

# Are Trump’s Indictments Rallying His Base? Evidence from the Counterfactual Format

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In the difficult task of assessing how sudden, significant events causally affect public attitudes, political pollsters often rely on respondents’ retrospective and self-reported causal inferences. We study the case of former president Donald Trump’s federal indictment for allegedly mishandling classified documents using two methods of retrospective causal inference. The commonly used *change format* asks respondents to directly state how the event affected their attitudes. This format triggers overwhelmingly partisan reactions and implausibly large effects. By contrast, the *counterfactual format* asks respondents to imagine what their attitudes and beliefs would have been if the event had not happened. Contrary to popular claims, it suggests that the indictment modestly hurt Trump’s standing among Republicans, increasing their belief that he mishandled documents (+2.5 pp) and decreasing their intention to vote for him in the primaries (-1.6 pp). These results are consistent with earlier research on the change format, as well as the broader body of research on political persuasion and the effects of scandal. Our approach includes a new sensitivity analysis of the counterfactual format that demonstrates its ability to capture more granular opinion change.

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In contrast to longstanding conventional wisdom about the effects of scandal (Markovits and Silverstein 1988; Darr et al. 2019; Hamel and Miller 2019; Dziuda and Howell 2021), some observers have suggested the recent indictments against President Donald Trump will serve to *increase* his electoral support (e.g., Vox 2023; FiveThirtyEight 2023*b,c*). Surveys conducted by national polling organizations that use “change format” questions appear to support this idea. When a CBS poll asked likely Republican primary voters “how might the indictment charges change their view of Trump,” 14% said, “for the better,” and 7% “for the worse,” implying a net increase in electoral support (CBS News 2023). A Reuters/IPSOS poll asked “How does the latest criminal case against Donald Trump impact your likelihood of voting for him in the 2024 presidential election, if at all,” with 31% of Republicans saying much more or somewhat more and 23% saying much less or somewhat less, again suggesting a net increase (IPSOS 2023).

As demonstrated in Graham and Coppock (2021), change format questions like these produce biased inferences about the effects of events on attitudes. They tend to overstate change in the congenial direction: supporters report becoming more supportive, opponents report becoming more opposed (Coppock 2023, chp. 2). One explanation for this bias is “response substitution,” wherein subjects answer the question they want to respond to, rather than the one they were asked (Gal and Rucker 2011; Yair and Huber 2020). On this reading, respondents who say that indictments make them *more* supportive of Trump are really trying to say that they support him *despite* the indictments.

In this paper, we use the “counterfactual format” introduced in Graham and Coppock (2021) to estimate the effect of the Trump’s second indictment ( mishandling of secret documents) on (i) the belief that he committed the crimes in question, (ii) primary election support among Republicans, and (iii) general election support among Democrats and Independents. The counterfactual format accomplishes this goal using a sequence of two questions. It first asks subjects for their attitudes given the news of the indictment, then asks what they think their attitude *would have been* if they had not heard the news. The difference is a measure of each subject’s belief about the indictment’s effect on their attitudes. Respondents could still be wrong about this causal inference, but the approach solves the response substitution problem: Trump supporters and opponents are able express their baseline support or opposition separately from their belief about the effect of the indictment.

In a poll conducted by SurveyMonkey and weighted to national demographic targets, we randomly assigned half the respondents to the change format and half to the counterfactual format. Among Republicans who answered using the change format, the indictments appear to be a net positive for Trump: 43% said the indictment made them more likely to support Trump in the primary and 16% said less likely. By contrast, in the counterfactual format, the average Republican gives themselves a 64.1 percent chance of supporting Trump. When asked how they would have responded if they didn’t know about the indictment, the average response was 65.7%, for an implied effect of -1.6 percentage points. Where the change format implies the indictment is a net positive for Trump, the counterfactual format indicates the opposite.

In the remainder of this short paper, we describe our survey design in full, present results for Democrats, Independents, and Republicans separately, then offer further evidence from that it is likely response substitution that generates the bias in change questions.

## Research Design

We surveyed 5,011 Americans between June 22-27, 2023, using SurveyMonkey’s “river sample,” wherein a random sample of the platform’s over 2 million daily respondents to customer-generated surveys are invited to take an additional, voluntary research survey.

