

Opinion Change and Learning in the US 2016 Presidential Election

Evidence from a Panel Survey Combined with
Direct Observation of Social Media Activity

Gregory Eady, Jonathan Nagler, Jan Zilinsky, Joshua Tucker

NYU Social Media and Political Participation Lab

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Research Questions

- What topics were covered by the media followed by liberal, moderate, and conservative respondents?"
- On what topics did people modify their attitudes over the course of 2016?
- To what extent did the media contribute to opinion change during the 2016 presidential campaign?

Preview of results from the panel survey

- **Media diet:** Liberals and conservatives saw stories on the same subjects
- **Opinion change:** Democrats moved against building the wall; stable views among Republicans (exceptions: military use & tariffs on Chinese goods)
- **Media-driven opinion change**
 - More tweets from conservative media → more support for deportations & more opposition to Obamacare
 - People who saw more tweets from liberal sources increased their support for pathway to citizenship, Obamacare, and even **free trade**



Hillary Clinton ✓ @HillaryClinton · 9 Mar 2016

It's a lot easier to get **from** 90% coverage to 100% than to start over. We need to build on and protect the **Affordable Care Act**. #DemDebate

312

1.3K



2.8K



Hillary Clinton ✓ @HillaryClinton · 18 Aug 2015

16 million Americans have gained health insurance **from** the **Affordable Care Act**. We need to protect it—not repeal it.

195

740



1.4K



Donald J. Trump ✓

@realDonaldTrump

Follow

Obamacare is a disaster. We must **REPEAL & REPLACE**. Tired of the lies, and want to #DrainTheSwamp? Get out & VOTE #TrumpPence16 & lets #MAGA!



- DECEMBER 07, 2015 -

DONALD J. TRUMP STATEMENT ON PREVENTING MUSLIM IMMIGRATION

(New York, NY) December 7th, 2015, -- Donald J. Trump is calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on. According to Pew Research, among

SMaPP U.S. 2016 Panel Survey

- Opinions on 10 issues were elicited
 - In April 2016
 - Again in Oct 25, 2016 - Nov 7, 2016
(2625 respondents of the original 3,500 participants re-took the survey)

Policy topics: Immigration, Health care, Trade, Taxation, Military use

SMaPP U.S. 2016 Panel Survey

- 1,843 respondents had previously provided YouGov with their Twitter ID & consented to its use
- We merged respondents' private survey responses with their public Twitter information
- Collected
 - Respondents' tweets
 - The set of all accounts these respondents followed
 - All tweets sent by the accounts they followed

Behavioral data

We see what content respondents seek out

- We match the set of all accounts each respondent follows to a set of approximately 2200 accounts of news organizations and journalists.
- Those 2200 media accounts are coded for ideology
(Approach: Barbera (PA, 2015) homophily-based method)

Model Opinion Change

(and the Evolution of Candidate Placement)

