CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How Much Is a Trump Endorsement Worth?

M.V. Hood III[1] and Seth C. McKee[2] (ID)

[1]Department of Political Science, School of Public and International Affairs, University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA
[2]Department of Political Science, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA
Corresponding author: Seth C. McKee; Email: mckee@okstate.edu

Abstract

Former president Trump made hundreds of candidate endorsements in the 2022 Republican primaries. The state of Georgia garnered outsized attention because it was ground zero for Trump's false accusations of a stolen 2020 presidential election. Trump endorsed several candidates in Georgia's May 2022 GOP primary contests, including candidates challenging Governor Brian Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, incumbents drawing Trump's ire for upholding the 2020 outcome favoring Joe Biden. In a survey of likely Georgia GOP primary voters randomizing whether they are told which candidate Trump endorsed in five statewide races (governor, US Senate, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and insurance commissioner), our analysis shows substantial variability in the influence of Trump's endorsement. With scant prior information in low-profile contests (e.g., insurance commissioner), the Trump endorsement has a substantial impact, whereas it is rendered ineffectual in the most high-profile race for governor. Thus, the findings demonstrate the remarkable variability of a Trump endorsement, which is primarily contingent upon the salience of a specific race.

Keywords: Georgia; Trump endorsement; 2022 GOP primary; survey; experiment

Introduction

How much is a Trump endorsement worth? The answer: it depends. It depends on several factors like the political composition of the state where the endorsement is offered, the relative alignment of candidates to the former president and/or his political views and those of his supporters, the prior information voters have on the candidates vying for the GOP nomination, and the relative visibility/profile of the candidates and the office they seek (e.g., a state legislative seat versus the governorship).

Because of the many factors contributing to the electoral influence of a Trump Republican primary endorsement, one way to simplify such an assessment is by examining voter preferences in a single state but across multiple offices in which the former president gave his endorsement. We take this approach, by looking

specifically at the possible impact of a Trump endorsement for multiple offices in the state of Georgia weeks before the Republican primary held on May 24, 2022.

By holding the state constant while examining the influence of a Trump endorsement across several offices, voter information is highly variable based on the candidates running and the relative visibility of the office they seek. Given the high degree of variation in voter information, it should follow that the effect of a Trump endorsement is likewise highly variable. For example, because likely Georgia GOP primary voters were very familiar with incumbent governor Brian Kemp, a Trump endorsement of his main opponent (recently defeated Senator David Purdue) should barely sway preferences. In contrast, Trump's endorsement in the contest for insurance commissioner should have had a substantial effect on preferences because of the dearth of previous information likely GOP primary voters possessed in this down-ballot contest. Hence, awareness of the endorsement probably did two things in lesser profile races: (1) greatly increased support for Trump's chosen candidate while (2) reducing the percentage of *Don't Know* responses for the specific vote choice question.

We employ an experimental survey design to assess possible changes in preferences of likely Georgia GOP primary voters based on their exposure to a Trump endorsement issued in five statewide offices: governor, US Senate, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and insurance commissioner. There is considerable variation in the visibility of the candidates and the office these contenders ran for in these five contests on the May 2022 Republican primary ballot. The data reveal minimal effects of a Trump endorsement in the high-profile gubernatorial contest whereas the ex-president's blessing registers a significant, variable, and substantial impact on vote choice in the other four races we analyzed.

The conditional influence of an endorsement

Recently, American politics scholarship has undergone a paradigm shift in conceptualizing political parties. The once heavily candidate-centered focus on individuals taking the initiative to seek office under the party label, with the party acting in service to these political entrepreneurs (Aldrich 1995), has fallen out of favor. To be sure, there remains credibility in viewing the major parties from this vantage, but it is also the case that as Democrats and Republicans polarized and became more driven by ideological differences (Abramowitz 2018) and affective dissension (Mason 2018), a framework built around the claim that parties are coalitions of various groups of policy demanders has gained theoretical and empirical credence (Bawn *et al.* 2012; Cohen *et al.* 2008). According to this perspective, the growing influence of the parties is evident in their ability to direct co-partisans in the electorate to support their choice in primary/nomination contests, whether for president or lesser offices. One tangible measure of party influence is the use of endorsements to attract electoral support in contested primaries. Whether it be a presidential nomination (Cohen *et al.* 2008), a House (Dominguez 2011), or Senate primary (Hassell 2016), party-generated endorsements (and/or financial contributions) are correlated with greater electoral backing in these contests.[1]

---

[1]It is defensible to consider financial donations as a type of endorsement (see Hassell 2016). We think a more straightforward definition of endorsement, and similar to the approach we take in this article is "public announcements explicitly intended to convey information to voters" (Grossman and Helpman 1999, 50).

Nevertheless, the "party decides" model of American political parties runs into complications if in fact the party is unable to coalesce around a single candidate and, even worse, if the candidate most elites in the party network oppose actually wins the nomination. This is of course the scenario that played out in 2016 when the political outsider Donald Trump won the GOP presidential nomination. We contend that Trump was a "movement" candidate because he captured the support of most Republican voters despite the efforts and signaling of numerous GOP elites who tried to make a case against him.[2] As MacWilliams (2016) sees it, because the Republican establishment failed to settle on an alternative to Trump, his unique appeal, greatly rooted in authoritarianism, propelled him to the 2016 Republican presidential nomination. Hence, as Hassell (2016, 76) points out, "Just because party networks want to influence primaries does not mean that they have the resources or power to do so." They did not in 2016, and in winning the White House, Trump took control of the Republican Party.

