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Immigration, presidential politics, and partisan polarization among the American public, 1992–2018

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ABSTRACT

We extend theories about “immigration backlash” and right-wing populism in three ways by analyzing trend data to examine the interplay between views of immigration, partisan polarization, and voting patterns in presidential elections. First, we document how immigration views became more aligned with partisan polarization between 2000 and 2018. Second, we show that immigration views were significantly more predictive of voting for Donald Trump in 2016 compared to Republican presidential candidates in the 1992 through 2012 elections. Due to increased partisan polarization, the indirect effects of immigration views on presidential voting (as mediated through political ideology and party identification) also increased over time, and were stronger in 2016 compared to previous elections. Finally, we show evidence of a post-Trump backlash on immigration views, with political independents and Democrats becoming significantly more favorable toward immigration after 2016. By 2018, the American public was more polarized over matters of immigration than at any time previous in the available data, and these views corresponded more strongly with voting patterns. These findings highlight the increasing importance of immigration for understanding partisan politics in the contemporary U.S., and reiterate the importance of anti-immigrant sentiment and partisan polarization to the success of right-wing populism in electoral democracies.

Introduction

Donald Trump’s populist campaign for the presidency in 2016 championed an exclusivist vision of ethno-nationalism supported by rhetoric and proposed policies that demonized immigrants, Muslims, and ethnic minorities (Bobo 2017). Trump signaled this focus from the outset, beginning his campaign with a speech calling Mexican immigrants rapists and drug smugglers, and making building a wall along the southern border of the U.S. the central feature of his rallies and political platform (see Lamont et al. 2017). Rhetoric about “criminal aliens” also became a recurring feature of Trump’s stump speeches.¹ While many pundits decried his rhetoric and proposed policies as xenophobic, these bold appeals to banish cultural “outsiders” distinguished Trump from a crowded Republican primary field and helped him secure the party’s nomination (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). In the general election, Trump’s appeal among working-class white voters, particularly in Midwestern states, carried him to victory in the electoral college (see McQuarrie 2017; Morgan and Lee 2018).

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Once elected, Trump attempted to make good on his promises to enact hardline policies targeting immigrants. He instituted a travel ban against residents of Muslim-majority countries, implemented a punitive policy of migrant family separation at the southern border, drastically restricted eligibility for asylum, and initiated the longest government shutdown in U.S. history in an effort to get funding for a border wall. When leveraging a government shutdown for billions of dollars in appropriations did not work, Trump declared a national emergency to get congressional funding for the border wall. Whatever else Donald Trump's mercurial style and substance of governance may have been, it was consistently anti-immigrant.

"Restrictive" expressions of nationalism based on ethno-racial boundaries align well with Trump's rhetoric and the demographics of his core constituency: "Directly appealing to [restrictive nationalists'] understanding of America may have been an important driver of Trump's popularity, enabling him to mobilize on the basis of nationalist sentiments Republicans for whom his issue positions might have appeared insufficiently conservative" (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016: 973). A critical component of applying Bonikowski's (2017) theoretical model specifying the sources of salience for ethno-nationalist populism when applied to the United States is that where ethno-nationalism had previously cut across political identities (Bonikowski 2016; Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016), it now aligns more strongly with conservative political identification and Republican Party affiliation, which helps account for the increasing prominence of right-wing, ethno-nationalist populism. While circumstantial and anecdotal evidence certainly suggest this is the case, this critical hypothesis about the political realignment of ethno-nationalism in the U.S. remains empirically untested (Bonikowski 2017: S205). Consequently, it is the central research question for our study.

To assess this aspect of ethno-nationalism, we focus on opposition to immigration. Anti-immigration sentiment among mass publics is strongly connected to the general popularity of far-right political parties (Rydgren 2008; Semyonov, Rajman, and Gorodzeisky 2006), a connection that is even stronger for candidates and parties emphasizing the cultural threat of immigrants (Wilkes, Guppy, and Farris 2007). The popularity of such views becomes more salient to the extent that previously hegemonic groups such as white men experience perceived losses in social status (Gidron and Hall 2017). In conjunction, expressions of nativist nationalism are often linked to the view that ethnic origins are an integral component of national identity (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Kunovich 2009). As a result, perceived threats to white cultural hegemony and subsequent backlashes offer a potentially critical component of understanding the resurgence of right-wing populism in western democracies in recent years (Bobo 2017; Fukuyama 2018; Golec de Zavala, Guerra, and Simão 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016). Indeed, "there is growing evidence for the centrality of anti-immigrant sentiment in fueling both the supply and demand sides of populist politics in Western Europe and the United States" (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016a: 10).

In the U.S., the Republican and Democratic parties have sorted strongly along "fixed" (previously called authoritarian) worldviews in the last fifty years, and the parties have also become more polarized regarding related issues of immigration (Hetherington and Weiler 2009). A fundamental characteristic of fixed worldviews is the "wariness of outsiders and of the change and uncertainty they represent" (Hetherington and Weiler 2018: 195). As the major parties in the U.S. have become increasingly sorted based on this orientation, opinions regarding the consequences of immigration have increasingly overlapped with party identification.

This partisan restructuring along lines of identity politics and authoritarianism was likely accelerated by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Public opinion toward Muslims in the U.S. became significantly more negative after 9/11 (Edgell et al. 2016; Gerteis et al. 2020; Panagopoulos 2006; Peek 2011), largely in response to changes in media coverage that portrayed Muslims as violent and predisposed to terrorism (Ahmed and Matthes 2017; Bail 2012, 2014). But the effects of 9/11 on public views extend beyond Muslims specifically and into views of

immigrants more generally, with a narrowing of public views on citizenship and an increase in xenophobic attitudes (Schildkraut 2002).

