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The Globalization of Social Cues: Trump's 2016 Victory Shaped the Salience of Immigration in Europe

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ABSTRACT

How did the election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 shape the salience of immigration in Europe? While previous research has documented transatlantic attitudinal spillovers, we know less about how such developments shape the salience of political issues. This study addresses this gap by leveraging individual-level data from the ESS and the SOM Institute, using the election as an Unexpected Event during Survey Design. Employing regression discontinuity and embedding regression techniques, we analyze attitudinal change as well as open-ended survey responses to the "most important issue" question to assess the election's effect on immigration salience. Our findings confirm previous work and show subgroup variations in the attitudinal effects of the election by different party groups, where authoritarian voters exhibit the largest liberalizing shift. Turning to salience, the text-based embedding analyses point to a significant shift in issue engagement, driven primarily by an increase among authoritarian voters, a pattern also evident, though more weakly, in the hand-coded data. Taken together, authoritarian voters became simultaneously more liberal in their immigration attitudes and more engaged with the issue. The findings underscore the importance of analytically distinguishing between attitudes and salience, illustrate how measurement choice can shape conclusions about salience, and demonstrate how major global political events can reshape the importance of specific political issues.

1 | Introduction

The cultural and political connections between Europe and the United States (U.S.) have deep roots. At the heart of the transatlantic relationship lies the figure of the U.S. president, who dominates European mainstream media's spotlight around the time of the presidential election. Beyond the elected president's impact on transatlantic trade and cooperation, the electoral outcome also functions as a key indicator of prevailing political sentiments within the U.S. population (Aelst et al. 2018). This paper contends that the presidential election thereby plays a significant role in shaping the salience of political issues across the Atlantic.

Salience, i.e., the degree of concern for political issues, is dependent on the wider political agenda surrounding individuals (Wlezien 2005). The election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 serves as a prime example of such a contextual setting (Minkus et al. 2019). His campaign centered on anti-establishment and xenophobic policies (see e.g., Joppke 2020), issues typically related to preference falsification, i.e., the tendency to conceal socially stigmatized views such as anti-immigration sentiment (Valentim 2024; Lindskog et al. 2024). Previous research has indeed substantiated an attitudinal shift in Europe, although a "reversed backlash" effect (Dennison and Kustov 2023), meaning that European citizens appeared increasingly liberal on several socio-cultural issues following the election (Costa-Font and Ljunge 2023). Hence, contrary to a prominent expectation that a de-stigmatization of anti-liberal attitudes will increase the expressions of such preferences (Rooduijn et al. 2016), Trump's victory indicated an opposite attitudinal scenario.

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We add to this puzzle by disentangling shifts in salience from shifts in attitudes, exploring variations across voters who support different party groups, and introducing an innovative research design. This inquiry builds on a growing body of research demonstrating that changes in salience rather than attitudes are among the key drivers behind the rise of radical right parties (Danieli et al. 2022; Dennison and Geddes 2019; Sagir and Mockabee 2023). This motivates our core question: whether and how issue salience is shaped by transatlantic elite influence, particularly in response to Trump's 2016 victory.

To this aim, we introduce a research strategy organized in two separate studies. The first study examines shifts in immigration attitudes following Trump's victory by leveraging the timing of the data collection of the European Social Survey (ESS) in thirteen European countries. The second study uses data from the Society, Opinion and Media (SOM) survey in Sweden to analyze shifts in political concerns before and after the election on November 9, 2016. Specifically, we employ embedding regression, a method recently introduced by Rodriguez et al. (2023), to assess general shifts in raw open-ended survey responses after the election and investigate whether such shifts are related to immigration. In brief, embedding regression represents each open-ended response as a numerical vector capturing its meaning, allowing us to test statistically whether the overall content of these responses shifted after the election, and in which substantive direction. We further analyze the probability of respondents mentioning immigration as one of the three most important problems using hand-coded categories. This approach broadens the scope of the causal inference regarding Trump's victory while integrating issue salience as a crucial factor in studies of transnational elite influence. Finally, we hope this approach contributes to the development of the use of quantitative text analysis in quasi-experimental settings (cf. Hobbs and Green 2025).

Despite employing a slightly different dependent variable, our replication of Costa-Font and Ljunge (2023) confirms the reversed backlash effect on immigration attitudes, particularly in the comparative sample. Our study further shows heterogeneous effects on how important voters consider the issue of immigration to be. Using open-ended responses analyzed through embedding regression, we find a robust and pronounced increase in issue salience among authoritarian voters, a pattern also present in the hand-coded data. The results for center and liberal voters are less robust across the different measures. The hand-coded measure indicates a decline in salience for center voters, while the embedding-based measure shows no effect reaching statistical significance. Liberal voters show weak, non-significant patterns under both approaches. This heterogeneity across voter groups—a marked and robust rise in engagement among authoritarian voters against a potential flat or declining salience elsewhere—may itself create conditions conducive to political mobilization, as the issue becomes increasingly 'owned' by a specific segment of voters.

