

# From *Apprentice* to President: The Role of Parasocial Connection in the Election of Donald Trump

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## Abstract

Data suggest that the outcome of the 2016 American presidential election was a surprise to most people. We conducted a study to examine the role parasocial bonds formed with Trump due to his appearances on reality television played in his surprising victory. Results suggested that exposure to Trump through *The Apprentice* and through other media predicted the formation of parasocial bonds with Trump. These parasocial bonds with Trump predicted believing Trump's promises, disregarding his unpopular statements, and having generally more positive evaluations of him. Parasocial bonds with Trump were also a significant predictor of self-reported voting behavior, even when examined concurrently with other likely predictors. This research suggests that parasocial bonds played an important role in the election of Donald Trump to President of the United States.

## Keywords

election, candidate evaluation, parasocial interaction, media

The election of Donald Trump as President in November 2016 came as a surprise to many pundits and citizens including Trump's own supporters (Norman, 2016). Trump had trailed Hillary Clinton in the polls throughout most of the campaign, and the press had regularly highlighted the disarray of his campaign, as well as the scandals that would have ended the electoral chances of most other candidates (e.g., the *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump brags about sexual assault; fraud lawsuits filed against him by former Trump University students).

Journalists, academics, and citizens have proposed a variety of reasons why Trump may have succeeded against the odds. Some of these explanations highlighted specific events unique to this particular election, such as Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Comey's release of a letter regarding Clinton's private e-mail server or cyber attacks conducted by Russia to undermine Clinton's candidacy (e.g., Entous & Nakashima, 2016; Goldman, Lichtblau, & Apuzzo, 2017). Others have focused on the role of psychological factors in guiding voter behaviors, such as implicit or explicit gender bias (Major, Blodorn, & Major Blascovich, 2016), racism (Schaffner, MacWilliams, & Nteta, 2017), and the role of identity politics in mobilizing working-class voters (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016).

Although all of these possibilities may have merit, we focus on another potential influence: the role of Trump's television shows, *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice (TA/CA)*, in creating a positive image of Trump and a psychological

connection between Trump and viewers. Because Trump was not involved in politics at the time of the show, this connection could be formed across party lines. We suggest that these programs, in which Trump decides which contestant has done the best job on business-related challenges, led to the formation of parasocial relationships with Trump that influenced the election.

Parasocial relationships are one-sided psychological bonds with specific media figures such as favorite celebrities or fictional characters (Gabriel, Valenti, & Young, 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Research suggests that although people understand that parasocial relationships are not "real" relationships, they are nevertheless experienced as real and thus elicit cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses that are similar to those of real relationships (for a review, see Gabriel et al., 2016). For example, exposure to parasocial relationships leads to social facilitation effects (Gardner & Knowles, 2008) and reduces prejudice toward out-group members (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005, 2006). People demonstrate high levels of commitment to their parasocial relationships (Branch, Wilson, & Agnew, 2013; Eyal & Dailey, 2012) and engage

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in various efforts to maintain their relationship (e.g., expressing gratitude and assuring loyalty; Sanderson, 2009). Finally, parasocial breakups (e.g., a favorite television show getting canceled) lead to similar kinds of emotional distress as real relationship dissolution (Cohen, 2003, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). In summary, a parasocial relationship is experienced in a similar psychological fashion as a real bond.

Exposure to Donald Trump on a television show would be a particularly strong medium in which to form a parasocial bond. Television provides a rich visual and auditory environment, mirroring our daily experience, and requiring few cognitive resources to simulate parasocial relationships. Television programming, particularly programs watched weekly over the course of many years, allow for regularly immersion in a recognizable “social” world in which familiar people, situations, landscapes, and events become intimate and comfortable (Cohen, 2006). Indeed, some theorists have argued that much of the neural architecture of humans is ill-evolved to distinguish between real and “fake” people (Kanazawa, 2002; Reeves & Naas, 1996), making this immersion in television’s social worlds powerful and potent. In support of this idea, research suggests that experiencing narratives like those in television shows leads one to psychologically become a part of the groups described within the narrative, which facilitates the formation of bonds with characters that feel very real and important (Gabriel & Young, 2011). Such connections may be particularly influential when individuals are transported or immersed into the narratives (see Green & Clark, 2013; van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014, for reviews).

