

The American Viewer: Political Consequences of Entertainment Media

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American voters consume an astounding amount of entertainment media, yet its political consequences are often neglected. We argue that this ostensibly apolitical content can create unique opportunities for politicians to build parasocial ties with voters. We study this question in the context of Donald Trump’s unconventional political trajectory and investigate the electoral consequences of *The Apprentice*. Using an array of data—content analysis, surveys, Twitter data, open-ended answers—we investigate how this TV program helped Trump brand himself as a competent leader and foster viewers’ trust in him. Exploiting the geographic variation in NBC channel inertia, we find that exposure to *The Apprentice* increased Donald Trump’s electoral performance in the 2016 Republican primary. We discuss the implications of these findings in light of the rise of nonconventional politicians in this golden age of entertainment.

INTRODUCTION

“[I]t is difficult to distinguish politics from entertainment, and dangerous to try.”

- *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011)

“Trump got elected. But TV became president.”


- James Poniewozik, *Audience of One* (2019)


Americans consume a tremendous amount of television. The 96% of households with a television (Nielsen 2021) spend between 8 and 9 hours a day watching television (Madrigal 2018), with individuals averaging over 4 hours of television per day—over half of Americans’ total leisure time (ATUS 2019).¹ Even in an increasingly digital world, no medium can compete with television’s reach and potential to communicate with the American public. In this light, the extensive scholarship considering broadcast media’s role in American politics should be no surprise. Research has amassed an impressive body of evidence estimating the media effects on election outcomes (Hopkins and Ladd 2014; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017), polarization (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Levendusky 2013),

agenda setting (Boydston 2013), and elite behaviors (Clinton and Enamorado 2014).²

While the outcomes differ, most previous studies have focused on the effect of *the news media* on political outcomes. Yet with the advent of cable television and the Internet, the media landscape has changed dramatically. Fewer and fewer are tuning in to traditional news (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013; Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016; Van Aelst et al. 2017). Audiences for the evening newscasts, once the most watched time slot, have dropped by 31% in the past decade alone (Moskowitz 2021). Our fragmented media environment provides countless alternatives to conventional news coverage, breaking its previous monopoly over content and allowing the less politically attentive to choose entertainment instead. Despite a handful of studies that examine the effect of entertainment on political attitudes—ranging from foreign policy knowledge (Baum 2011) to the perceived legitimacy of radical political action (Jones and Paris 2018), from beliefs in the American Dream (Kim 2023) to politicized views of ESPN (Peterson and Muñoz 2022)—the extent to which entertainment media shape contemporary electoral politics remains largely unknown.

In this article, we bridge neighboring theories in political science and communication to conceptualize the potential power of entertainment media in the realm of electoral politics. As most voters lack personal interactions with politicians, the candidate–voter connections are primarily parasocial. We argue that entertainment media offer unique opportunities for politicians to build parasocial ties with voters, not only

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¹ And these estimates only partially account for modern media exposure through smartphones and streaming services.

² Not to mention the substantial work demonstrating the small (Coppock, Hill, and Vavreck 2020), short-lived (Hill et al. 2013), but persistent (Sides, Vavreck, and Warshaw 2022) effects of campaign advertising.

because Americans primarily consume entertainment over the news but also because it provides some of the only uncontested, “one-sided information flows” (Zaller 1992). Accepted without much resistance in an ostensibly apolitical context, these considerations can then be accessed in more explicitly political arenas.

We begin by describing how entertainment media provided Trump the opportunity to develop a public persona that would benefit his eventual political career. For 11 years, *The Apprentice* presented Trump to an audience of millions as “America’s Boss”—a successful businessman; a savvy negotiator; a tough, but supportive mentor; adept at reaching profitable deals in high-pressure situations. While scholars have presented a range of compelling explanations for his unconventional path to the White House (Hochschild 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019), we use an eclectic array of data to describe how this program fostered a favorable image of Donald Trump, which would in turn propel his successful, insurgent 2016 campaign.

We then turn to national survey data to probe the mechanism of parasocial ties. Using a survey of white voters conducted before the 2016 presidential election, we find that regular viewers of the program were more likely to trust Trump, feel a personal connection to him, and reject information critical of his candidacy. Open-ended answers further reveal that avid *Apprentice* viewers were explicitly relying on aspects of his television persona, such as his business experience and leadership potential, to explain their support. In contrast, nonviewers supporting Trump were more likely to evaluate his campaign along more typical partisan dimensions.

Next, by exploiting the geographic variation in viewership induced by channel inertia—the estimated spillover in ratings driven by the previous time block’s viewership—we show that exposure to *The Apprentice* increased Trump’s electoral performance in the 2016 Republican primary. Such effects do not exist for other Republican presidential candidates in either general or primary elections, or other prime-time TV shows on NBC during the same TV season. We report no effect of *The Apprentice* on the general election, a finding that sheds light on the possible scope conditions of entertainment media effects; they might matter more in a setting where partisan heuristics are lacking.

Together, these results suggest that *The Apprentice* allowed Trump to cultivate a reputation that would bear fruit for his nascent political career through the parasocial ties he established with the viewers/future voters. By providing a deluge of uncontested, seemingly apolitical considerations, entertainment media provides a unique route into the public consciousness.

Early theories of media effects relied on “an implicit acceptance of the media regime in place at the time” (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011, 63)—an era where Walter Cronkite was a household name and *60 Minutes* was America’s most watched television program. This tradition often discounts entertainment media as politically irrelevant, driving a research agenda removed from the daily media diet of ordinary Americans. But in

this high-choice media environment where public attention increasingly turns from news and toward entertainment (Boydston and Lawrence 2020; Chadwick 2017; Krupnikov and Ryan 2022; Nielsen, Palmer, and Toff 2023; Prior 2013), what entertainers can accumulate is political power (Archer et al. 2020; Street 2004). Our findings here serve as a sober reminder that the study of the American voter can’t be removed from the study of the American viewer.

THE POWER OF ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA IN BUILDING PARASOCIAL TIES

Does entertainment media matter for the study of politics? By any metric, the American consumption of entertainment dwarfs that of the news (Jones and Paris 2018). Yet the prevailing assumption has been that the political consequences of entertainment would be trivial because of its scattered messaging and seemingly apolitical narrative. The substantive content of entertainment programs was deemed “too sporadic to produce large-scale message effects of the sort described by the classic persuasion paradigm” (Bennett and Iyengar 2010) or a force that simply dilutes news media effects (Arceneaux and Johnson 2013) and distracts the public from current affairs (Prior 2013).

This isn’t to suggest that entertainment can’t deflect or dilute. For example, Velez and Newman (2019) explore the effect of Spanish-language television (SLTV) within Latino communities, focusing specifically on its introduction in North Carolina and Florida. By comparing Latinos residing just inside and outside the stations’ reception boundaries, they find that exposure to SLTV dampened political participation. Why? Because, as the authors note, very little SLTV programming is devoted to political news (821).