Hence, this paper aligns with the argument that salience and attitudes constitute distinct processes in political behavior (Mader and Schoen 2019; Dennison and Geddes 2019). While attitudinal shifts generally require strong external shocks, changes in salience may be more immediately shaped by elite cues within the political landscape. We begin with a brief review of the relevant literature and an overview of the 2016 U.S. election as a contextual backdrop. We then present findings from both the comparative study and the case study, complemented by additional evidence in the Appendix. The paper concludes with a discussion on the broader implications of our findings.

2 | The European Response to Trump's Victory

Existing evidence on the transatlantic influence of Trump's victory centers on attitudinal change rather than changes in salience. The 2016 election, centered around issues of ethnic identification (cf. Major et al. 2018; Crandall et al. 2018), highlighted the widespread support among the U.S. population for the Republican candidate's xenophobic and populist stance. This stood in contrast to the globalist and liberal approach embodied by the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton. Interestingly, few qualified observers of U.S. politics anticipated Trump's triumph in the election. According to Minkus et al. (2019, p. 399), 14 out of 15 national polls predicted Trump's defeat during the election week.

Trump's campaign rejected mainstream political values, instead prioritizing issues typically associated with the far right, such as cultural conflicts, strong opposition to immigration, and anti-elitism. However, previous research indicates that Trump's victory had a reversed impact on European political attitudes.[1] Examining Europeans' sentiments towards the EU before and after Trump's election, Minkus et al. (2019) reveal a discernible "Trump effect", signaling a shift towards more pro-EU preferences. Similarly, Costa-Font and Ljunge (2023) illustrate that Trump's election significantly influenced attitudes in favor of more globalization across Europe, aligning perfectly with Dennison and Kustov's (2023) assertion of a reversed backlash effect (cf. Giani and Méon 2021).[2] To describe these attitudinal developments, recent work hints that opponents of xenophobia counter-react to condemn the de-stigmatization of anti-immigration mobilization (Collingwood et al. 2018), while the expression of anti-immigration attitudes among supporters of Trump could increase through destigmatization processes when they receive political representation (cf. Valentim 2021).

Furthermore, the widespread interest in U.S. politics heightened during the presidential election, raising questions about the extent to which Europeans shape not only their attitudes, but also their political priorities based on U.S. politics. Indeed, recent evidence suggests that salience––as opposed to broader attitudinal changes––is more apt to explain the mobilization of radical right parties (Danieli et al. 2022; Dennison and Geddes 2019; Sagir and Mockabee 2023).

[1] A corresponding reversed backlash effect does not appear in the U.S. except within certain subgroups (Chan et al. 2022; Bowler et al. 2023). Given the consistently negative media portrayal of Trump in Europe (Sintes-Olivella et al. 2022), such media differences may help explain the broader "reversed backlash effect" observed in this region (Costa-Font and Ljunge 2023). Another possible explanation lies in contextual differences. By the end of the presidential race, U.S. voters exhibited clear signs of "voter fatigue" (Jackman and Miller 1995), which may have dampened broader mobilization post-election (Bursztyn et al. 2024).

[2] Likewise, studies drawing on the same research design show an effect on attitudes towards the US (Carreras et al. 2022) and substance abuse (Perry 2023) following the election.

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Furthermore, salience is more susceptible to fluctuations, whereas attitudes tend to be deeply rooted, especially after the formative years (cf. Gidron and Hall 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2017). While some studies use the terms interchangeably (e.g., Kustov 2023), others show that individuals with well-defined attitudes on a political issue can still vary significantly in how much importance they assign to it. Moreover, this perceived importance can shift over time, even if the underlying attitudes remain relatively stable (Dennison and Geddes 2019). For example, Mader and Schoen (2019) demonstrate that the 2015 European refugee crisis did not change attitudes towards immigration but instead amplified its salience as a political issue in Germany.

The extensive documentation of Trump's candidacy and 'sudden' victory thus provides a unique window to explore the impact of salience on Europeans, as his presence was virtually unavoidable for a significant audience across the continent and sent a strong signal about the political agenda in the US (Costa-Font and Ljunge 2023).

3 | Expectations

Salience and attitudes capture two distinct dimensions of political behavior, which can be based on three observations. First, individuals can have clear attitudes about issues without perceiving them as politically prioritized and salient (Dennison and Geddes 2019). Second, salience is often shaped by individuals' exposure to an issue, as seen in the heightened salience of immigration issues during a refugee crisis, but where public attitudes remain virtually unchanged (Mader and Schoen 2019). Finally, salience and attitudes differ in temporal dynamics: salience may fluctuate more rapidly in response to events, whereas attitudes are generally more stable predispositions and tend to be more deeply rooted in ideology, socialization, and personal experiences (Kustov et al. 2021; Mendelberg et al. 2017). Hence, Trump's victory may not only have changed individuals' preferences but, more presumably, their focus.

