the US government in Latin America.

## **The Trump Election and Attitudes towards the United States in Latin America**

The expectation that the election of an unpopular US president<sup>2</sup> can generate a rapid decline in trust in the US government abroad is supported by well-known psychological foundations. First, Balmas (2018) shows that the news coverage of a foreign leader's behaviors and personal characteristics influences perceptions of that leader's country. This effect reflects "a psychological phenomenon whereby people project their emotions and perceptions regarding a leader's personal characteristics onto his or her country and people" (Balmas 2018: 499).<sup>3</sup>

Given the aggressive and controversial rhetoric used by Donald Trump during the campaign, it is not surprising that the elite reaction and media coverage in Latin America was lukewarm toward him. This might have contributed to more negative evaluations of the US government as a whole. For instance, Semetko et al. (2018) show that the tone of the media coverage of Trump in Mexico was negative during the campaign and after the election. In appendix A, we further discuss the negative media coverage Trump received during the 2016 elections in the five Latin American countries in our sample.

Secondly, part of the literature on anti-Americanism emphasizes the ambivalence inherent to the phenomenon (Chiozza 2009, Katzenstein and Keohane 2007). Individuals are ambivalent when their evaluations of the United States involve "strong elements of both attraction and repulsion" (Katzenstein and Keohane, 2007: 16). This is significant because psychological research suggests that salient political events can lead to rapid changes in political attitudes in domains with significant attitudinal ambivalence (Conner and Sparks 2002, Zaller 1992, Conner

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<sup>2</sup> A Gallup poll conducted during Trump's first year in office reveals that only 16% of people in Latin America approved of his job performance.

<sup>3</sup> If evaluations of foreign leaders shape stereotypes of their countries more generally, we should also expect a connection between the evaluation of a foreign president and trust in that government. While there are ideological and political divisions within a country, governments are likely to reflect the political views and personal characteristics of their leaders.

and Armitage 2008). Since people in other countries tend to be ambivalent about the United States, the level of trust in the US government might depend on available and quickly retrievable information: that is, the “availability heuristic” (Tversky and Kahneman 1973, Zaller 1992).

American elections may play this role. They are salient events that receive abundant media coverage in Latin America, and can shape views of the US government in the region. During the campaign, then-candidate Trump behaved in ways that may have foregrounded negative predispositions toward the United States (e.g., arrogance and imperialistic behavior). The Republican candidate often disparaged Latin American migrants in the United States as criminals and rapists.<sup>4</sup> He also proposed the construction of a controversial wall along the border with Mexico and stated on numerous occasions that Mexico would pay for it. Finally, Trump also signaled his intention to renegotiate trade agreements with Latin American countries, restrict remittances that Latin Americans send home, and block US companies from moving factories to the region.<sup>5</sup>

While Trump’s rhetorical attacks mainly targeted Mexico and Mexicans, he often disparaged Hispanic migrants more generally calling them “criminals” and “rapists.”<sup>6</sup> To be clear, our argument is not that people in other Latin American countries lost confidence in the United States after Trump’s election out of solidarity with Mexicans (i.e., via linked fate). Rather, the media in other Latin American nations also emphasized the threat Trump posed to Hispanic migrants in general, the remittances they send to their home countries, US economic aid, and trade agreements with the United States. Throughout Latin America, Trump was portrayed as a leader

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/16/donald-trump-mexico-presidential-speech-latino-hispanic>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/mexico-officials-are-planning-for-economic-turmoil-if-trump-wins/2016/11/04/8a6fd1e2-a2b7-11e6-b74c-603fd6bbc17f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexico-officials-are-planning-for-economic-turmoil-if-trump-wins/2016/11/04/8a6fd1e2-a2b7-11e6-b74c-603fd6bbc17f_story.html)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/9-outrageous-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-latinos\\_n\\_55e483a1e4b0c818f618904b](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/9-outrageous-things-donald-trump-has-said-about-latinos_n_55e483a1e4b0c818f618904b)

who would treat Hispanic migrants badly and lead to a deterioration in US-Latin American relations. We provide a more detailed discussion of the Latin American media coverage of Trump in the 2016 election in appendix A. All this discussion leads to the first hypothesis of the paper.

**Hypothesis 1:** The election of Donald Trump produced an immediate decline in trust in the US government in Latin America.

Several mechanisms may have produced this expected effect, including Trump's abrasive personality and political style, the unpopularity of the policies he proposed, and the negative media coverage he received in the region. Our research design does not allow us to disentangle their individual effects. Nevertheless, a combination of these factors may have contributed to more negative evaluations of the US government in Latin America.

An alternative hypothesis is that people would not have updated their attitudes toward the United States immediately after the election for three reasons. First, the United States is the hegemon in the Western Hemisphere and has an outside political, economic, and cultural influence in Latin America. It might therefore be the case that Latin Americans are much less ambivalent towards the United States than residents of Europe or the Middle East (Chiozza 2009). Morgenstern and Bohigues (forthcoming: 2) point out that "the long relation of the United States and the countries [in Latin America] has given Latin Americans ample time to form opinions, negative or positive, about their northern neighbor." It is then possible that Latin American citizens already have fully formed and stable evaluations of the United States, and that these attitudes do not rapidly shift in response to political changes in Washington. In fact, attitude stability is a function of the saliency and the amount of experience with the attitude object (Prislin 1996, Petty and Krosnick 1995).

