

Voting in solidarity? Immigration enforcement and political participation in the U.S.

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1 Introduction

The 2000s have witnessed an unprecedented expansion of interior immigration enforcement, with a 80% increase in funding for the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, a twofold increase in the number of detentions and a threefold increase of removals/deportations ¹. Although this expansion was meant to affect mainly individuals with multiple immigration violations, there was a significant increase of those convicted after unique petty crimes, thus expanding the base of individuals who might have been both directly or indirectly affected by this measure and contributing to the erosion of public trust, especially by immigrants.

A key question is how this increase of immigration enforcement affected the political participation of citizens who lived near potential deportees. On the one hand, their political engagement might increase to express discontent with the policies that affect directly people near them, and indirectly due to the anxiety and financial hardships associated with an increase in enforcement, especially in mixed-status households. On the other hand, this kind of hardships have been linked to political disengagement in certain contexts ([Amuedo-Dorantes and Lopez \(2017\)](#)).

This paper will study whether stricter immigration enforcement had an effect on the political participation of Hispanic citizens, who are not themselves eligible for removal but who are the ethnic group exhibiting the most links with non-citizen immigrants. Recent survey evidence suggests that deportation fear is widespread for

¹See U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Budget in Brief, fiscal years 2003-2013

Hispanic individuals ², especially considering that under federal law any non-citizen – both undocumented immigrants and green card holders – can be deported.

In particular, I will study the relation between immigration enforcement and political engagement in the context of the creation of the *Secure Communities (SC)* program, a *U.S. Immigration's and Customs Enforcement (ICE)*-run deportation program that improved the partnership level between federal, state and local law enforcement agencies. This program increased the likelihood that a non-citizen immigrant would be deported conditional on being arrested, since it allowed local law enforcement agencies to check whether the individual's fingerprint was part of the *IDENT Department of Homeland Security (DHS) database* for immigration violations.

I will exploit the gradual roll-out of the SC program across counties to estimate the spillover effect of SC on the political participation of Hispanic citizens using a triple-differences framework.

2 Literature review

A growing body of work has examined the effect of immigration policies on U.S. citizens with close relationships to immigrants, especially to unauthorized immigrants. [Watson \(2014\)](#) documents that heightened immigration enforcement leads to "chilling effects" in Medicaid participation among children of non-citizens, even if the children held U.S. citizenship. [Alsan and Yang \(2018\)](#) find a negative impact of the Secure Communities program on the take up of safety net programs by Hispanic citizens, which they attribute to the greater fear of increasing the risk of deportation of a member of their social's network. Moreover, these policies can lead to negative labor market outcomes ([East et al. \(2018\)](#)), and worst children outcomes, especially when a member of the family is deported ([Amuedo-Dorantes and Lopez \(2017\)](#)). However, there is no causal evidence up to date on the effect of stricter internal immigration policies on the political behavior of citizens.

Between 1996 and 2013, approximately 5 million non-citizens were deported [Simanski \(2013\)](#). Given that this caused many families to become separating, it is not surprising to find that U.S.-born youth with foreign-born parents are twice as likely as those with U.S. born parents to participate in protest activities associated with the intensification of immigration enforcement ([Lopez and Gonzalez-Barrera \(2013\)](#)). Previous research show that the introduction of anti-immigration legislation is corre-

²Data from 2017 UCLA Luskin Los Angeles Quality of Life Index Survey

lated with an increase in Latino voter turn out [Roman et al. \(2021\)](#) and mobilization efforts ([White \(2016\)](#)).

3 Institutional background and context

Secure Communities (SC) was an immigration enforcement program administered by U.S. Immigration's and Customs Enforcement (ICE) initially active from 2008 to late 2014, and re-activated from 2017 to 2021. The SC program had a three-fold goal: "1) Identify criminal aliens through modernized information sharing; 2) Prioritize enforcement actions to ensure apprehension and removal of dangerous criminal aliens; and 3) Transform criminal alien enforcement processes and systems to achieve lasting results" ([Morton \(2009\)](#)).

The key element of the policy was expanding the ability to build domestic deportation capacity thanks to integrated databases and partnerships between local, state and federal law enforcement agencies. In particular, the program expanded the pre-existing relationship between the FBI and local and state law enforcement for bio-metric fingerprint matching to include an additional cross-check with the DHS-owned IDENT database, which contains bio-metric records of immigration applicants. Therefore, each time a person was arrested and booked, their fingerprints were submitted to the ICE. If they matched those of a non U.S. citizen, the Law Enforcement Support Center of ICE was automatically notified and each case would then be evaluated.

There was a progressive implementation of the program, starting with a pilot program under the Bush presidency and reaching full implementation to all 3,181 jurisdictions under the Obama administration on January 22, 2013. It was temporally suspended from November 20, 2014, through January 25, 2017, when reactivated by President Donald Trump in 2017. The Secure Communities has recently been ended again in January 2021 by President Joe Biden.

4 Data

To carry out this study, I will need data on the specific roll out dates of the Security Communities program per county and on political participation.

Data on the timing of the *Secure Communities* program implementation can be accessed through public, FOIA requests to ICE as in [Alsan and Yang \(2018\)](#). There

is the possibility to access micro-level detailed data on the detainers issued by ICE from 2002, including information on reason of arrest, date and county the detainer was issued, individual's country of origin and other individual-level demographics. Further information on the individuals who were actually deported from the U.S. due to fingerprint match and county-level fingerprint match submission (2008-2015) are also available through a restricted-use data agreement. I do not include these later variables for this proposal, since I am only looking at the timing of the implementation, but it opens the door to further more detailed analysis.