Given these features, we expect salience to be at least as affected by Trump's victory as attitudes. While increased salience can create the conditions for attitudinal shifts, the two do not necessarily move in tandem. Genuine and lasting attitudinal changes typically require significant shocks or considerable personal experiences, yet even under such circumstances, attitudes may remain persistent (see also Hopkins et al. 2019 on immigration attitudes, and Goldstein and Peters 2014 for a null effect of economic shocks). Indeed, Kustov et al. (2021) demonstrate that immigration attitudes remain surprisingly persistent through a variety of different external shocks, while fluctuations in salience spark changes in voting behavior. Attitudinal change thus appears to require particularly strong treatments, whereas shifts in salience are more malleable to elite cues or disruptions in the political or societal landscape. Considering that previous research shows a counterreaction among the European electorate in their immigration preferences, we expect a similar counterreaction in the urgency people attach to the issues raised by Trump. Based on these considerations, we propose a complementary hypothesis to the attitudinal hypothesis (H1b) posed by Costa-Font and Ljunge (2023) and Dennison and Kustov (2023), formulated as:

H1a. (*Salience*): *Trump's* 2016 *victory decreased the salience of immigration in Europe.*

H1b. (*Attitude*): *Trump's* 2016 *victory had a liberalizing effect on immigration attitudes in Europe.*

However, the direction of such an effect and how vocal voters are in expressing their preferences is likely to differ across the population. These hypotheses rest on the basic idea that political behaviors are woven into various group-based convictions (Elster 1989), dynamic to the individual's surrounding political context. As such, previous research has shown that opinion polls and electoral outcomes can serve as indicators of prevailing societal norms, particularly when the results are unexpected (Oleskog-Tryggvasson 2021; Valentim 2024).

We argue that the counterreaction to the electoral gains by radical right parties occurs solely among the large segments of the electorate opposing Trump and his political agenda. The inclination to distance themselves from the new political landscape thus intensifies for citizens aligning with more liberal immigration attitudes when parties embracing nationalism achieve electoral success (cf. Bullock and Lenz 2019). If this holds true, we expect that those who do not sympathize with the radical right need to distance themselves from Trump's anti-liberal agenda by de-emphasizing problems associated with immigration and expressing even more liberal preferences themselves. It is therefore reasonable to expect that immigration will be a less important issue for these voters and that their attitudes will undergo a liberalizing shift following the election. Therefore, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H2a. (*Salience*): *Immigration is less of an important political issue among liberal voters following the election.*

H2b. (*Attitude*): *The liberalizing effect on immigration attitudes following Trump's victory is present among liberal voters.*

However, the urge to voice pro-immigration stances would not be present among respondents whose immigration preferences align with Trump's. For this group, we can expect an opposite scenario where electoral gains by radical right parties may increase the importance of immigration as a political issue. They may experience a heightened sense of urgency and opportunity for mobilization on this issue as it mobilizes across the continent. Individuals who previously concealed their preferences may also more comfortably express anti-immigration attitudes (Harteveld et al. 2017; 2019). These voters are likely to perceive heightened political representation after the election, particularly as the international political discourse increasingly converges with their own preferences. Consequently, if this holds true, the following hypotheses would be accepted:

H3a. (*Salience*): *Immigration is a more important issue for authoritarian voters following the election.*

H3b. (*Attitude*): *Authoritarian voters express stronger anti-immigration preferences following the election.*

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4 | Research Design

We conduct two studies to evaluate our hypotheses. In both studies, we exploit the fact that the election took place during survey data collection in Europe, allowing us to estimate the causal effect through RD modeling. Moreover, a text-as-data analysis of open-ended survey responses offers a unique opportunity to go beyond otherwise standardized individual survey items and study changes in issue salience relying on the full open-ended answers.

We use survey data from 2016, derived from the ESS round 8[3] and the SOM Institute 2016, for the analysis. The ESS is a cross-country and cross-sectional survey that incorporates standardized questions related to various cultural attitudes and has been run every second year since 2002. The response rate was 70% in 2016, and the data were collected through face-to-face interviews with random probability sampling. In turn, the SOM Institute conducts annual postal and digital surveys in Sweden on a randomly selected sample, which not only include standardized and comparable questions but also utilize open-ended questions. The response rate was 51% in 2016, and 9,828 individuals answered the survey in total.[4]

We consider the Swedish survey as a "most likely" case for identifying a potential counterreaction to the anti-immigration agenda as well as a de-stigmatization effect among radical right supporters. The Nordic countries, and Sweden in particular, are known for their liberal political contexts where anti-immigration attitudes are stigmatized, even if the Swedish radical right party the Sweden Democrats received almost 18 per cent of the votes in the national election 2018 (see Rydgren and van der Meiden 2019 on "the Swedish exceptionalism").

4.1 | Design

Previous studies have used different approaches to analyze what has been recently called the Unexpected Events Survey Design (UESD). The central idea is that major events often occur during data collection, which creates a quasi-experimental setting where it is virtually exogenous to whether respondents took the survey "just before" or "just after" the event. This reasoning corresponds to the RD approach with time as the running variable and the threshold T being the event's occurrence. In our two studies, we use a dependent variable of interest, Y, and the date of the Trump election as the treatment assignment mechanism. Hence, as the survey date of the respondent should be considered random, this generates exogenous variation in the treatment variable. We add linear, quadratic, and cubic time trends to conduct this analysis (cf. Minkus et al. 2019).

4.2 | Empirical Considerations

The identification strategy relies on two central assumptions. The ignorability assumption is based on the idea that the timing of the election during the survey fieldwork is random and, therefore, not associated with the outcome variables. The excludability criterion assumes that the only difference between respondents who answered the survey before and after the election is whether they experienced the event. Consequently, any differences in their responses should be attributable solely to this treatment (Muñoz et al. 2020). We consider the risks of violating these assumptions and conduct a variety of robustness checks to assess the plausibility that our estimations are unbiased.