*TA* and *CA* were highly successful shows, running for 14 seasons and propelling Trump to national stardom, making them prime vehicles for the formation of parasocial bonds. In addition, although *TA* and *CA* were called “reality” television programs, they were highly edited (or even scripted) to produce drama or desired outcomes. Thus, the Trump that people formed bonds with was presented as having many of the qualities necessary for the presidency:

He is running things. He sets the tasks. The competitors all call him “Mr. Trump” and treat him obsequiously. He gives orders and famous people accept them without quibble. At the end of the show, he asks tough questions and demands accountability. He is smooth and unruffled while the team members are tense and tongue-tied. Finally, having given everything the five minutes of due diligence it needs, he takes charge and fires someone. And on the season finale, he picks a big winner and in the process raises lots of money for charity. Do you see how precisely this squares with so many people’s view of the presidency?” (Drum, 2015; p. 1)

Those first impressions of Trump would have had the power to influence later impressions as people typically use their first impressions when deciding how to interpret new information (e.g., Anderson & Barrios, 1961; Asch, 1946). Thus, just as our opinions of our real friends of many years are resistant to change, years of forming parasocial bonds with a carefully

edited view of Trump may have led to a predisposition to believe positive information about Trump, discount negative information, and view Trump as a good potential president.

### Current Research

Our main hypothesis is that parasocial bonds with Trump, formed due to his frequent appearances both on his own show and in the media generally, played a consequential role in explaining his election to President. To examine this, we surveyed 521 Americans of voting age and assessed their media consumption, parasocial bonds with Trump, attitudes about Trump, belief in Trump’s promises and of his controversial statements, measures of political affiliation, and demographic information. We predicted that:

1. Exposure to Trump through *TA* and through other forms of media will predict the formation of parasocial bonds with Trump. In other words, the more people watched *TA/CA* and were exposed to Trump via other media, the more likely they will be to have a parasocial bond with Trump.
  - a. In addition, the interaction of watching *TA/CA* and the tendency to be transported into narratives should also predict the formation of parasocial bonds with Trump. People who tend to become immersed in media and who are exposed to Trump a great deal in the media should be especially likely to form parasocial bonds with Trump.
2. Media exposure to Trump will predict attitudes related to Trump, including believing his promises, not believing the less appealing aspects about him, and having positive feelings toward him.
  - a. Furthermore, the effects of media exposure on Trump attitudes should be mediated by parasocial bonds with Trump. Specifically, exposure to Trump in the media should predict a parasocial bond with Trump, which should then predict positive attitudes related to Trump.
3. Parasocial bonds with Trump should predict self-reported voting behavior. Specifically, the stronger the parasocial bond with Trump, the more likely that someone will have voted for Trump. This should be true even when other known predictors, such as party affiliation and income, are also examined.
4. Finally, the effects of parasocial bond with Trump should be especially strong for those who would not, by default, vote for a Republican candidate. Specifically, people who are not Republicans should be more strongly affected by the parasocial bond as compared to those who are Republicans. In other words, we predict that parasocial bonds with Trump can help explain why voters who would not have been expected to vote for Trump did in fact vote for Trump in the 2016 election.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

A sample of 521 participants (41.4% male, 48.3% female, 10.2% no gender indicated; mean age = 39.98 years) from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was recruited in this study. According to G\*Power, the  $N$  needed to achieve 0.80 power for a conventionally small regression effect size ( $f^2 = 0.02$ ) with nine predictors (as used to test Hypothesis 1) would be 395. We had resources to obtain a total  $N$  of 600, which gave us adequate power to detect even smaller effects (approximately  $f^2 = 0.015$ ). We had 595 individuals sign up for the study, although only 521 participants actually filled out the questionnaires. MTurk is a crowdsourcing online service that allows users to select tasks to complete in exchange for a certain amount of money (specified by the researchers; in the present study, users were compensated with US\$0.80 for their participation). MTurk is available worldwide; however, recruitment was filtered to include only users currently in the United States, and the study description requested that only presently registered U.S. voters participate. Verifying that this request was upheld by the majority of participants, 97% said that they were registered voters and 91% of participants said that they voted in the election. Forty-eight percentage of them reported having voted for Trump.

