

Fear and Loathing in the 2024 Presidential Election

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Background

Affective forecasting refers to predicting how one will feel about a future event, decision, or situation. A common error in this process is impact bias, or the tendency to overestimate how intensely and for how long future events will affect emotions. In political settings, positive distinctiveness—the inclination to view one’s in-group more favorably than out-groups—can heighten this bias. When political identity becomes highly salient, particularly during elections, voters may overpredict the emotional satisfaction of their candidate winning and the distress of their candidate losing. This emotional exaggeration is tied to the ‘us-versus-them’ mindset that defines much of American political discourse today (Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2015).

A 2020 Pew survey found that 90% of both Trump and Biden voters believed the opposing candidate’s victory would harm their way of life, while their own candidate’s win would improve it. These beliefs are examples of affective forecasting influenced by group membership. However, research shows that individuals frequently misjudge how future events will affect them emotionally (Lench et al., 2024). The interaction between impact bias and strong group identity may amplify emotional expectations and contribute to political polarization, shaping not only how people vote but also how they react to electoral outcomes.

Hypothesis

We hypothesize that individuals with more complex group membership will be more likely to experience intense and inaccurate affective forecasting leading up to the 2024 election.

Methods

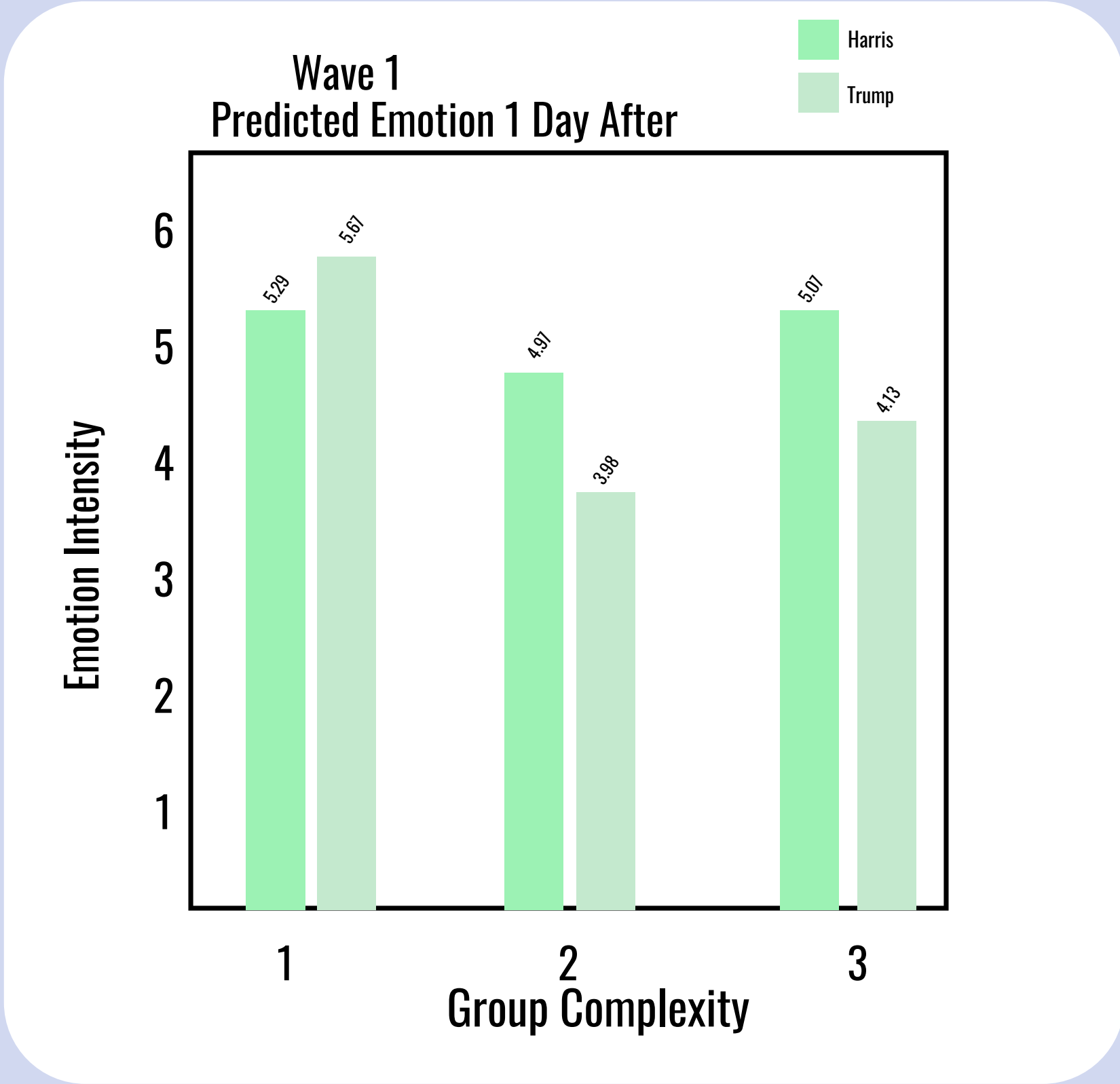
Participants completed surveys via Qualtrics across four time points:

- Wave 1: Pre-Election
- Wave 2: 1 Day After Election
- Wave 3: 1 Month After Election
- Wave 4: 2 Months After Election

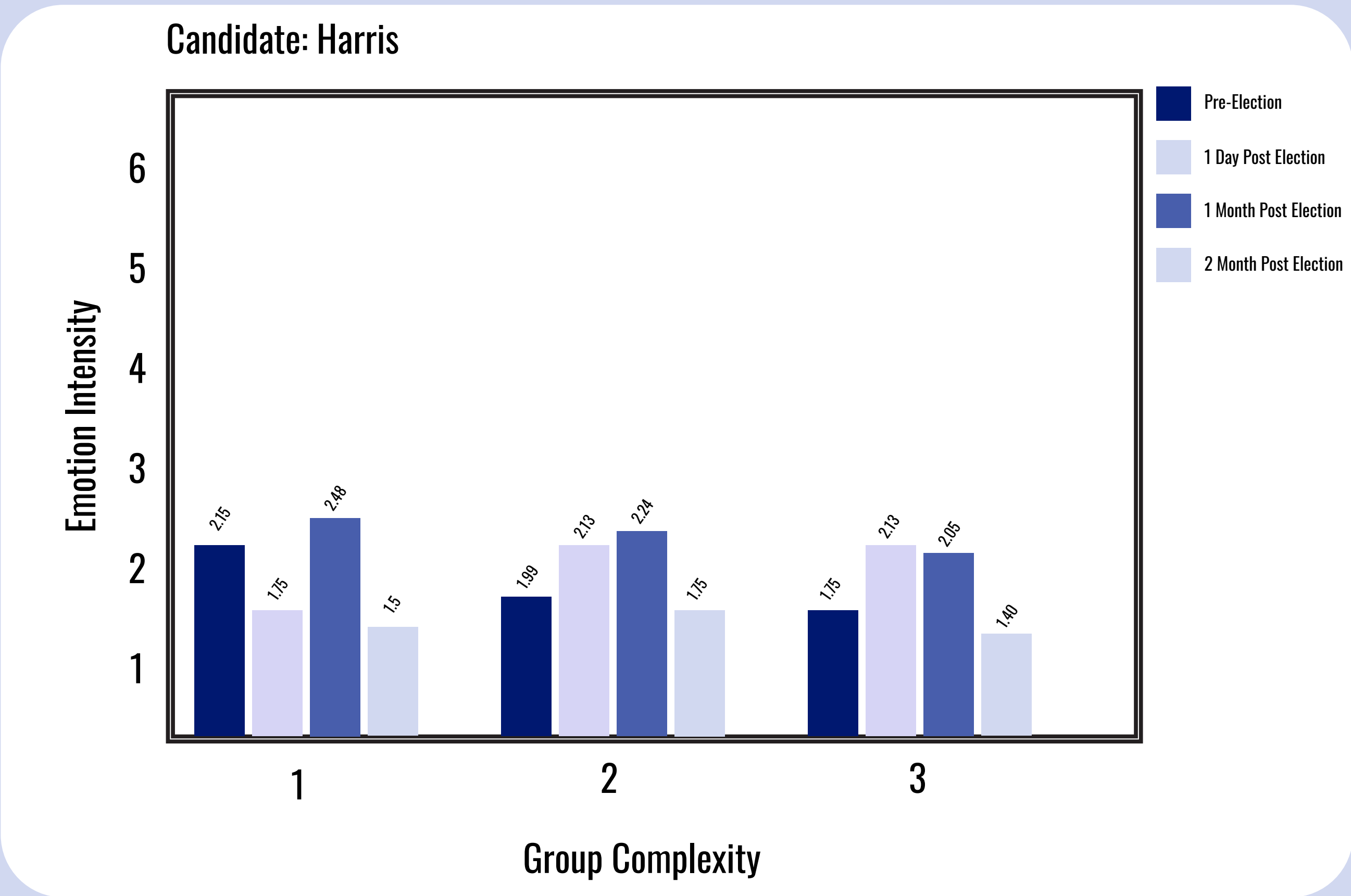
For Wave 1, participants were asked to list the social groups they identify with and to rate the personal importance of each group on a 6pt Likert Scale, and then to predict how they would feel emotionally if their preferred candidate won or lost. For the following three waves, participants were asked to list the social groups they identify with and to rate the personal importance of each group on a 6pt Likert Scale, and then to report how they felt emotionally after the results of the election at the respective time points.