Further, views of immigration among mass publics vary in response to levels of perceived threat (Lahav 2013), which were substantially altered by 9/11 and subsequent media coverage of terrorism. Empirical research has documented that fears about terrorism and anti-immigration attitudes became more tightly connected among the American public after 9/11 (Branton et al. 2011; Rosenberger and Steiner 2019). Accordingly, trend analyses also show an increase in restrictive views of immigration among the public after 9/11 (Branton et al. 2011; Muste 2013; Suro 2009). This reflects the increasing confluence of racial anxiety, fears about terrorism, and xenophobia after 9/11 (Winders 2007), with antipathy toward Muslims, and immigrants more generally, becoming increasingly connected (Kalkan et al. 2009). Notably, however, previous research on this topic has not thoroughly examined the extent to which increases in restrictive sentiment about immigration after 9/11 were connected to partisanship, a considerable omission given that the Republican Party clearly and directly positioned itself as hawkish through its rhetoric, policies, and foreign wars related to the “War on Terror.”

In the more recent past, Trump clearly bundled xenophobia and Islamophobia together in his most prominent policy proposals and efforts—the southern border wall and Muslim travel ban. Consistent with the importance of these issues for understanding the ascent of Trump, people who switched to voting Republican for President in 2016 primarily did so based on views of race and immigration (Mutz 2018; Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019). Trump’s largest voting constituencies consisted of strong partisans, Christian nationalists, and those with high levels of antipathy toward “outsiders,” particularly Muslims and immigrants (Baker et al. 2020; Tucker et al. 2019; Whitehead et al. 2018).

Despite the increasing salience of immigration views for political identification in the U.S., little empirical research has provided evidence of a direct link between views of immigration, voting behavior, and party affiliation over time. An important exception is *White Backlash* (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015), which posits that immigration backlash is a key driver of contemporary American politics, and empirically shows that attitudes about immigration are a significant reason why a majority of white Americans vote for and align themselves with the Republican Party (also see Hajnal and Rivera 2014). At the same time, Abrajano and Hajnal (2015: 58) noted that: “To date, there is scant evidence that the partisan affiliation or voting decisions of individual white Americans strongly reflect their views of immigration.” Their study hypothesizes and provides some evidence that views of immigration have changed in relation to partisanship and voting, but they also emphasize that high-quality, over time analyses with a consistent measure of immigration views have not been provided, even in their own study (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015: 84).

Hypotheses

We test three central hypotheses derived from theories of right-wing populism (Bonikowski 2016; Bonikowski 2017) and immigration backlash (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015) using high-quality trend data with consistent measures of views of immigration, political identification, and voting in presidential elections. Our first hypothesis assesses the relative importance of the role of immigration views in the election of Donald Trump in 2016 compared to previous presidential elections. In other words, whether there are significant differences in the correlations between views of immigration and voting for Trump compared to previous Republican candidates.

H₁.—Views about immigration were more strongly correlated with presidential vote choice in 2016 compared to previous presidential elections (1992–2012).

Our second set of hypotheses concern how immigration views are correlated with political partisanship over time. More specifically, we are interested in whether views about immigration

became significantly more politically polarized after 9/11 and the subsequent foreign invasions and “War on Terror.” Hence, we test:

H_{2a}—Views about immigration became more politically polarized after 9/11.

To the extent that views of immigration did become more partisan after 9/11, we would also expect a related increase in the indirect effects of immigration views on voting. In other words, to the extent that immigration views were increasingly connected to partisanship, there should be a corresponding increase in the indirect effects of immigration views on vote choice as mediated through partisan identification. Hence, we test:

H_{2b}—The indirect effects of immigration views on voting patterns, as mediated through political ideology and partisan identification, have become larger since 9/11.

Our third and final hypothesis is an extension of both our first and second hypotheses, and concerns whether there have been significant changes to the public’s views of immigration since Trump’s election in 2016. To the extent that Trump mobilized voters around immigration views and has made anti-immigration policies a focus, this may have deepened political polarization over immigration. To see if there has been a “backlash effect” on views of immigration among the American public since 2016, we test:

H₃—Views about immigration have become significantly more partisan since 2016.

Data

To examine these three hypotheses related to right-wing populism and immigration backlash in the U.S., we analyze data from the cumulative file of the General Social Survey (GSS). Since 1994 the GSS has been collected biannually, and the surveys use area-based probability sampling to generate nationally representative samples of American adults. The samples are collected by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, with surveys conducted using face-to-interviews. For details on the sampling methods and response rates of the GSS, see Smith et al. (2019).

To see if the relationship between views of immigrants and voting for Donald Trump was different than vote patterns in previous presidential elections, we present models showing the relationship between views of immigration and voting for Republican candidates in seven presidential elections (Trump 2016, Mitt Romney in 2012, John McCain in 2008, George W. Bush in 2004 and 2000, Bob Dole in 1996, and George H. W. Bush in 1992). This allows us to see whether the relationship between views of immigration and Trump voting was truly unique, or was similar to previous candidates. We also use views of immigrants as an outcome, with party identification as a focal predictor, to see if Americans’ attitudes about immigration have become more partisan over time. In all, we analyze data from the 1994, 2000, and 2004–2018 waves of the GSS, which are all the years that have included a consistent question about whether respondents wanted less, more, or the same levels of immigration.