The sample was predominately White (72%) but also included individuals who identified as African American (7.6%), Asian (6.5%), Latin American (4.9%), American Indian (1.3%) as well as some who listed their ethnicity as "other" (0.5%) or did not specify their ethnic identity (7.2%). The majority of participants (87.9%) reported English as their first language. Median estimated annual income for these participants was \$38,000, and mean estimated annual income of these participants was \$45,965.

This study was conducted online in late December 2016. All data were collected after Donald Trump was elected into presidency (November 2016), but prior to his inauguration (January 2017). Importantly, participants had knowledge that Trump would soon be president but did not yet have experience with Trump actually being President of the United States. Therefore, their responses to the survey questions were all based on their perceptions and beliefs held about Trump after he was elected but before he was officially inaugurated. Scales were presented in random order; however, questions about participants' voting history were always presented last, to prevent unintentionally priming participants with their decision to vote for or against him in the election and potentially influencing their responses to the other scales.

### Measures

**Measures of Trump/apprentice familiarity.** Participants' watching of *TA/CA* was assessed two different ways.<sup>1</sup> An Apprentice Seasons Questionnaire showed participants images of the cast from each season of *TA* and asked participant to indicate all of the seasons that they had seen. An Apprentice Viewing

Question asked participants to indicate what portion of each season they generally watched (e.g., all episodes, only portions of episodes). Thus, we assessed both the total number of seasons watched and the viewing frequency within seasons.

A general measure of media consumption was also included. The media consumption measure (Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamieson, 2006) asks participants to indicate how often they utilized a variety of media sources including newspapers, the Internet, and television news broadcasts. This measure also asked participants how many hours of television they watched on a typical weekday.

**Measures of political attitudes and behavior.** To assess participants' political beliefs and attitudes, as well as past political behavior, several questionnaires were used. A Voting History Questionnaire asked participants a variety of questions regarding their political identity (e.g., "How much do you identify as a DEMOCRAT?"; "How much do you identify as a REPUBLICAN?") on a Likert-type response scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) as well as their feelings about past political candidates including Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, Barak Obama, Mitt Romney, and John McCain. This questionnaire also asked participants if they had voted in the 2016, 2012, and 2008 elections, as well as to specify whom they had voted for in each of those elections.

The political cynicism measure (Jebril, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2013) was also used to assess participants' trust in politicians. This scale includes 4 items, such as "Politicians are mainly focused on themselves," that participants answer on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 10 (*strongly agree*) scale.

**Measures of parasocial bonds.** An adaptation of the parasocial interaction (PSI)-Processes Scale (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008) was used to assess parasocial bond with Trump. The PSI Scale was chosen as it is specifically designed to measure parasocial bonds that grow from TV exposure and it is designed for use after the exposure is over. For each question, we asked participants to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with 13 statements. Each statement began, "Back before Trump was a presidential candidate, when he was the star of *TA*" and then asked about their feelings toward Trump at that time (e.g., "I sometimes really loved Donald Trump for what he did on the show and I would feel good if Donald Trump felt good on the show.").

We also administered a modified version of the Narrative Transportation Scale (Green & Brock, 2000). The Transportation Scale assesses how involved participants became in their favorite television shows while watching them (i.e., "My favorite TV shows affect me emotionally"). Participants responded on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

**Current attitudes about trump.** Attitudes toward Trump were derived two ways. A single item simply asked participants, "How do you feel about Donald Trump?" (1, *strongly dislike* to 5, *strongly like*). Second, six items assessed more specific Trump-related attitudes, such as "Donald Trump has a

well-documented history of successful business ventures” and “The media portrayed Donald Trump in a certain way during the election due to their own bias.”

A second scale measured to what extent participants believed things that Trump said or did during the campaign. This questionnaire reminded participants of six of Trump’s main campaign promises including his proposal to build a wall between the United States and Mexico, his promise to bring jobs back to America, and his promise to destroy ISIS. For each promise, participants were asked to indicate how much they thought Trump meant his promise, and how much they thought Trump would fulfill the promise, and how much they took the promise seriously (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* for all). We hoped that the items would load onto two different scales, one that taps into believing that Trump would keep his promises (e.g., Trump will bring back jobs) and one that taps into believing that Trump meant his more controversial or extreme claims (e.g., Trump will ban all Muslims from entering the United States).

**Demographics.** Demographics were collected at the end of the survey. Participants were asked to report their gender, age, ethnic identity, first language, religious denomination, education level, and estimated annual income.