Because a non-probability river sample was used, it is not possible to calculate the overall response rate for this survey. Out of an initial 6,877 respondents that began the survey, 5,011 completed it (73% completion rate). The modeled error estimate for the survey is plus or minus 1.8 percentage points, calculated using a simulated sampling distribution with 5,000 bootstrap re-samples.<sup>1</sup>

We asked respondents to report demographic information for use in weighting. There were no missing data on the weighting variables, as they were required for the response to be coded as complete. We used multi-stage raking to weight respondents on age, gender, race, education level, region, Census division, and state, using the 2019 American Community Survey. The weighted demographic distributions are close to the distributions from the 2021 American Community Survey (See Table A-1; U.S. Census Bureau 2021). As an additional benchmark, we asked respondents for their approval of President Joe Biden; our weighted estimate (40.4%) is close to the June 26 average approval ratings calculated by FiveThirtyEight (40.3%; FiveThirtyEight 2023a).

We randomly assigned respondents to one of two methods for retrospectively assessing causal effects, the change format or the counterfactual format.

The change format is the standard approach to retrospectively assessing causal effects. Respondents assigned to this format were asked, “As you may know, former president Donald Trump was recently indicted for removing classified information from the White House, including sensitive nuclear secrets. Does the indictment make you think it is more likely or less likely that Trump mishandled nuclear secrets?”<sup>2</sup> Among Republican respondents, we then asked “Does the indictment make you more or less likely to vote for Trump in the primary?” Among Democratic and independent respondents, we asked “Imagine that the 2024 presidential election is between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Does the indictment make you more or less likely to vote for Trump?” For all of these change format questions, the response options were “more likely,” “no change,” or “less likely.”

The counterfactual format (Graham and Coppock 2021) uses a sequence of two questions

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<sup>1</sup>Modeled error, in this context, is the standard error attending to the sample mean estimator of a hypothetical binary variable with  $p = 0.5$ , calculated using bootstrapping, a more flexible and conservative method particularly for non-probability samples, rather than an analytical formula. See Baker et al. (2013).

<sup>2</sup>The indictment in question had occurred June 8, 2023.

to elicit the level of opinion given the event occurred first, then the level of opinion if (counterfactually) the respondent did not know about the event. To estimate the causal effects on the belief in the commission of the crime itself, we asked respondents:

- *Q1*: “As you may know, former president Donald Trump was recently indicted for removing classified information from the White House, including sensitive nuclear secrets. In your opinion, how likely is it that Trump mishandled nuclear secrets?” [0-100 scale]
- *Q2*: “Suppose you did not know about the indictment. How would you have answered the following question: In your opinion, how likely is it that Trump mishandled nuclear secrets?” [0-100 scale]

To estimate the effect of the indictments on electoral support, we asked respondents:

- *Q1 (among Republicans)*: “How likely are you to vote for Donald Trump in the 2024 Republican primary?” [0-100 scale]
- *Q1 (among Democrats and Independents)*: “Imagine that the 2024 presidential election is between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. How likely are you to vote for Donald Trump?” [0-100 scale]
- *Q2*: “Suppose you did not know about the indictment. How would you have answered the following question: How likely are you to vote for Donald Trump?” [0-100 scale]

Relative to previous implementations of the counterfactual format that used seven-point Likert scales (Graham and Coppock 2021), the usage of a continuous scale outcome is novel. This feature allows us to observe the sensitivity of the counterfactual format results to differing definitions of “change” according to different cut-offs of the continuous scale. By extension, it allows for a comparison with the degree of change people are trying to report with the change format, which does not elicit magnitude information.

## Results

The two formats imply very different conclusions about how the indictment affected beliefs and attitudes toward Trump and his handling of the documents. Whereas the change format suggests strong and overwhelmingly partisan reactions, the counterfactual format suggests a modest and relatively even-handed reactions, as shown in Table 1. A visualization of the data underlying Table 1 is offered in Figure A-1.