Measures

Dependent variables

For the presidential voting outcomes, we coded responses into binary variables such that voting for the Republican candidate in a given year was = 1, and voting for any other candidate was = 0. Respondents who did not vote were coded as missing. All analyses were weighted by WTSSALL to better match the population parameters of the American public over time. In the presidential vote models, as well as other binary logistic regression analyses, we calculated and

report fully standardized coefficients that allow us to rank order the strength of predictors within a model (Menard 2010, 2011).

Focal independent variable

To see if and how views about Americans' preferred levels of immigration have become more partisan over time, as well as how these views are related to voting patterns, we used a question in the GSS that asked respondents, "Do you think the number of immigrants to America nowadays should be ..." Answer choices were: "increased a lot," "increased a little," "remain the same as it is," "reduced a little," and "reduced a lot." Higher scores indicate a desire for reductions in immigration levels. This question has been asked in every GSS wave since 2004. Prior to this, a similar question with the same answer choices was asked in the 1994 and 2000 waves. This question asked respondents, "Do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased a lot, increased a little, left the same as it is now, decreased a little, or decreased a lot?" We use this question about preferred immigration levels as our focal independent variable for predicting presidential voting.

We also use the views of immigration question as an outcome, and do separate analyses for each wave of the survey to see whether views of immigrants have become more partisan over time. We then merged the question from 2000 with the one from 2004–2018 and condense it into a binary outcome for wanting less immigration (1) and wanting the same or more immigration (0). We then show the results of a binary logistic regression model on the pooled data that includes interaction terms for each partisan identification and year of the survey. This allows us to map how the predicted probabilities of wanting to restrict immigration have changed over time for Americans with different types of partisan identifications.²

Control variables

In the multivariate regression models, we control for sociodemographic, political, and religious characteristics that could confound the relationship between views of immigration and vote choice in presidential elections. Gender is coded as a binary variable, with women = 1. Age is measured in years. Education is measured as the highest grade completed. Level of dissatisfaction with one's financial situation, which has been suggested as precipitating Trump voting (Berezin 2017)—is measured in ordinal categories for "satisfied" (1), "more or less" (2), and "not at all satisfied" (3). To control for income level in the GSS, we used the REALINC variable, which places household family income in constant dollars (using 1986 as the base year) across all waves.

We included dummy variable controls for both marital status (married = 1) and work status (employed full time = 1). Race was coded into dummy variables for "black" and "other races," with whites as the reference category. A separate dummy variable was used for Hispanic ethnicity, which was not mutually exclusive with the racial categories. The 1994 wave of the GSS did not include this variable, so this control was not included in the model predicting voting for George H. W. Bush in 1992.

A variable for the size of place where respondents lived was included, which had ordinal categories for the twelve largest statistical metropolitan areas in the U.S. (1), the 13th through 100th largest SMAs (2), 12 largest suburban areas (3), 13th through 100th largest suburban areas (4), other urban areas (5), and other rural areas (6). Region of the country was divided into Midwest, West, and Northeast, with South as the reference category.

To account for political ideology and partisan identification, we used two variables that have been asked the same way in the GSS across the 1994–2018 waves. Political ideology was measured with a question that asked: "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are

Table 1. Voting for Republican candidates in 1992–2016 presidential elections by immigration views.

	Trump	Romney	McCain	Bush 04	Bush 00	Dole	Bush 92
Political ideology	0.184***	0.226***	0.154***	0.161***	0.167***	0.177***	0.166***
Party identification	0.446***	0.479***	0.489***	0.606***	0.575***	0.478***	0.533***
Immigration views	0.193***	0.110***	0.066**	0.055*	0.038	−0.134**	−0.070
Model stats							
Constant	−0.799	−1.412	−1.112	−0.110	−0.189	−4.498	−1.089
<i>N</i>	859	2790	2490	2492	1488	653	804
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	0.792	0.772	0.720	0.715	0.718	0.637	0.557

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests); ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Source: 1994, 2000, and 2004–2018 General Social Surveys.

Notes: Fully standardized coefficients are shown. All models include controls for gender, age, education, financial satisfaction, income, marital status, employment status, race and ethnicity, size of place, region, religious service attendance, biblical literalism, and religious affiliation.

arranged from extremely liberal—point 1—to extremely conservative—point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?” “Moderate” was the middle category. For party identification we used a variable that asked: “Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?” Answers ranged from “strong Democrat” (0) to “strong Republican” (6), with “independent” or other parties coded as the middle category (3). For ease of presentation in the analyses of immigration views over time, we simplify this variable into dummies for Republican, Democrat, and independent/other party.

We also controlled for frequency of religious service attendance, Bible views, and religious affiliation. Frequency of attendance was measured from “never” (0) to “more than once a week” (8). Biblical literalism was coded as a dummy variable (literalist = 1). Religious affiliation in the GSS was coded into dummy variables based on the RELTRAD classification scheme for organizing religious traditions in the U.S. (Steensland et al. 2000). We include dummy variable controls for black Protestant, mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, no religion, and other religions, with evangelical Protestant as the reference category. All variables were standardized by their respective means and standard deviations before entry into the models.