When political science research does consider the effects of entertainment media, it focuses on its role as an alternative source of information, especially for those who avoid more traditional news. Baum (2011), for instance, argues that foreign affairs covered in “soft news” programs get viewers otherwise uninterested in politics to pay attention to international crises. Scholars have also found that exposure to satire, comedy, and talk shows can promote political learning, whether knowledge of campaign finance regulations (Hardy et al. 2016) or recognition of political candidates (Brewer and Cao 2006; Hollander 2005).

It would be remiss not to recognize the contributions of communication studies and cultural sociology to our understanding of entertainment media effects (Appel 2008; Bartsch and Schneider 2014; Bryant and Miron 2002; Mulligan and Habel 2011). Here, scholars have long explored cultivation theory—the idea that habitual exposure to the wider entertainment media environment can affect the audience’s perception of social and political realities. For instance, heavy television viewers are more likely to perceive the world as a meaner and scarier place, and support more restrictive criminal justice policies (Gerbner 1998; Gerbner et al. 1986). Similarly, exposure to prime-time dramas

featuring progressive portrayals of women was found to enhance support for increased gender equality (Holbert, Shah, and Kwak 2003), while watching science fiction programs, such as *The X-Files*, reduced trust in government (Pfau, Moy, and Szabo 2001).

However, much of this evidence is correlational in nature, limiting our ability to make causal claims about the effects of entertainment. Some research has leveraged experimental tools to address this problem. Mulligan and Habel (2011) find that watching the film *Cider House Rules* induced more pro-choice abortion views in its audience. Jones and Paris (2018) find that exposure to dystopian narratives, such as those present in the popular young adult films *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, increased the willingness to justify radical, even violent, forms of government resistance. Kim (2023) shows that exposure to “rags-to-riches” narratives common in reality television programs can increase viewers’ beliefs in the American Dream and promote tolerance for income inequality. Other scholars have utilized natural experiments to quantify the effects of entertainment, ranging from the impact of America’s first blockbuster movie, *Birth of a Nation*, on white supremacist activities (Ang 2023) to the effects of cable soap opera on female school enrollment in India (Jensen and Oster 2009).

Yet it is unclear whether the entertainment media can influence electoral politics in contemporary America. On the one hand, the powerful force of partisan identity, which increasingly aligns with racial and social identities, suggests that the impact of other factors may be negligible, if not nonexistent. In this context, the idea that entertainment media could have a significant influence on voting patterns may seem a bit far-fetched. On the other hand, some empirical studies—all of them from earlier eras and different countries—highlight the potential of entertainment media. Xiong (2021) finds that exposure to Ronald Reagan as a television host in the 1950s led to greater support for his early bids for elected office. Similarly, Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei (2019) find that early access to Italy’s Mediaset all-entertainment content increased the likelihood of voting for its founder, Silvio Berlusconi, decades later.

This evidence underscores the potential of entertainment media to shape candidate–voter connections. Just as humans form attitudes and impressions toward other people, how voters evaluate politicians tends to be grounded in interpersonal notions of attraction and familiarity. Citizens’ perceptions of candidates’ personality traits, such as their perceived competence, empathy, integrity, or warmth, have a well-documented electoral impact (Fridkin and Kenney 2011; Hayes 2010; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). But as most citizens do not interact with politicians in person, the candidate–voter connections are primarily parasocial—one-sided psychological bonds viewers cognitively develop with images of people they see through mass media (Cohen and Holbert 2021; Giles 2002; Horton and Wohl 1956). While parasocial ties can form through various media experiences, including news media, the majority of evidence on the media’s role in cultivating such relationships is situated within the context of

entertainment media. This body of work demonstrates how parasocial interactions between audiences and celebrities—be they actors, comedians, or show hosts—can trigger various attitudinal and behavioral changes.³

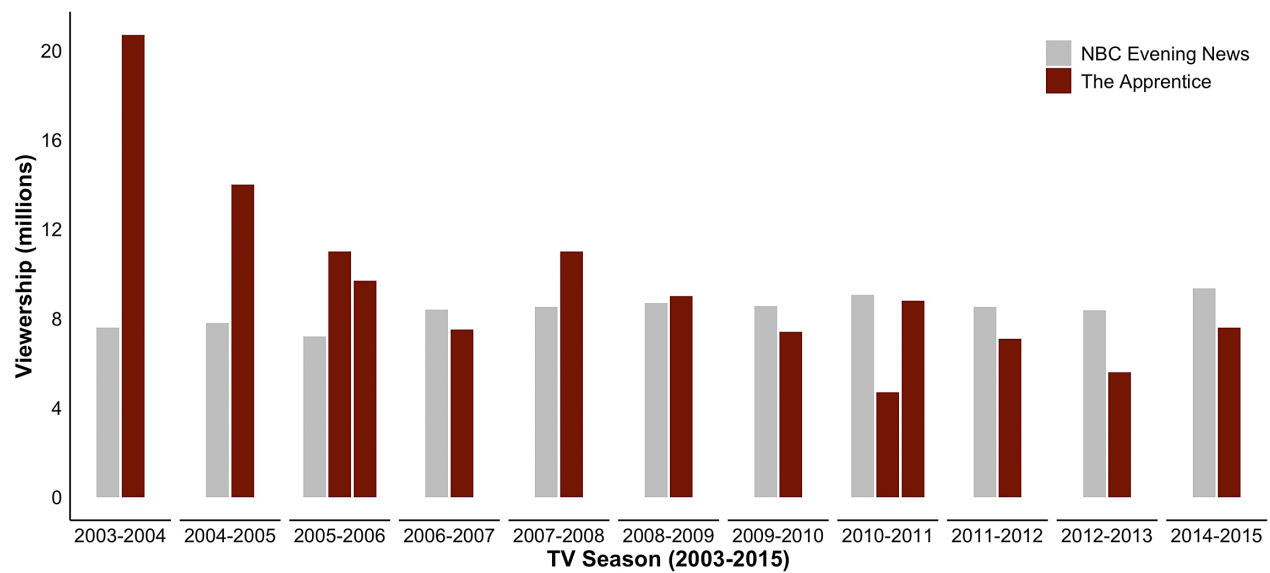
In many ways, these parasocial relationships are particularly well-positioned to influence political behavior. First, entertainment constitutes the vast majority of the average American’s media diet (Kim 2023; Madrigal 2018; Pinsker 2018), providing a greater opportunity to form these bonds. Second, messages and narratives provided through entertainment media are more likely to be accepted. For example, comedy has been shown to reduce the tendency to counterargue a persuasive message (Boukes et al. 2015), as a comedic message focuses people on processing the humor making them less likely to resist the underlying argument (Young 2008). And third, in comparison to the traditional news media environment where political candidates actively counter their opponents’ messages, entertainment media usually provides a one-sided information flow—notably lacking a “countervailing signal” that reduces susceptibility (Zaller 1992, 267).