Among Republican primary voters (“Republicans”), the change format suggests that the indictment strengthened Trump’s position making them *less* convinced that Trump mishandled documents and *more* supportive of Trump in the primary. When asked directly, just

Table 1: Self-Reported Effect of Indictments, by Party and Question Format

Topic	Party	Counterfactual format			Change format		
		Actual	Predicted if not for indictment	Diff.	More likely	Less likely	Diff.
Believe Trump mishandled docs	Republican	27.1	24.6	+2.5* (0.6)	16.2	39.6	-23.4* (2.8)
	Democratic	85.3	79.5	+5.8* (0.6)	76.0	5.0	71.0* (2.3)
	Independent	55.4	53.7	+1.8 (0.9)	38.8	16.5	22.3* (3.9)
Vote for Trump (general election)	Democratic	11.1	10.1	+0.9 (0.8)	8.0	60.2	-52.1* (2.7)
	Independent	41.9	41.8	+0.1 (0.9)	20.5	31.1	-10.6* (3.9)
Vote for Trump (primary election)	Republican	64.1	65.7	-1.6* (0.6)	43.0	16.3	26.7* (2.9)

*Note:* In the “counterfactual format” columns, cell entries are means and differences in means. In the “change format” columns, cell entries are percentages and differences in percentages. Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$ .

16% of Republicans said that the indictments increased their belief that Trump had mishandled documents. Many more, 40%, said that the indictments made them *less* likely to believe he had mishandled documents. Similarly, 43% said the indictment made them more likely to support Trump, against just 16% saying “less likely.”

By contrast, the counterfactual format suggests that the indictment put a small dent in Trump’s still-strong position among Republicans. After the indictment, the average Republican said that there is a 27.1% chance that Trump mishandled classified documents. If they had not known about the indictment, they estimated that they would have said 24.6% on average, a difference of 2.5 percentage points (s.e. = 0.6,  $p < 0.01$ ). Republicans also thought that the indictment made them less likely to vote for Trump in the primary. The average Republican said they had a 64.1% chance of doing so, compared with 65.7% if the indictment had not been issued (difference = 1.6 pp, s.e. = 0.6,  $p = 0.02$ ).

Among Democratic primary voters (“Democrats”), the two formats also paint different pictures. The change format suggests that Democrats had a major, partisan reaction to the indictment. About 76 percent said the indictment made them more likely to believe that Trump mishandled documents, with 60 percent saying it made them less likely to vote for Trump. The opposite sentiments stood in the single digits. The counterfactual format suggests that the indictment modestly increased Democrats’ belief that Trump mishandled

documents, with no effect on their general election preferences. The average Democrat said that there was an 85.3% chance that Trump mishandled documents and guessed that if the indictment had not been issued, they would have said 79.5% (difference = 5.8 pp, s.e. = 0.6,  $p < 0.01$ ). Either way, they said there was only a 10 to 11% chance they would vote for Trump (difference = 0.9 pp, s.e. = 0.8,  $p = 0.22$ ).

Among those who do not plan to vote in either party’s primary (“independents”), the change format suggests that the indictment modestly hurt Trump. Pluralities of about 45 to 50% said that the indictment had no effect on their views or vote intentions, but those who reported an effect were more likely to say that the indictment made them believe Trump mishandled documents (difference = 21.6 pp, s.e. = 3.9,  $p < 0.01$ ) and less likely to vote for Trump in the general election (difference = -10.5 pp, s.e. = 4.0,  $p < 0.01$ ). By contrast, the counterfactual format suggests indifference: independents report that the indictment slightly revised their beliefs in favor of the idea that Trump mishandled documents (+1.8 pp, s.e. = 0.9,  $p = 0.05$ ), with no substantial effect on vote choice (+0.1 pp, s.e. = 0.9,  $p = 0.89$ ).

## Why do the Answers Differ?

The topline results differ in both direction and in magnitude. Whereas the change format suggests large, overwhelmingly partisan public reactions, the counterfactual format indicates small and relatively even-handed reactions.

