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Framing the 2016 Election: a Look into Donald Trump's Abnormal Rhetoric

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Donald Trump is one of the most controversial and unconventional presidential candidates in history. For the first time, a candidate is running for office that says exactly what is on his mind. The question then is, How is this abnormal rhetoric (issue framing) affecting political attitudes on Trump, Clinton, and politics more broadly? While other studies look at issue framing, none examine abnormal political rhetoric of the Trump variety. To explore these effects, in the summer of 2016 I conducted an online survey-experiment comparing the responses of a group exposed to *no statement* to four other groups reading one of the following four Trump statements: *Mexicans at rapists, build the wall, ban Muslims, and Megyn Kelly's you know where*. Two findings stand out; first, none of Trump's controversial statements shift people's attitudes about Trump compared to the group given no statement. These findings also hold for a variety of subgroups including independents and Latinos. Overall, our results suggest that the public's attitudes about Trump are relatively firm and that future Trump statements may not be as impactful as we might expect. Second, while most of Trump's statements do not affect attitudes toward Hillary Clinton, the Muslim ban statement does boost both approval and intention to vote for Clinton by six points. This could be due to the fact that while Trump support may be "baked in," those who find themselves in the undecided category may interpret the Muslim ban statement to be so antithetical to widely accepted anti-racist and anti-immigrant/melting pot norms that it forces them to choose the only viable alternative to Trump, Hillary Clinton. This suggests that Trump statements that strike at the heart of core American values and deeply embedded social norms may be powerful enough to shift election attitudes.