We model opinion change as function of

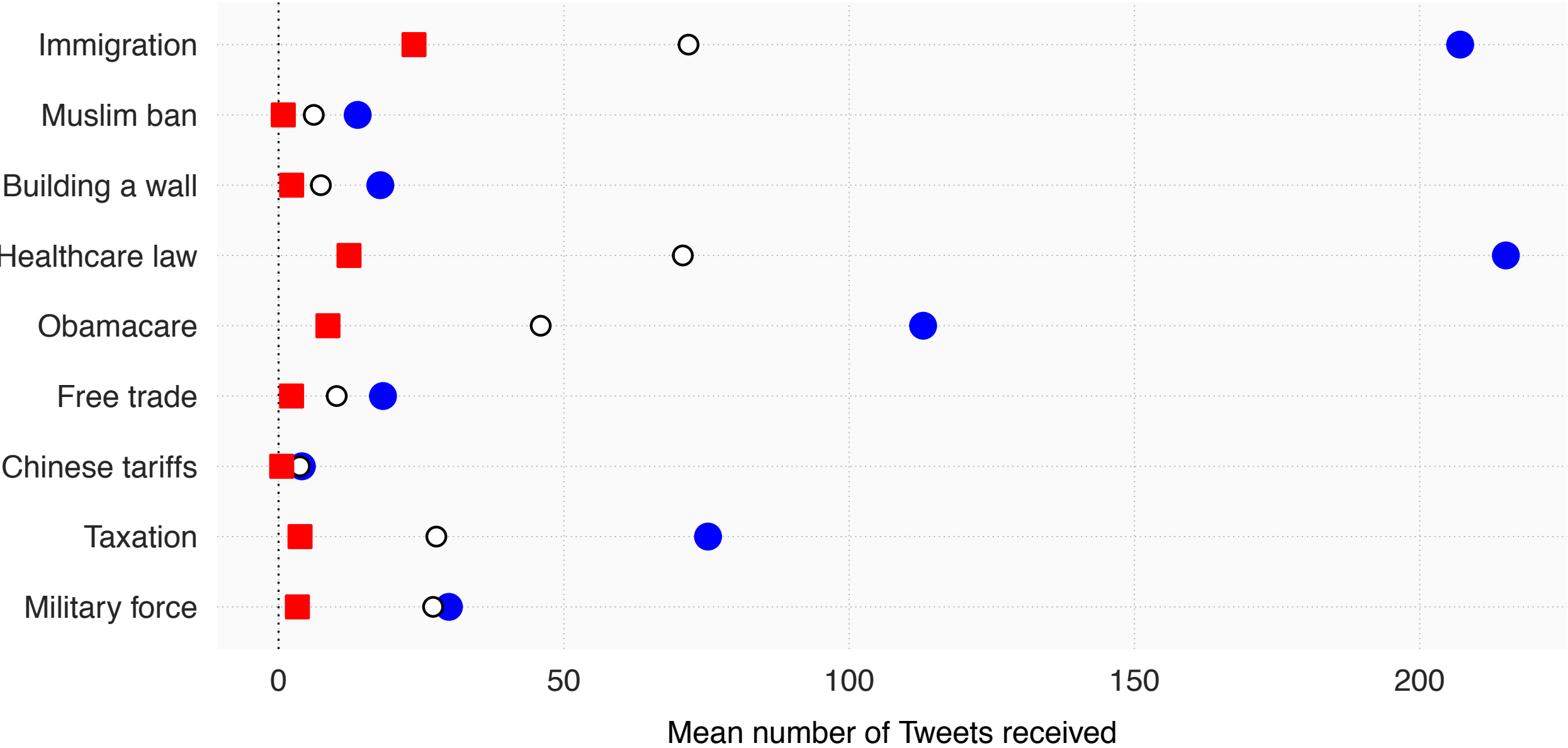
- (**Number of tweets** seen) about (**topic**) by (**source type**)
- Television consumption; respondents' characteristics

Basic Intuition: Seeing tweets by Fox News will lead respondents to move closer to Donald Trump's positions. Seeing tweets by MSNBC will lead respondents to endorse (most) Hillary Clinton's policy positions

Average number of tweets received by liberal respondents from 3 types of media sources