## Results

No participants were dropped from the analyses.

### Scale Construction

Analysis of the scree plot generated by factor analyses revealed that all the questions about media usage formed one factor. Thus, an average was taken of the 12 items to form a scale of media consumption ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Watching *TA/CA* was computed by standardizing two different assessments and then taking their mean. One assessed how many seasons of *TA/CA* were watched and the other assessed how what portion of episodes within the seasons was watched ( $\alpha = .83$ ). We also computed parasocial bonds with Trump ( $\alpha = .93$ ) and transportation ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

### Hypothesis Testing

**Hypothesis 1:** Exposure to Trump through *TA* and through other media predicts the formation of parasocial bonds with Trump. We ran a regression with exposure to media generally, *TA/CA* watching, education level, income, skepticism about politics, affiliation as a Republican, affiliation as a Democrat, liberal versus conservative ideology, transportation, and the interaction between transportation and watching *TA/CA* as predictors. The model was significant,  $R^2 = .57$ ;  $p < .001$ . Only four variables significantly predicted parasocial bond with Trump: skepticism about politics,  $B = -.12$ ; 95% confidence interval (CI)  $[-.24, -.08]$ ;  $t = -4.00$ ;  $p < .001$ ; *TA/CA* watching,  $B = -.24$ ; 95% CI

$[-.21, .42]$ ;  $t = 5.83$ ;  $p < .001$ ; media consumption,  $B = .45$ , 95% CI  $[.48, .71]$ ;  $t = 10.10$ ;  $p < .001$ ; and the interaction between transportation and watching, *TA/CA*,  $B = .11$ , 95% CI  $[.07, .23]$ ;  $t = 3.55$ ;  $p < .001$ .<sup>2</sup> Specifically, people high in transportation had a stronger relationship between watching *TA/CA* and parasocial bonds with Trump,  $B = .30$ ; 95% CI  $[.29, .50]$ ;  $t = 7.11$ ;  $p < .001$ ; as compared to those low in transportation,  $B = .18$ ; 95% CI  $[.12, .36]$ ;  $t = 3.86$ ;  $p < .001$ . In summary, the data strongly support our hypothesis that parasocial bonds with Trump were predicted by media exposure.

In addition, because our data were collected after the show aired, it was important to show that parasocial bonds were not strongly related to party affiliation. As predicted, none of the political affiliation variables emerged as significant predictors of parasocial bonds. Income and education also were not significant predictors. However, skepticism about politics was a significant negative predictor. The more skeptical about politics people were, the less likely they were to form a parasocial bond with Trump. Although not predicted, it was not surprising that being skeptical about politicians would be related to a reduced tendency to form a parasocial bond with a political character. In summary, participants’ parasocial bonds with Trump could be most strongly predicted by how much they watched *TA/CA*, how much media exposure they had, and the interaction between watching *TA/CA* and dispositional transportation levels; the more participants were exposed to Trump in the media, the stronger their bond. Importantly, this was true even when political affiliation, measured three different ways, is entered into the model, suggesting that this is not an artifact of Republicans watching more reality television.

One could argue that the increased bond with Trump was simply due to the mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968). If that were the case, then we would expect the same pattern to emerge with attitudes toward Clinton. However, although media exposure was related to a positive evaluation of Trump ( $r = .43$ ;  $p < .001$ ), it was actually related to a negative evaluation of Clinton ( $r = -.16$ ;  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that mere exposure could not be the only mechanism.

**Hypothesis 2:** Media exposure to Trump predicts Trump-related attitudes. Believing Trump’s preelection statements loaded into two different factors: promises (i.e., defeating ISIS, bringing jobs back to Americans, and building a wall) and generally controversial statements (i.e., creating a registry for all Muslims in the United States and sexually assaulting women).<sup>3</sup> Positive feelings about Trump were computed by taking the *z*-score of the direct item measuring liking for Trump as well as the Current Attitudes about Trump Scale ( $r = .89$ ). To get an overall measure of media exposure to Trump, we calculated the mean of general media exposure and watching *TA/CA*,  $r = .80$ . As we predicted, media exposure to Trump was correlated with Trump-related attitudes (see Table 1 for all correlations).

