

# External Cues and Policy Preferences: Rethinking the Drivers of Policy Positions

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## Abstract

At a time when the influence of external cues on opinion formation is gaining attention due to their relevance for preference formation, this research note investigates how external cues from political elites and close friends shape individual policy preferences. Building on prior studies by Barber and Pope (2019, 2024) regarding Donald Trump's impact on people's policy preferences during his 2017–2021 presidency, we examine whether this influence persists soon after Trump's first presidential tenure concludes in late 2021 through a survey experiment. We also assess the influence of a second external cue that has gained attention due to the growing role of social media in political processes: a close friend, who might also serve as a relevant figure for policy position formation. We find that Trump's liberal cues shift Republican preferences in a liberal direction, while close friend cues show diverse patterns, including some backlash effects where individuals adopt positions opposite to conservative friend advocacy. These effects vary with individuals' party identification, political knowledge, and social conformity levels. Individual characteristics moderate political elite influence, while peer influence operates through reactance mechanisms rather than conformity, revealing that social networks shape opinions through more complex pathways than commonly theorized.

Scholarship has extensively explored the formation of policy preferences and the influences that sway public support or opposition to policies. Barber and Pope (2019) have highlighted the critical role of political elites in shaping individuals' policy positions. More recently, Barber and Pope (2024) demonstrated that the impact of these cues varies depending on the importance individuals assign to specific policy issues. While these studies have provided new insights into the relationship between partisanship and policy preference formation, important questions remain regarding the duration of the effect of political elites on shaping individuals' opinions and whether other types of external influences, such as the influence of close friends or personal social circles, may also affect public policy inclinations.

Understanding whether elite and peer positions influence policy preferences is increasingly relevant in the current era of heightened polarization, as polarization can intensify the impact of external cues (Druckman, Peterson & Slothuus, 2013). Recent studies have shown how external influences may make a difference in opinion formation, such as expert sources (Case et al., 2022), political parties (Bäck, Fredén, & Renström, 2022; Vössing, 2021), and local political leaders (Painter & Kimball, 2022). Regarding elite cues, while research has demonstrated that former presidents can retain significant persuasive power over the public even after leaving office (Winger & Oliver, 2024), important questions remain about how this influence varies across different policy domains and contexts. This is particularly relevant for understanding the unique case of Donald Trump,

whose unprecedented post-presidential political engagement offers new opportunities to examine how the nature and extent of elite influence may shift after leaving office. Peer influence through interpersonal contact represents another crucial pathway, as research demonstrates that social relationships can significantly shape policy attitudes with effects varying by contact quality and ideological orientation (Kordsmeier, Tumilson, & Song, 2019). This peer influence can be particularly powerful when it operates through partisan channels, as peer cues can be as influential as elite cues on policy preferences (Toff & Suhay, 2019).

In the current study, we contribute to this line of work by assessing the influence of external cues from two of the most important figures in recent discourse on opinion formation in American politics—namely, of post-presidential Donald Trump, and of close friends. First, we assess whether the external cue given by a former president holds after the completion of their presidential tenure. We build on the work of Barber and Pope (2019, 2024), which shows Donald Trump's influence on policy positions based on surveys fielded during his 2017–2021 presidential tenure.<sup>1</sup> As noted by Barber and Pope (2019: 41–42), their research design leverages Trump's uniquely frequent shifts in policy positions, arguing that “there is something about Trump or the presidency more generally” that is more powerful than party labels to sway policy

<sup>1</sup> After his inauguration in early 2017 (Barber & Pope, 2019), and in 2018 (Barber & Pope, 2024).

positions. Our replication of their study using late 2021 survey data allows us to assess whether Trump's influence still holds after his presidential term, thereby contributing to the unresolved question of whether the power of formal office-holding impacts the persuasiveness of political figures.

Second, we extend beyond Barber and Pope's original design by examining post-presidential Trump influence in concert with close friendship influence, which has gained prominence in the current sociopolitical landscape. By studying these two sources of influence, our design offers insights into their relative importance in shaping policy preferences. This comparative approach is valuable for understanding contemporary political communication, where both elites and personal connections compete for attention on social media platforms.