When celebrity candidates take center stage in the electoral processes, the lines between politics and entertainment blur, allowing nontraditional candidates to exploit the parasocial relationship they have built from popular culture (Adam and Maier 2010; Balmas and Sheafer 2015; Boydston and Lawrence 2020). For example, WWF star Jesse Ventura can present himself as a “political action figure” ready to “battle special interest groups” (Ventura 1998). Arnold Schwarzenegger, *The Terminator* star and former Mr. Universe, can criticize the “girlie men” in Sacramento during budget negotiations (Broder 2004). Fred Thompson had little difficulty convincing Tennesseans he could serve as a statesman in the Senate, having “played a White House chief of staff, a director of the Central Intelligence Agency, a highly placed F.B.I. agent, a rear admiral, [and] even a senator” on the big screen (Bragg 1994). Mehmet Oz’s major Senate campaign slogan during the pandemic was “A Dose of Reality,” priming both his medical and celebrity reputations cultivated through *The Dr. Oz Show*. Yet no case could be a more prominent test of the parasocial ties that entertainment media can forge than Donald Trump and *The Apprentice*.

THE APPRENTICE: PRIME-TIME EXPOSURE TO TRUMP AS “AMERICA’S BOSS”

How did entertainment media provide Trump the opportunity to develop a public persona that would

³ Researchers have found that parasocial ties can lead to social facilitation effects (Gardner and Knowles 2008), reduce prejudice toward out-group members (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006), and promote self-esteem and increase political efficacy (Papa et al. 2000) to name just a few.

FIGURE 1. *The Apprentice* and *NBC Evening News* Viewership Over Time

Note: The figure displays the average viewership (in millions) for *NBC Evening News* and *The Apprentice* for 2003–15. If two TV show seasons were aired, then two bars are shown (i.e., in TV season 2004–5, seasons 2 and 3 of *The Apprentice* were on air). Appendix A of the Supplementary Material has further information, such as the specific time window for each season of *The Apprentice* and the viewership for the finale. We gathered the rating data from Wikipedia, which report the official estimates from Nielsen.

benefit his eventual political career? Many commentators from left and right have suspected the role that a popular reality TV show, *The Apprentice*, may have played (Nussbaum 2017; Poniewozik 2019).⁴ Heritage (2016), for instance, rather bluntly argued: “You might think that the rise of president-elect Trump is down to sexism, or social media filter bubbles, or a country’s ability to put partisan politics ahead of personal judgment, or the dying roar of a frightened white majority. But it isn’t. It’s because of *The Apprentice*.” Though disentangling the causal link between the TV show and Trump’s electoral success is not as easy as pundits would put it, we argue that exposure to *The Apprentice* gave Trump a unique opportunity to build parasocial ties with viewers (see also Gabriel et al. 2018).⁵

First, *The Apprentice* was popular. This competition-based reality TV—in which a group of contestants fight for the opportunity to run one of Donald Trump’s companies—drew 28.1 million viewers at its peak popularity. Its early seasons were NBC’s ratings juggernaut

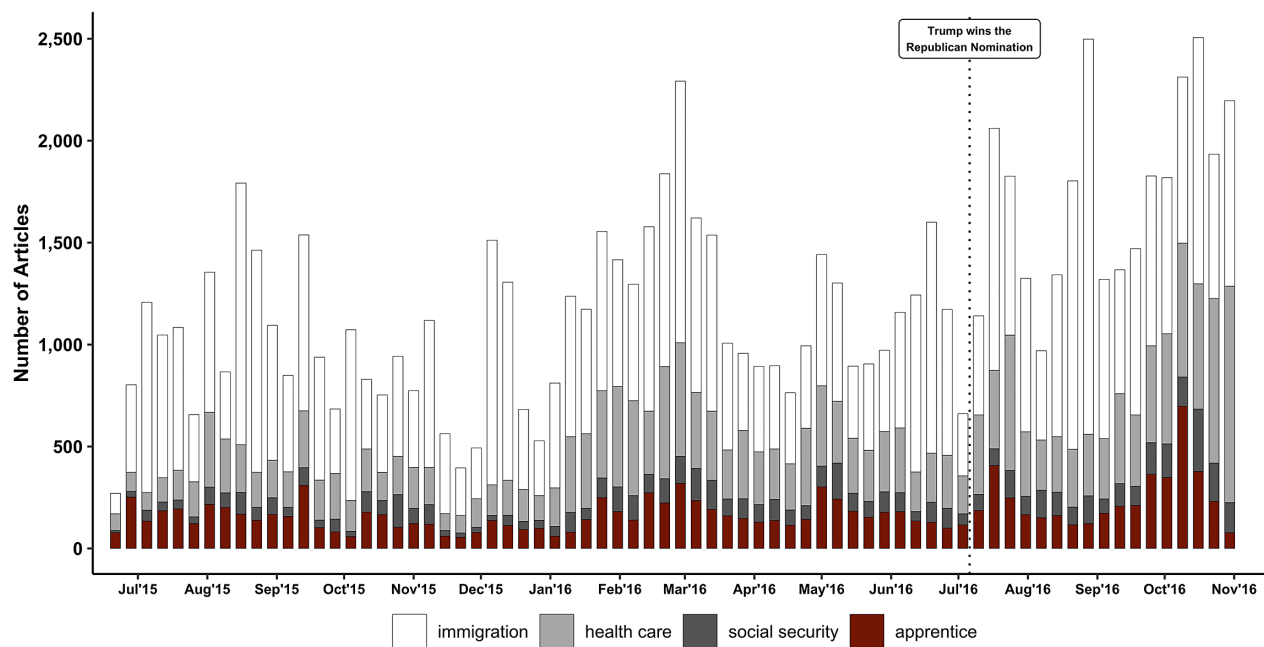
⁴ Post-2016 political commentary often credited *The Apprentice* for Trump’s reputation as a successful businessman; his campaign tactics and acumen (Keefe 2018); and raucous, avid fan-base (Wickenden 2019). Even “the Donald’s” ride down a golden escalator and into contention for the Presidency “looked like a promotional appearance for the next season of *The Apprentice*” (Kruse 2019).

⁵ Here, we interpret parasocial ties broadly. One may argue that parasocial relationships usually require perceptions of much deeper realism and involvement. Here, we follow previous literature that defines parasocial ties as one-sided psychological bonds with specific media figures such as celebrities or fictional characters (see also Alrababa’h et al. 2021).

and nominated for the 2004 Emmy’s Best Reality Television Program. As seen in Figure 1, it attracted an average viewership of around 20 million viewers in its first year, an audience nearly three times greater than *NBC Evening News* and ten times greater than *Fox News*. Though the popularity dwindled over time, it continued to attract a greater or comparable audience to the evening news until 2015 (Appendix A of the Supplementary Material).

Second, with its universally positive portrayal of Trump, *The Apprentice* helped re-brand his public persona. By no means an unknown quantity, Trump had long used television as a means of brandishing his image. As early as the mid-1980s, Trump would appear as the sharp-dressed landlord or the wealthy suitor in cameo appearances on different television programs. But as Nussbaum (2017) describes, his cameos throughout the 1980s and 1990s were that of an “arrogant self-promoter,” “omnipresent in pop culture,” but “often as a punch line.” The Donald Trump of the early 2000s, fresh off public divorces and bankruptcies, was held in nothing like the esteem “America’s Boss” would be in *The Apprentice*. For 11 years, *The Apprentice* presented Trump to an audience of millions as a savvy businessman and a decisive mentor.