**Table 1.** Zero-Order Correlations Between Major Variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Exposure to Trump in media	.xx	.703*	.324*	ns	.339*	.237*	-.120**	ns	ns	.244*	.259*	-.147**
2. Parasocial bond with Trump	—	.xx	.417*	-.014	.346*	.189*	-.229*	ns	ns	-.311*	.315*	-.173*
3. Trump Current attitude	—	—	.xx	-.488*	.654*	ns	.226*	ns	-.116**	-.644*	-.682*	.620*
4. Believe Trump negative Statements	—	—	—	.xx	ns	.116**	.111**	ns	.087**	.278*	-.236*	.364*
5. Believe Trump positive promises	—	—	—	—	.xx	ns	-.216*	ns	-.108**	-.546*	.553*	-.437*
6. Transportation Scale	—	—	—	—	—	.xx	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	.145*
7. Skeptical about politics	—	—	—	—	—	—	.xx	ns	ns	.173	-.217*	.091*
8. Income	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.xx	-.213*	ns	ns	ns
9. Education	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.xx	-.140**	.133**	.127**
10. Liberal	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.xx	.748*	.674*
11. Republican	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.xx	-.643*
12. Democrat	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.xx

\*Denotes  $r$ s that are significant at  $p < .001$ . \*\*Denotes correlations that are significant at  $p < .05$ . xx signifies that the two variables are the same (i.e., no correlations).

A mediation model using bootstrapping with 5,000 samples (as recommended by Preacher & Hayes, 2008) examined the prediction that the associations between exposure to Trump media and Trump attitudes was mediated by parasocial bonds with Trump. We ran three separate analyses in which we constructed 95% CI around the mediated indirect effects predicting general attitudes toward Trump, believing Trump's promises, and believing Trump's controversial statements. In all three cases, we found significant mediation (see Figure 1). The same analyses run with skepticism about politics as a covariate yielded highly similar, also significant, results. Analyses examining reverse mediation to test alternative directions of the effects did not find support for a model in which believing Trump's controversial statements mediates the link between Trump media exposure and parasocial bonds with Trump, 95% CI [.00, .02]. We do, however, find support for reverse mediation for Trump's promises, 95% CI [.02, .08] and general attitudes toward Trump, 95% CI [.06, .15]. However, in these models, the mediator accounts for 4% and 16%, respectively, of the association between the predictor and the outcome variable, whereas in our predicted model, the mediator accounts for 36% and 80% of the effect.

In summary, the data are consistent with the hypothesis that media exposure to Trump led participants to form a parasocial bond with Trump, which then led them to believe his promises, disregard unpopular statements that he made, and have generally more positive evaluations of him. In other words, the data are consistent with the hypothesis that attitudes about candidate Trump were influenced by parasocial bonds that were formed due to years of watching *TA/CA* and other media.

**Hypothesis 3:** Parasocial bonds with Trump predict voting behavior. We also examined whether parasocial bonds predicted self-reported voting behavior. To examine that, we ran a logistic regression examining the effects of parasocial bonds with Trump on whether participants voted for Trump or not. We also included other likely predictors of voting behavior: affiliation with the Republican party, affiliation

with the Democratic party, identification as liberal versus conservative, cynicism about politics, income, and education level. A test of the full model against a constant only model was statistically significant, indicating that the predictors as a set reliably distinguished between those who voted for or against Trump ( $\chi^2 = 365.99$ ,  $p < .001$  with  $df = 7$ ). Republican ( $OR = -2.309$ ;  $p < .001$ ), Democrat ( $OR = .435$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and liberal ( $OR = .62$ ;  $p < .0018$ ) were all significant predictors. Most importantly for the current discussion, parasocial bond with Trump was also a significant predictor ( $OR = 1.609$ ;  $p < .001$ ). As predicted, parasocial bonds with Trump were a significant predictor of voting behavior—even when examined concurrently with other likely predictors. Thus, the data are supportive of the hypothesis that parasocial bonds with Trump influenced his election to President of the United States.

In addition, we look at whether parasocial bonds mediated the relationship between exposure to Trump Media and actually voting for Trump. A mediation model designed specifically for a dichotomous dependent variable (Kenny, 2016) found support for the prediction, Sobel = 2.09;  $p = .02$  (see Figure 2).