Second, a number of studies suggest that citizens have low levels of political knowledge (Fraile and Gómez 2017, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) and rarely follow political news (Salzman 2011). If Latin American citizens are politically uninformed, it is possible that Trump's election had no (immediate) effect on Latin American public opinion.

Finally, although the Trump election was unexpected, many Latin Americans might have been aware that a large proportion of the US population was considering voting for him, a candidate who often used offensive language toward residents of the region and Latinos in the United States. In other words, decreased positivity toward the United States because of Trump might have occurred before his election.

**Hypothesis 2:** The election of Donald Trump did not have an immediate effect on trust in the US government in Latin America.

Both hypotheses provide plausible accounts of how Latin Americans reacted to the election of Donald Trump. Testing which more closely captures the effect of the Trump election on views of the United States in Latin America requires rigorous empirical analysis.

## **Research Design**

It is not easy to study the causal impact of political shocks because individuals might be able to anticipate them, and as a consequence, react to these circumstances even before they actually occur. The unexpected results of the 2016 presidential elections in the US provide an opportunity to address this issue, and therefore to study the consequences of the election of Donald Trump on how Latin Americans perceive the United States. To do this, we exploit the timing of the field implementation of the AmericasBarometer to compare subjects who participated in the study

before and after the US presidential election.<sup>7</sup> The election happened during the survey implementation in Paraguay, Venezuela, Honduras, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic.

The 2016–2017 wave of the AmericasBarometer includes an item that captures attitudes toward the US government. The question allows us to analyze how the election of Donald Trump affected anti-Americanism in Latin America. In our analysis, we use a binary indicator of “trust in the US government” as the outcome variable (see appendix B for more details).

We use the survey data and the 2016 US presidential election to construct a regression discontinuity design in time (RDiT), where time is the running variable and the treatment begins at a particular threshold in time (Hausman and Rapson 2018). Within this strategy, all units have a score; when that number is above a known cutoff the units will be considered treated, and when it is below the cutoff, they will be considered controls. In our RDiT the units of analysis are the respondents from the five aforementioned countries. We assigned a score to each survey participant based on the difference between the day the survey was implemented and the 2016 US presidential election (November 8, 2016). We define our cutoff as the night of the US election. Using the score and the cutoff, we can construct the treatment and control groups, where the former corresponds to positive values of the score (i.e., Trump as president-elect) and the latter to negative values of the score (i.e., Trump as a candidate). Therefore, the day of the election is the last day of the control group (score: -1), and the first post-election day is the first day of the treatment group (score: +1).<sup>8</sup> We estimate the following local-linear RD specification:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 S_i + \beta_3 T * S_i + \sigma_p + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

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<sup>7</sup> Minkus et al. (2019) use a similar design to study the impact of Trump’s election on the EU’s popularity.

<sup>8</sup> There is no reason to believe that survey respondents determined their position around the cutoff or that enumerators changed the fieldwork schedule because of the 2016 US presidential elections.



Y is the respondent's trust in the US government. T depicts the treatment (units above the cutoff), and S describes the score. The interaction between T and S allows the regression function to differ on both sides of the cutoff point.  $\sigma_p$  corresponds to country fixed effects. As is typical, we weighted the observations using a triangular kernel, which assigned more importance to respondents closer to the cutoff.

The RDD involves the selection of a bandwidth: values of the score that determine the units to be included in the analysis. Following Bueno and Tuñon (2015), instead of limiting ourselves to the results obtained from using an optimal bandwidth, we implement equation 1 on 32 different bandwidths starting +/- 6 days from the election and ending +/- 37 days from the election, which allows us to observe the sensitivity of our estimates to a wide range of subsets. A bandwidth of 6 days means that we will implement equation 1 in a subset of respondents who answered the survey up to 6 days before and up to 6 days after the election. We limited our bandwidths according to two criteria: one, we did not expand the possible bandwidths to more than 37 days since this was the last day below the cutoff; we did not use less than 6 days to keep a reasonable number of observations on each side of the cutoff.

The optimal bandwidth<sup>9</sup> is 8 days, within the window of bandwidths used in this paper [6, 37]. In appendix C, we compare the main characteristics of the entire sample and the optimal bandwidth sample, which shows that the findings are not coming from an unusual group of respondents. In appendix D, as a validity check, we show that relevant placebo covariates<sup>10</sup> such as age, education, gender, and geographic location do not change abruptly around the cutoff. In

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<sup>9</sup> We use the Mean Squared Error (MSE) optimal bandwidth, which optimizes the bias-variance trade-off (Calonico, Cattaneo, and Titiunik 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Placebo covariates are individual characteristics that should not be affected by the treatment.