Previous research has demonstrated the importance of friendship networks in political communication and opinion formation (Parker, Parker, & McCann, 2008), including their effects on electoral participation (Partheymüller & Schmitt-Beck, 2012). Our results contribute to disentangling whether observed social media effects on opinion formation (Aruguete et al., 2021; Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil De Zúñiga, 2015) are primarily driven by exposure to elite cues or by the influence of personal connections, thereby helping resolve a key puzzle in the literature on political communication in the digital age.

To assess the potential influence of both external figures, we exposed a representative sample of respondents in the United States to policy cues from both Trump and a close friend, varying across the liberal and conservative spectrum. Our findings reveal that Donald Trump's and a close friend's stances have varying impacts on overall policy positions, and that their impact is highly conditional on respondents' characteristics. Specifically, we find that these effects vary with individuals' party identification, political knowledge, and social conformity levels. An important implication of these heterogeneous findings is that the influence of political elites on policy positions becomes more partisan-concentrated after they leave office, as our findings show that post-presidential Trump's influence in late 2021 affects only Republicans and only for liberal cues, while showing no effects for conservative cues—representing an asymmetric pattern compared to Barber and Pope's findings (2019, 2024) during his presidency. For peer cues, the findings suggest backlash effects whereby those high in political knowledge and social conformity seem to resist perceived peer pressure by adopting positions opposite to those advocated by conservative close friends.

These insights are crucial in light of Donald Trump's successful election to a second presidential term and show the importance of investigating the extent to which Trump's influence may again gain traction during his second presidential term. Additionally, our finding that peer influence operates through unexpected backlash mechanisms suggests that social circles shape opinions in more complex ways than commonly theorized.

## Argument and Hypotheses

We aim to evaluate the influence of two key external figures on shaping policy positions in late 2021: a prominent political elite (post-presidential Donald Trump) and a close friend. The rationale for elite influence is well-established (Barber & Pope, 2019, 2024), and we contribute to this line of work by examining whether this elite influence persists after leaving office. Prior work shows political elites can shape public opinion even when not officially in the public administration (Agadjanian, 2021; Lenz, 2012). As Winger and Oliver (2024) argue, former

presidents can maintain significant political influence through the “rhetorical post-presidency.” H1a: Post-presidential Trump cues will influence policy positions.

For peer influence, research shows social relationships significantly shape policy attitudes (Kordsmeier et al., 2019), with studies demonstrating how connections influence support for specific policies (Pearson-Merkowitz, Filindra, & Dyck, 2016; Wood & Bartkowski, 2004). While elite cues operate through hierarchical authority and perceived credibility, peer cues function through horizontal social pressure via mechanisms of informational persuasion and social norm conformity (Druckman & Lupia, 2000; Sinclair, 2012). H1b: Close friend cues will influence policy positions.

We hypothesize heterogeneous impacts between external cues and respondents' characteristics. Following Converse (2006), individuals with strong partisan identities have more stable policy preferences and are less susceptible to external influence, with party identification serving as a proxy for ideological strength (Fowler et al., 2023). For Trump cues specifically, Republicans should be more susceptible given their partisan alignment (Barber & Pope, 2019). H2: Strong partisans will be less susceptible to external influence, though Republicans will be more responsive to Trump cues due to partisan alignment.

On the contrary, research suggests that those with lower political knowledge are more susceptible to cues due to having fewer prior beliefs (Zaller, 1992). H3: Individuals with lower political knowledge will be more influenced by external cues.

Finally, individuals valuing social conformity over autonomy align more with external cues since their behavior follows social norms (Blais & Hortala-Vallve, 2021). This effect should be stronger for peer cues, as conformity operates through social identification mechanisms (Toff & Suhay, 2019). H4: Individuals high in social conformity will be more influenced by external cues, particularly peer cues.