The selection of bandwidths around the election date ensures similarity between the pre- and post-treatment groups by minimizing the influence of other external events that could affect the results. We follow the commonly used bandwidth of 4 weeks (cf. Costa-Font and Ljunge 2023) and compare the results with a 2-week window. For comparability, we apply the same bandwidths in Study 1 and Study 2. The balance tests (Figure A6 for Study 1 and Figure B3 for Study 2) show minor imbalances in respondents' characteristics before and after the election (see also Figure A5 and B2 for potential sorting around the threshold in the data collection), so we include controls (age and gender) to get a more precise estimate.[5] Models without controls show similar results and are presented in the Appendix (Figure A1).

Another challenge arises from potential imbalances between the treatment and control groups due to unobservable characteristics related to variations in respondent reachability during the field period, which may introduce imbalances between the pre- and post-treatment groups. This risk is particularly relevant in surveys where participants can decide when to respond (Muñoz et al. 2020), as is the case in the SOM online survey. However, the balance tables provide reassurance that the groups are largely comparable at least in their observable characteristics, suggesting that this assumption is not strongly violated in the ESS data nor the SOM data.[6]

A further key assumption for identification is that the event itself was unexpected (cf. Cattaneo et al. 2019). Since Trump's electoral victory defied the predictions of nearly 95% of opinion polls (Minkus et al. 2019, p. 399), this condition appears to be satisfied. Furthermore, we inspect time trends and placebo treatments to ensure that there is a strong case for the Trump election to be the sole occurrence that drives the results (see Figure A8). We also control for pre- and post-election trends in the outcome Y by adjusting for time-trends, which is in line with a conventional RD setup.

[3]The interviews were conducted between 22/08/2016 - 28/12/2017. Given the various time periods in data collection for various countries, we limit the sample to the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.
[4]The field period was between the 23/9 2016 to the 31/1 2017 for the SOM data collection, with 90% of the responses collected by December. The survey sample was drawn from administrative register data provided by the Swedish statistical agency and was designed to adjust for certain response biases—i.e., the tendency for men and younger individuals to respond at lower rates. The sample is largely representative of the broader population, although potentially biased towards politically interested and older citizens (Arkhede et al. 2017).
[5]While there are some imbalances in the SOM sample size at the four-week bandwidth, methodological analyses of the SOM survey suggest that systematic differences in respondent covariates emerge primarily at an earlier stage of data collection (Arkhede et al. 2017). The local effect we identify can thus be interpreted as an ATE for the full sample.
[6]While close analyses of changes in the ESS sample show slight discrepancies in observable characteristics across the fieldwork period (cf. Muñoz et al. 2020), this dataset is common to use in studies on unexpected survey events due to its high-quality design.

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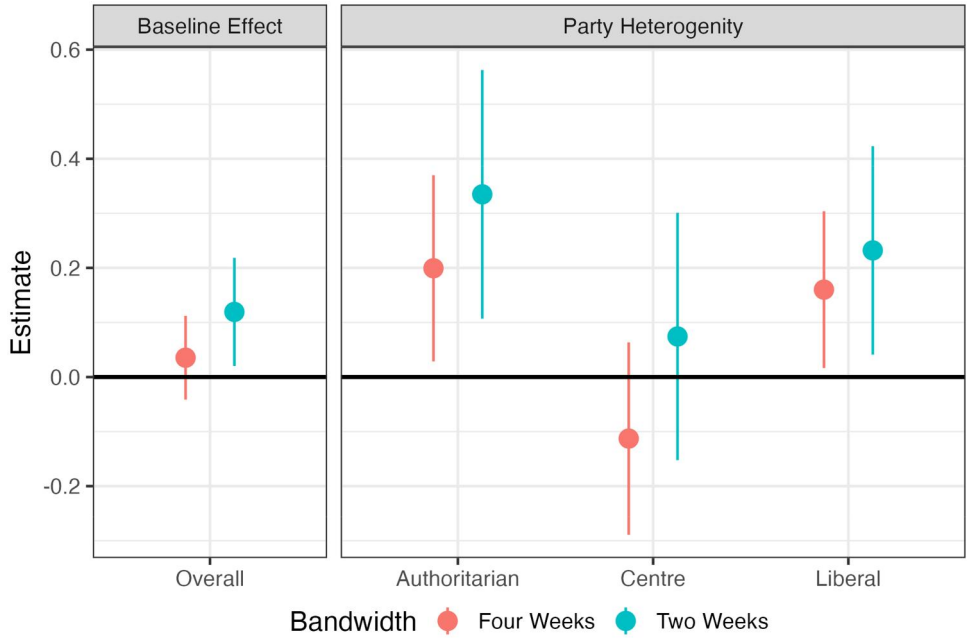

FIGURE 1 | The effect of the Trump Election 2016 on immigration attitudes (1–10, liberal direction). The figure shows the relationship across voter groups in Europe, ESS. Local randomization RD. *Note:* The data are derived from the European Social Survey 2016. The figure includes 95% confidence intervals and includes controls for age and gender. The figure compares differences in means before and after the election. Sample sizes for each group, pre- and post- election, for both bandwidth specifications are given in the Appendix (Table A2). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