Results

Presidential voting

Table 1 shows the results of the binary logistic regression models predicting voting for a Republican candidate for president. Two aspects stand out about the relationship between views of immigration and voting in the past seven presidential elections. First, in the model predicting Trump voting in 2016, the variable about immigration policy was the third strongest predictor in the model ($\beta = 0.193$; $p < .001$), trailing only political party identification ($\beta = 0.446$; $p < .001$) and the difference between white and black Americans ($\beta = -0.428$; $p < .001$). Notably, views of immigration even had a slightly stronger effect on voting for Trump than did identification as liberal or conservative ($\beta = 0.184$; $p < .001$).

Second, it is readily apparent that the correlation between restrictive views of immigration and voting for Republican presidential candidates has continually gotten stronger across the last six presidential elections. In the 1996 election, more restrictive views of immigration were a significant predictor of voting *against* Republican nominee Bob Dole ($\beta = -0.134$; $p < .01$), despite Dole attempting to outline a hardline stance on illegal immigration and deportation.³ Since the 1996 election, Americans with restrictive immigration views have steadily become more reliable Republican voters in presidential elections. Views of immigration did not significantly influence vote choice in the 2000 election ($\beta = 0.038$; $p = .22$), but did become a significant factor in voting for George W. Bush in 2004 ($\beta = 0.055$; $p < .05$). The influence of immigration views increased

Table 2. Difference of coefficients tests from linear probability models for immigration views predicting Trump vote compared to previous Republican candidates.

Candidate	<i>b</i>	S.E.	Z	<i>p</i> (two-tailed)
Trump	0.062	0.012	—	—
Romney	0.031	0.007	2.231	.026
McCain	0.020	0.007	3.023	.003
Bush —2004	0.016	0.007	3.311	.001
Bush —2000	0.016	0.010	2.945	.003
Dole	−0.042	0.016	5.200	.000
H.W. Bush	−0.023	0.016	4.250	.000

Source: 1994, 2000, and 2004–2018 General Social Surveys.

Notes: All models include controls for gender, age, education, financial satisfaction, income, marital status, employment status, race, size of place, region, religious service attendance, biblical literalism, religious affiliation, political party, and political ideology.

incrementally for voting for John McCain ($\beta = 0.066$; $p < .01$) and again for Mitt Romney ($\beta = 0.110$; $p < .001$).

Because logistic regression coefficients can be unreliable for comparisons across models due to possible changes in the unobserved heterogeneity resulting from omitted variables (Allison 1999), we also estimated linear probability models for each presidential voting outcome, which allows for the comparison of coefficients across models (Mood 2010) and significance tests for differences between coefficients (using the formula outlined in Paternoster et al. 1998). Table 2 shows the results of Z tests for differences of coefficients for the effects of immigration views on voting for Trump in the 2016 election compared to previous Republican presidential candidates. Table 2 includes the unstandardized coefficients for views of immigration from each of the linear probability models, the standard error for views of immigration, a Z-score for the difference between voting for Trump and the candidate in question, and the two-tailed *p*-value for the significance test for the difference between the coefficients. Supporting H₁, by far the largest effect of restrictive views of immigration on voting for the Republican candidate occurred in the 2016 election. Trump both capitalized on and extended a preexisting trend of Americans with restrictive immigration views voting Republican. Views of immigration were a significantly stronger predictor of voting for Trump compared to voting for Mitt Romney ($Z = 2.23$; $p = .03$), and the effect size for views of immigration on voting for Trump were twice that of voting for Romney ($b = 0.062$ for Trump; $b = 0.031$ for Romney). The differences in the effects of immigration views on voting for Trump were also significantly larger compared to all other Republican candidates modeled (all Z scores for differences of coefficients ≥ 2.95 ; all *p*-values $\leq .003$).

To provide a visual look at these differences, Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities of voting for each Republican candidate across responses to the immigration question on the GSS, holding all control variables at their respective means. The differential effects of immigration views in relation to voting for Trump are clear, as he won a clear majority (0.57) of voting Americans who thought that levels of immigration should be substantially reduced. Trump's ability to solidify those who support restrictive immigration policies makes him unique among the last six Republican presidential candidates across seven elections. While it is impossible to point to a single factor as decisive in an event as complex as a presidential election, Trump's rhetoric and proposed restrictive immigration policies, such as the Muslim travel ban and southern border wall, were clearly effective at consolidating a long-term trend toward anti-immigration views among Republican voters.

View of immigrants and partisanship over time

The relationship between immigration views and presidential voting shows a clear change across the last seven elections, presumably also reflecting a change in the relationship between political