**Hypothesis 4:** The effects of parasocial bond with Trump should be especially prominent for those who would not normally be likely to vote for Trump. We examined whether parasocial bond interacted with Republican party affiliation to predict attitudes related to Trump. Republican party affiliation was chosen instead of Democratic party affiliation or liberal versus conservative ideology because it was the largest predictor of voting for Trump among our sample. We predict that parasocial bonds with Trump would be especially predictive for those who were not affiliated with the Republican party and thus would not be likely to vote for any Republican candidate by default. Regression analyses examining Republican affiliation, parasocial bonds, and the interactions of those variables (see Table 2) suggest that, as predicted, people who do not identify as Republicans were

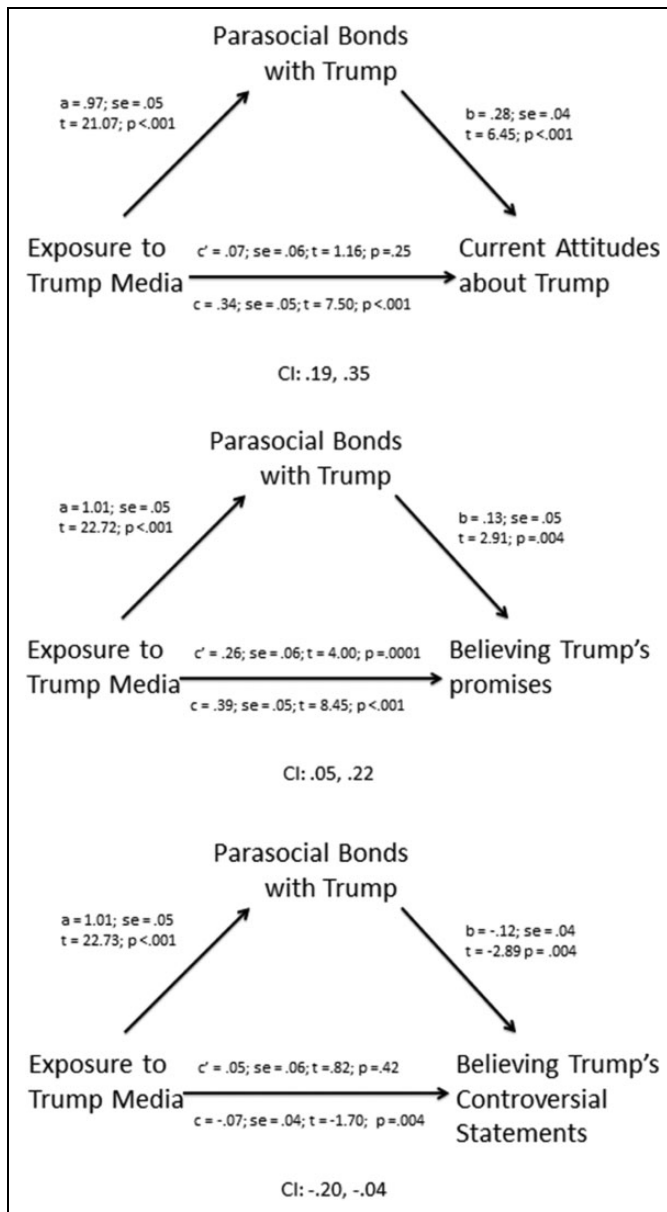


Figure 1. Mediation models.

especially influenced by parasocial bonds with Trump. Those who were strongly identified as Republicans had very positive attitudes toward Trump, believed Trump's promises, and disregarded his controversial statements regardless of whether they had parasocial bonds with Trump (see Figure 3). Those who did not affiliate with the Republican party were strongly affected by parasocial bond—when they had a parasocial bond, they were much more likely to have positive attitudes toward Trump, believe Trump's promises, and disregard his controversial statements as compared to when they did not have parasocial bonds with Trump.<sup>4</sup> Thus, parasocial bonds with Trump are particularly useful for explaining why unlikely voters voted for Trump.

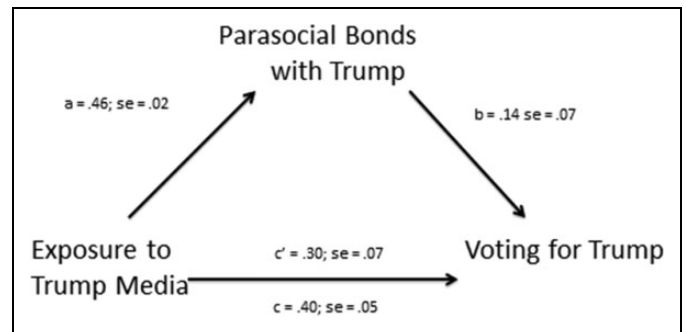


Figure 2. Mediation models.