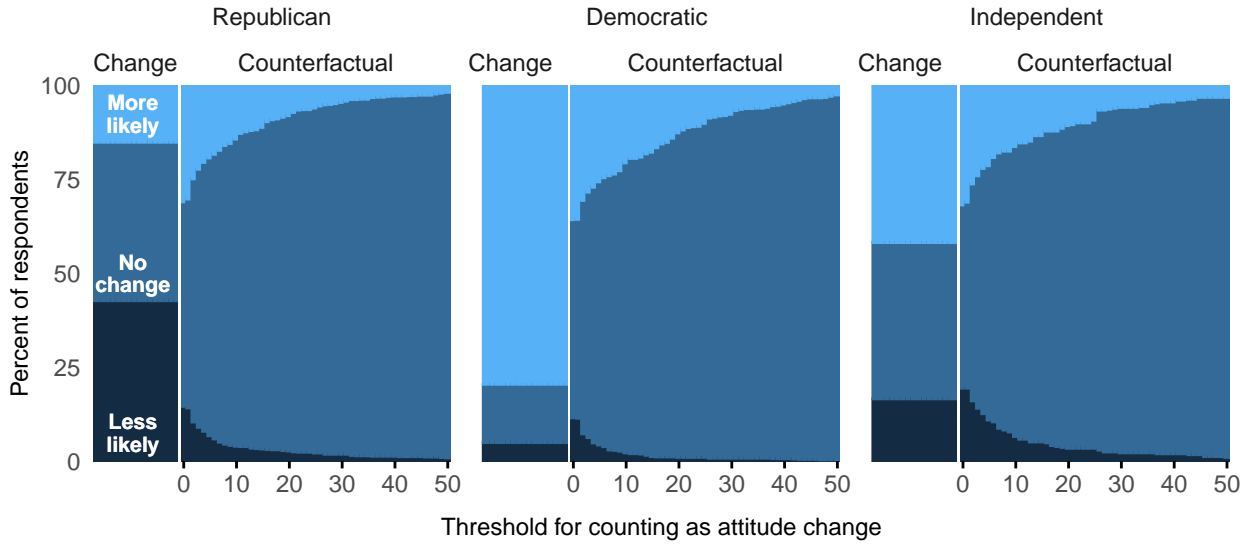
Figure 1 offers some explanation for the discrepancy. In each panel of the figure, we directly compare the fraction of subjects reporting positive, negative, or no change in their attitudes using the two formats. For the counterfactual format, we have to choose a threshold of difference between the first and second responses that amounts to “change.” All the way to the left, we count any difference as change; at the 10 position on the horizontal axis, we count differences smaller than 10 points as “no change.”

Starting with the “Independent” panels, we find that these subjects appear to be well-calibrated: when the threshold for change is small, the implied distribution of positive, negative, and no change from the counterfactual format lines up almost exactly with the distribution from the change format. One interpretation of this correspondence is that Independents’ have in mind small changes in attitudes. Moving to the right along the horizontal axis, the middle area representing “no change” grows rapidly, while the top and bottom areas representing positive and negative change correspondingly shrink. This pattern indicates that by and large, independents think the indictment had small effects on their attitudes and beliefs. Of the 42.5% of Independents who report any change on their vote choice,  $18.7 / 41.7 = 45\%$  report effects smaller than 5 points (see Table A-2 for detailed results). Another interpretation is that Independents are right by accident: they want to use the change question to express their middling level of support for Trump, so they are likely to respond “no change.”