Manento and Testa (2022, 1654) pose an interesting question: "When a party outsider captures the party, who is then considered an outsider?" By the time former president Trump issued a slew of candidate endorsements in the 2022 midterm cycle, by dint of his enduring popularity among Republican voters and his remaining engaged in the political arena, Trump persisted as the de facto head of the GOP (Jacobson 2021). Thus, in a remarkable bottom-up political twist, by achieving historically high approval among rank-and-file GOP voters, the Republican Party network bowed to Trump. With his passionate base of supporters and far-reaching influence within the GOP, Trump deployed Republican primary endorsements to continue leveraging current and future political concessions within the party he leads.[3] Given this reality, we should expect Trump's endorsement to be especially impactful in GOP primary contests, and there is evidence it was (Manento and Testa 2022).

However, context is critical in thinking about the significance of a Trump endorsement. Georgia was a setting where a Trump endorsement should be highly variable because of the ex-president's controversial involvement with Republican officials and election administration, after he lost the state to Joe Biden (Hood and McKee 2022a; Hood and McKee 2023a). We now turn to a discussion of the likely conditional effects of a Trump endorsement based on what we know about political behavior.

As stated by Manento and Testa (2022, 1634), "In an age of popular primary elections, for party organizations to see their preferred candidates nominated, the voters must act in accordance with the wishes of party elites. Yet it is not clear that voters always follow the cues of the party." The American voter is notoriously disinterested in politics, possessing a myopic view of current events, which places hard limits on their depth of decision-making and hence a frequently faulty capacity

---

[2]Interestingly, in seeking the GOP presidential nomination in 2016, Donald Trump garnered hardly any endorsements from Republican officeholders, and this signaled the widely held belief among the Republican establishment that Trump was not viable (Cohen *et al.* 2008). Of course, it ultimately did not matter what GOP elites thought because Trump had the most support from the group that matters most in nomination contests, that of GOP primary voters (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018).

[3]Of course, shortly after the 2022 midterms, Trump declared a third run for the presidency.

to properly assign electoral punishment and reward (Achen and Bartels 2016). To be sure, there is a small stratum of politically sophisticated ideologues and issue publics (Converse 1964); the former care to know about politics because it interests them (Luskin 1990), and the latter easily acquire information because it directly impacts their livelihoods. But for most of the mass public, cue-taking and shortcuts are greatly valued devices because it is an efficient means to engage a subject most could easily care less about (Lupia 1994; Popkin 1991).

There is an interesting irony to the context of primary elections. They attract the most engaged voters, at least by evidence of their willingness to participate, even if this smaller contingent is typically representative of the general electorate sharing the same party affiliation (Geer 1988; Sides *et al.* 2020). But the choice calculus among these more participatory voters is considerably more complicated at the primary stage when there exist multiple candidates all affiliated with the same party (Bartels 1988). With the party label constant and the presence of several candidates, an endorsement from a high-profile actor can be a helpful and efficient tool for primary voters to draw upon in forming their decision (Grossman and Helpman 1999; Pease and Brewer 2008; Garthwaite and Moore 2013). Enter Donald Trump, a business-man, celebrity, and political figure whose presidential popularity among Republican voters achieved all-time highs while also registering the most polarized partisan disparities in approval ever recorded by the Gallup Poll (Jacobson 2021; McKee, Evans, and Clark 2022). With universal name recognition and an enduring hold over the Grand Old Party because of his continued involvement in politics after losing reelection in 2020, a Trump endorsement should have been influential in Republican primary contests.

Nevertheless, there are natural limits to the influence of any endorsement, even one made by Republican voters' most approved of president. Foremost, voters weigh the endorsement against prior information they have on primary candidates. This means that a Trump endorsement should exhibit a highly variable effect on vote choice. Hence, we expect a Trump endorsement registered its greatest effect in the lowest-profile primary contests. In the absence of any competing information on primary candidates, the positive association with a Trump endorsement should have moved most voters to favor Trump's endorsee, which also necessarily reduced the share of otherwise undecided voters. Thus, in a Republican primary the Trump endorsement essentially served the dual purpose of persuading and informing. However, a Trump endorsement should have exhibited negligible effects in the most high-profile primary contests because voters possess more information that makes it easier to shape their candidate preference regardless of Trump's choice. For instance, a well-known incumbent cultivated a favorable profile with voters, and their impression of this politician is likely developed to the point that any endorsement, even a Trump endorsement, exhibited at best a minimal to modest influence on vote choice.

Table 1 shows summary information for five statewide offices on the May 2022 Georgia Republican primary ballot in which Trump gave his endorsement. First, the number of candidates running in these contests ranges from three (insurance commissioner) to six (US Senate). Second, the salience of these contests was remarkably variable; with few voters possessing information on insurance com-missioner candidates, even with the presence of an incumbent officeholder appointed by Governor Kemp. In contrast, well-known Governor Kemp drew four challengers for renomination, including Trump-endorsed David Perdue, who most

Table 1. Summary information for Trump-endorsed Georgia GOP statewide primary contests

Office	Candidates	Vote share (%)	Incumbent (in bold)	Trump endorsee	Endorsee win?	Race profile
Governor	Catherine Davis,	1	Yes	David A. Perdue	No	High
	Brian Kemp,	74				
	David A. Perdue,	22				
	Kandiss Taylor,	3				
	Tom Williams	<1				
US Senate	Gary Black,	13	No	Herschel Walker	Yes	High
	Josh W. Clark,	4				
	Kelvin King,	3				
	Jonathan McColumn,	2				
	Latham Saddler,	9				
	Herschel Walker	68				
Lieutenant Governor	Burt Jones,	50	No	Burt Jones	Yes	Low
	Mack McGregor,	11				
	Butch Miller,	31				
	Jeanne Seaver	8				
Secretary of State	David C. Belle Isle,	9	Yes	Jody Hice	No	Moderate
	Jody Hice,	33				
	T.J. Hudson,	5				
	Brad Raffensperger	52				
Insurance Commissioner	Ben Cowart,	13	Yes	Patrick Witt	No	Low
	John King,	71				
	Patrick Witt	17				