Third, reality television provides an effective avenue for generating parasocial ties. Unlike other programming, reality TV is billed as *reality*. As Von Drehle described in his coverage of the 2016 election, “the crafted characters of reality TV experience a different kind of stardom from the TV and movie idols of the past. Fans are encouraged to feel that they know these people, not as fictional characters but as flesh and

FIGURE 2. News Reference to Key Issues and *The Apprentice* during 2016 Election Cycle

Note: The stacked bar chart displays the weekly variations in the number of news articles that mention Trump and one of the four keywords: immigration, health care, social security, and apprentice. For the apprentice search, we included references to reality television as well. The period is from June 16, 2015 (when Trump announced his candidacy for president) to November 5, 2016 (the last Saturday before the election day). We used the Nexis Uni database, which allows us to do a keyword search for all major U.S.-based national and local newspapers, news magazines, and broadcast transcripts.

blood” (2016). Trump, in this view, is not playing the role of a successful, powerful businessman, he *is* a successful, powerful businessman.

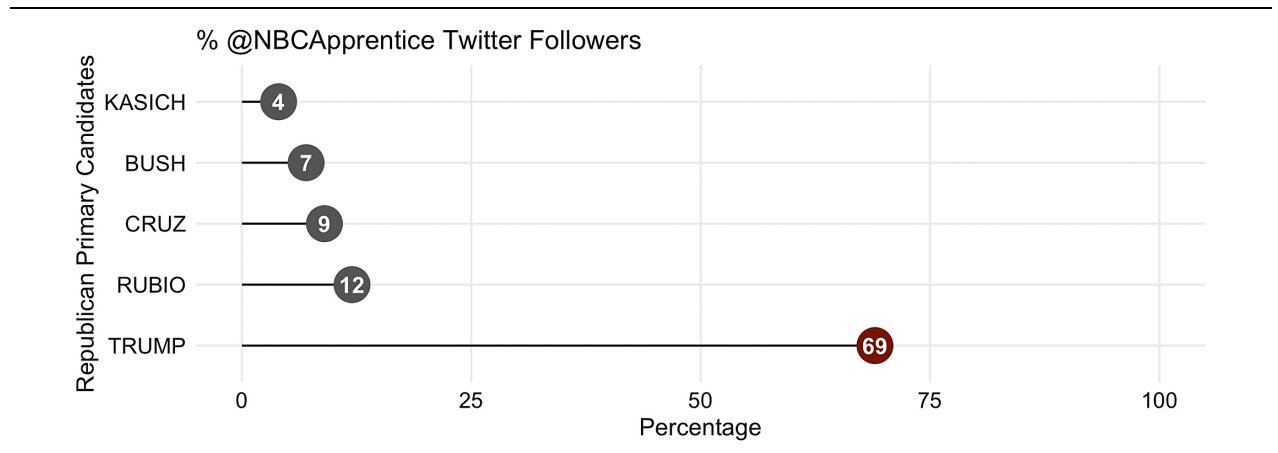
A closer look at the scripts themselves sheds light on how the *The Apprentice* contributed to revamping Trump’s image. The phrases that contestants used to describe Trump throughout the 13 seasons align with his own 2016 campaign messages. Trump is portrayed as someone who “has certainly given everybody a shortcut to the American Dream” (Season 1: Episode 1); “one of the most powerful men in the world” (S2: E1); “...a humanitarian. And somebody who’s also concerned about important causes” (S4: E13); “the greatest businessman ever” (S6: E1); “the Mack Daddy of the United States” (S3: E7); “an icon [...] an amazing individual and everybody looks up to [Trump]” (S7: E13); There is even a scene in which Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY) lent credence to Trump’s success, saying that “even when [Trump] was much younger,” he knew that “[Trump] was gonna go places” (S5: E8). Season 6, aired in 2007, features a person holding a “Trump for PRESIDENT” sign.

Public attitudes toward Donald Trump were not systematically measured while he was a (mere) reality TV celebrity, but scattered surveys between 1999 and 2005 (Appendix B of the Supplementary Material), hint that *The Apprentice* may have helped boost Trump’s favorability ratings. After the first two seasons were aired, more than half of Americans viewed Trump favorably.

Finally, the mainstream media frequently referenced *The Apprentice* during the 2016 election cycle. Figure 2 displays the weekly number of news articles⁶ that mentioned Donald Trump and one of four issues—immigration (white), health care (light gray), social security (dark gray), and *The Apprentice* (dark red). Perhaps not surprisingly, immigration was more discussed than issues of health care and social security in the articles that refer to Trump throughout the 2016 election cycle. Yet the total number of articles that refer to *The Apprentice* or Donald Trump’s former career as the reality TV show host was twice as high than the number of articles that mention social security ($N = 697$ vs. 306). For every three articles about Trump and immigration, there was one article that mentioned Trump’s reality TV program ($N = 1,938$ vs. 697). This is in sync with existing evidence that finds that the heavy mainstream media coverage of Trump (Patterson 2016), driven by the collision of celebrity politics with traditional journalism resulted in “as much clown-like coverage as serious coverage” throughout the campaign (Boydston and Lawrence 2020).

This is not to suggest that *The Apprentice* was more potent than other substantive political issues such as immigration. Rather, our goal is to illustrate that the mainstream media often depicted Trump through the

⁶ We used Nexis Uni, which allows us to search for keywords across hundreds of national and local news outlets, including TV news scripts.

FIGURE 3. @NBCApprentice Followers Who Follow 2016 Republican Primary Candidates

Note: This figure displays the percentage of @NBCApprentice account followers who also followed one of the 2016 Republican primary candidates. As of October 2020, @NBCApprentice had a total of 114,121 followers. We gathered data from Twitter and cross-checked whether each follower also follows the official Twitter accounts of John Kasich, Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and Donald Trump.

lens of his reality TV persona from *The Apprentice* or as the successful businessman that the show helped to craft in public perception.⁷ Though we do not have direct empirical evidence to probe whether such reminders could strengthen the connections between candidate Trump and “America’s Boss” for those who previously watched *The Apprentice*, we speculate that it is likely given the long-standing evidence on priming and cue activation in campaign communications. It is well-documented, for instance, how various explicit and implicit cues, as well as appeals to racial and gender identities, family upbringing, and former occupations, can influence the public’s evaluation of candidates (Druckman 2004; Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Mendelberg 2001; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019).

The link between Trump and *The Apprentice*—ironically activated by the mainstream media—is reflected in social media data as well. We scraped the Twitter handles of every user who follows the @NBCApprentice account ($N = 114,121$ in October 2020), and determined whether each user followed any other 2016 Republican primary candidates.⁸ Figure 3 shows the percentage of the overlapping audience. We find that less than 15% of *The Apprentice* fans follow other Republican politicians, while 69% of them follow Trump on Twitter. Granted, as we do not know when a user started following Trump on Twitter, it is possible that they began to follow NBC’s *The Apprentice* account after becoming a supporter of Donald Trump. However, it would be hard to explain this scenario without the psychological bond of *The Apprentice*, particularly as Trump was no longer hosting the program.

Altogether, an eclectic array of descriptive data we assembled here—viewership statistics, TV transcripts,

public opinion polls, news coverage, and Twitter data—strongly suggest that Trump’s candidacy could have benefited from the parasocial ties built via the entertainment media.