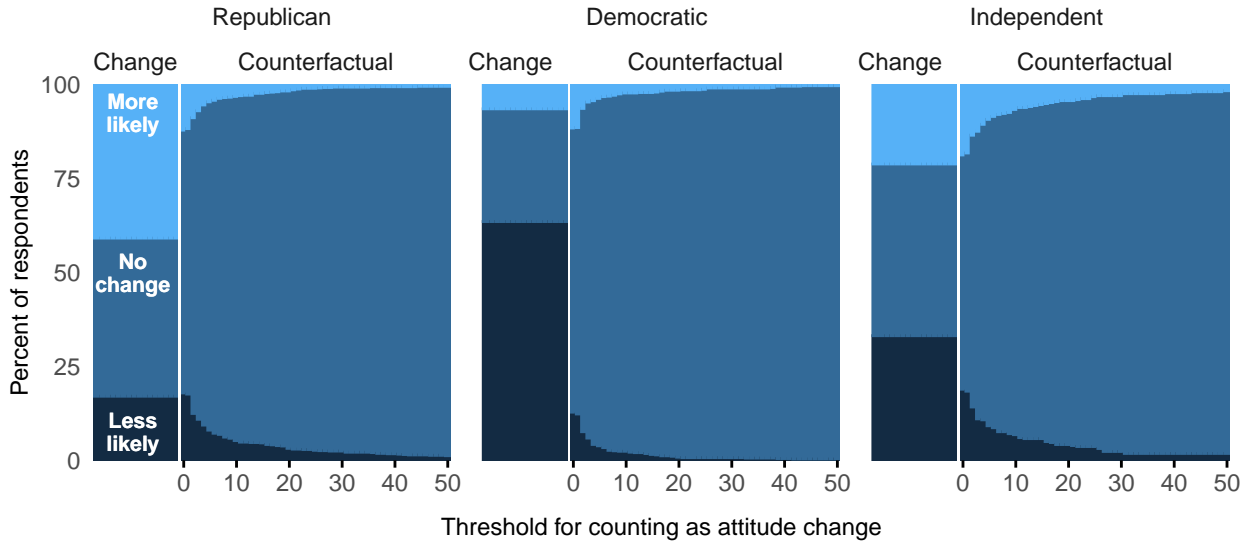
The Republican and Democratic panels do not share this correspondence. In the change

Figure 1: Self-Reported Change by Question Format

(a) Belief Trump Mishandled Documents



(b) 2024 Vote Choice



format, many Republicans say that the indictments made them less likely to believe Trump mishandled documents and more likely to vote for Trump in the primary. Even when the threshold for change is just 1 point, the counterfactual format suggests the share of Republicans with this “backwards” response to the indictments is much smaller. The inverse pattern is more pronounced among Democrats, many of whom say in the change format that the indictment increased their belief in Trump’s wrongdoing and decreased their probability of voting for him. Similarly to Independents, both Republicans and Democrats report small amounts of change using the counterfactual format:  $17.2 / 30.7 = 56\%$  of Republicans who

report any change report effects smaller than 5 points; the equivalent figure for Democrats is  $16.3 / 27.5 = 59\%$ .

We interpret the analysis presented in Figure 1 as consistent with the response substitution theory. Partisan respondents – Democrats and Republicans – want to use the change format to express their *level* of support for Trump, not to express the *change* in that support due to the indictment.

## Discussion

Our goal was to study the effect of Trump’s indictment for allegedly mishandling classified documents on public belief that he committed the crime and on his electoral support in the primary and possible general election. Does getting indicted harm one’s political prospects, as was traditionally supposed, or does an indictment “backfire” in the sense of shoring up support among the base? Using the counterfactual format, we find that the indictment put a small dent in Trump’s still-strong position. We found positive effects on belief that Trump mishandled documents and negative or nonsignificant effects on voting, among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. This stands in contrast to the more commonly-used change format, which suggested a strong and overwhelmingly partisan reaction, with Democrats and Republicans alike becoming more convinced of their preexisting beliefs and preferences.

In the context of existing research, the counterfactual format gives the more credible answer. Above, we note that the overwhelmingly partisan reactions suggested by the change format are consistent with earlier research on the format’s tendency to overstate congenial attitude change (Graham and Coppock 2021). Small negative effects are also more consistent with observational research on the political effects of scandal, which finds misconduct carries electoral penalties (Hamel and Miller 2019; Rottinghaus 2023).

Our approach also sheds light on the differences between the counterfactual and change formats. Earlier studies of the counterfactual format used coarse scales (binary, five-, or seven-point Likert scales), which are undersensitive to small amounts of attitude change. Relative to the change format, these studies reported dramatic reductions in the proportion of respondents claiming that their attitudes had changed, but could not say how much of this reduction was due to the counterfactual format and how much was due to scale coarseness. In the present study, we used a finer, 101-point scale. With this added granularity, we find more change than in previous applications, as the “small amounts of change critique” would predict. Yet even with a 101-point scale, we find less change than the change format implies. This design feature gives us a firmer basis from which to conclude that the change format exaggerates the proportion of people whose attitudes change by any substantively meaningful amount.