Note. Trump also made an endorsement for attorney general, but this came too late to have included the race in our survey experiment. Among the five contests in the table, the most votes were cast for governor (1,203,835). Roll-off, the percentage less votes cast in the remaining contests, was as follows: 2% for US Senate; 3% for secretary of state; 7% for lieutenant governor; and 8% for insurance commissioner. Data are from the Georgia Secretary of State's website.

recently lost reelection to the US Senate in an early January 2021 runoff against Democrat Jon Ossoff.[4]

Table 1 also displays the vote share garnered by each candidate in each primary race, denotes the incumbent in bold if there is an incumbent running, indicates the Trump endorsee in the contest, whether Trump's endorsed candidate won, and the relative profile of the race. Notably, the significance of incumbency appears present (Ansolabehere *et al.* 2006) at least with respect to the fact that in the three races with an incumbent, all three won renomination. Trump did not endorse these incumbents and his endorsed candidates finished second in each of these races – an indication that the endorsement likely had some influence but not enough to change the outcome. By comparison, in the two open contests (US Senate and lieutenant governor), Trump backed the winner. Although the incumbency advantage is trending toward an all-time low (Jacobson 2015) because of the nationalization of American voting behavior (Bartels 2000; Hopkins 2018), it probably retained some potency in Georgia because the ballot indicated the incumbent in the race, which

---

[4]The Brian Kemp versus Stacey Abrams 2018 gubernatorial general election in Georgia made national news, was highly competitive, and was controversial because Kemp refused to step down from his position as secretary of state. Beyond obvious conflict-of-interest issues, Democrats (with Abrams leading the charge) accused Kemp of suppressing minority participation in the 2018 midterm election (see Hood and McKee 2019).

served as a useful cue particularly in a primary race that featured candidates of the same party (Schaffner, Streb, and Wright 2001).[5]

The last column of Table 1 holds particular importance when thinking about the significance of an endorsement. Again, we hypothesize that a Trump endorsement mattered more in low-profile contests. Given Trump's high popularity among an electorate disproportionately comprised of GOP identifiers, if they have scant information about the candidates in a certain contest, then Trump's endorsement was a potent positive cue to guide the vote decision. Further, with minimal information in a low-profile race featuring multiple contenders, the Trump endorsement not only informed the vote decision but, in the process, greatly reduced the number of voters who otherwise would register a *Don't Know* response in a more obscure contest.

In determining the level of profile in the five contests in Table 1, a reliable metric is to consider voter roll-off. By this account, the gubernatorial race was the highest profile as it received the greatest number of votes (see the note under Table 1). The US Senate contest was not far behind with 2% less votes cast (so it is also labeled high profile). Because of the attention cast on the secretary of state race, with Trump vehemently opposed to the incumbent Brad Raffensperger, who refused to accommodate the president's "request" for finding enough votes to overturn Biden's Georgia victory, we rated this contest as one of a moderate profile (3% roll-off vis-à-vis the gubernatorial race). Lastly, the two lowest-profile races are lieutenant governor and insurance commissioner, with voter roll-off of 7% and 8%, respectively.

Finally, in theory, a Trump endorsement should weigh heaviest in lowest-profile races. However, what complicates the *possible* influence versus *actual* influence of Trump's endorsement is whether primary voters are indeed informed of it. For example, Trump elevated the profile of the secretary of state race because of his quarrel with Raffensperger, and his endorsement of challenger and Congressman Jody Hice appears to have greatly reduced the chances of the incumbent winning.[6] By comparison, in the highest-profile race for governor, incumbent Brian Kemp was very well-known and popular for his record of accomplishments. In this context, as we will demonstrate, the Trump endorsement of challenger and former Senator David Perdue had basically no electoral payout. And in the race where a Trump endorsement should matter most, for insurance commissioner, because of the obscurity of the candidates (Maisel 1982), the incumbent sailed to victory (71% of the vote). But, as we will show, the effect of a Trump endorsement in the experimental

---

[5]In the Supplementary Material, see the sample ballot for the 2022 Republican primary in DeKalb County, which indicates who is the incumbent when there is an incumbent running for a specific office.

[6]Some Trump-aligned Georgia Republicans who were displeased with the outcome of the secretary of state contest, are advocating for the Peach State to move to a closed Republican primary (Amy 2022). The rationale is based on the evidence that thousands of Raffensperger supporters were Democrats. To be sure, crossover voting is always available to voters in a state like Georgia, which holds open primaries. Nonetheless, our sample revealed that only a meager share of likely Georgia GOP primary voters affiliated with the Democratic Party, though there probably were enough to prevent a runoff, as Raffensperger won a slim majority of the vote (52%). In all elections (primary and general) Georgia requires a simple majority vote for the winner, otherwise there is a runoff held among the top two candidates. After winning reelection in 2022, Secretary of State Raffensperger suggested replacing the runoff with a ranked choice voting (RCV) format, to determine the winner in a single round of voting, similar to the RCV system in Maine.

setting was greatest in this contest. The problem is that there is limited external validity because such a low-profile contest as insurance commissioner meant that few Republican primary voters were aware of the Trump endorsement.

Data and methods

This preregistered experiment was conducted through the University of Georgia's School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA) Survey Research Center from March 20 to April 8, 2022 (Hood and McKee 2023b). A total of 736 likely Republican primary voters[7] in Georgia were interviewed over the phone using live callers.[8] Respondents were randomly assigned to either the control group or the treatment group at the beginning of each interview. There were 391 respondents in the treatment group (53%) and 345 respondents in the control group (47%).[9] The control group was asked who they planned on voting for in the following five statewide contests: governor, US Senate, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and insurance commissioner. Respondents in the treatment group were told which candidate former president Trump had endorsed prior to being asked their vote preferences. All respondents were then asked a set of additional political and demographic questions.

