

Trust in Medicine and the Demand for Health Care

Charles Hanzel

- Trust in medicine has declined rapidly in the US since 2019, driven by Republicans [Trends](#)

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 - **Drivers** of distrust (O'Brian & Kent, 2025), decreased **vaccine uptake** (Sandlin, 2025)

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- Leverage **partisan nature** of the rapid decline in trust post-Covid to study shifting utilization and health

- **Care Utilization:** county-level utilization by BETOS category, provider-level patient volumes by specialty from CMS
 - **Main outcomes:** Log evaluation and management visits per beneficiary, Log PCP patient volumes
- **County Partisanship:** presidential voting by election from MIT Election Lab
- **Covid-19 Restrictions:** county-by-day data from CDC
- **Physician Ideology:** based on party registration from L2 voter files or political donations from DIME
- **Mortality:** county-level from NVSS

County-Level Specification

$$y_{ct} = \sum_{k=2015}^{2023} \beta_k \times \text{sharetrump}_c \times \mathcal{I}[t = k] + \phi_{st} + \psi_c + X'_{ct}\gamma + \epsilon_{ct}$$

- y_{ct} is an outcome in county c and year t
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- **Interpretation** of β_k : capture how utilization has changed over time across local partisan orientation

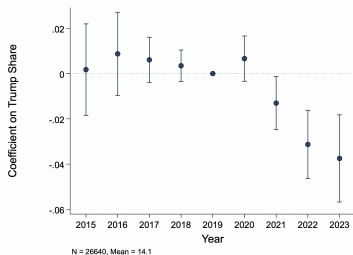
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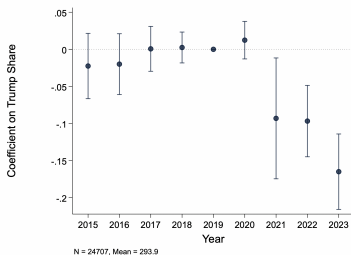
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- **Interpretation** of β_k : capture how utilization has changed over time across local partisan orientation
- **Robustness**: use 2016 election, change controls/fixed effects

Routine Care

(a) E&M Visits per Beneficiary



(b) Patients per PCP



10p.p. increase in Trump vote share \Rightarrow 0.4% fewer E&M Visits, 1.5% lower patient volumes by 2023

Other Categories

Triple Differences

- Leverage research on drivers of distrust (O'Brian & Kent, 2025)
- Approach 1: Interact vote shares with a measure of **pandemic restrictions**
 - **Measure:** share of days between April 2020-August 2021 with mask mandate or gathering restriction
 - **Intuition:** backlash against restrictions core driver of distrust
 - **Question:** Are relative utilization declines in Republican counties larger in places with more restrictive policies?

Specification

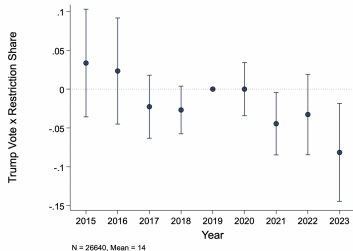
Triple Differences

- Leverage research on drivers of distrust (O'Brian & Kent, 2025)
- Approach 2: Interact vote shares with **physician party**, run at provider-level
 - **Measure**: indicator for physician being a Democrat
 - **Intuition**: physicians mirror voters in views of pandemic (Levin et al., 2023); belief misalignment may exacerbate distrust
 - **Question**: Are relative patient volume declines in Republican counties larger for Democratic PCPs?

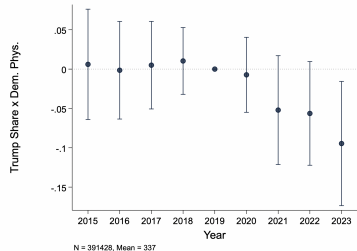
Specification

Triple Difference Results

(a) Pandemic Restrictions (E&M)



(b) Physician Party (Patients)



Utilization declines in Republican areas more pronounced with more stringent restrictions and for Democratic PCPs

Alternative Explanations

- Alternative stories
 - Local economic conditions
 - Beneficiary composition
 - Covid-19 Mortality
 - Supply side

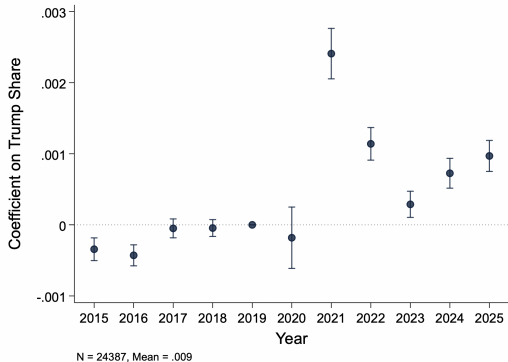
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 - Patient volumes decline only for white beneficiaries
- **Remaining question:** is there evidence of changes in health outcomes?