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# Appendix

## Survey Information

Table A-1: Unweighted and Weighted Demographic Distributions and Biden Approval

Demographic	Category	SurveyMonkey poll		ACS 2021	FiveThirtyEight
		Unweighted	Weighted		
Gender	Male	48.1	47.5	49.0	–
	Female	49.9	50.2	51.0	–
Age	18-24	5.5	12.1	11.7	–
	25-34	10.3	17.5	17.4	–
	35-44	13.1	16.7	17.0	–
	45-54	17.0	16.0	15.7	–
	55-64	21.0	16.6	16.6	–
	65+	33.0	21.0	21.6	–
Race/ Ethnicity	White, non-Hispanic	68.2	63.9	63.6	–
	Black, non-Hispanic	11.5	12.7	11.8	–
	Hispanic	12.5	16.4	16.9	–
	Asian, non-Hispanic	2.7	5.4	6.0	–
	Other, non-Hispanic	5.0	1.6	1.7	–
Educational Attainment	High school or less	17.9	38.5	38.0	–
	Some college/Associate’s	31.1	30.5	29.5	–
	Bachelor’s	28.5	19.5	20.2	–
	Graduate degree	22.5	11.5	12.3	–
Biden Approval	Approve	43.3	40.4	–	40.3
	Disapprove	54.0	56.3	–	55.2

*Note:* SurveyMonkey poll data are weighted to the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS). Percentages for the 2021 ACS are based on the ACS 1-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample available from <https://data.census.gov/mdat>. FiveThirtyEight data are the June 26, 2023 average Biden approval ratings available from <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating/>.

## Additional Results

Table A-2: Magnitude of Self-Reported Effect Sizes

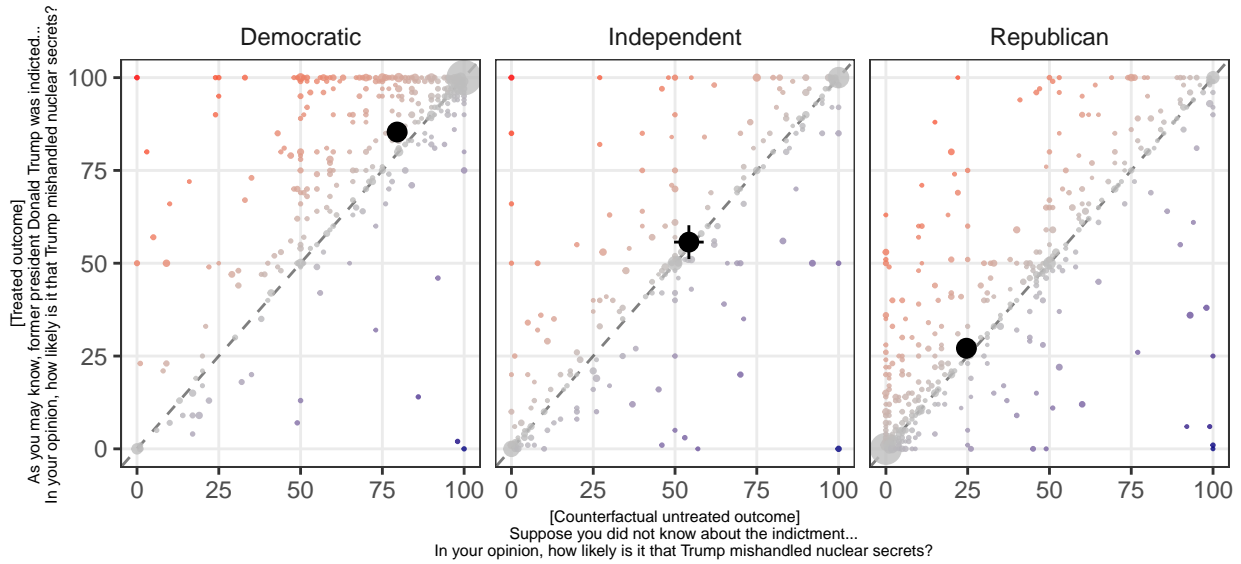
(a) Beliefs

Format	Effect	Republicans		Democrats		Independents	
		Pct.	Cum.	Pct.	Cum.	Pct.	Cum.
Change	Some effect	55.7	-	81.0	-	55.3	-
	No effect	44.3	-	19.0	-	44.7	-
Counterfactual	Some effect	48.2	-	48.4	-	50.2	-
	1-5 percent	21.0	21.0	16.2	16.2	19.9	19.9
	6-10 percent	8.7	29.6	8.0	24.3	9.8	29.6
	11-20 percent	8.0	37.7	9.7	34.0	8.2	37.8
	21-50 percent	8.3	46.0	12.8	46.8	10.5	48.3
	50 percent or more	2.2	48.2	1.6	48.4	1.9	50.2
	No effect	51.8	100.0	51.6	100.0	49.8	100.0