Our analysis proceeds in two parts. First, we display the results for each of the five races analyzed (see Table 2). Here we examine the difference in the estimated vote share for the Trump endorsee across the treatment and control groups. We also display results for *undecideds* and the remaining candidates. Second, we construct a series of multinomial logit models, by office. Because of the nature of this randomized survey experiment, it is not necessary to include controls.[10] For the multivariate analysis (see Table 3), we construct models by office, where the dependent variable is coded 2 to indicate support for the Trump endorsee, 1 for all other candidates in the race, and 0 for undecideds (those answering *Don't Know* when asked who they planned to support).[11] Given the unordered nature of the dependent variable, models

---

[7]Georgia is an open primary state without party registration. Self-identified Democrats and Independents can, and do, vote in the Georgia Republican primary. As such, our survey of likely Republican primary voters included a small number of self-identified Democrats (1.3%) and Independents (3.4%).

[8]Post-stratification weighting was applied to ensure respondents were representative of the 2022 Georgia Republican primary electorate in terms of education, race, gender, and age.

[9]A sample comparison between the control and treatment groups (weighted and unweighted) is provided in Table A8 in the Supplementary Material for the following variables: gender, age, race, education, income, political party, and ideological self-identification. Table A8 demonstrates a close congruence on these factors between the control and treatment groups.

[10]We appreciate the insightful and constructive advice from one of our anonymous reviewers who stressed why it is typically unnecessary to include controls when analyzing experimental data. In particular, control variables may bias the estimated effect of the treatment variable (Mutz 2011), especially if the control variables are measured post-treatment (e.g., Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018), which is the case for several of our demographic and political variables. Hence, we only show results in the article without the inclusion of controls. Nevertheless, for readers curious what the results would be, if controls were included (keeping the methodological concerns noted above in mind), Tables A4–A6 and Figure A1 in the Supplementary Material provide this information.

[11]The Supplementary Material contains alternative model specifications that rely on a binary dependent variable (Trump endorsee = 1; all other candidates and undecided = 0). Models with and without controls are specified along with simulated probabilities and confidence intervals (see Tables A1–A3).

Table 2. Support for Georgia GOP primary candidates by Trump endorsement

Office	Group	Control	Treatment	Difference
Governor	Endorsee	37.2	39.2	2.0
	Other Candidates	51.0	51.0	0.0
	Undecided	11.8	9.8	−2.0
US Senate	Endorsee	64.4	76.0	11.6[a]
	Other Candidates	11.8	9.3	−2.5
	Undecided	23.9	14.7	−9.2
Lt. Governor	Endorsee	29.7	59.0	29.3[a]
	Other Candidates	16.1	11.3	−4.8
	Undecided	54.2	29.8	−24.4[a]
Secretary of State	Endorsee	30.3	60.3	30.0[a]
	Other Candidates	30.7	21.2	−9.5
	Undecided	39.0	18.5	−20.5[a]
Insurance Commissioner	Endorsee	8.3	51.8	43.5[a]
	Other Candidates	20.3	11.7	−8.6
	Undecided	71.4	36.5	−34.9[a]

Note. The Difference column is calculated as Treatment minus Control.
[a]Probability difference between treatment and control groups is significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3. Predicting support for Trump endorsees in the 2022 Georgia GOP primary

Predictor	Governor	US Senate	Lt. Governor	SOS	Insurance
All Other Candidates					
Treatment	0.1884	0.2535	0.2449	0.3743	0.1243
	(0.2963)	(0.3493)	(0.2483)	(0.2314)	(0.2369)
Constant	1.4631***	−0.7074**	−1.2127***	−0.2403	−1.2589***
	(0.1976)	(0.2550)	(0.1612)	(0.1514)	(0.1494)
Trump Endorsee					
Treatment	0.2388	0.6547**	1.2872***	1.4331***	2.5031***
	(0.3068)	(0.2321)	(0.2019)	(0.2181)	(0.3108)
Constant	1.1481***	0.9911***	−0.6034***	−0.2524	−2.1524***
	(0.2091)	(0.1515)	(0.1512)	(0.1570)	(0.2822)
N	736	736	736	736	736

Note. Entries are multinomial logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. DV: Trump Endorsee = 2; All other candidates = 1; and Don't Know = 0 (Base Category).
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.
***$p < 0.001$.

were estimated using multinomial logit with the *undecided* category serving as the baseline comparison. Following estimation, we calculated simulated probabilities (Table 4) and associated confidence intervals for each of the three categories of the dependent variable (Table A7 in the Supplementary Material), across the treatment and control groups. The primary variable of interest for our analysis is the respondent's assignment to the control or treatment group where the indicator *Treatment* is coded 1 for those in the treatment group and 0 for respondents in the control group.

Findings

As we have discussed, the information environment of a primary election can be challenging. Once the voter gets past top-of-the-ballot contests like governor and US Senate, the low profile of the other offices, and hence dearth of knowledge on candidates running in them, makes a salient cue like Trump's endorsement a

Table 4. Support for Georgia GOP primary candidates by Trump endorsement

Office	Group	Control	Treatment	Difference
Governor	Endorsee	0.372	0.392	0.020
	Other Cand.	0.509	0.508	−0.001
	Undecided	0.119	0.100	−0.019
US Senate	Endorsee	0.642	0.757	0.115[a]
	Other Cand.	0.120	0.095	−0.025
	Undecided	0.238	0.149	−0.089[a]
Lt. Governor	Endorsee	0.296	0.588	0.292[a]
	Other Cand.	0.163	0.114	−0.049
	Undecided	0.541	0.298	−0.243[a]
Secretary of State	Endorsee	0.302	0.602	0.300[a]
	Other Cand.	0.309	0.212	−0.097[a]
	Undecided	0.389	0.186	−0.203[a]
Insurance Commissioner	Endorsee	0.086	0.516	0.430[a]
	Other Cand.	0.205	0.118	−0.087[a]
	Undecided	0.710	0.365	−0.345[a]

[a]Probability difference between treatment and control groups (Treatment minus Control) is significant at the 0.05 level.

powerful factor in guiding vote choice. We begin by discussing the findings from Table 2.