Data Analysis consisted of ANOVA and interaction effects tested using SPSS v29, and examined main effects and interactions between candidate, group complexity, and time.

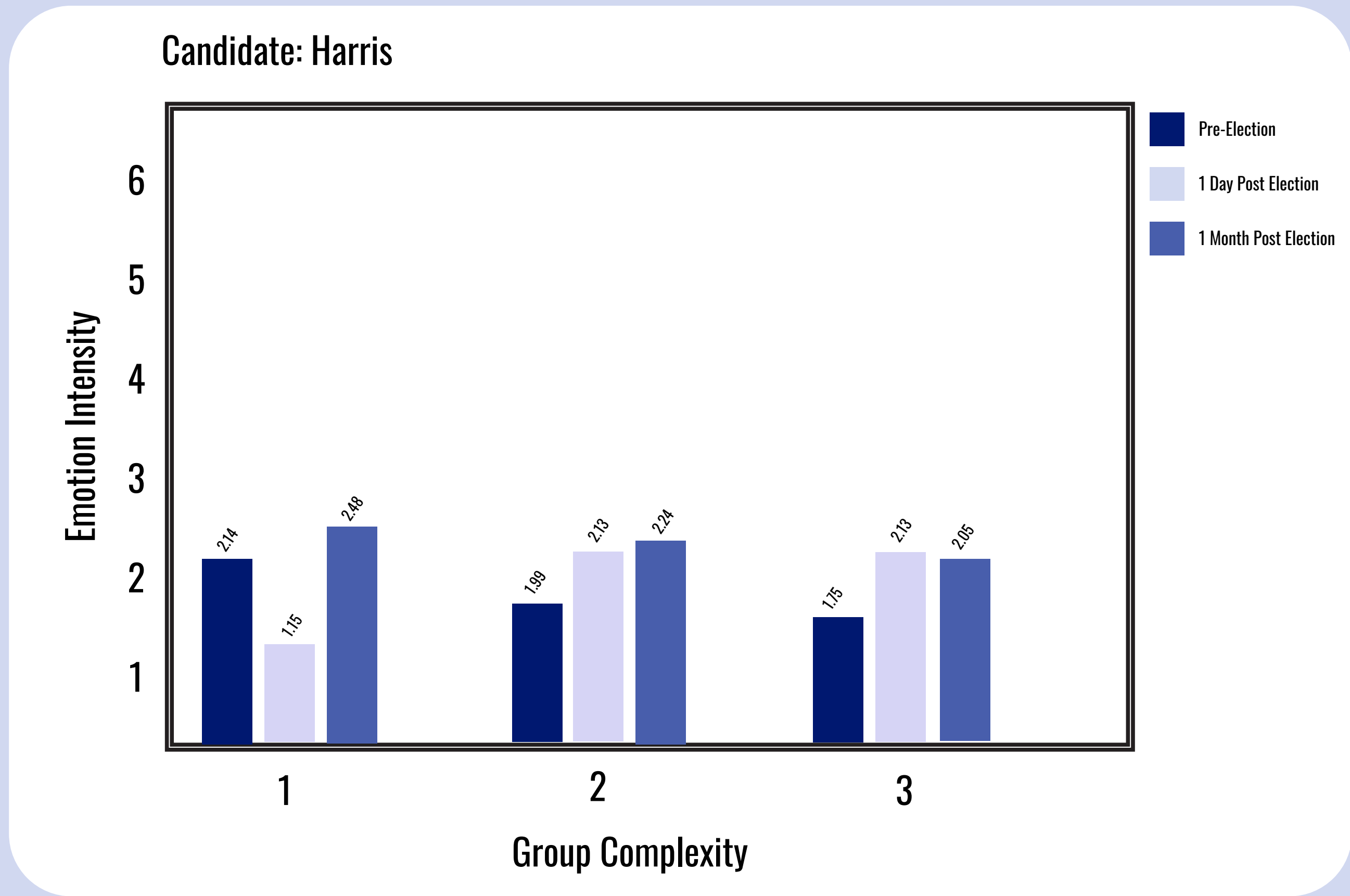
Group Complexity



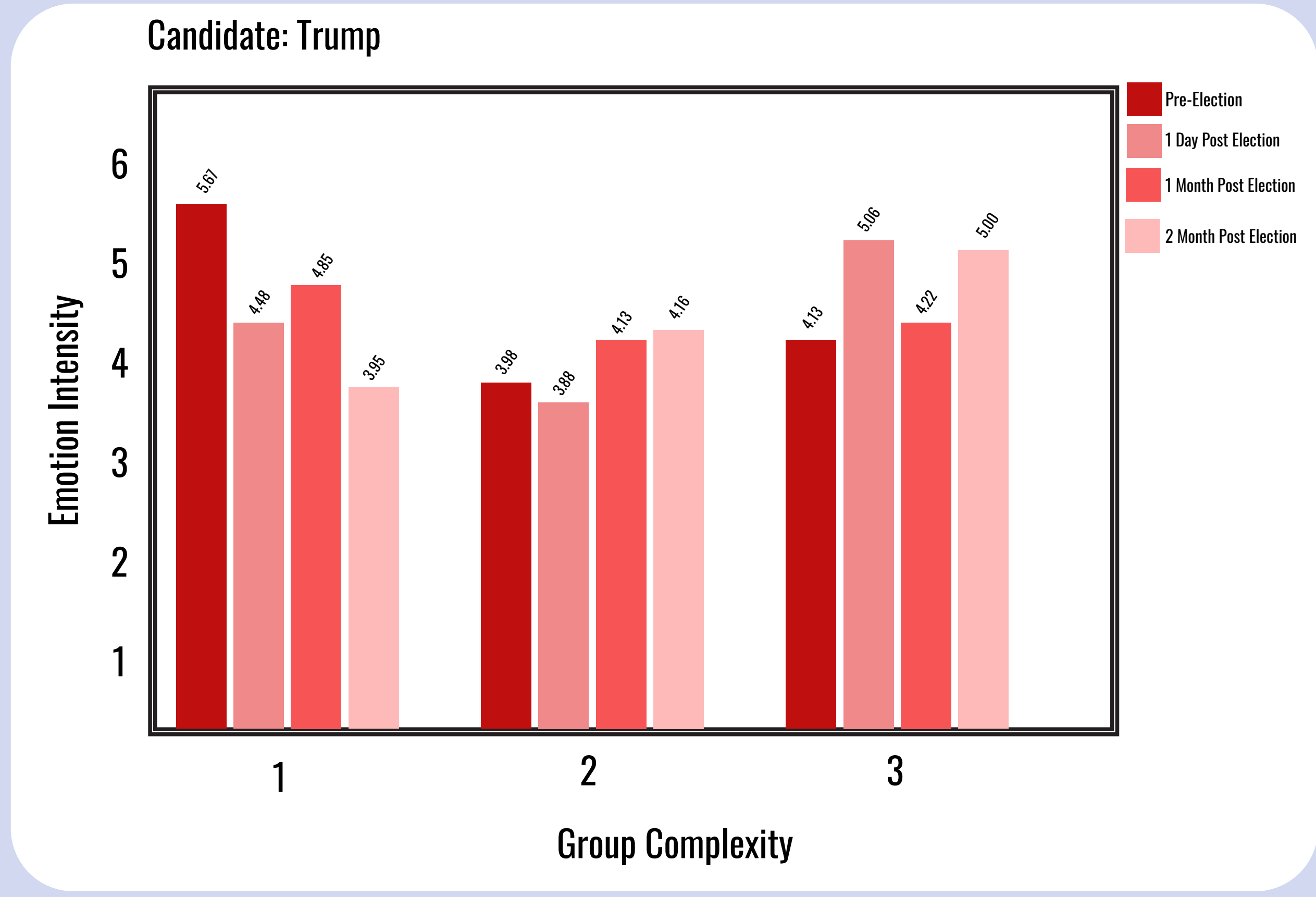
Time



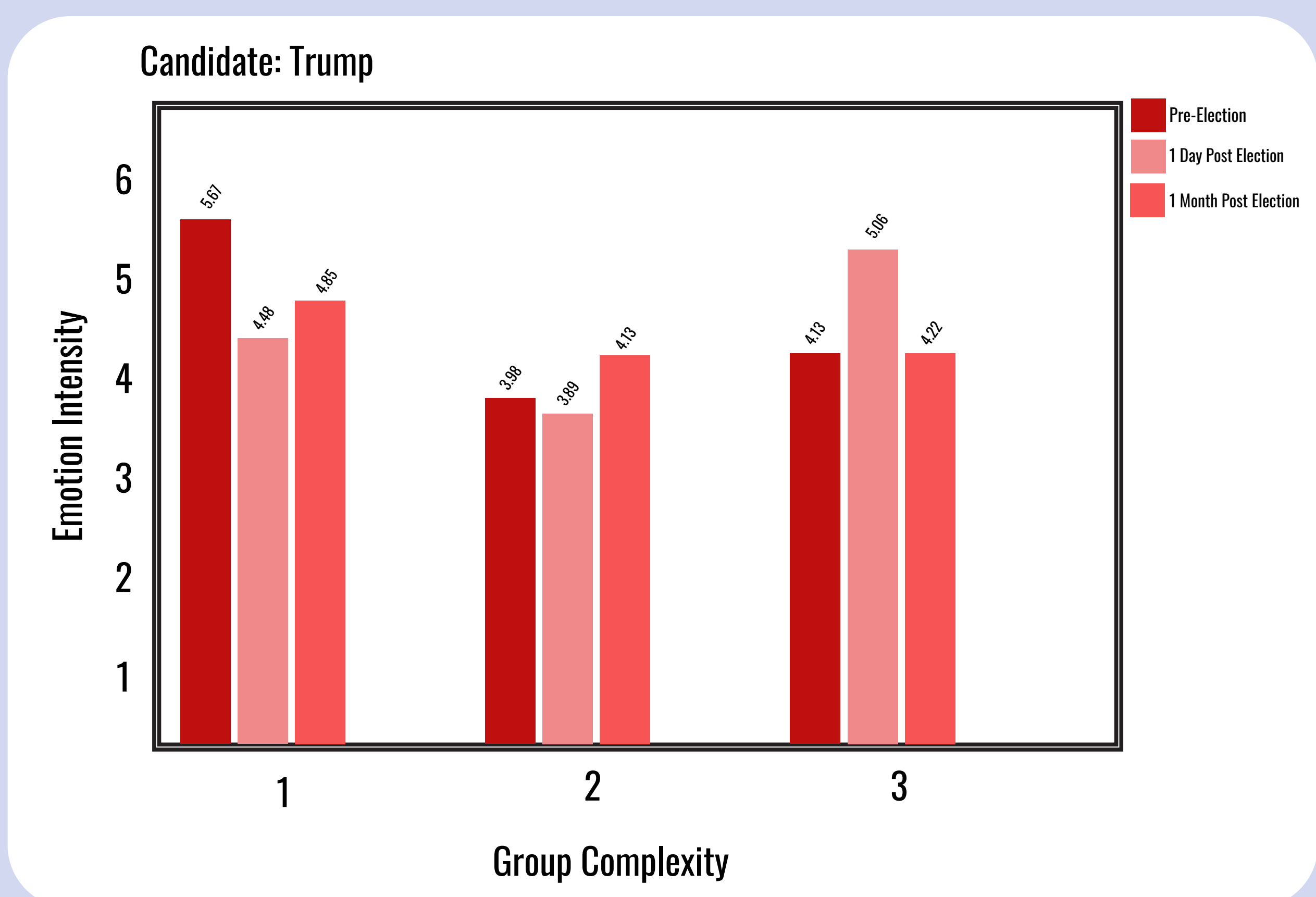
Accuracy



Time



Accuracy



Discussion and Implications

The hypothesis, which predicted that higher group complexity would lead to more intense emotions, was only partially supported. Group 1 (low complexity) predicted stronger emotions than Group 2 (moderate complexity), but Group 3 (high complexity) did not show greater emotional intensity. This suggests that the relationship between group complexity and emotional intensity is not straightforward. Rather than a simple increase with complexity, high complexity may introduce competing identities that temper emotional responses instead of amplifying them.

Among participants whose candidate lost (Harris supporters), emotional intensity did not differ across complexity groups. However, among Trump supporters, group complexity moderated emotional responses: Groups 1 and 3 reported stronger emotions than Group 2. This finding suggests that moderate complexity may dampen emotional intensity, potentially providing a buffering effect against extreme emotional reactions to political outcomes. In contrast, individuals with either low or high complexity may experience heightened emotions, possibly due to either a more rigid identity structure (low complexity) or competing, emotionally charged group memberships (high complexity).

These results highlight the complex and sometimes unpredictable role of identity complexity in shaping emotional reactions to political events. The findings also suggest that individuals with moderate complexity may possess a more flexible or resilient identity structure, helping to regulate emotional intensity during politically charged moments.

A potential confound to these findings is the broader political climate, including recent actions taken by the current president and heightened political tensions. Such external factors could have independently influenced participants' emotions, suggesting the need for future research to better isolate the effects of group complexity from the impact of the surrounding sociopolitical environment.

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