An additional risk concerns post-treatment bias in our heterogeneity analysis. Since we split respondents into party-support subgroups (Liberal, Center, Authoritarian) using the same post-election survey wave, this grouping variable is itself measured after the event and could, in principle, be affected by it. For example, if Trump's victory shifted which party respondents said they supported, our subgroup comparisons would partly reflect selection into the subgroup rather than a stable, pre-treatment characteristic (cf. Muñoz et al. 2020; Minkus et al. 2019; Montgomery et al. 2018). Ideally, we would use an exogenous, pre-treatment measure of party choice to rule this out, but since that is not available, we instead test directly whether the election shifted party support itself, and find no evidence that it did. We demonstrate this in Figure B4 of the Appendix. This reassures us that our subgroup splits are not themselves an artifact of the treatment.

5 | Study 1

To examine attitudinal change following the election, we generate a dependent variable based on the mean of three questions regarding attitudes toward immigration. These include "Immigration bad or good for country's economy," "Country's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants," and "Immigrants make country worse or better place to live." These items are commonly used to study immigration attitudes (cf. Kunst et al. 2023; Lindskog and Oskarson 2023) and have a high internal consistency (Cronbach alpha 0.87).[7] The index ranges between 1 and 10, where high values equal more pro-immigration stances. See Table A1 for descriptive statistics of the core variables, and Figure A2 for the analysis of each item separately, yielding similar results.

In the RD analysis in our first study, we compare respondents before and after the Trump election, following the setup of Costa-Font and Ljunge (2023).[8] Likewise, we compare differences in means in the main analysis. We also assess more traditional RD modeling with varying slopes before and after the election, as well as different polynomial specifications (see Figure A3 in the Appendix).

For the subgroup analysis, we use a question on which party the respondents voted for in their prior election (recall vote) and divide them into three groups based on the parties' positions on the liberal-authoritarian dimension in ParlGov—generating groups of liberal, center, and culturally authoritarian voters. These groups are constructed to be balanced across both models with two—and four-week bandwidth (see Table A2).

6 | Results

The result of the attitudinal analysis is presented in Figure 1, demonstrating both the general effect as well as differences in effect depending on the voters' party affiliation. We confirm previous research on attitudinal change following the election, as the general effect suggests a positive shift in immigration attitudes, though this effect is only significant at the two-week bandwidth and weakens at four weeks. The effects vary by political party support, but not along a simple polarizing divide: authoritarian voters show the largest positive shift of any subgroup, significant at both bandwidths, followed closely by liberal voters, who also show a robust liberalizing effect at both bandwidths. Center voters, in contrast, show the most unstable

[7]The variable names are imbgeco, imueclt, and imwbcnt. Figure A2 shows the analysis of each item separately.
[8]Table A2 shows the effective sample size.

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pattern, with the point estimate switching sign across bandwidths and confidence intervals that include zero throughout. This suggests that Trump's victory shifted immigration attitudes in a liberalizing direction across most of the political spectrum, with authoritarian and liberal voters showing the clearest reactions, while center voters show no reliable effect.[9]

7 | Study 2

Having replicated the core Costa-Font and Ljunge (2023) results and expanded them by examining heterogeneity across party-family subgroups, we move forward to explore shifts in immigration salience following Trump's victory using Swedish SOM data.[10] This approach also relies on a UESD design, but the dependent variable is constructed from open-ended survey responses identifying the "most important societal issue of today," a typical measurement of issue salience (Wlezien 2005; Geer 1991). Interestingly, the attitudinal effects observed in Study 1 did not robustly replicate in the Swedish sample (see Figure B5 and B6). The null result on attitudinal change at the full-sample level may suggest that this context presents a tougher test for detecting changes in salience following the election. However, at the subgroup level, authoritarian voters show a statistically significant shift toward more anti-immigration attitudes at the two-week bandwidth, while center voters show a (non-significant) shift toward more liberal attitudes.

As a first step, we use the hand-coded labels provided by the SOM survey to test whether the role of immigration as a political concern changed by focusing on classified labels that identify immigration as a problem. The approach involves creating a binary outcome variable and running an RD model to examine general shifts in immigration salience, as well as exploring any differences among sub-populations. This model estimates the probability of whether immigration is mentioned at all, which gives a formal test of the shortened, categorized responses and provides a basis for comparison for the regression embedding analysis. However, the hand-coded approach may underestimate the salience of immigration, as it indicates whether the issue is mentioned in general, whereas responses to various extents may concern immigration. Such differences are more effectively captured by the embedding-based approach, which illustrates one of the potential applications of quantitative text analysis (cf. Hobbs and Green 2025).