## Data and Methods

### Survey Experiment

Following our pre-analysis plan, available in the Supplementary Information (SI), we conducted a survey experiment using a representative sample of Americans ( $n = 1,000$ ) as part of a module in the Cooperative Election Study (CES) fielded between November and December 2021.<sup>2</sup> Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions or the control group, with the assignment being completely independent of participants' self-reported ideology.<sup>3</sup>

The conditions were: Trump supporting a liberal policy position (Liberal Trump), Trump supporting a conservative policy position (Conservative Trump), a close friend supporting a liberal policy position (Liberal Close Friend), a close friend supporting a conservative policy position (Conservative Close Friend), or no cue (reference category).

Each participant received the same cue across different policy vignettes.<sup>4</sup> To assess the influence of these cues, we follow

<sup>2</sup> We conducted power analyses that document that this sample size is sufficient for detecting relevant effects (see Supplementary Section A.3), and this sample size is commensurate with the sample used by Barber and Pope (2019) to conduct analyses similar to those we report.

<sup>3</sup> While Trump approval was measured post-treatment rather than pre-treatment, robustness analyses reveal no systematic relationship between treatment assignment and Trump approval distributions (see Supplementary Section D.2).

<sup>4</sup> For each of the policy issues, respondents are randomly assigned to one of the aforementioned cues (see Supplementary Table A.1.1).

Barber and Pope (2019) and include eight policy issues, ranging from minimum wage and taxes to abortion and immigration policies. For the liberal and conservative positions, we followed established ideological stances. For instance, in the Trump liberal condition, the cue on taxes is phrased as *Please indicate whether you support or oppose the statement: To increase the amount of taxes paid by the wealthy. Donald Trump has expressed support for this policy. How about you? Do you support or oppose increasing the amount of taxes paid by the wealthy?* The conservative position for this issue advocated for reducing taxes on the wealthy, with parallel phrasing. For additional details of the experimental design, see SI Section A.

Regarding the close friend conditions, we opted for using an unnamed close friend in the survey experiment context to establish a minimal level of trust for the communication that is common among strong ties (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). This approach has been successfully employed in previous research examining how close friendships shape various attitudes and behaviors (Windle, 1994). This design choice entails an important trade-off: while it allows us to examine the broader effect of close friendship cues on policy positions, it may yield conservative estimates of peer influence, as it lacks the specific identity cues (names, demographics, shared characteristics) that establish credibility in social influence processes (Barber & Pope, 2022). In the concluding section, we discuss how future research could complement our findings by examining how the strength of specific friendship ties moderates these effects.

## Estimation

Given the randomized allocation of subjects into one of four experimental groups or the control group, we used weighted linear regression models estimated via OLS to obtain the average treatment effect (ATE) of the cues from a political figure and a close friend. Our estimation approach for the ATE includes the primary outcome variable and a binary indicator for treatment exposure as outlined in Equation 1, using the control group as the reference category. To account for observed sample imbalances in gender and party identification, we incorporated these as control variables.<sup>5</sup> We use CES survey weights in all analyses.

$$\text{ATE} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Treatment}_i + \beta_2 \text{Male}_i + \beta_3 \text{Party}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

The ATE is the treatment effect on policy positions, measured on a scale that ranges from  $-1$  (oppose, indicating more conservative policy positions),  $0$  (don't know), to  $1$  (support, indicating more liberal policy positions). The coefficients can be interpreted as the average change in the probability of support for liberal positions associated with each treatment condition. To examine potential heterogeneous effects outlined previously, we conducted extended versions of this baseline estimation, including interactions between the treatment and respondents' self-reported party identification, political knowledge, and an indicator of social conformism.<sup>6</sup>

## Results

Our first analysis estimates the ATE of liberal and conservative prompts on the overall policy support. As depicted in Figure 1,

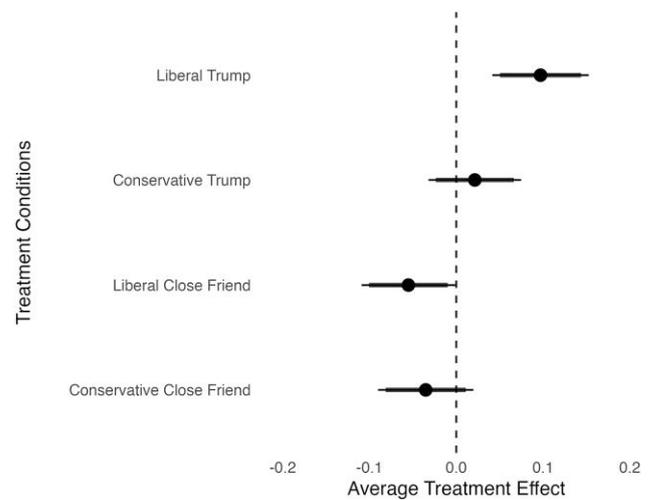


Figure 1. ATE on policy support. ATE, average treatment effect.