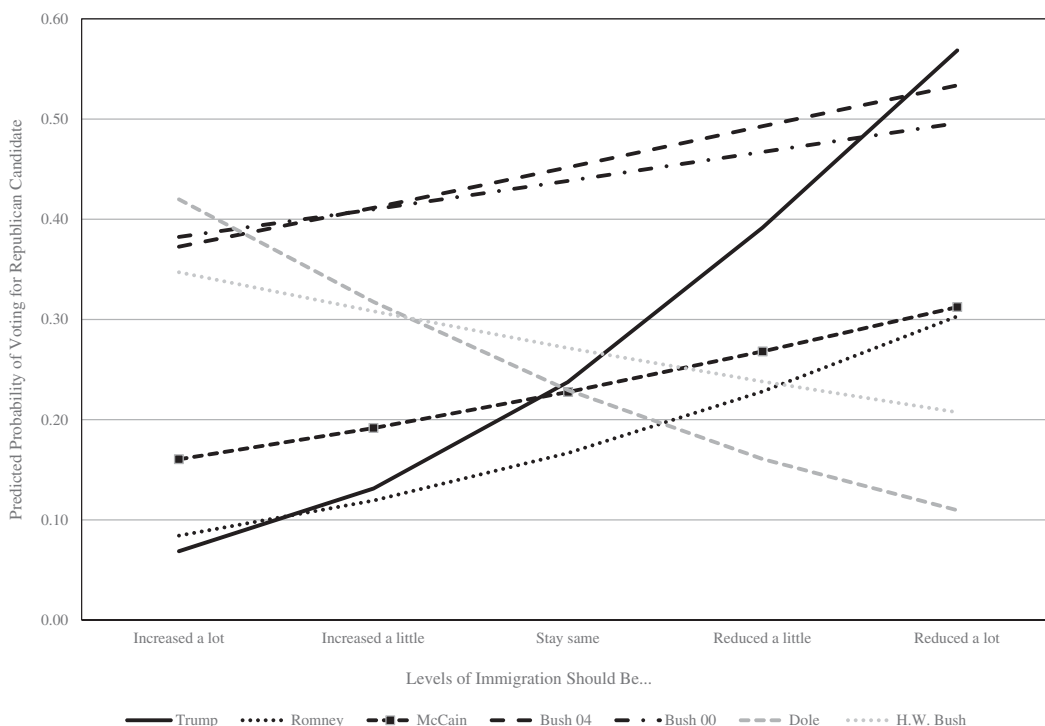


Figure 1. Predicted probability of voting for Republican candidates in 1992–2016 presidential elections by immigration views.

partisanship and views of immigration over time. We examined this possibility by using the views of immigration variable as an outcome, political ideology and party identification as predictors, and the other variables included in the vote choice models as controls. We then paneled the models by the year of the survey (Table 3 and Figure 2) to look at how views of immigration changed in relation to partisanship. Figure 2 also shows Goodman and Kruskal's (1954) gamma (γ) statistic for the relationship between the ordinal view of immigration question and the ordinal party identification question.

In the 1994–2008 waves, as well as the 2012 wave, political party identification was not a significant predictor of immigration views. By 2014, however, partisan identification had become a strong predictor of views of immigration ($b = 0.135$; $p < .001$). There is a particularly substantial increase in the partisanship of immigration views in the 2016 ($b = 0.243$; $p < .001$) and 2018 waves ($b = 0.271$; $p < .001$). Indeed, the coefficients for political party in the 2016 and 2018 models were significantly different than for all previous waves, including in the 2014 wave.⁴ The pattern of increasing covariance between party identification and views of immigration over time is also evident in changes to the γ statistic across survey waves. Between 1994 and 2008, the γ statistic never rises above .11, indicating a weak relationship between political party and immigration views. Beginning in 2010, in the aftermath of Barack Obama's election and the reactionary Tea Party movement among conservatives, the γ rises steadily across survey waves, particularly in 2014 (0.20), 2016 (0.29), and 2018 (0.35). In short, where political partisanship was not significantly related to views about immigration in the 1990s and 2000s, by 2014 and especially in 2016 and 2018, political party identification was by far the strongest predictor of whether Americans wanted more or less restrictive immigration policies.

Table 3. OLS regressions of immigration views by political identity and ideology paneled by survey year.

Variables	1994	2000	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018
Political ideology	0.061	0.097**	0.111**	0.140***	0.142***	0.037	0.174***	0.167***	0.157***	0.166***
Party identity	0.023	0.006	0.005	0.022	−0.033	0.107**	0.092*	0.135***	0.243***	0.271***
Model stats										
Constant	3.926	3.542	3.798	3.705	3.700	3.647	3.560	3.554	3.392	3.181
N	1202	1069	749	1614	1057	1184	1073	1417	1594	1302
Adjusted R ²	0.044	0.091	0.130	0.153	0.119	0.129	0.106	0.131	0.177	0.218

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests); ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Source: 1994, 2000, and 2004–2018 General Social Surveys.

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients are shown. All models include controls for gender, age, education, financial satisfaction, income, marital status, employment status, race, size of place, region, religious service attendance, biblical literalism, and religious affiliation.