## General Discussion

Through *TA*, Trump built a personal brand any outsider politician would envy: decisive, averse to bullshit, impossible to swindle, and guided in all decisions by brash, plainspoken common sense (Friedersdorf, 2011).

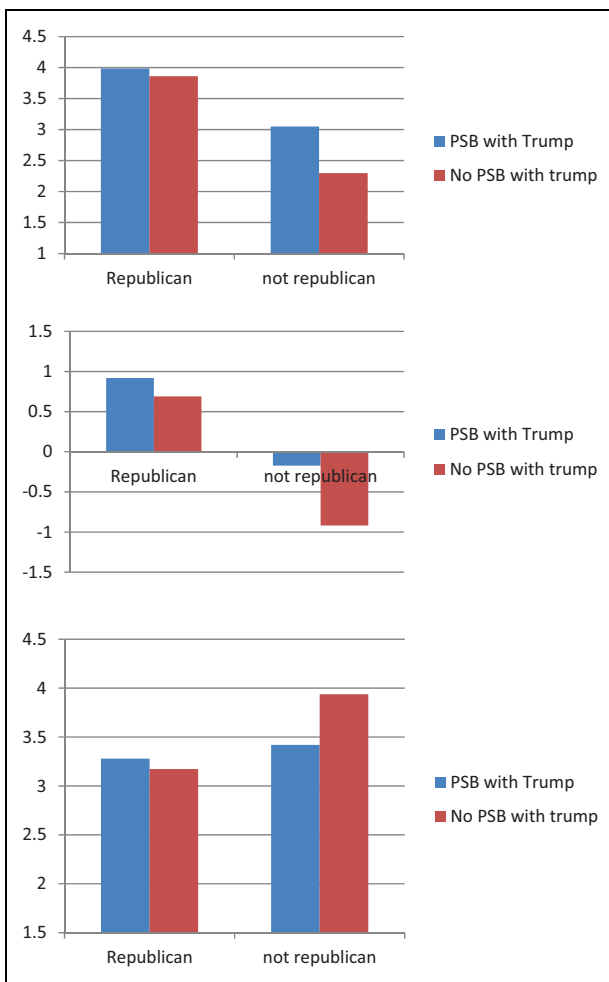
Although most politicians fiercely compete for precious media time and work with diligence to form a likable yet authoritative impression on the American voters—often with discouraging outcomes—Donald Trump had 14 seasons of carefully edited prime time exposure to imprint a presidential impression on American minds. Our data suggest that he was successful in doing so and that it played an important role in his election. The more participants in our study were exposed to Trump, both through his TV shows and other media, the more likely they were to have a parasocial bond with Trump. That bond with Trump predicted having a positive attitude toward Trump, believing his promises, disregarding his inflammatory statements, and even (self-reported) voting behavior. In addition, these effects were particularly strong for those whose votes were a surprise in the election: people who did not identify with the Republican party.

The strongest limitation of the study was its retrospective nature. We asked participants to recall how much of *TA/CA* they watched, and we also asked them to recall their parasocial bond with Trump. This leaves open the possibility that the parasocial bond reported was not really due to television exposure to Trump, but instead was misremembering due to people's current attitudes toward Trump (e.g., "I like Trump now, so I must have liked him then"). However, the data do not seem to support that alternate hypothesis. First, the regression analysis looking at what predicted parasocial bonds found no evidence that education level, income, affiliation as a Republican, affiliation as a Democrat, and liberal versus conservative ideology had any relationship to parasocial bonds with Trump. Instead, the strongest predictors of parasocial bond were variables related to exposure to Trump in the media. In addition, reverse mediation was much less successful than the predicted model. Thus, we concluded that being exposed to Trump in the media led participants to form a bond with him, which then led to change in attitudes about Trump. Therefore, despite the retrospective nature of the data collection, we think there is reason to be confident about the conclusions.