PROBING THE MICRO-MECHANISM OF PARASOCIAL TIES

While many have argued that *The Apprentice* contributed to the electoral success of Donald Trump, demonstrating this empirically is difficult. The first problem is a lack of data. Scholars were not thinking about the potential impact of *The Apprentice* per se, let alone thinking about the scenario of Trump running for office. Widely used national election surveys rarely ask about people’s entertainment media preferences, let alone their particular consumption of *The Apprentice*. Contemporary survey experiments that would have people watch *The Apprentice* and then measure their attitudes toward Trump would all suffer from post-treatment bias.

Given these limitations, to probe whether *The Apprentice* provided Donald Trump the opportunity to build parasocial ties with viewers, we first turn to one existing survey of white voters launched before the 2016 election—that happened to include several questions about Trump’s character and, importantly, reality television consumption habits. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only preelection survey that addressed both support for Trump and *The Apprentice* viewership.⁹

⁹ This data were first introduced and discussed in the Online Appendix of Xiong (2021). We thank Xiong for generously sharing the data. The survey was administered using the Survata platform (see Appendix D of the Supplementary Material for the full questionnaire). It was conducted over the week of October 24, collecting 932 responses. Potential respondents were screened to include only white registered voters from the United States aged 21+. Therefore, to the degree that the effect of *The Apprentice* could be heterogeneous across ethnic groups, this limits the interpretation of our results.

⁷ Appendix C of the Supplementary Material shows the news references to his identity as a real estate mogul and a reality TV host.

⁸ We were able to conduct this analysis, as this was before Trump was suspended from Twitter.

TABLE 1. *The Apprentice* Viewership and Attitudes toward Trump

	(1) Support Trump	(2) Trump believes in his policies	(3) Trump cares about people like me	(4) Do not mind the Access Hollywood tape
Frequency of watching <i>The Apprentice</i>	0.070*** (0.012)	0.026* (0.012)	0.050*** (0.011)	0.036*** (0.008)
General television habit	-0.001 (0.014)	0.008 (0.014)	-0.013 (0.013)	-0.016 (0.009)
Preference for reality TV	0.012 (0.010)	0.004 (0.010)	0.009 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.006)
Demographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No. of obs.	916	916	916	916

Note: All outcomes are re-coded to range from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. See Appendix E of the Supplementary Material for full results. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 1 presents the relationship between self-reported viewership of *The Apprentice* and attitudes toward Trump. *Support Trump* measures the strength of electoral support for Trump. Both *Trump believes in his policies* and *Trump cares about people like me* measure agreement with that statement. *Do not mind the Access Hollywood tape* measures how respondents' assessment of Trump was affected by the *Access Hollywood* tape (reverse coded). All outcomes have been re-coded to range from 0 to 1. We control for general television habits, preference for reality TV, political ideology, trust in politicians, as well as a host of demographic variables (age, income, education, and gender)¹⁰ and state fixed effects in each regression. Even after controlling for observables, the frequency of watching *The Apprentice* is positively correlated with all dimensions of Trump support. Frequent viewers of *The Apprentice* are more likely to say that Trump believes in his policies and cares about people like them. They are less likely to say that the *Access Hollywood* tape—in which Donald Trump bragged about groping women—negatively affected how they think of Trump.

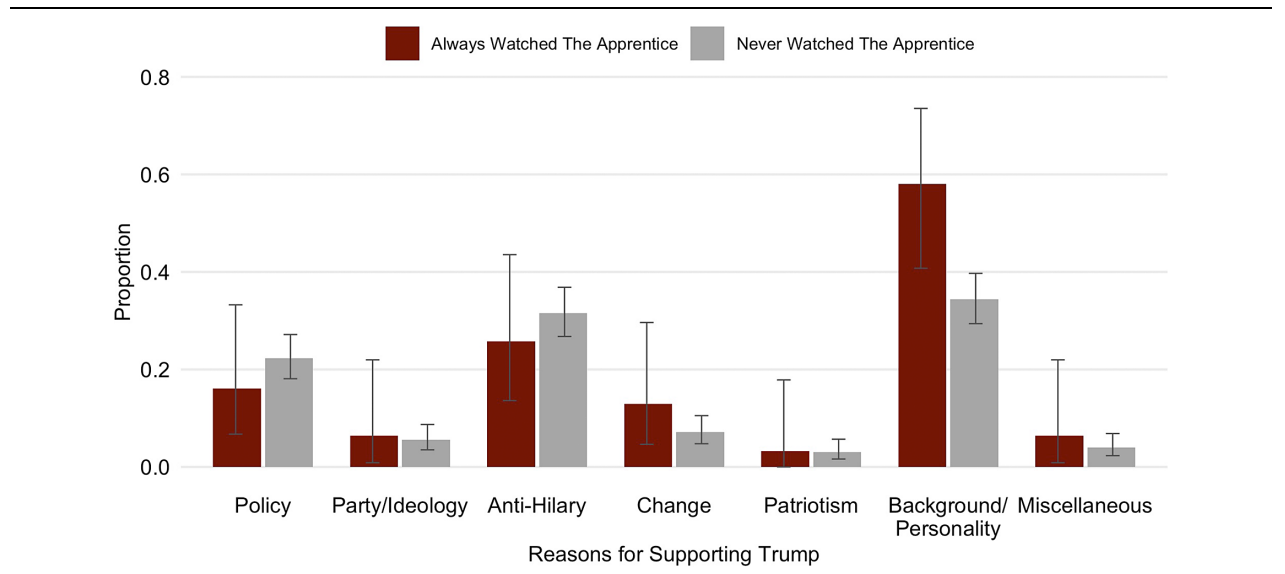
These effects are not negligible. In our full model specification (Appendix E of the Supplementary Material), we find that female voters on average are 7.3 percentage points less likely to support Trump than their male counterparts. The size of the coefficient on *The Apprentice* viewership in column 1 is of similar magnitude. If we compare those who are avid fans—who indicated that they watched *The Apprentice* every season—to those who never watched *The Apprentice*, then the avid viewers ($N = 40$ out of 916) are 28 percentage points more likely to support Trump. Given that 33% of the entire sample or 22% of those who are not liberal reported that they watched *The Apprentice*, the findings here shed light on how the parasocial ties built via entertainment media made Trump as a politically viable candidate

in spite of a host of typically disqualifying political setbacks.

Among Trump supporters who never watched *The Apprentice*, we find frequent references to various policy issues (“Illegal immigrants,” “not planning war with Russia,” “Wall. Trade. Foreign policy.”) or the fact that he is just a better alternative than Clinton (“He’s not Hillary,” “He’s the only one that can save our country. Hillary belongs in jail.”) in their open-ended justifications for supporting Trump. In contrast, those who always watched *The Apprentice* relied more so on his personality traits (“a lot tougher,” “speaks his mind”) and business expertise (“Business man and not a politician”)—the Trump persona that *The Apprentice* cultivated. While the small sample size prevents a more systematic, rigorous text analysis of these open-ended answers, Figure 4 summarizes the content analysis of the open-ended answers (Cronbach’s Kappa = 0.889, see Appendix F of the Supplementary Material). Out of seven thematic categories, the only category that showed a meaningful difference between the avid viewers and nonviewers was the one on Trump’s background and personality. While 58% of open-ended answers from avid viewers referred to Trump’s personal characteristics, 34% of the answers from nonviewers contained such references.