● Liberal media ○ Moderate media ■ Conservative media

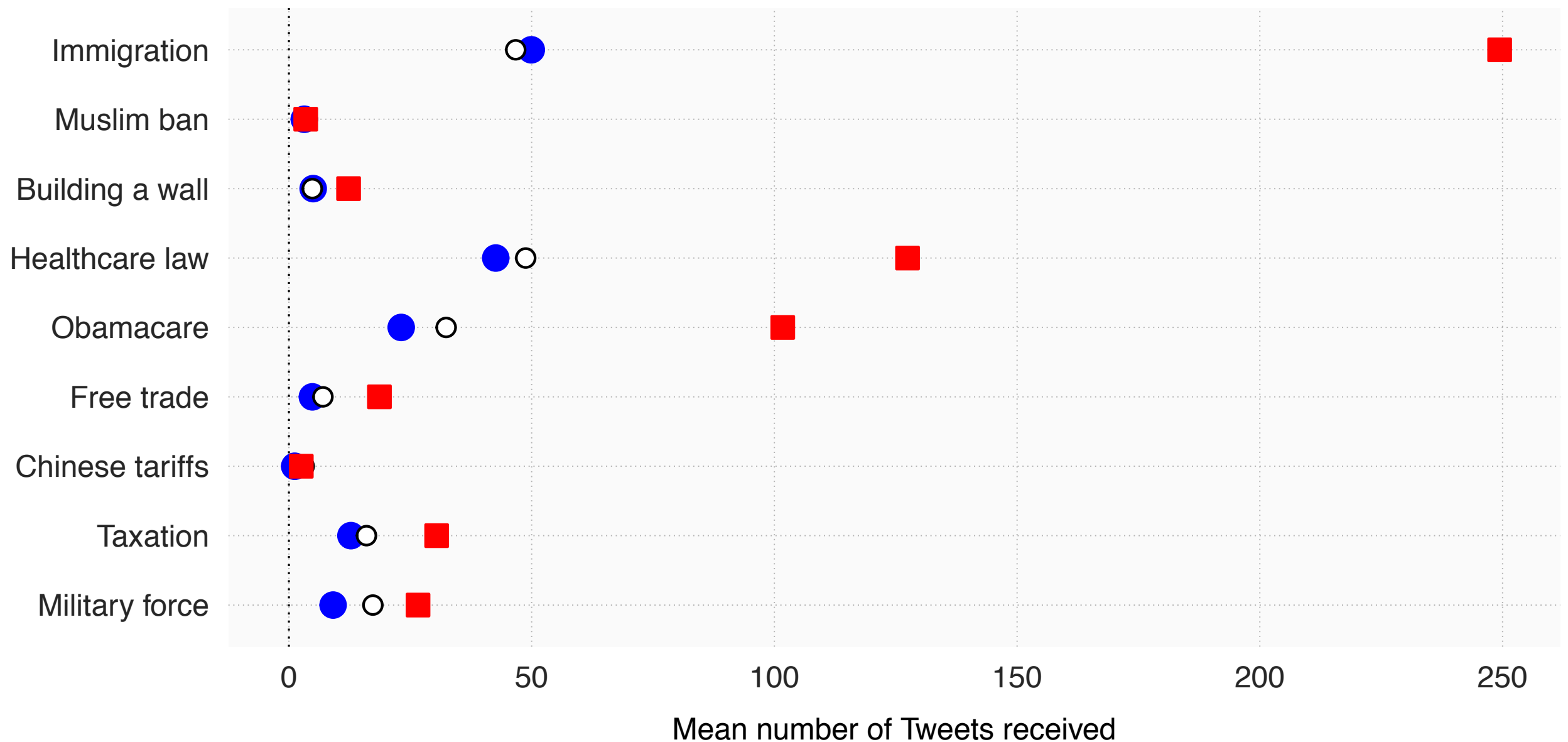
Liberal respondents



Average number of tweets received by **conservative** respondents from 3 types of media sources

● Liberal media ○ Moderate media ■ Conservative media

Conservative respondents



Modeling Opinion Change

Outcome variable: respondents' **self-placement** on one of the issues wave 3

We conditioned on the respondents' self-placement of the outcome variable in wave 1 of the survey

Explanatory variables: **the number of tweets** seen on the topic from liberal media outlets, and conservative media outlets