Figure 3: Mortality Rate



10p.p. increase in Trump vote share \Rightarrow \uparrow 1 death per 10,000 (1% increase) by 2025

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- Suggestive evidence of worsening health outcomes

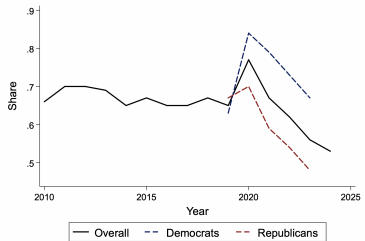
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- Has coincided with sharp declines in routine and preventive care use in Republican areas
- Concentrated where distrust most salient: more restrictive states and ideologically misaligned PCP-patient matches
- Suggestive evidence of worsening health outcomes
- Rebuilding trust among Republicans will be a key challenge for the medical profession

Appendix

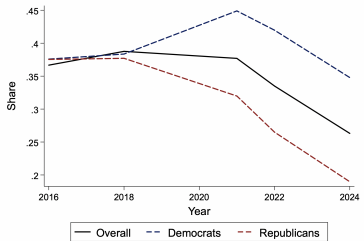
Share of Americans who...

(a) Describe Doctors as Honest or Ethical



Source: Gallup, 2019 party split from Pew

(b) Have Great Deal of Confidence in Medicine

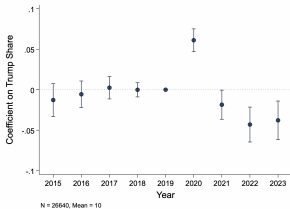


Source: General Social Survey

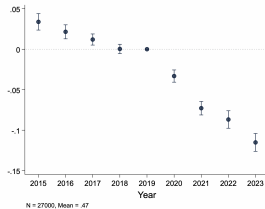
Other Categories

Figure 5: Other Categories

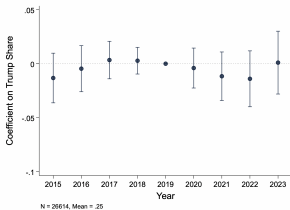
(a) Tests+Imaging



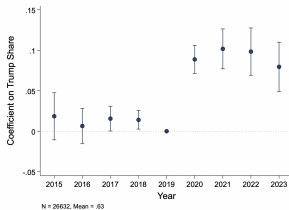
(b) Flu Vaccinations



(c) Inpatient Stays



(d) ER Visits



Pandemic Restrictions Specification

$$y_{ct} = \sum_{k=2015}^{2023} [\beta_k \times sharetrump_c \times \mathbf{restrict}_c + \alpha_k^t \times sharetrump_c + \alpha_k^r \times restrict_c] \times \mathcal{I}[t = k] + \phi_t + \psi_c + \epsilon_{ct}$$

- y_{ct} : outcome in county c and year t
- $sharetrump_c$: Trump vote share in 2020
- ϕ_{st}, ψ_c : state-year and county fixed effects
- $restr_c$: share of days from April 2020-August 2021 with gathering/mask policy
- **Interpretation** of β_k : capture whether differential shifts by local partisanship are larger with greater pandemic restrictions

Provider-Level Specification

$$y_{jct} = \sum_{k=2015}^{2023} \beta_k \times \text{sharetrump}_c \times \mathbf{dem}_j] \times \mathcal{I}[t = k] + \phi_{ct} + \psi_j + \epsilon_{jct}$$

- y_{jct} : patients for provider j in county c and year t
- ϕ_{ct}, ψ_j : county-year and physician fixed effects
- sharetrump_c : Trump vote share in 2020
- dem_j : indicator for Democratic physician
- **Interpretation** of β_k : capture whether differential shifts by local partisanship are larger with ideological mismatch