Our goal here is not to argue that the results—both the regressions and content analysis—are causal. If a respondent indicated that she regularly watched *The Apprentice* and intended to vote for Donald Trump, we could not know whether her vote intention prompted her to claim that she used to watch the TV show. It is also possible that the correlation between exposure to *The Apprentice* and electoral support for Donald Trump could be due to some other unobservable characteristics (Fioroni et al. 2022). While this concern is partially mitigated by the small and insignificant coefficients on the impact of general television habit and preference for reality TV on supporting Trump, we now turn to a causal inference strategy using observational data to more convincingly claim that *The Apprentice* affected Trump’s political prospects.

¹⁰ Since this is a survey of white voters, we didn’t control for race.

FIGURE 4. Content Analysis of the Open-Ended Answers for the Reasons Supporting Donald Trump

Note: The figure displays the proportion of open-ended answers classified into seven themes for those who indicated that they have always watched *The Apprentice* ($N = 31$) and for those who never watched the show ($N = 324$). Cronbach's Kappa for intercoder reliability is 0.889. See Appendix F of the Supplementary Material.

IDENTIFYING THE ELECTORAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE APPRENTICE USING CHANNEL INERTIA

To identify the electoral consequences of *The Apprentice*, we exploit the fact that in the early 2000s, channel inertia—viewers staying on the same channel even when a program ends—was quite common (Gershon 2013). A rich strand of social psychology research finds that the default options substantially affect viewers' choices and substantial inertia exists even when the cost of switching—such as requiring a press of a button on a remote control—is negligible (Esteves-Sorenson and Perretti 2012). As one advertising executive put, the media environment in pre-Netflix America was the one in which “you could read the phone book after *Seinfeld* and get a 25% viewer share.”¹¹ Indeed, network producers designed TV programs to encourage a natural audience flow so that people can transfer from the completion of one program to the beginning of another without much resistance (Gershon 2013, chap. 2). Such an idea is captured in the phrase “watching television” as opposed to watching a particular program; for network producers, television viewing was about promotion and information for an entire evening (Turner and Tay 2009).

Building on this insight, we exploit the fact that early seasons of *The Apprentice* used to be aired on Thursdays after popular 8 p.m.-sitcoms *Joey* and *Will & Grace*—programs that attracted around 20 million viewers. We use the 8 p.m. Nielsen ratings in 2004 as an

instrumental variable for the ratings for the 9 p.m. program, *The Apprentice*, as we expect those ratings are correlated due to channel inertia. In particular, we rely on ratings data during the “sweeps” periods (November, February, and May) for 2004–5 period where two early seasons of *The Apprentice* (seasons 2 and 3) were aired.¹² We argue that this is a valid instrument as it is implausible to believe that viewership of those two sitcoms—while related to the ratings of *The Apprentice*—would affect people's vote choice in a Republican primary more than a decade later, after conditioning on a host of sociodemographic variables.¹³

Formally, this is encapsulated by the following system of equations:

¹² We also chose this particular time period as the county-level geographic coverage of Nielsen rating data for the TV season 2003–4 was too sparse.

¹³ We rely on county-level demographic data from the U.S. Census and electoral data from Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections for our covariates. To achieve conditional exogeneity, we control for theoretically motivated potential confounders. First, as voting patterns in America are correlated with party identification, we control for county-level vote share for the Republican Party in the 2012 presidential election. Second, building on the well-established evidence of the critical role that racial, gender, and rural identity played in the 2016 election, we control for county-level racial and gender composition as well as population size and population density. Third, given Trump's campaign rhetoric about immigration and globalization, we control for county-level unemployment rates, median household income, and the proportion of college degrees and foreign-born population. Fourth, we also control for county-level share of same-sex couples and religiosity, for the potential role that the attitudes toward LGBTQ could have played. We also take into account the population change between 2004 and 2016, captured by the logged number of the average outflow and inflow movers.

¹¹ See Subramanian and Kalka (2001, 2).

TABLE 2. The Apprentice Effect on Trump Vote Share

	Trump vote share				
	Apprentice ratings	Primary election		General election	
	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) 2SLS	(4) OLS	(5) 2SLS
8 p.m. TV show ratings	0.593*** (0.036)				
<i>The Apprentice</i> ratings (9 p.m.)		0.148** (0.049)	0.239* (0.102)	0.00002 (0.0002)	0.0004 (0.001)
F-statistic			282.24		278.46
Covariates	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Model	First stage		Second stage		Second stage
No. of obs.	1,065		960		1,065

Note: All regressions are weighted by the number of TV households in each county. Appendix I of the Supplementary Material has full regression results. Trump vote share is measured as a percentage, ranging from 0 to 100. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

$$Apprentice_i = \delta_1 Ratings_{8pm_i} + \alpha X_i + \alpha_s + u_i, \quad (1)$$

$$Vote_i = \beta \widehat{Apprentice}_i + \alpha X_i + \gamma_s + \epsilon_i. \quad (2)$$

The first-stage regression describes how viewership of *The Apprentice* varies with the popularity of the program immediately preceding it (*Joey* or *Will & Grace*) in county i . The idea is that viewers who just finished watching the program immediately preceding *The Apprentice* might be more inclined to remain and continue watching television on the same channel. The resulting variation would be driven by channel inertia rather than explicit preferences for *The Apprentice*. In the second stage, we estimate our coefficient of interest by regressing the Trump vote share on predicted viewership of *The Apprentice*.

We argue that our instrument is correlated with vote support for Trump, but uncorrelated with the error term. People choose to watch entertainment media primarily to entertain themselves. Some of the characteristics that lead people to watch entertainment (i.e., low education) might lead them to vote for the populist political candidate, for instance. But after conditioning on relevant factors in the first stage, we find that 8 p.m. rating is a relevant instrument, as evidenced by the strong first-stage results in Table 2. If our instrument affects our outcome through some mechanism other than our endogenous regressor, the validity of our instrument would be called into question. The exclusion restriction is difficult to verify empirically. To address the possibility that there might be some unobservable traits that affect the instrument (watching *Will & Grace* and *Joey*), the treatment (watching *The Apprentice*), and support for Donald Trump, we conduct three tests.

First, we address the possibility that existing attitudes toward the LGBTQ could affect both the likelihood of watching *Will & Grace* and electoral support for Trump in 2016. The fact that *Will & Grace*—TV show widely

considered to cultivate pro-LGBTQ attitudes—was one of the lead-ins to *The Apprentice* raises the question about the validity of the instrument, particularly if the effect of viewership of *Will & Grace* on support for Trump in the 2016 primaries was at least partly mediated through attitudes toward gays and lesbians (Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021; Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes 2006). To alleviate this concern, we include county-level measures of religiosity and the proportion of same-sex couples as covariates, as rough proxies for attitudes toward LGBTQ.¹⁴

Second, we also show that it is unlikely that attitudes toward LGBTQ were electorally consequential among Republican primary voters in 2016. For example, the 2016 CCES asked respondents to rate the importance of 15 different political issues. Among voters who either identified with or leaned toward the Republican Party, all considered “gay marriage” overwhelmingly a “not important” issue, regardless of which Republican candidate they supported. Indeed, it was considered the least important issue regardless of whom they supported in the primary (see Appendix G of the Supplementary Material).