We therefore proceed by making use of word embeddings, which are a way of making a numerical representation of the open-ended responses and their meaning. While word embeddings have commonly been used to study semantic change (cf. Rodman 2020), we use it to study general changes and the overall use of immigration-related words in the open-ended responses. Using the embedding regression approach, we create embeddings that capture the overall meaning of the responses and regress how these embeddings change after the election. We start by analyzing whether the responses differ overall post-election by utilizing pre-trained word embeddings to represent each word in the open-ended responses in a 1 x D-dimensional vector space.[11] We thereby construct an embedding where responses with similar meanings are closer to each other in this vector space (see e.g. Rodman 2020; Rodriguez and Spirling 2022) and examine whether Trump's victory explains a systematic shift in the responses. Put simply, this means that we analyze whether there is a general change in the type of responses that voters give after the election, without necessarily assuming how they will change.[12] Figure B7 in the Appendix illustrates the general idea of such a change.

To identify the direction of potential changes and their impact on the salience of immigration, we predict the average response vector before and after the election.[13] Thereafter, we measure how similar these vectors are to four vectors representing different political issues using cosine similarity, which quantifies the similarity between vectors (cf. Rodman 2020). These political issues are climate, economy, healthcare and immigration, topics that have been salient in the Swedish political landscape in recent years and at the time of the election (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2018). The rationale is that if post-election responses use more words related to immigration, the cosine similarity with the immigration vector will increase following the election.

8 | Results

8.1 | Hand-Coded Responses

In the first step, we show the treatment effects derived from the RD techniques with hand-coded responses as illustrated in Figure 2 (Table B1 show descriptive statistics over the variables). The full sample suggests a small negative effect of Trump's election on the probability of mentioning immigration. Under the local-randomization approach used throughout our figures, the estimated effect is -0.039 ($p = 0.54$) at the two-week bandwidth and -0.057 ($p = 0.31$) at the four-week bandwidth, neither reaching conventional significance.[14,15] However, substantial heterogeneity emerges when examining subgroup effects. Center voters show a clear decline in immigration salience (four-week bandwidth: coefficient = -0.144, $p = 0.012$), the only subgroup effect reaching conventional significance under randomization inference. Liberal voters show a similarly negative

[9] For country differences, see Figure A4 in the Appendix. The results are robust when excluding one country at a time. Additional robustness tests include placebo test (Figure A8), and a balance plot (Figure A6), all supporting the main results of the study. See also Figure A5 in the Appendix for a McCrary sorting test.

[10] See Figure B5 and B6 on the same analysis on the SOM-data.

[11] We use embeddings pre-trained for Swedish by Wirsching et al. (2024).

[12] In the Appendix, we provide additional details on the logic of inference in this approach and show in a lower- dimensional space what we mean by change in word use (Figure B7). For further details, see Spirling et al. (2023a).

[13] Sometimes, respondents mention only specific words (e.g., *"immigration, schools, and healthcare"*), while other times, they discuss the topic in more general terms (e.g., *"There is a big problem with the large influx of refugees"*).

[14] To examine whether these findings stem from a crowding-out effect – in which Center and Liberal voters express problems related to the US election instead of Immigration – we re-run the analysis using a hand-coded label for international issues as well, but fail to detect such an effect. While such responses are generally rare, there is a potential decrease for liberal voters.

[15] To construct a general measurement of 'immigration' as an important political issue, we combine hand-coded answers from SOM associated with the following replies: integration, segregation, refugees/asylum, immigrants/immigration, migration, multiculturalism, and labor immigration.

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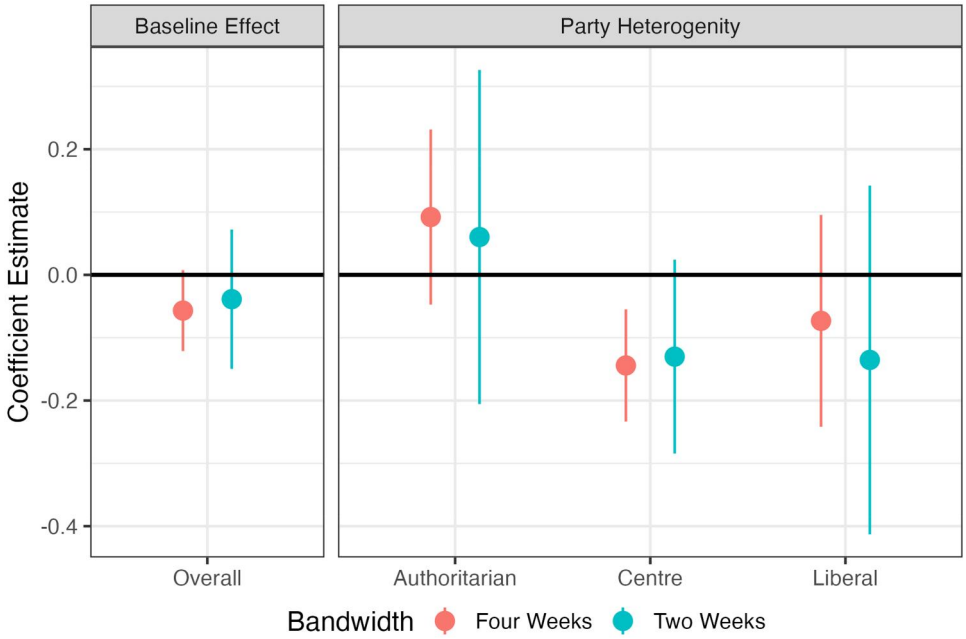