Starting with the gubernatorial contest, we see that Trump's endorsement barely moved the needle in favor of former senator David Perdue. His vote share increased two points over the control group. By comparison, in the US Senate primary, Herschel Walker's vote share among the treatment group increased 11.6 points. Nevertheless, it is also clear that Walker could have easily won without Trump's endorsement because he garnered just over 64% of the vote among the control group. Most of the increase in Walker's vote came from a 9-point drop in the *Undecided* category. In contrast to many national media reports, it is clear that Trump's endorsement of Walker was not the overriding factor in his winning the GOP nomination for US Senate.

The remaining three down-ticket races reveal a much more pronounced effect for Trump's endorsement, with the difference between the control and treatment groups ranging from 29 to almost 44 points. In the lieutenant governor's race, the Trump endorsee Burt Jones's vote share increased from 30% to 59%, while the vote share for the other candidates dropped a modest 4.8 points. Most of the movement comes from the *Undecided* category, which dropped from 54% for the control group to 30% for the treatment group.

In the secretary of state contest, Trump endorsee Jody Hice's vote share doubled from 30% to 60%. The vote share for other candidates in the race, which included incumbent Brad Raffensperger, dropped a more modest 9.5 points, while the share of undecideds fell just over 20 points, from 39% to 18.5%. Finally, in the race for insurance commissioner, the Trump endorsee Patrick Witt's estimated vote share skyrocketed from 8% to 52% – a difference of nearly 44 points. Most of this movement was related to the concomitant decline in the percentage of undecideds, going from 71% to under 37%.

Table 3 shows the results of our multinomial logit models. Again, the baseline category for comparison is the group of respondents who were undecided when asked about their vote preference. First, we will examine the results comparing those who intended to vote for a candidate who was not the Trump endorsee. The
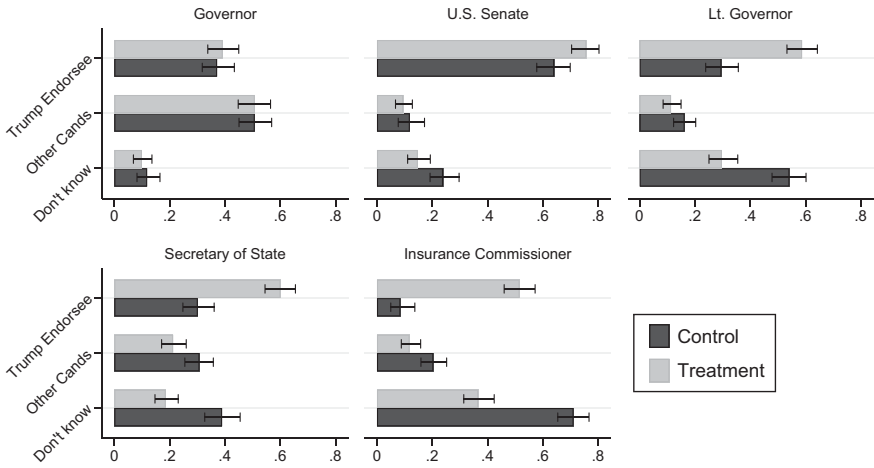
Figure 1. Support for Georgia GOP primary candidates by Trump endorsement.

treatment variable, not surprisingly, does not exert a statistically significant effect on differentiating between these respondents. In contrast, comparing those respondents supporting Trump-endorsed candidates to the base category, we see that for all but the governor's race, the treatment variable is positive and significant. Respondents exposed to Trump's endorsement were more likely to express support for these candidates.

Multinomial logit coefficients are difficult to interpret directly. As such, we converted the model coefficients into a set of predicted probabilities using the observed-value approach as suggested by Hanmer and Kalkan (2013). The predicted probabilities for the five statewide contests are displayed in Table 4 and Figure 1.[12] Not surprisingly, the results of the multinomial logit models comparing support for the Trump-endorsed candidate between the treatment and control groups are very similar to the descriptive findings in Table 2.

In the governor's contest, the difference between the treatment and control groups in support of the Trump endorsee, at 2.0, is negligible and not statistically significant. At 8.9, the difference for the US Senate contest is statistically significant, but certainly more modest as compared to the three down-ticket races. In the three contests for lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and insurance commissioner, there is evidence of a decline in the likelihood of voting for the candidates not endorsed by Trump. However, the greatest impact of being exposed to the Trump endorsement (a respondent in the treatment group) is reflected in the large increase in the probability of preferring the Trump endorsee and a decline in the likelihood of being undecided (choosing the *Don't Know* option).

The difference in the likelihood of preferring the Trump endorsee, depending on whether the respondent is in the treatment group versus the control group, for lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and insurance commissioner, respectively is 0.29, 0.30, and 0.43. Clearly, these are substantial and statistically significant

---

[12]Table A7 in the Supplementary Material includes 95% confidence intervals for the predicted probabilities presented in Table 4.

disparities that emerge from whether one is provided information on the contender Trump endorsed. Likewise, the decline in the probability of being undecided based on whether one is in the control group vis-à-vis the treatment group, for lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and insurance commissioner, respectively is 0.24, 0.20, and 0.34. In line with our contention that the secretary of state contest was higher profile than the other two races, the difference in the undecided category is the lowest. Thus, residing in the treatment group obviously results in a substantial reduction in the likelihood that a respondent selects the *Don't Know* option in down-ballot contests for lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and insurance commissioner.