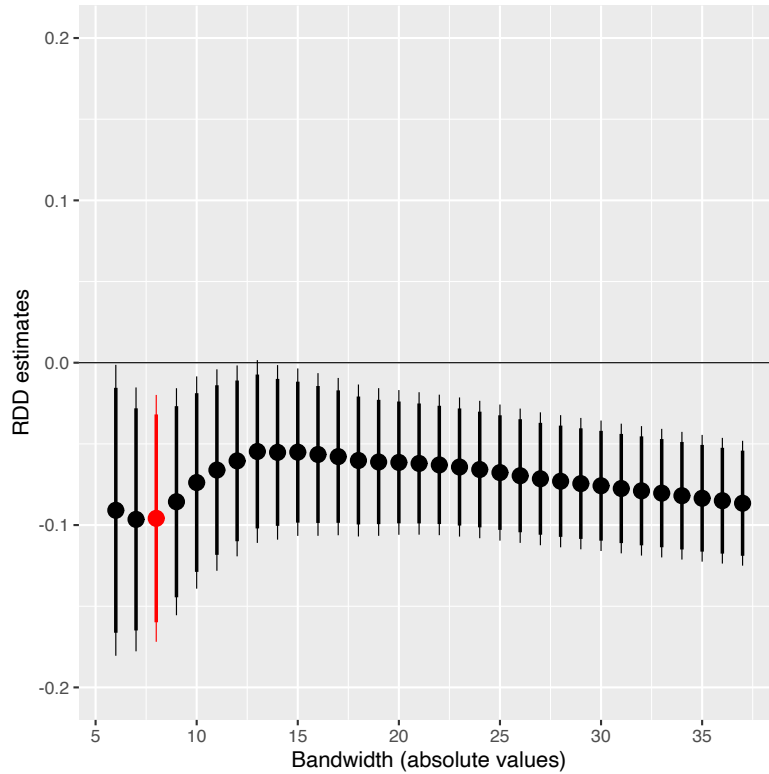
appendix E, we run a falsification test by changing the day of the US presidential election (i.e., modifying the cutoff). In appendix F, as a robustness check, we conduct an interrupted time series analysis using all the units available and including time trends.<sup>11</sup> In appendix G, we use other outcomes as a placebo analysis.

## Results

Figure 1 summarizes the effects of the election of Trump on the outcome of interest based on estimates of equation 1 on a battery of bandwidths. The y-axis represents the RDD point estimates and the x-axis the bandwidths in absolute values. We provide 90% and 95% confidence intervals for every point estimate. We marked in red the results when using the optimal bandwidth. As shown in the first panel of figure 1, when using the optimal bandwidth (8 days), respondents surveyed after Trump's election are 10 percentage points less likely to express trust in the US government (two-tailed p-value: 0.014, observations: 2744). To contextualize the results, before the US presidential election, 48% of respondents expressed trust in the US government.

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<sup>11</sup> A common concern with RDIT is serial dependence (Hausman and Rapson 2018). This problem tends to arise when the study uses the same unit of analysis across time. Since our data do not follow this structure, we expect serial dependence to be less of a concern. Additionally, Muñoz et al. (2020) discuss potential violations to the exclusion restriction, which is a key concern when using unexpected events during survey design. For example, a close election could generate large protests, and as result, it would be hard to know which of these two events explains the outcomes of interest. However, the nature of the treatment (i.e., the US presidential election) reduces the relevance of this concern since the election did not take place in the five Latin American countries studied in the paper.



**Figure 1:** RDD Estimates for trust in the US government

We conducted a number of robustness checks. In appendix G, we provide a table with the number of observations, point estimate, standard error, and p-value for each of the bandwidths. In appendix H, we explore heterogeneous treatment effects by respondent and country characteristics. In appendix I, we discuss the existence of floor effects. In appendix J, we check the results by country to illustrate that the main findings are not case specific. In appendix L, we expand on our decision to use a binary dependent variable.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we assessed whether the election of Donald Trump produced an immediate shift in attitudes toward the United States. The results show that the 2016 US presidential elections had an immediate negative effect on trust in the US government in Latin America.<sup>12</sup>

Our results suggest a high level of volatility in attitudes toward the US government in Latin America. Changes in US favorability under different administrations are not surprising *per se* (Chiozza 2009), but the fact that they occurred so quickly is striking. If anti-American attitudes are shaped by the long history of US-Latin American relations (Morgenstern and Bohigues forthcoming), as well as by slow-moving structural (Baker and Cupery 2013) or individual-level factors (Azpuru and Boniface 2015), evaluations of the US government should be strong attitudes: i.e., attitudes that are stable and “have the ability to withstand an attack” (Petty and Krosnick 1995: 3). The rapid decline in trust in the US government as a result of an exogenous shock (i.e., the Trump election) suggests a higher level of ambivalence in anti-American attitudes in Latin America than previously recognized.

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<sup>12</sup> We discuss the generalizability of our findings in appendix M.

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