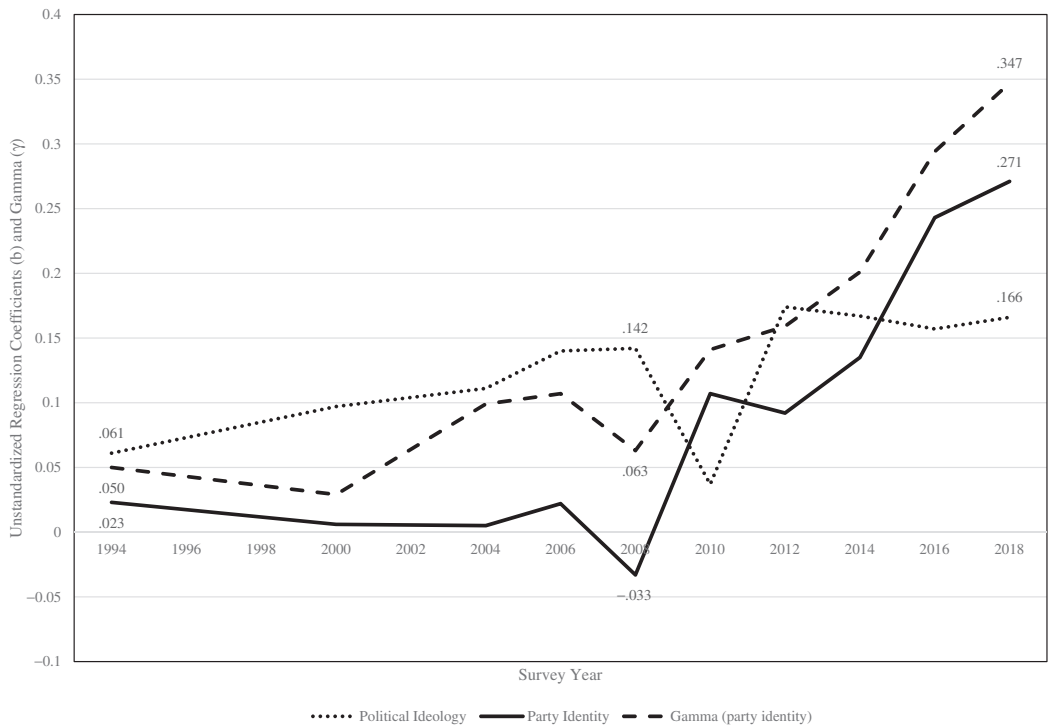


Figure 2. Immigration views by political ideology and party identification, 1994–2018.

Table 4. Multiple mediation PROCESS models of direct and indirect effects of immigration views on voting for Republican candidates in presidential elections.

Candidate	Direct effect	Indirect effect – political ideology	Indirect effect – party identity	Total effect
Trump	0.758	0.284	0.613	1.655
Romney	0.409	0.215	0.511	1.135
McCain	0.180	0.116	0.259	0.555
Bush – 2004	0.163	0.080	0.164	0.407
Bush – 2000	0.084	0.059	0.201	0.344
Dole	–0.479	0.078	0.002	–0.399
H. W. Bush	–0.164	0.017	0.151	0.004

Source: 1994, 2000, and 2004–2018 General Social Surveys.

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients are shown. All models include controls for gender, age, education, financial satisfaction, income, marital status, employment status, race, size of place, region, religious service attendance, biblical literalism, and religious affiliation.

Direct and indirect effects of immigration views on voting

The increasing alignment of views about immigration with partisan identity additionally suggests that immigration backlash may be exerting an increasing influence on American politics indirectly, by virtue of sorting voters into political parties with particular ideological alignments. To empirically assess the degree to which this has occurred, we ran multiple mediation PROCESS models—a form of path modeling based in regression analyses—for each of the presidential voting outcomes (on PROCESS modeling, see Hayes 2017; Preacher and Hayes 2008). This method uses bootstrapping to provide more accurate estimates of indirect effects than are available through other methods of indirect estimation (MacKinnon et al. 2002; Williams and MacKinnon 2008). The results presented here are from PROCESS models using 1000 bootstrapped samples to estimate indirect effects. These models tested for the mediation of immigration views on presidential voting through both political ideology and party identification simultaneously. Table 4 presents the results of these models,

showing the direct effects of views of immigration on the voting outcomes, along with the estimated indirect effects of views of immigration through political ideology and party identity. The last column displays the estimated overall effect (direct and indirect combined) for views of immigration on presidential vote choice for the last seven elections.

For voting for George H. W. Bush in 1992, there was a slight negative direct effect and slight positive indirect effect that canceled out into essentially no overall effect for immigration views. For Bob Dole in 1996, the negative direct effect of more restrictive views of immigration was strong enough to generate a significant negative overall effect in voting *against* Dole, as was also seen in Table 1. Starting with voting for George W. Bush in 2000, American voters with restrictive immigration views began to steadily and increasingly support Republican candidates. For each election cycle after 2000, the direct effects of wanting lower levels of immigration on voting for a Republican in presidential elections increase. Likewise, starting with George W. Bush in 2004, each election cycle thereafter also features increasingly larger indirect effects of immigration views on Republican voting by virtue of sorting Americans into conservative political ideology and Republican Party identification. Lending further support to our first and second hypotheses, both the direct and indirect effects of immigration views were the largest for the 2016 election.

Collectively, these analyses lend clear support for H_1 and H_2 . Views of immigration were a strong predictor of voting for Donald Trump in 2016, have become increasingly partisan in recent decades, and the direct and indirect effects of immigration views on Trump voting were uniquely strong compared to voting for Republicans in other recent presidential elections.

As we showed in Figure 2, the covariance between partisan political identity and views of immigration steadily increased after 2008. To get a visual estimation of how views of immigration have changed across party identifications over time, we created a binary variable for whether respondents reported that they wanted less immigration (1) or the same or higher levels of immigration (0). We then created dummy variables for identifying as a Republican, Democrat, or political independent/third party, and used these categories to create multiplicative interaction terms for every combination of partisan identity and survey year, shown in Table 5. This allows us to calculate and graph the predicted probabilities that Americans wanted greater restrictions on immigration for each partisan identification in each survey year, and allows the point estimates to vary freely rather than imposing a linear trend (see Aiken and West 1991).

Figure 3 shows the predicted probabilities calculated from this model for Republicans, Democrats, and independents from each survey year from 2000 until 2018. Three features of the resulting trends stand out. First, in 2000 there was very little differentiation between partisans on views of immigration. The predicted probabilities that a Democrat (0.46), independent (0.45), and Republican (0.43) wanted less immigration were all essentially the same, with Republicans the least restrictive. Second, supporting H_{2a} there is a post-9/11 increase in wanting to restrict immigration, with Republicans becoming the most restrictive and the opening of a small partisan gap on these issues. By 2006, a majority of Democrats (0.52) and independents (0.55) both reported wanting lower levels of immigration. The rise in restrictive immigration views was sharper among Republicans though, as over three-fifths (0.61) wanted less immigration by 2006.