Figure 1 provides a visual display of the set of predicted probabilities generated from our multinomial logit models in Table 4. For each GOP primary contest, we plot the predicted probabilities for the treatment and control groups for Trump's endorsed candidate, other candidates, and those who indicated they were undecided. Each horizontal probability bar also contains its respective 95% confidence interval. This presentation of the data highlights the effect of being exposed to the treatment condition, with palpable shifts in support for Trump's endorsed candidate and attendant declines in undecided voters, especially in the three lowest-profile races for lieutenant governor, secretary of state, and insurance commissioner.

Discussion

The power of a Trump endorsement is paradoxical: where it mattered most it exhibited the least actual impact. Trump's chosen candidate experienced a veritable shot in the arm in the insurance commissioner race, boosting support by more than 40 points. Nonetheless, because the contest for insurance commissioner essentially received zero press coverage, hardly any likely Georgia Republican primary voters knew of Trump's endorsement. Hence, we can demonstrate the remarkably powerful effect of a Trump endorsement in a contest that few voters had any prior information about. But there is minimal actual effect because of the deficit in external validity. In the real world, it is too cumbersome to spread the word about Trump's endorsement in a low-level contest like insurance commissioner. Governor Kemp's appointee to the position, John King, was the incumbent in the race. King easily prevailed against Trump's choice, Patrick Witt, and another candidate. Our evidence suggests that if only more Georgia GOP primary voters were made aware of the Trump endorsement, then the outcome would have worked out in the former president's favor.[13]

In higher profile contests, those for governor and US Senate, *ceteris paribus*, the Trump endorsement is worth less because the markedly greater coverage of these races equipped voters with more information to consider in forming their preference. In the most salient contest on the Georgia GOP primary ballot, that of governor, Brian Kemp was a well-known incumbent with a strong record. His main opponent, former senator David Perdue, was a recent loser in one of Georgia's two early January 2021 Senate runoffs that flipped the chamber in favor of Democrats. Additionally, Perdue did himself no favors by being a lackluster challenger, who ran a poor

---

[13]This is not a certainty, however, as Trump endorsed Patrick Witt principally because Governor Kemp appointed John King as insurance commissioner. It is possible that if Trump had become vocal about backing Witt, then Kemp may have become equally vocal in his defense of King and then Trump's endorsement may have been effectively countered.

campaign by running on the principal message that the 2020 presidential election was stolen.[14] To be sure, Trump loved that Perdue's campaign theme was about him, but it is hard to see how this strategy would pay electoral dividends even if the lion's share of Georgia Republicans believed Trump's "Big Lie" of a stolen presidential election (Hood and McKee 2023a). Particularly in a contest for governor, which is not as nationalized as a US Senate race (Black and Black 1987; Sievert and McKee 2019), voters care more about what candidates intend to do for the state to improve their quality of life, and this was something Governor Kemp spent a good deal of time and effort campaigning on.

Though lower profile, the secretary of state race showed strong parallels with that for governor. Like Governor Kemp, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger endured the wrath of Trump in the fallout of the 2020 presidential election, because he opposed the president's efforts to overturn the outcome in Georgia. Trump backed Congressman Jody Hice (GA-10) to run against Raffensperger, and Hice was eager to play a similar role as Perdue, running a campaign that centered on the false narrative of a stolen presidential election. But like Perdue, Hice ran a poor campaign, serving as a stand-in for Trump's retrospective grievances while not showing much appetite for hitting the hustings. In contrast, Raffensperger campaigned aggressively, and in his capacity as secretary of state, he emphasized his actions to ensure the prohibition of voting by non-citizens, something of course already prohibited, but nevertheless an effective ploy.

Hence, even though Trump targeted Raffensperger and Kemp for defeat, both incumbents had records of accomplishment to tout in seeking renomination. Additionally, their messages were substantive, positive, and tailored toward doing their jobs with the purpose of improving Georgians' quality of life. Given the choice of a Trump endorsee focused almost singularly on a past (and false) grievance with no bearing on the day-to-day concerns of Georgia voters, versus an incumbent who campaigned on using their office for the betterment of Georgia Republicans, it is not surprising that Trump's endorsement carried less weight in the races for governor and secretary of state (Bender and Haberman 2022). Nevertheless, we suspect that if Jody Hice had been a better campaigner, by raising the profile of the secretary of state race, Trump's endorsement could have registered a greater effect (as shown in our analyses). Further evidence of this expectation is borne out by the fact that Kemp garnered 73% of the votes cast for governor whereas Raffensperger narrowly avoided a runoff by taking 52% of the votes cast for secretary of state.[15]

Trump's endorsement registered a substantial amount of electoral payoff in the low-profile GOP primary for lieutenant governor. This was just the kind of contest

---

[14]Perdue also expended precious political capital trying to convince voters that his failed 2021 Senate runoff reelection was also stolen/rigged because of fraud.

[15]Once again, there is evidence that thousands of Democrats voted for Raffensperger (Amy 2022). Additionally, in previous polling in the months after the 2020 presidential election we found that Raffensperger was more popular among Democratic respondents than Republican respondents. More recent polling shows Republicans more approving of Raffensperger than are Democrats, which likely is due to the secretary of state taking a more aggressive stance in supporting restrictive voting measures like those contained in Georgia lawmakers' passage of Senate Bill 202, which not one Democratic state legislator voted for (Hood and McKee 2022b). Nevertheless, because Raffensperger's main opponent Jody Hice promoted Trump's stolen election lie, this made it clear to Democrats that Raffensperger was a better choice.

where we should expect the endorsement to prove effective. There was no incumbent in this race, and it is of relatively higher profile than other statewide races like insurance commissioner, but certainly was not given anything like the attention of that for governor or US Senate. Trump's endorsee, Burt Jones, managed to secure a little over 50% of the vote, precluding a runoff in a race with three other opponents. Our analysis clearly shows that in this low-profile race, awareness of Trump's endorsement significantly moved likely Georgia GOP primary voters in favor of the ex-president's candidate while concomitantly reducing the percentage of respondents choosing the *Don't Know* option for lieutenant governor.