**Table 2.** Regression Analyses.

Variables	Republican Affiliation	Parasocial Bond	Interaction	Slope for Low Republicans	Slope for High Republicans
Attitudes toward Trump	$B = .63; t = 19.16^*$	$B = .25; t = 7.50^*$	$B = -.12; t = -3.83^*$	$B = .38; t = 7.90^*$	$B = .11; t = 2.44^{**}$
Believe Trump promises	$B = .51; t = 13.30^*$	$B = .21; t = 5.46^*$	$B = -.09; t = -2.33^{**}$	$B = .29; t = 5.14^*$	$B = .13; t = 2.86^{**}$
Believe controversial statements	$B = -.25; t = -5.53^*$	$B = -.11; t = -2.49^*$	$B = .19; t = 4.27^*$	$B = -.28; t = -4.27^{**}$	$B = .06; t = 1.08$ ns

\*Denotes significance at  $p < .001$ . \*\*Denotes correlations that are significant at  $p < .05$ .



**Figure 3.** Predicted Scores for regression analyses examining Republican party affiliation, parasocial bond, and their interaction on believing Trump’s promises, current attitudes toward Trump, and believing Trumps controversial statements.

Although these data were collected between the time of the election and the inauguration, it stands to reason that these bonds might also predict which people have stuck with Trump at a time when his popularity was dwindling. Because people’s attitudes toward Trump were shaped through 14 years of exposure to him, they are likely to be relatively strong. The strength of an attitude negatively predicts susceptibility to change and

positively predicts attitude–behavior correspondence (Krosnick & Petty, 1995). Future research would be necessary to examine these ideas.

We would caution before suggesting that the effects we found in this study would transfer to any public figure. For example, we are not suggesting that *Survivor* host Jeff Probst is likely to be our next president. The presentation of Trump in *TA/CA* was decidedly presidential—he alone made the decisions about who would stay or go, his decisions were always right within the narrative of the show, and he was able to make the decision fairly and quickly. It is unknown whether these effects would transfer to a public figure with a less specific image. However, Trump’s case shares some similarities with other celebrities who have achieved electoral success: former professional wrestler turned Governor Jesse Ventura and movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger, former governor of California. Although Ventura and Schwarzenegger’s entertainment roles were less obviously “presidential,” they were also both successful at creating public personas that were both likable and powerful. Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Zimbardo (2002) suggest that voters construct and use simplified perceptions of candidates’ personalities, focusing on the factors of energy (extroversion) and agreeableness. Future research might explore which types of parasocial relationships or personality impressions are most likely to provide benefits beyond the entertainment context.

This research also increases what is known about parasocial bonds. To our knowledge, it is the first research to show that parasocial bonds with celebrities can influence elections. It also suggests long-term effects of parasocial bonds. Most studies examining the effects of parasocial exposure on bonds tend to look at short-term outcomes variables such as temporary boosts to self-esteem or feelings of belonging (for a review, see Gabriel et al., 2016). This research suggests that parasocial bonds can last for years and can influence major decisions long after initial exposure. Thus, the current study is consistent with the arguments that an understanding of parasocial relationships and media influence more generally is essential to an understanding of how individuals interact with their social worlds (e.g., Okdie et al., 2014).

Finally, we are not arguing that Trump’s appearance on reality television is the only reason he was elected president. It is clear that there were a large number of factors at play.

However, we are suggesting that Trump's election was seriously influenced by his appearance on reality TV. Indeed, given that this was such a close election, it is possible that Trump would not have won without the benefit of his years on *TA/CA*. Therefore, as we work toward understanding the election of 2016, it is imperative that we consider the role of parasocial bonds.

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### Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

### Notes

1. A full list of all measures is available online. We also measured a number of other measures which were not examined. Specifically, we also measured religious orientation, enjoyment of reality shows, and enjoyment of *The Apprentice*. We would be happy to share the full dataset with anyone interested.
2. There was also a marginal effect of income. Higher income was related to a higher parasocial bond with Trump.
3. More details about this factor analysis are available online.
4. When analyses were repeated with affiliation with Democrats, identification as liberal, and voting for Obama replacing identifying as Republican, the same patterns were found although not all of the interactions were significant. Interestingly, believing Trump's controversial statements was the one variable that was significant across every predictor. Specifically, Democrats, liberals, and people who vote for Obama were especially likely to discount Trump's controversial statements when they had parasocial bonds with him.

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