we find mixed evidence for our hypotheses about external cues. Regarding political elite influence in the post-tenure period (H1a), only the Liberal Trump condition shows positive effects. The liberal Trump cue shows a 0.10 increase in liberal policy support overall, which is larger than the 0.05 effect Barber and Pope (2019) found during Trump's presidency, though the overlapping confidence intervals indicate this difference is not statistically significant. In contrast, conservative Trump cues showed no significant effects, which is also consistent with Barber and Pope's (2019) findings. When examining Trump's influence across specific policy issues (Supplementary Table C.2.1), the liberal cues shift opinions on wages, taxes, and immigration toward more liberal positions. The conservative Trump cue shifts opinions in a conservative direction only on background checks, and produces a backlash effect on immigration, shifting respondents toward more liberal positions.

Regarding close friend influence (H1b), we find limited effects overall. The liberal close friend cue shows a small but significant negative effect, moving respondents toward more conservative policy positions, while the conservative close friend cue shows no significant effect.<sup>7</sup> While prior research has found that political discussions can play a strong role in shaping partisan opinions (Zichettella, Weeks, & Hasell, 2024), our findings show hypothetical friendship cues may produce backlash effects rather than conformity, with respondents potentially reacting against perceived peer pressure by moving in the opposite ideological direction from the cue.

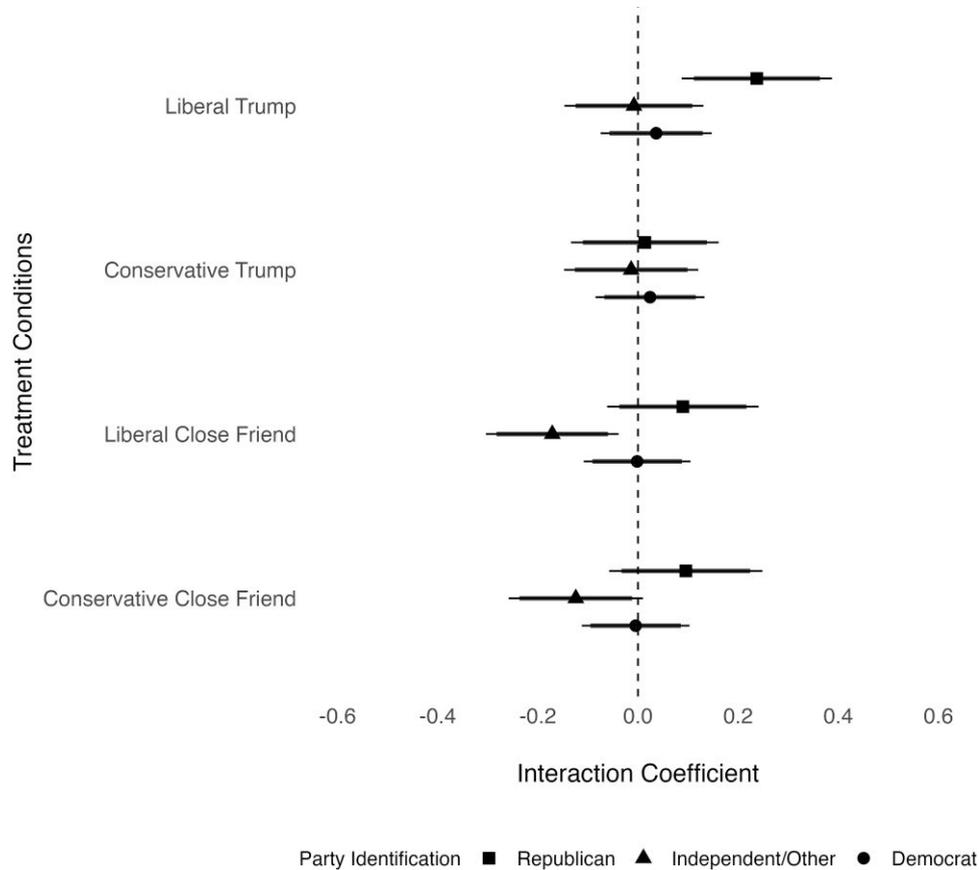
We turn to our investigation of respondents' traits and their varying effects, focusing on party identification (H2), political knowledge (H3), and social conformism (H4). Figure 2 illustrates the effect on policy support across party identification.<sup>8</sup> While Barber and Pope (2019, 2024) found that Trump cues had the strongest effects on Republicans during his 2017–