Finally, the US Senate contest is perhaps the most interesting blend of contextual dynamics. The GOP nomination was open and because of the high demand for a Senate seat, the race attracted a half-dozen candidates, including former football great Herschel Walker. By dint of leading the University of Georgia to a national championship, winning the Heisman Trophy, and having a notable career in the National Football League, Walker was a household name to most Georgians of a certain age (the over 40 contingent).[16] Indeed, Walker is a celebrity with high name identification not terribly different from other celebrities Trump endorsed for Senate in Ohio (J.D. Vance) and Pennsylvania (Dr. Mehmet Oz). Despite an alarming history of domestic violence, the celebrity status of Walker appeared to override these concerns[17], and he did not need Trump's endorsement to win the Senate nomination. Regardless, just as we know Trump's endorsement benefited Mr. Vance and Dr. Oz, our analysis showed that it registered a significant, though relatively modest, effect in favor of Walker.

Conclusion

There are a multitude of factors that deserve attention in determining the influence of a political endorsement (Manento and Testa 2022). In this study, we looked specifically at the power of a Donald Trump endorsement in the Georgia GOP primary elections held on May 24, 2022. As a highly popular former president among Republican affiliates – in fact, the most historically popular GOP president on record in the eyes of Republican voters during his time in office (Jacobson 2021) – there is no question that a Trump endorsement draws attention. However, the political context in a specific race can serve to bolster or counter the impact of a Trump endorsement, and this is evident in the five contests we examined in this study.

The possible significance of a Trump endorsement is a topic of great interest to the media and electorate because of the stature and notoriety of the former president and the persistent allure of the horse race (Patterson 1993), and also because Trump has

---

[16]It is unlikely that outside of a football-loving household where knowledge of the sport is passed down from one generation to the next, that GOP primary voters younger than Generation X (Millennials and Generation Z) have much familiarity with Herschel Walker, who has been a Texas resident for decades and whose football exploits date back to the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, this generational difference was not a factor in the Georgia GOP primary, because the bulk of respondents were at least 45 years old (see Table A8 in the Supplementary Material). For a brief time in the 1980s, Walker once played in the USFL for Trump's New Jersey Generals franchise.

[17]Of course, we are certain many (perhaps most) likely Georgia GOP primary voters were ignorant of reports that Walker once threatened his ex-wife at gunpoint.

been so prolific in granting it – over 100 in 2022 GOP primaries alone.[18] We decided to estimate the effect of a Trump endorsement in Georgia because the ex-president made several in statewide contests of highly variable salience. From our analyses, a Trump endorsement registered the greatest effect under conditions in which likely voters in a Republican primary possessed a dearth of prior information.

Trump's 2022 GOP primary endorsement was a potentially powerful positive cue shaping voter preferences (Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994). But we say Trump's endorsement was a *potentially* powerful cue because it was limited by whether a voter was aware of the ex-president's selection. Under conditions of low information, like the Georgia contest for insurance commissioner, our data showed Trump's endorsement had the greatest effect. But this finding runs up against the hard reality of external validity. Outside of experimental conditions in which we let a random subset of respondents know of Trump's endorsement, we suspected it registered minimal effects because most Georgia voters otherwise lacked the cue. On the other end of the spectrum – a high-profile race for governor – Trump's endorsement was greatly constrained by the large amount of information voters already possessed on the two leading candidates. Now, Trump's choice competed with what voters knew about the leading candidates. A favorable record of performance in office (Brian Kemp) overwhelmed the endorsement of a challenger who recently lost an election, offered an uninspiring and frankly hackneyed message of grievance, and generally ran a poor campaign (David Perdue). Under these conditions, Trump's endorsement was ineffective.

So, what have we learned about the value of a Trump endorsement? As we stated at the outset of this article, the electoral influence of a Trump endorsement is conditional. The endorsement depends on many things, not just the political and demographic characteristics of GOP primary voters, but perhaps most importantly, what voters know or do not know about the slate of races on their ballot. Decades of scholarship on American political behavior tells us that voters' modal inclination toward forming a candidate preference combines rational ignorance (Downs 1957) with a heavy dose of cue-taking (Campbell *et al.* 1960; Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994; Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2010; Achen and Bartels 2016; Kinder and Kalmoe 2017). The Trump endorsement can serve as a powerful cue, especially if it manages to penetrate extant rational ignorance in a given contest. On the other hand, in high-profile races, voters often have considerable prior information on the leading candidates, which can override Trump's endorsement. In the 2022 Georgia GOP primary contests, Trump's endorsement was one of several competing and variable considerations that voters drew upon in making a choice.

---

[18]See Ballotpedia's documentation of Donald Trump endorsements: https://ballotpedia.org/Endorsements_by_Donald_Trump.

References

Abramowitz, Alan I. 2018. *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. 2016. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Aldrich, John H. 1995. *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Amy, Jeff. 2022. "Some in Ga. GOP Want Closed Primaries After Trump Picks Lose." *Associated Press*, June 6. Available at: https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-donald-trump-georgia-government-and-politics-2e3493a2aec63cae99eb4f89eb586e20.

Ansolabehere, Stephen, Shigeo Hirano, James M. Snyder Jr., and Michiko Ueda. 2006. "Party and Incumbency Cues in Voting: Are They Substitutes?" *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 1 (2): 119–37.

Bartels, Larry M. 1988. *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bartels, Larry M. 2000. "Partisanship and Voting Behavior, 1952–1996." *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (1): 35–50.