In 2008, partisan views of immigration once again converged, but beginning in 2010, there is a steady decline in restrictive immigration views among Democrats, showing that the trend toward partisan polarization over immigration clearly pre-dated Trump. Notably, however, this trend among Democrats accelerated significantly in 2016 and 2018, with 10-point and 8-point declines in the probability of wanting to restrict immigration in each wave, respectively. There is also a decline in restrictionist views among political independents, but again notably this decrease does not begin until 2016. Before then, Republicans and independents were equally likely to hold restrictive immigration views. Clearly supporting H_3 , in the wake of Trump's election there is wider polarization on immigration views between Republicans compared to both political independents and Democrats than at any other time in the GSS data. These data also make it clear

Table 5. Binary logistic regression of wanting less immigration by year and political party.

Variables	<i>b</i>	Odds ratio
Party identity		
Independent	0.067	1.069
Democrat	0.118	1.125
Survey year		
2004	0.487**	1.628
2006	0.738***	2.092
2008	0.394**	1.482
2010	0.551***	1.736
2012	0.347*	1.414
2014	0.516***	1.676
2016	0.632***	1.882
2018	0.279*	1.322
Interactions		
Independent*2004	−0.356	0.701
Independent*2006	−0.314	0.731
Independent*2008	−0.214	0.807
Independent*2010	−0.492	0.612
Independent*2012	−0.014	0.986
Independent*2014	−0.279	0.757
Independent*2016	−0.757**	0.469
Independent*2018	−0.828***	0.437
Democrat*2004	−0.099	0.906
Democrat*2006	−0.505**	0.603
Democrat*2008	0.008	1.008
Democrat*2010	−0.403*	0.668
Democrat*2012	−0.353	0.703
Democrat*2014	−0.574**	0.563
Democrat*2016	−1.122***	0.326
Democrat*2018	−1.277***	0.279
Model stats		
Constant	−0.274	
<i>N</i>	11224	
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	0.171	
−2 log likelihood	13764.617	

* $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests); ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Source: 2000 and 2004–2018 General Social Surveys.

Notes: Republican is the reference category for party identification. The 2000 wave is the reference category for survey year.

Model also includes controls for gender, age, education, financial satisfaction, income, marital status, employment status, race and ethnicity, size of place, region, religious service attendance, biblical literalism, religious affiliation, and political ideology.

that Trump did not initiate the trend toward polarization around immigration. Rather, Trump capitalized on preexisting trends toward polarization; however, partisan polarization over restrictive views of immigrations has clearly been entrenched and widened among the public since 2016.⁵

Discussion and conclusion

Views of immigration were strongly correlated with voting patterns in the 2016 presidential election, and there is clear evidence that the relationship between these views and voting patterns was significantly stronger than in other recent presidential elections. This was the result of both the increased partisanship of immigration views over time and Donald Trump's effective use of the issue as the cornerstone of his campaign, as both the direct and indirect effects of immigration views on presidential vote choice were larger in 2016 compared to previous elections. Further, views of immigration have become even more polarized since Trump's election in 2016. The contemporary political landscape in the U.S. is more polarized over issues of immigration than at any other time in the twenty-first century.

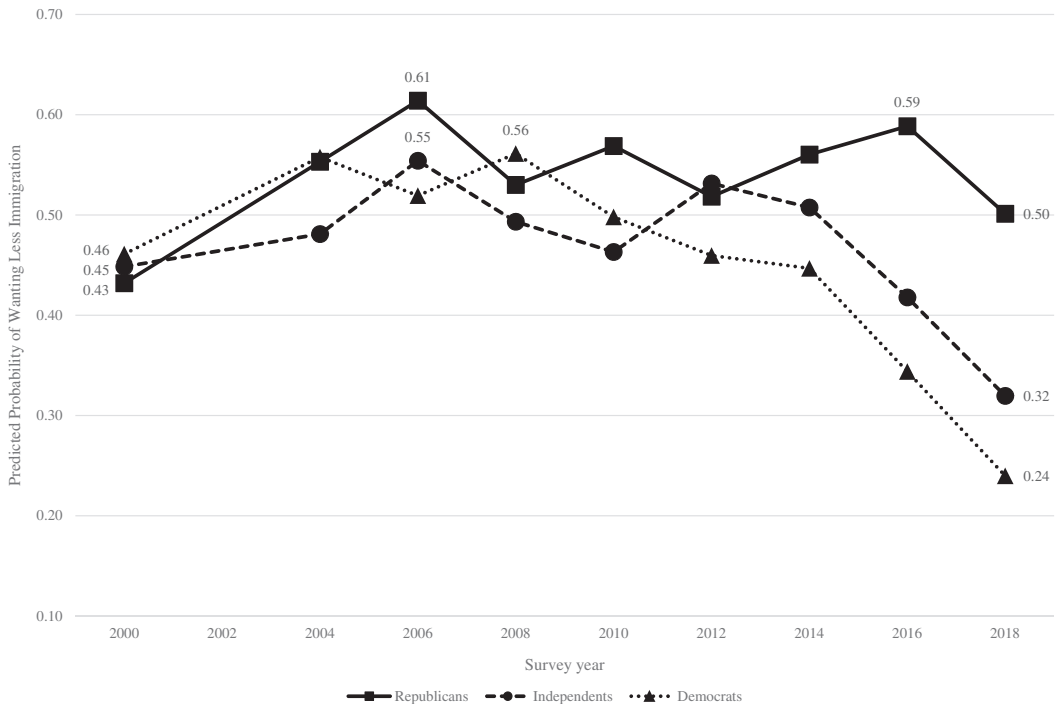


Figure 3. Predicted probability of wanting lower levels of immigration by party and survey year.