FIGURE 2 | The effect of the Trump Election 2016 on immigration salience. The figure shows the relationship across voter groups using hand-coded responses (0–1). SOM data. Local randomization RD. *Note:* SOM 2016. The figure illustrates differences in responses to the "most important issue" before and after the Election of Trump. Sample sizes for each group, pre- and post- election, for both bandwidth specifications are given in the Appendix (Table B2). The models are estimated on the hand-coded responses, indicating 1 if immigration is mentioned and otherwise 0. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

point estimate, though it does not reach the threshold for significance. Authoritarian voters, by contrast, show a positive point estimate, though this pattern is only marginally significant at the four-week bandwidth ($p = 0.099$) and not significant at the two-week bandwidth. Thus, while Trump's victory appears to have decreased the salience of immigration among center voters in particular, the suggestive increase among authoritarian voters should be interpreted with some caution, given its only marginal significance. Figure B1 shows the same results, although without the control variables.

TABLE 1 | The effect of the Trump Election 2016 on immigration salience using open-ended responses across voter groups, SOM-data. Normed coefficient estimates for multivariate embedding regression coefficients. Local randomization RD.

Group	(ALL)	Authoritarian	Center	Liberal
Trump	0.48**	4.64***	−0.01	0.88
N	3452	563	2248	641

Note: SOM 2016. The empirical p-values are calculated through 1000 jackknife replications. The table reports changes in immigration as the "most important issue" before and after the election. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

8.2 | Embedding Regression and General Changes

Moving forward, the results from the embedding regression indicate a shift in salience of immigration across the full sample, with a particularly notable change among the authoritarian voters. Table 1 presents the normed coefficient estimates from the model, both for the full sample and in the subgroup analysis.[16] The coefficients thus capture the extent to which the salience of immigration—as measured by open-ended responses—changed following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, though not the direction or content of that change. The results indicate a significant shift in how immigration was prioritized, with clear heterogeneity across the party groups. Notably, the effect is largest and statistically significant among authoritarian voters, while the estimates for center- and liberal voters are smaller and not statistically significant.

While these results suggest a shift in the responses of the authoritarian voters, they provide limited insight into the effect sizes and the specific nature of such changes. The full sample coefficient is smaller than several of the subgroup estimates, which likely reflects that different subgroups shift by different magnitudes, and potentially in different directions within the broader embedding space, when pooled together. To explore this further, we calculate the cosine similarity between respondents' predicted word vectors and four central political themes (cf. Oscarsson and Holmberg 2018), beginning with authoritarian voters. We apply the same approach to liberal- and centrist voters (Figures B8 and B9 in the Appendix); these groups show marginal, but same-direction, increases in immigration-related engagement, which qualifies how we interpret the heterogeneity documented here.[17] This small, same-direction rise for center- and liberal voters stands in some tension with the hand-coded measure's finding of a salience decline among center voters

[16]While these coefficients provide an indication of the relative magnitude of the shifts, they should not be interpreted in a directional sense.
[17]These figures show less clear patterns with only small changes in the salience measure for climate, economy and healthcare for liberal voters (by -0.02- -0.05 scale points), but it slightly increases for immigration (by about 0.08 scale points). Only a marginal change is detected among centrist voters.

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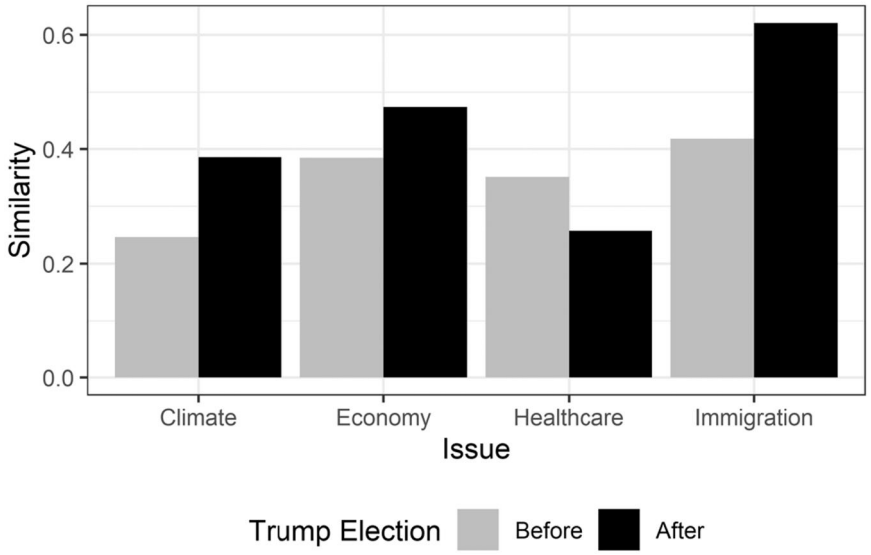

FIGURE 3 | The effect of the Trump election 2016 on the cosine similarity between predicted survey responses and the political themes among authoritarian voters. Open-ended responses. Local randomization RD. *Note:* The figure illustrates differences in responses before and after the Election of Trump, for respondents saying they would vote for the Sweden Democrats or Christian Democrats.

reported above. We return to this apparent discrepancy in the concluding discussion, where we argue it reflects the two measures' differing sensitivity to the intensity, rather than the mere presence, of immigration-related content.