Third, we also address the potential concern that our instrument might be correlated with nontraditional sources of support for the Republican party since Trump was an outlier candidate. We test to see if the county-level viewership of the 8 p.m. program is correlated with the factors that have been argued as precursors to Trumpism, such as the Tea Party movement (Skocpol and Tervo 2019) and backlash against trade liberalization (Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018). As

¹⁴ We controlled for the proportion of anyone who is affiliated with all kinds of religious tradition; we also try the model where we control the proportions of two religious affiliations that are known to be most anti-LGBTQ—evangelical protestants and Mormons, and there were no meaningful differences.

reported in Appendix H of the Supplementary Material, we find no evidence that our instrument—8 p.m. rating—correlates with any of these factors that may have foreshadowed Trump’s candidacy.

Results

Table 2 presents our instrumental variable estimates of the effect of *The Apprentice* on two outcome measures using a two-stage least squares (2SLS) model. All regressions are weighted by the number of households with a television in each county and include state fixed effects. Column 1 presents the first-stage relationship between 8 p.m. ratings and *The Apprentice* (9 p.m.) ratings. This estimate indicates that 8 p.m. ratings are indeed positively related to 9 p.m. ratings. The statistical significance here underscores the relevance of the instrument and serves as evidence of channel inertia. The first-stage *F*-statistics for the excluded instrument are all over 270, which means that it is unlikely that a weak instrument biases our estimates.

Columns 2 and 4 show the ordinary least squares estimates. Analyzing the OLS estimates first, 9 p.m. ratings have a positive association with Trump’s vote share in the primary election (column 2), but not in the general election (column 4). Panel A columns 3 and 5 present the second-stage estimates of the effect of 8 p.m. ratings on the Trump vote share for the Republican primary and presidential election. As shown, there is a clear causal effect of *The Apprentice* for the Trump vote share for the Republican primary. Note that our 2SLS estimates are larger than OLS estimates because our instrumental variable strategy estimates the local average treatment effect (LATE)—treatment effect among those who saw *The Apprentice* if and only if they were watching the previous show. This heterogeneity will make the IV estimates larger than the OLS estimates. Substantively speaking, the 2SLS estimate from column 3 indicates that one standard deviation (4.83) increase in the (instrumented) *Apprentice* ratings would lead to a roughly 1 percentage point increase in county-level vote share for Trump. In the context of a competitive primary election with more than 10 candidates, these effects are not insignificant. In the Iowa caucus, the difference in vote share between Trump and Rubio was 1 percentage point. In Arkansas, Trump’s overall vote share was 33% whereas it was 31% for Cruz. Considering the winner-take-all delegate allocation in

¹⁵ In Appendix I of the Supplementary Material, we also show the null effects of *The Apprentice* on the campaign donation (logged) for Trump during the primary and general elections. We interpret these null effects to be consistent with the image Trump cultivated in *The Apprentice*—a successful businessman—and re-ignited throughout the election cycle. Trump has made self-funding a major selling point, and used it as proof that, unlike other politicians, he’s not beholden to anyone, whether it’s special interests or lobbyists: “I don’t need anybody’s money. I’m using my own money. I’m not using the lobbyists. I’m not using donors. I don’t care. I’m really rich.”

¹⁶ <https://www.npr.org/2015/07/31/427857932/are-donald-trumps-pockets-deep-enough-to-fund-his-campaign>

TABLE 3. No Effect of Another NBC 9 p.m. Program (*Will & Grace*) on Support for Trump

	Trump vote share			
	Primary		General	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	OLS	2SLS	OLS	2SLS
<i>Will & Grace</i> (July 9 p.m.) ratings	−0.051 (0.059)	−0.200 (0.148)	−0.0002 (0.0003)	−0.0003 (0.001)
<i>F</i> -statistic	176.26	193.17		
Covariates		Yes		Yes
State FE		Yes		Yes
No. of obs.		960		1,065

Note: All regressions are weighted by the number of TV households and include state fixed effects. Appendix J of the Supplementary Material has full regression results. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Republican primaries, these increases can lead to dramatic changes in primary outcomes.^{15,16}

But one might wonder whether those who watch television, not *The Apprentice* per se, are inherently different from those who don’t. Those fundamental differences somehow made them more prone to voting for Trump. For instance, frequent TV viewers might be more vulnerable to populist rhetoric (Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei 2019). We address this concern by exploiting the fact that later in the 2004–5 TV season (i.e., July 2005), at 9 p.m., instead of *The Apprentice*, *Will & Grace* was aired—followed by *Joey* (8 p.m.–9 p.m.). If there is something about those who watch television at 9 p.m. that made them more likely to support for Trump—regardless of *The Apprentice*, then we would see the significant effects when we use the July 9 p.m. ratings data. We find that both a simple OLS regression and an instrumental variable regression show no effect, as shown in Table 3.

We also conduct placebo tests where we use the same IV specification but look at the vote share of the major candidates for the previous election’s Republican primary. As seen in Table 4, the results are either null or substantively not meaningful. The (instrumented) *The Apprentice* ratings seem to have tangential, negative effects on Gingrich’s primary vote share, but the size of the 2SLS coefficient (−0.001) is a fraction of the one predicting Trump’s primary vote share (0.239). We find these placebo tests reconfirming our main findings on the unique role of *The Apprentice* in cultivating support for Trump.

It is also worth reflecting on how our LATE relates to our underlying theory of parasocial relationships. These relationships are typically characterized by strong, *habitual* connections with media figures. This could appear at odds with our estimand in the instrumental variable analysis, which identifies the impact of *incidental* viewership of *The Apprentice*. However, this is why we focus on early ratings for *The Apprentice*. We think it reasonable to assume that the 2004 compliers

TABLE 4. The Apprentice Effect on Republican Primary Candidates in 2012

	Romney share	Santorum share	Gingrich share	Paul share
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	2SLS	2SLS	2SLS	2SLS
<i>The Apprentice</i> ratings (9 p.m.)	0.002 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 ⁺ (0.001)	0.0002 (0.001)
Covariate	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No. of obs.	1,022	1,022	1,022	1,022

Note: All regressions are weighted by the number of TV households and include state fixed effects. Appendix K of the Supplementary Material has full regression results. ⁺ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

are more likely to become habitual viewers (in later years) than nonviewers. The incidental viewership induced by channel inertia would not have immediately sparked the parasocial ties, but increased the opportunity for them to form. By the end of Trump's tenure on *The Apprentice*, it becomes more difficult to make causal arguments about exposure to the program.

In many ways, our approach echoes those of studies of *Fox News*, which use channel positioning as an instrumental variable. This approach is based on the observation that viewers are more inclined to watch *Fox News* when it's assigned a lower channel number (Ash and Poyker 2023; Li and Martin 2022; Martin and Yurukoglu 2017). However, once viewers become familiar with *Fox News*' channel number, cease channel surfing, and start directly selecting *Fox News*, they are no longer the "compliers" in an IV analysis. Despite this shift, these studies remain insightful regarding the influence of *Fox News* on viewers who initially discovered the channel by chance, while follow-up observational studies can shed light on the impact of *Fox News* on its habitual audience.