Aligning with recent research and theory on immigration backlash (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015), right-wing populism (Bonikowski 2017), and political polarization (Sides et al. 2018), our results provide further evidence that the two dominant parties in the U.S. are continuing to sort based on identity issues, particularly around attitudes regarding those seen as cultural outsiders and threats to white ethno-nationalism. The increasing political polarization around immigration starting in the early 2000s has only accelerated since Trump’s election, a finding that has recently been replicated in another national dataset tracking levels of xenophobia and Islamophobia from 2014 until 2019 (Bader et al. 2020). Consequently, the partisan battles over immigration and the rhetorical and electoral uses of “tough on immigrants” penal populism have only just begun in the U.S. At the same time, increasingly favorable views of immigration among non-Republicans suggest that while such strategies may continue to be successful in Republican primaries and safe conservative districts, they may become less effective in competitive general elections over time. This, however, remains to be seen.

Our findings support and extend the theory of immigration backlash as being increasingly central to contemporary American politics by providing high-quality, over-time empirical evidence for the increasing political polarization of immigration views, as well as by showing how the 2016 election of Donald Trump both resulted from and helped further these political dynamics. Trump’s use of racialized framing about “illegal immigrants” and “criminal aliens” has elevated the use of this tactical rhetoric, and subsequently also produced a backlash among large segments of the public. Our findings also support and extend Bonikowski’s (2017) theory of right-wing populism by showing the centrality of immigration views transitioning from a cross-cutting partisan issue into strong alignment with partisan cleavages as paving the way for Trump’s election.

A particularly striking and noteworthy aspect of this dimension of right-wing populism is that overall levels of antipathy toward immigration were actually higher in the U.S. *before* Trump was elected. The percentage of respondents to the GSS who reported wanting lower levels of immigration was at its highest level in 1994 (65%), and was at its overall highest post-9/11 level between

2004 (53%) and 2008 (54%); however, it was only when restrictive views of immigration began to align with rather than cross-cut partisanship that right-wing populism became a prominent and successful electoral strategy. Further, Trump was able to leverage his position as a party outsider against the Republican Party's failure to embrace an anti-immigrant stance as a successful primary strategy (see Bonikowski and Gidron 2016b on the use of populist rhetoric by political challengers). Where the GOP's own "post-mortem" report after losing the 2012 election called for greater inclusion of and outreach toward women and ethnic minorities (Barbour et al. 2013), Trump instead capitalized on the growing partisan rift over immigration and other cultural issues as a successful primary and electoral college strategy.

Stoking fears about cultural outsiders is a perennial strategy for motivating social groups who feel threatened to support right-wing populist politicians and punitive social policies targeting minorities. At the same time, the success of such politicians and policies can lead to a backlash against xenophobia. Since Trump's election in 2016, opposition to immigration among non-Republicans has declined significantly—a backlash to immigration backlash, as it were. This in no way signals the waning influence of immigration issues in American politics, but rather highlights the increasing partisan polarization among the public on these matters. Antipathy toward perceived and projected outsiders is a fundamental component of right-wing populism. Consequently, it has also become, and for the foreseeable future will remain, an inexorable feature of politics in the United States.

Notes

1. See, for example, the "immigration speech," delivered on August 31, 2016. A transcript is available at: <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-immigration-address-transcript-227614>.
2. We used a binary version of the immigration attitudes measure for this set of analyses for two reasons. First, conceptually we are primarily interested in people who have restrictive views of immigration, as ethnic antipathy is a key signifier of right-wing populism (Hogan and Haltinner 2015). Second, the binary variable makes the presentation of the information on immigration views simpler and clearer. In a supplemental model we analyzed the full five-outcome immigration views measure using an OLS regression model (see Table A2 in the Supplementary Appendix). The results mirror those presented for the binary outcome (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary Appendix).
3. For Dole's stance on immigration during the campaign, see <http://www.dolekemp96.org/agenda/issues/immigration.htm>. Voters in 1996 with restrictive views of immigration were much more likely to vote for third-party candidate Ross Perot. In the 2000 GSS, 66% of Perot voters wanted less immigration, compared to 42% of Clinton voters, and 38% of Dole voters.
4. $Z = 2.45$; $p < .01$ for difference between 2016 and 2014 waves; $Z = 2.67$; $p < .001$ for difference between 2018 and 2014 waves.
5. Notably there is also a decrease in the proportion of Republicans who favored restricted immigration in the 2018 wave. Further analysis shows that this occurred entirely among those who said they were "not strong Republicans" or were "independent but lean Republican." Among respondents who identified as "strong Republicans," the percentage wanting less immigration actually *increased* further in 2018. By 2018, less than half of respondents of all political party identifications other than "strong Republican" wanted to restrict immigration. In contrast, among strong Republicans, 70% wanted to restrict immigration. This further attests to the now-entrenched nature of restrictionist views of immigration in the post-Trump GOP.

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Data availability statement

GSS data are publicly available from the National Opinion Research Center: <https://gss.norc.org/get-the-data>. Data and code for replication are available from the authors.

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