Finally, using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), we demonstrate that the selected words represent distinct clusters in the word vector space. To estimate the similarity, we predict the average word vector before and after the election. Thereafter, we compute the cosine similarity between these vectors and those representing climate, economy, healthcare, and immigration (for more details, see the Appendix under the section titled "Text Analysis"). The findings of this analysis are visualized in Figure 3 below, while additional details on the text analysis approach can be found in the Appendix (Figure B7).

The findings provide valuable insight into the nature of the changes observed. The most notable change is in the emphasis on immigration. Specifically, immigration is more likely to be discussed among the Sweden Democrats and Christian Democrats voters after the election and remains the most evident difference across the issues under examination. It is further notable that the climate—a topic commonly part of the same "sociocultural" dimension as immigration—also shows an increase. These are, however, only four themes among countless other issues that could have been considered. It is likely that other themes also have declined, since issues are commonly emphasized at the expense of others. Hence, Trump's mobilization on immigration policies was seemingly successful not only in the US, but also in specific voter groups across the Atlantic.

9 | Concluding Discussion

The principal finding of this paper is that Trump's 2016 victory reshaped how prominently immigration featured in European political discourse, though not through a clean polarization in which some groups grew more engaged while others grew less engaged. Center voters showed a decline in immigration salience on the hand-coded measure. Authoritarian voters, by contrast, showed increased engagement with immigration as a topic, an effect that emerges most clearly in the embedding-regression and cosine-similarity analyses. Notably, this increase was not confined to authoritarian voters; liberal and center voters' cosine similarity to the immigration theme also rose slightly after the election, but by a much smaller magnitude. This pattern illustrates how a major political event in the U.S. can shape the salience of political issues to different degrees, if not always in opposing directions, across the Atlantic. Consequently, we find reasonably strong, though not unambiguous, support for H3a; H2a is not supported, since liberal voters' salience did not decline more than other groups'. If anything, their topical engagement with immigration slightly increased. H1a receives only weak, inconsistent support across model specifications.

The analysis using the hand-coded measure largely aligns with the findings based on the open-ended text responses. One possible explanation for the differences is that the embedding regression analyses the responses in their entirety, while the hand-coded labels divide them into three distinct variables corresponding to the issues mentioned. In the latter approach, the outcome variable is coded as 1 if immigration is mentioned without distinguishing between different types of mentions or whether multiple issues are framed in relation to immigration. This kind of nuance or "intensity" can be better captured with the embedding-based approach.

Relatedly, our finding of a liberalizing shift in immigration attitudes, present specifically among liberal voters, confirms H1b and H2b. We interpret this as consistent with an account in which discontent with xenophobia among voters who already held pro-immigration attitudes and had not anticipated Trump's victory drove this backlash effect, though we note this mechanism is speculative and not directly tested here. Notably, this attitudinal shift was not replicated in the SOM data at the full-sample level, further supporting the argument that salience is

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more malleable than attitudes (cf. Mader and Schoen 2019). For liberal voters specifically, witnessing Trump's rise to power may have acted as a catalyst to actively oppose shifting social norms, leading them to express their opposition to xenophobia more strongly while simultaneously de-emphasizing immigration as a political problem. Again, an interpretation rather than a directly tested mechanism. Contrary to our expectations, however, we find no support for H3b—that authoritarian voters would express stronger anti-immigration preferences. The data show that such voters exhibit the strongest liberalizing attitudinal shift of any subgroup in our sample, exceeding both the liberal and overall estimates at both bandwidths. This suggests that the reversed backlash effect extended even to the group we expected to react most differently to Trump's victory.

An important contextual factor is that ESS and SOM fieldwork in 2016 followed shortly after the 2015–16 European refugee crisis, which substantially elevated public attention to immigration across Europe, including Sweden. It is possible that immigration attitudes and salience were already trending, or that the electorate was already polarized along party lines, independent of the Trump election. However, our RD design compares respondents within a narrow window (two to four weeks) around the election date, holding constant slower-moving contextual factors such as the refugee crisis. A pre-existing trend would therefore need to produce a sharp coincidental discontinuity exactly at the election date to confound our estimates. We nonetheless note that the broader post-2015 immigration discourse forms the backdrop against which these effects should be interpreted.

In conclusion, the variation in individuals' reactions to Trump's victory, depending on their political orientation, can be understood through the lens of shifting social cues and the electorate's response to the perceived normalization of stigmatized preferences. Liberal voters may have reacted by rejecting what they saw as a legitimization of exclusionary rhetoric; unlike authoritarian voters, however, this did not translate into a substantially heightened focus on immigration as a topic, consistent with the weak and non-significant salience effects observed for this group across both measures. Authoritarian voters, by contrast, may have interpreted the election as a signal of legitimation, feeling more empowered to prioritize and vocalize concerns around immigration. This polarization in salience may have been further amplified by the temporal proximity of the Brexit referendum, which similarly centered on anti-immigrant sentiment (Schwartz et al. 2021). Consistent with longstanding theories of political dialectics, these dynamics suggest that a core driver of political engagement and issue salience lies in the inclination to oppose political adversaries.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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