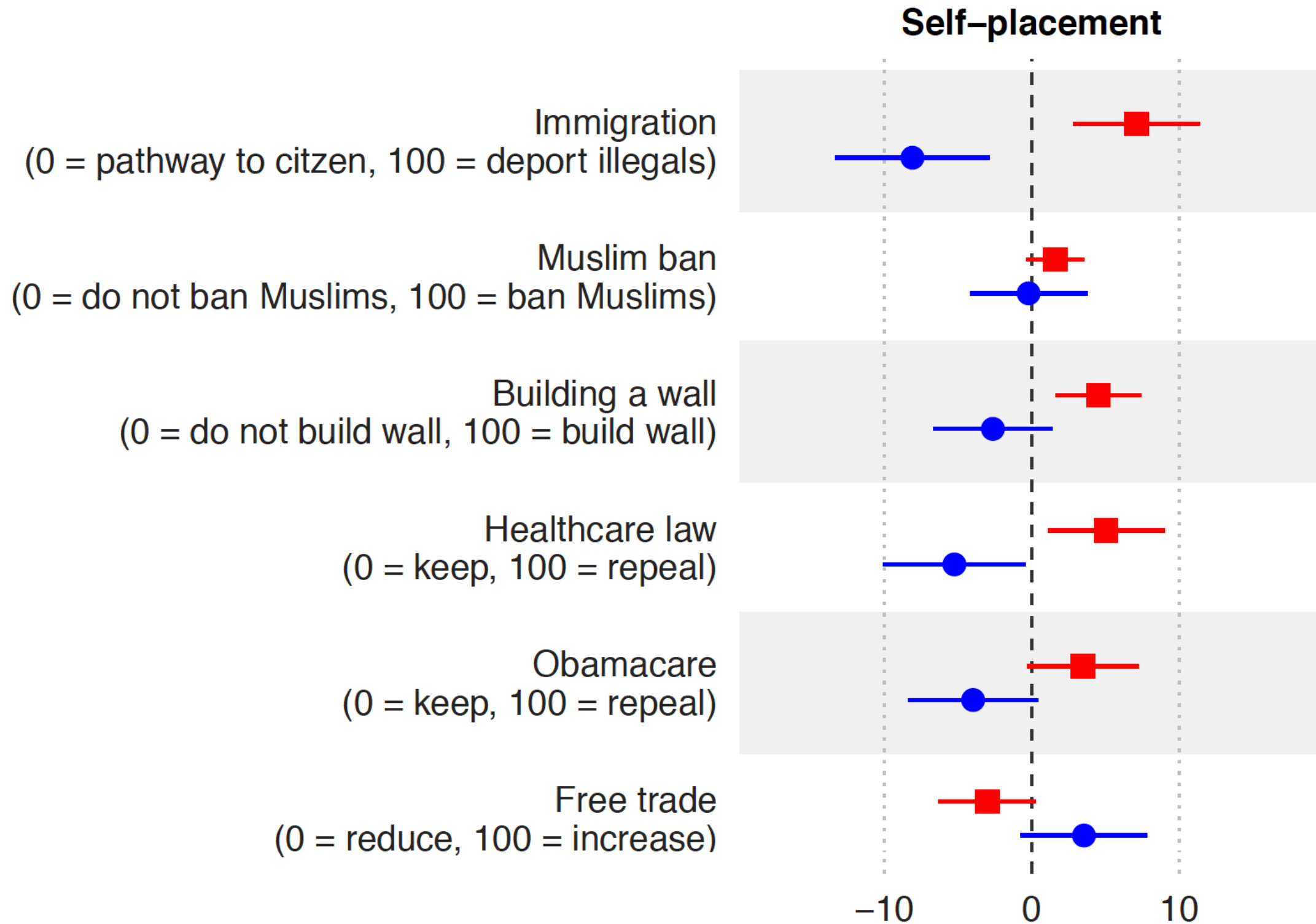
Whether they followed Clinton and whether they followed Trump

Offline exposure to news: conditioning on whether they reported watching Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, or any of (ABC, CBS, or NBC).

Controls: Party ID, gender, age, education, income

Predicted opinion change based on consuming the average number of tweets instead of zero tweets on the subject

● Liberal media ■ Conservative media



Conclusion

- Respondents who saw more tweets from conservative news sources in their Twitter feed revised their views on policy in a conservative direction
(with the exception of free trade and military use)
- Stories from liberal sources are also linked to opinion change (in the liberal direction)
- Movement to the *right on trade* among people who saw more stories on trade from liberal media, and to the left (*against free trade*) when more tweets from conservative sources were received
- We condition on behaviors and voters' characteristics that should explain information acquisition during the campaign