(b) Vote Choice

Format	Effect	Republicans		Democrats		Independents	
		Pct.	Cum.	Pct.	Cum.	Pct.	Cum.
Change	Some effect	59.3	-	68.2	-	51.6	-
	No effect	40.7	-	31.8	-	48.4	-
Counterfactual	Some effect	30.7	-	27.5	-	41.7	-
	1-5 percent	17.2	17.2	16.3	16.3	18.7	18.7
	6-10 percent	3.6	20.8	2.7	18.9	6.8	25.5
	11-20 percent	4.3	25.1	4.3	23.2	7.3	32.8
	21-50 percent	3.5	28.6	3.1	26.3	6.9	39.7
	50 percent or more	2.1	30.7	1.1	27.5	2.0	41.7
	No effect	69.3	100.0	72.5	100.0	58.3	100.0

(a) Counterfactual format beliefs that Trump mishandled documents



(b) Counterfactual format probabilities of voting for Trump

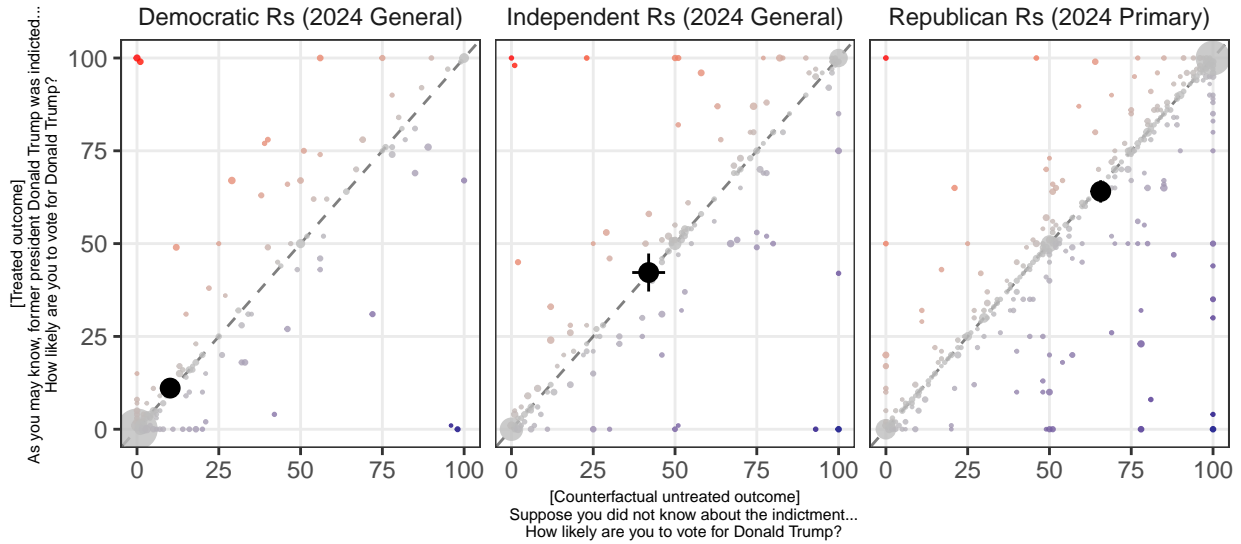


Figure A-1: Scatterplots of the counterfactual format with the treated outcome on the vertical axis and the untreated (counterfactual) outcomes on the horizontal axis. Points above the 45 degree line indicate positive change. The black point with 95% confidence intervals indicates the average treated and counterfactual responses by subgroup. To avoid overplotting, points are sized as the sum of the sampling weights at each unique combination of responses