Bawn, Kathleen, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. 2012. "A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics." *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (3): 571–97.

Bender, Michael C., and Maggie Haberman. 2022. "Trump Vowed Vengeance, But Georgia Voters Rejected His Meddling." *New York Times*, May 25. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/25/us/politics/trump-perdue-georgia.html.

Black, Earl, and Merle Black. 1987. *Politics and Society in the South*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Cohen, Marty, David Karol, Hans Noel, and John Zaller. 2008. *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter, 206–61. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Dominguez, Casey B. K. 2011. "Does the Party Matter? Endorsements in Congressional Primaries." *Political Research Quarterly* 64 (3): 534–44.

Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row.

Garthwaite, Craig, and Timothy J. Moore. 2013. "Can Celebrity Endorsements Affect Political Outcomes? Evidence from the 2008 US Democratic Presidential Primary." *Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 29 (2): 355–84.

Geer, John G. 1988. "Assessing the Representativeness of Electorates in Presidential Primaries." *American Journal of Political Science* 32 (4): 929–45.

Grossman, Gene M., and Elhanan Helpman. 1999. "Competing for Endorsements." *American Economic Review* 89 (3): 501–24.

Hanmer, Michael J., and Kerem Ozan Kalkan. 2013. "Behind the Curve: Clarifying the Best Approach to Calculating Predicted Probabilities and Marginal Effects from Limited Dependent Variable Models." *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (1): 263–77.

Hassell, Hans J. G. 2016. "Party Control of Party Primaries: Party Influence in Nominations for the US Senate." *Journal of Politics* 78 (1): 75–87.

Hetherington, Marc J. 2001. "Resurgent Mass Partisanship: The Role of Elite Polarization." *American Political Science Review* 95 (3): 619–31.

Hood III, M.V., and Seth C. McKee. 2019, "Why Georgia, Why? Peach State Residents' Perceptions of Voting Improprieties and their Impact on the 2018 Gubernatorial Election." *Social Science Quarterly* 100 (5): 1828–47.

Hood III, M.V., and Seth C. McKee. 2022a. *Rural Republican Realignment in the Modern South: The Untold Story*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Hood III, M.V., and Seth C. McKee. 2022b. "Getting the Message: Opinion Polarization over Election Law." *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 21 (2): 124–34.

Hood III, M.V., and Seth C. McKee. 2023a. *"Partisan Schism in America's Newest Swing State." Party Politics.* https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688221112895.

Hood III, M.V., and Seth C. McKee. 2023b. "Replication Data for: How Much is a Trump Endorsement Worth?" https://doi.org/10.15139/S3/GLOOJH, UNC Dataverse, V1.

Hopkins, Daniel J. 2018. *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jacobson, Gary C. 2015. "'It's Nothing Personal: The Decline of the Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 77 (3): 861–73.

Jacobson, Gary C. 2021. "The Presidential and Congressional Elections of 2020: A National Referendum on the Trump Presidency." *Political Science Quarterly* 136 (1): 11–45.

Kinder, Donald R., and Nathan P. Kalmoe. 2017. *Neither Liberal nor Conservative: Ideological Innocence in the American Public.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Levendusky, Matthew S. 2010. "Clearer Cues, More Consistent Voters: A Benefit of Elite Polarization." *Political Behavior* 32 (1): 111–31.

Lupia, Arthur. 1994. "Shortcuts Versus Encyclopedias: Information and Voting Behavior in California Insurance Reform Elections." *American Political Science Review* 88 (1): 63–76.

Luskin, Robert C. 1990. "Explaining Political Sophistication." *Political Behavior* 12 (4): 331–61.

MacWilliams, Matthew C. 2016. "Who Decides When The Party Doesn't? Authoritarian Voters and the Rise of Donald Trump." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 49 (4): 716–21.

Maisel, Louis Sandy. 1982. *From Obscurity to Oblivion: Running in the Congressional Primary.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Manento, Cory, and Paul F. Testa. 2022. "In Party We Trust? Voter Support for Party-Backed Candidates in Primary Elections." *Political Behavior* 44 (4): 1633–56.

Mason, Lilliana. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McKee, Seth C., Heather K. Evans, and Jennifer Hayes Clark. 2022. "The 'PERFECT' Call: Congressional Representation by Tweet in the Midst of the Ukraine Whistleblower Scandal." *American Politics Research* 50 (1): 30–44.

Montgomery, Jacob M., Brendan Nyhan, and Michelle Torres. 2018. "How Conditioning on Posttreatment Variables Can Ruin Your Experiment and What to Do about It." *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (3): 760–75.

Mutz, Diana C. 2011. *Population-Based Survey Experiments.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Patterson, Thomas E. 1993. *Out of Order.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Pease, Andrew, and Paul Brewer. 2008. "The Oprah Factor: The Effects of a Celebrity Endorsement in a Presidential Primary Campaign." *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13 (4): 386–400.

Popkin, Samuel L. 1991. *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schaffner, Brian F., Matthew Streb, and Gerald Wright. 2001. "Teams Without Uniforms: The Nonpartisan Ballot in State and Local Elections." *Political Research Quarterly* 54 (1): 7–30.

Sides, John, Chris Tausanovitch, Lynn Vavreck, and Christopher Warshaw. 2020. "On the Representative-ness of Primary Electorates." *British Journal of Political Science* 50 (2): 677–85.

Sides, John, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck. 2018. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sievert, Joel, and Seth C. McKee. 2019. "Nationalization in U.S. Senate and Gubernatorial Elections." *American Politics Research* 47 (5): 1055–80.

Author Biographies. M.V. (Trey) Hood III is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Georgia where he conducts research in American politics and policy.

Seth C. McKee is a Professor of Political Science at Oklahoma State University. McKee studies American elections and is a former editor-in-chief of *Political Research Quarterly*.