<sup>7</sup> We conducted additional analyses of the negative effect of liberal friend cues to assess whether the frequency of respondents' discussions with friends across policy issues impacts our findings. The results in Supplementary Section D show that frequent discussants do not show consistent treatment effects for specific policy issues, demonstrating that the negative effect is not driven by discussion frequency.

<sup>8</sup> While Figure 1 showed the ATE across all respondents, Figure 2 reveals how these effects vary by party identification. Therefore, the coefficients represent the total treatment effect for each partisan group rather than additional effects to be added to the main effects shown in Figure 1.

<sup>5</sup> For details about covariate imbalances, see Supplementary Table B.1.1.

<sup>6</sup> See Supplementary Section B.2 for the description of these interaction variables.



**Figure 2.** Interaction between treatments and party identification.

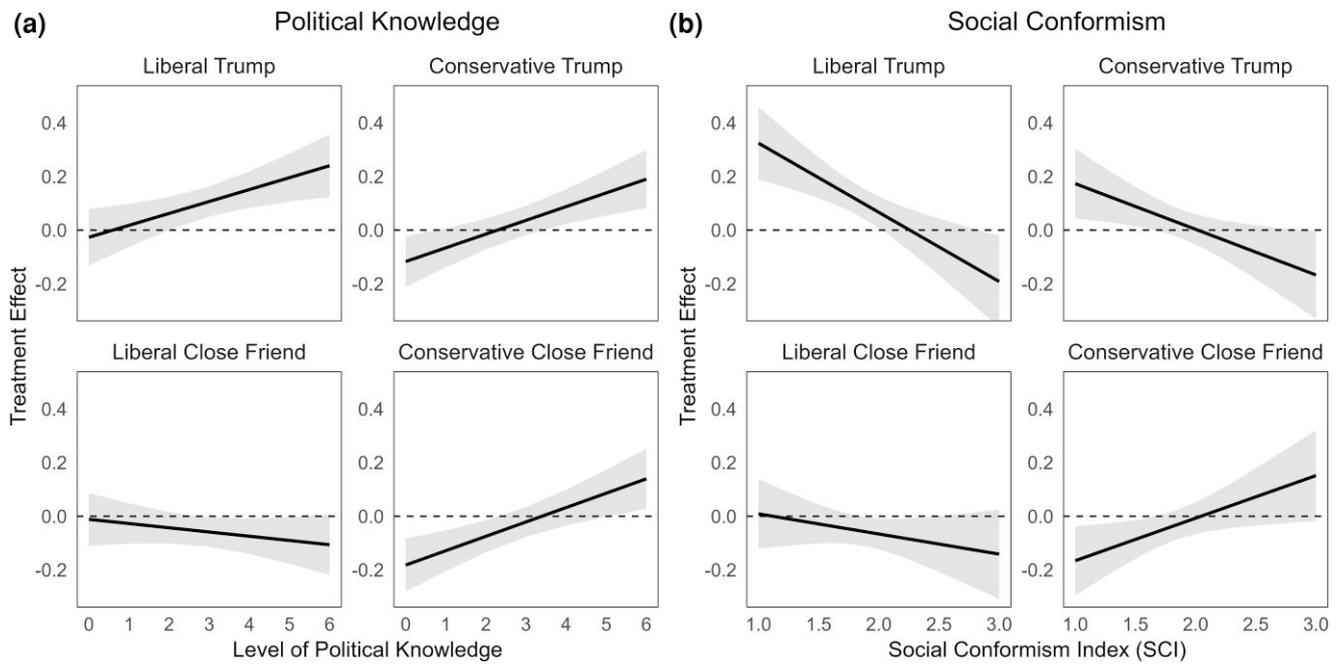
2021 presidential tenure, our results show a different pattern in the post-presidential period. For conservative Trump cues, we find no significant effects across partisan groups. For liberal Trump cues, however, Republicans show a large positive effect, moving significantly toward more liberal policy positions, while Democrats and Independents show no significant response. Regarding close friend cues, we observe limited effects overall. While [Toff and Suhay \(2019\)](#) emphasize the importance of peer cues within strong partisan social identities, our findings show that liberal close friend cues produce small negative effects (moving toward more conservative positions) among Independents, pointing to possible backlash effects rather than conformity. This indicates the importance of future research on the complex nature of independents' political stances in a polarized political environment, as well as relevant factors beyond partisan identity for explaining peer influence.