Similarly, we pair our correlational evidence on the effects of habitual viewership with our better-identified effects of incidental viewership to suggest that Donald Trump was able to cultivate a politically relevant persona from his tenure on *The Apprentice*. By exposing "America's Boss" to millions of Americans over many years, we believe his persona was transmitted into the public's consciousness, providing Trump fertile ground for his 2016 election.

DISCUSSION

Donald Trump's unprecedented electoral success has produced no shortage of scholarly explanations. Some work highlights the very predictable nature of the 2016 election (Dassonneville and Tien 2021), while others have attributed his rise to numerous specific factors, including white working-class economic anxieties

(Porter 2016); long-term economic deprivation (Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2018); exposure to greater trade competition (Ballard-Rosa, Jensen, and Scheve 2021), attitudes surrounding race, ethnicity, and religion (Lajevardi and Abrajano 2019; Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019); and the status threat and cultural backlash felt by white voters in the face of growing domestic diversity and globalization (Inglehart and Norris 2017; Mutz 2018). All of these factors contributed to Trump's election, but our evidence suggests another: the consequences of entertainment media.

We argue that *The Apprentice* allowed Donald Trump to form parasocial bonds with his audience and, eventually, with his electorate. Using a pre-election survey of white voters, we show that regular viewers of the program were more likely to feel connected with Trump and reject negative information about him than other white respondents. They were also more likely to rely explicitly on aspects of his business mogul persona in describing their support for his campaign. Using the estimated effect of spillover ratings, we then show that exposure to *The Apprentice* fostered electoral support for Donald Trump in the 2016 Republican primary.

Granted, each piece of evidence alone is an imperfect test of our hypothesis: Nielsen's ratings data back in 2004 is incomplete; the survey of white voters was conducted right before the general election, instead of the primary, and due to its sampling frame is unrepresentative of the electorate at-large; the open-ended responses are too sparse for more systematic text analysis; and the potential priming mechanism is speculative. Yet with all available data taken together, we interpret our findings as evidence that Donald Trump's role as "America's Boss" on *The Apprentice* provided him with the public credibility necessary to secure an advantage in the Republican nomination in 2016.

We find little evidence that *The Apprentice* increased campaign contributions to the Trump campaign or improved his performance in the general election, suggesting possible scope conditions for entertainment. These null effects in the general election likely reflect classic explanations of voting behavior—ranging from partisan identity to the state of the national economy. Yet in an electoral setting lacking partisan heuristics, where voters struggled to differentiate him ideologically (Eady and Loewen 2021), Trump, like all celebrity candidates, came with the natural advantage of built-in ties and familiarity with voters. To the extent that voters follow party cues regardless of who the candidate is for a presidential election, then the power of entertainment media to influence the nomination is all the more consequential.

Some have argued that Donald Trump's unprecedented success was in many ways an anomaly, a reality TV star who stumbled his way into the White House. However, the use of entertainment media to propel political campaigns well predates Trump's success. From 1954 to 1961, Ronald Reagan hosted *General Electric Theater*, which at its peak was viewed by over 25 million households per week. Using CBS signal strength as a proxy for viewership, Xiong (2021) finds that exposure

to this ostensibly apolitical programming increased Reagan's electoral performance in the 1976 Republican primaries and to a lesser extent his gubernatorial and presidential general elections. In 1988, Salvatore "Sonny" Bono leveraged his fame to become mayor of Palm Springs, and later a member of Congress. Sean Duffy, once a cast member in a MTV reality show *The Real World: Boston*, has been serving as the U.S. Representative for Wisconsin's seventh congressional district since 2011. From Jesse Ventura to Al Franken, from Arnold Schwarzenegger to Cynthia Nixon, entertainment has and continues to serve as an avenue for candidate emergence (Wright 2019). These are not isolated incidents. As Knecht and Rosentrater (2021) show, there has been a steady increase in the number of celebrity candidates seeking elected office in the United States since the 1980s (see Appendix L of the Supplementary Material). Increasingly blurred boundaries between entertainment and politics mean that the actors from one space can easily enter and shape the other with increasing frequency (Lawrence and Boydston 2017).

Nor is this trend unique to American politics. Durante, Pinotti, and Tesei (2019) leverage the staggered introduction of Silvio Berlusconi's Mediaset all-entertainment television programming to show that it increased support for his party persistently over five elections. Jimmy Morales, who served as president of Guatemala (2016–2020), rose to fame starring in the comedy television program *Moralejas*; Marjan Sarec, who served as the Prime Minister of Slovenia (2018–2020), began as a political satirist and impressionist; twin brothers and child actors Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński would later co-found the Polish Law and Justice party and serve concurrently as President and Prime Minister of Poland, respectively; George Weah, often described as one of the greatest African football players of all time, served as the President of Liberia. Positions of celebrity in mass entertainment often serve as springboards to public office and political power around the globe.

What these celebrity politics portend for democracy, however, remains unclear. On the one hand, the influence of entertainment can foster and reinforce democratic norms. Long before Volodymyr Zelensky was elected as the president of Ukraine, his comedy show was watched by millions of viewers across countries previously colonized by the Soviet Union. His previous career is viewed as something that de-polarized the country in terms of language and forged a nationalist Ukrainian identity (Pisano 2022). He used entertainment to foster a new "capacious form of patriotism focusing on love for Ukraine," without which "the country might not have unified" in the face of Russian invasion (Pisano 2023). Here, we can see the tremendous potential of entertainment—accepted without much resistance in an ostensibly apolitical context, these attitudes can make or break a democratic state.

Meanwhile, we see an important parallel between the increasing prevalence of populist celebrity candidates who campaign as "outsiders" and the rise in polarization, nativism, and the politics of othering (see also Durante,

Pinotti, and Tesei 2019; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017; Lindstaedt 2020). Relying on public support unmediated by traditional political institutions, these leaders can drive dramatic, heterodox shifts in mass opinion and public policy. For example, long the party of free trade, Trump's protectionist platform (Bown and Irwin 2019) drove Republicans to adopt anti-free trade positions (Essig et al. 2021). Trump's trade war with China reportedly cost the U.S. economy nearly a quarter million jobs, not to mention a tremendous amount of uncertainty in the world of diplomacy (Pettis 2021).

Many keen observers of politics from Harold Lasswell to the thinkers of the Frankfurt School have long speculated that popular culture *is* political, significantly affecting how average citizens understand their political environment (Dorzweiler 2017). However, the consumption of nonpolitical media has sparked debates more attuned to how voters make political decisions given limited information, rather than how entertainment media affects their political behaviors (Delli Carpini 2014; Van Zoonen 2005). American viewers have been tuning in nonetheless, with politics happening there all along.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000728>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data, except for proprietary Nielsen ratings data, that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Database: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EWXQQH>.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflict of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors affirm this research did not involve human participants, as all of the analyses relied on secondary (already-collected) data.

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