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MCCARTHY-ERA BLACKLISTING LED TO LASTING CAREER LOSSES IN HOLLYWOOD, WITH FILMS BECOMING MORE CONSERVATIVE AND REPUBLICAN VOTING INCREASING IN EXPOSED COUNTIES

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Summary

This paper examines how anti-communist accusations against Hollywood actors and writers during the McCarthy era impacted individual career outcomes, ideological shifts in film content, and local voting behavior in the United States. Accused actors and writers saw sharp and persistent employment losses, making Hollywood's subsequent film content noticeably more conservative after 1950. This cultural shift appears to have shaped voting behaviour, with communities more exposed to conservative films becoming more likely to vote Republican.

Objective

Understand how McCarthy-era anti-communist policing, the Red Scare, influenced careers in Hollywood, the ideological content of film and culture, and the downstream impact on US political attitudes and voting behavior over time.

Methodology

The authors used individual-level career data and film-level content data from 1930-1970, using coarsened exact matching to estimate the causal impact of accusations on career trajectories. They also utilized machine-learning natural-language-processing and word embeddings to examine ideological shifts in film themes. Finally, they applied a difference-in-differences approach to theater exposure to estimate films' effects on presidential voting outcomes.

Results

- Accused actors appeared in around one fewer production per year (roughly the size of an actor's annual output), with losses lasting seven years on average; writers experienced worse on average.
- The average net progressiveness of films dropped sharply. The decline from 1950–1952 is about 50% of the mean level of film progressiveness.
- Counties more exposed to conservative films saw higher Republican vote shares, especially when communism was portrayed as an internal threat.

Accused actors lost
1 job per year for
7 years
on average

~50%
drop in film
progressiveness, with rise
in Republican vote share