To test our hypothesis about political knowledge (H3), [Figure 3](#), panel a shows the interaction between the four treatments and different levels of political knowledge. The results reveal distinct patterns across treatments. For Trump cues, both liberal and conservative treatments show stronger effects as political knowledge increases, though in different directions: liberal Trump cues produce stronger liberal effects among knowledgeable individuals, while conservative Trump cues produce stronger backlash effects (movement toward liberal positions). For close friend cues, we observe different patterns: the liberal close friend cue shows no statistically significant interaction with political knowledge, indicating that knowledge levels do not moderate the direction or magnitude of this treatment's effect on policy positions, while the conservative close friend cue shows a positive

interaction effect with political knowledge, indicating that among higher knowledge individuals this cue produces stronger movement toward liberal positions (a backlash effect). These findings demonstrate that political knowledge moderates the impact of external cues, but in ways that vary by source and ideological direction of the cue.

Our final analysis investigates the impact of social conformism on individuals' reactions to diverse policy positions (H4). [Figure 3](#), panel b illustrates the interaction between social conformism and treatment effects. The results reveal distinct patterns across treatments. For Trump cues, we observe contrasting effects of social conformism: liberal Trump cues produce backlash effects, with higher social conformism leading to more conservative positions (opposite to the cue direction), while conservative Trump cues show increased influence, with higher social conformism enhancing their effectiveness at producing conservative positions. These findings indicate that social conformism moderates Trump's influence in ideologically distinct ways: individuals high in conformity resist liberal messaging from Trump (producing backlash) but are more receptive to conservative messaging from Trump (showing influence). One interpretation for this result is that those prone to conformity are more responsive to Trump cues that align with conventional conservative norms while rejecting his more unconventional liberal positions that conflict with established ideological expectations.

For close friend cues, the patterns differ: the liberal close friend cue shows a slight negative trend that is not statistically significant, while the conservative close friend cue shows a positive interaction effect with social conformism, producing backlash effects where higher conformism leads to more



**Figure 3.** Interaction between treatments and political knowledge on policy support (panel a) and treatments and social conformism index (panel b).

liberal positions (opposite to the cue direction). This suggests that individuals high in social conformity may react against conservative peer pressure by moving toward more liberal positions, possibly reflecting resistance to perceived attempts at social influence. The contrasting patterns between Trump and close friend cues indicate that conformity operates differently depending on the source of influence, with conformist individuals showing varied responses to elite versus peer messaging that depend on both the source and ideological direction of the cue.

### Limitations and Scope Conditions

Two main limitations are worthy of note. The first limitation is that after Trump's presidential term, his positions became less volatile, more well-known to the public, and more conservative. However, Trump demonstrated some policy flexibility on key conservative issues even late in his presidency, including granting temporary legal status to Venezuelan migrants in January 2021 (Sesin, 2021) and extending residency for migrants from six countries in December 2020 (Associated Press, 2020), which supports the experimental realism of liberal Trump cues on this matter during our late 2021 survey period.

The second limitation concerns the close friend treatment, which possibly lacked realism for respondents whose close friends hold consistently different views from those presented in our experimental cues. Our heterogeneous results regarding close friend influence should therefore be interpreted as evidence about the potentially limited impact of generalized friendship cues, rather than as evidence against friendship influence more broadly. Previous research demonstrating significant friendship effects has typically examined either face-to-face conversations between actual friends (Parker et al., 2008) or specifically named friendship ties (Partheymüller & Schmitt-Beck, 2012). The contrast between these studies and our results shows the importance of extending the current research to test whether the mechanism of friendship influence may operate primarily through sustained

interpersonal interactions and conversations with specific individuals, rather than through abstract friendship endorsements.

### Conclusion and Discussion

This study contributes to the growing literature on the importance of external cues on policy position formation by offering a robust examination of two of the most important external figures in contemporary discourse, namely post-presidential Donald Trump in late 2021 and close friends. Our results indicate significant but highly conditional impacts of these two external figures on people's overall policy support.

Regarding Trump's influence as a post-presidential figure in late 2021, we show a complex pattern of effects that vary significantly across different groups. The liberal Trump cue moved opinions in a liberal direction, particularly among Republicans. The persistence of Trump's influence on liberal issues among Republicans may indicate that charismatic leaders can create "sticky" political brands that operate independently of traditional ideological sorting (Torcal, Martini, & Carty, 2025). Additionally, politically knowledgeable individuals showed liberal responses to Trump cues generally (including backlash effects for conservative cues), and those high in social conformity showed conservative responses to Trump cues generally (including backlash effects for liberal cues). We report these findings after Trump's election to a second term and at a time of increased media coverage of American voters who report uncertainty as to whether their choice for the presidency truly matters (Nagourney, 2024). Further research is needed to assess whether the completion of formal office-holding is the causal factor that leads to these patterns of partisan-concentrated influence and not other confounding case-specific factors, such as the January 6th insurrection and its aftermath (Akande & Kellner, 2023). The varying impact of Trump's cues across different subgroups points toward the importance of additional research on how political elites' influence may be conditioned by individual-level characteristics both

during and after their tenure in office—including research on political elites who are less polarizing figures than Trump in the public's evaluation (Nai & Maier, 2021).

As for the influence of close friends, our findings reveal significant but unexpected patterns: liberal close friend cues produced backlash effects (moving respondents toward more conservative positions), while conservative close friend cues showed no main effects but produced backlash effects among those high in social conformity and political knowledge. This indicates that close friendship influence may be more complex than previously theorized, operating through reactance mechanisms rather than conformity, and potentially depending on individual predispositions to social influence and their ability to process political information. Additional research on these findings is crucial for a better understanding of political influence in our evolving social media landscape. The backlash effects may reflect that in highly polarized environments, peer cues trigger reactance rather than conformity. Future research would benefit from either collecting pre-treatment data about participants' social networks to tailor friend cues or employing a laboratory design where participants interact with real peers whose political positions can be manipulated, following work by Bäck, Renström, and Sivén (2021). Ultimately, our findings reveal that former presidents can still influence voters, while peer influence operates through backlash mechanisms that challenge traditional conformity theories. This challenges conventional wisdom about both elite and social influence in American politics.

## Acknowledgments

For helpful comments on the full draft manuscript, we thank participants at our presentation at MPSA 2024, as well as Jeremy Albright and Barak Zur. For early insights on our initial research design plan, we thank André Blais, Semih Çakır, Ruth Dassonneville, Jessica Feezell, Hahrie Han, Anselm Hager, Jeremy Pope, and participants in the 2021 University of Montreal Seminar at the Chair for Electoral Democracy. For expert insights on survey design development, we thank the leadership team at the Cooperative Election Study.

## Competing Interests

No competing interest is declared.

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary materials are available at *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* online.

## Funding

This work was funded by the European Union (ERC, PRD, project number 101077659).

## Data availability

Data and replications materials can be found at the Harvard Dataverse (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GDCPDT>), and as an archived GitHub repository on Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17849288>).

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