To calculate voter turnout rates, I first need the number of voters per race in a given area and then the citizen voting-age population per race. Combining these two variables allows me to calculate Hispanic voter turnout as a share of the total number of eligible Hispanic voters in the area. Notice that this is more relevant than calculating it as a share of registered voters that turn, since the effect on voting responses could cause previously-unregistered people to mobilize to register and vote [White \(2016\)](#).

I have identified a commercial data set maintained by *Catalist*, a data vendor that collects voter records from each state and maintains a database of almost 200 million registration records. This data set merges state voter files with both publicly-available and commercial information to create individual-level records of voting history. These are used to impute each voter's racial/ethnic background for states which do not collect that information, and this is a widely used data source in political science literature (see [White \(2016\)](#)).

There is also data on political participation at the individual level from the 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 *CPS November Voting and Registration Supplements*, which could be used to construct. This supplement ask respondents whether they registered and voted in the most recent election, and it has been carried out for every congressional and presidential election since 1964. However, a threat of using survey data in this study is that fear of deportation of someone in an individual's network can also lead to lower-than-usual survey response rate of the Hispanic population. Therefore, the empirical strategy will refer to the Catalist data set when talking about political participation data.

Finally, to construct our measure for voter turnout, I will use publicly available data from the *American Community Survey (ACS)* to obtain *citizen voting-age population (CVAP)* estimates of eligible voters per race/ethnicity.

5 Empirical strategy

To study the impact the implementation of the Secure Communities program on political participation for Hispanic citizens at county level, I will use a triple-difference strategy. This approach is motivated by the estimation strategy used in [Alsan and Yang \(2018\)](#) to study the impacts of immigration enforcement on the take-up of the *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)* and the *Supplemental Security Income (SSI)*.

This triple-differences methodology exploits the staggered roll-out of SC activation across U.S. counties as well as the differential impact of SC on Hispanics than on non-Hispanic whites and blacks within a county. A simple diff-in-diff approach is not valid in this case because there might be county-specific time-varying shocks affecting all minority groups. Using repeated county-level cross-sectional data in the ACS, I would like to estimate the following equation:

$$Y_{rcst} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 I_{ct}^{post} + \beta_2 (I_r^H \cdot I_{ct}^{post}) + \beta_3 (I_r^B \cdot I_{ct}^{post}) + \Psi X_{rcst} + \delta_{st} + \theta_{rs} + \kappa_{rt} + \varepsilon_{icst}$$

where r is race/ethnicity, c is county, s is state, and t is year. Y_{rcst} is the outcome of interest, that is, voter turnout. We exclude border counties since enforcement activities began earlier in those locations and some these counties self-selected through a voluntary pilot program ([Miles and Cox \(2014\)](#)).

I_{ct}^{post} is an indicator equal to one after the activation of the program for each county. I_r^H and I_r^B are indicators for Hispanic ethnicity and non-Hispanic blacks, respectively. X_{rcst} is a vector of control variables that are direct determinants of political participation that vary across race, county, and time. I include state year-specific fixed effects (δ_{st}) to capture state-specific policies or economic shocks that might influence political engagement, including differential state-level effects of federal immigration reforms. State-by-race/ethnicity fixed effects (θ_{rs}) are also included to control for attitudes and policies in each state that affect minority groups differentially. Race-by-year fixed effects κ_{rt} capture yearly shocks that differentially affect the different racial groups. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

The coefficient of interest is β_2 , which estimates the impact of SC implementation on Hispanic political participation response relative to non-Hispanic whites, compared to counties that have not yet activated. β_3 captures the impact of SC implementation on Black political participation response relative to non-Hispanic whites, compared to counties that have not yet activated. This serves as a placebo test, since we

would expect it the effect to be insignificant given that the deportations affect mainly Hispanic families.

The identifying assumption for the triple differences is a modified version of the parallel trend assumption for normal diff-in-diff models. In particular, it requires the differential in the outcomes of the group which should be affected (H) and group which shouldn't be affected (B) in the treatment state to trend similarly to their differential outcomes in the control state, in the absence of treatment. In our context this requires that there be no location-specific shocks timed with the staggered SC roll-out which influence the evolution of political participation outcomes for Hispanics only.

Two possible threats to identification is that there might have been other policies that have affected the evolution of political participation for Black voters but not for Hispanic; and the fact that there might been cross-ethnicity voting solidarity.

6 Proposed next steps

The first step that I need to take is analyzing the Secure Communities program better to understand if there are other possible problems in the sample selection. In particular, there were some "reluctant states" which tried to avoid implementing the program (for example: Illinois, New York), and I need to think about how to deal with them in my estimation.

The next step would be to improve my empirical strategy, especially to provide clear reasons and evidence on why it is plausible that my identifying assumption holds.

An interesting extension of the proposal, which I haven't included due to the lack of good data (time-constrained), is to look at the effects of immigration enforcement of political engagement besides voter turnout, for example, membership in political organizations, activism or attendance to protests. This would also allow us to look into the behavioral response of both citizens and non-citizens. The effects of the SC program could be arguably be different for those two sub-groups. The SC program only affects the risk of deportation for non-citizens, and they might be more reluctant to go into protests since this would increase their chance of getting arrested. We could identify here both a direct treatment effect – non-citizen participation in protests/political activity could decrease out of fear of revealing themselves, and an indirect treatment effect–ambiguous effect depending on whether the fear of increasing

the risk of deportation for someone in an individual's social network, due to attending to protests, is bigger or not than the willingness to mobilize against a perceived injustice. I would like to check if this strand of analysis is possible, conditional on finding appropriate data source. So far, I have found surveys on the political participation status of Latin and Hispanic citizens for the years 2015 and 2018. However, this is not the time frame I have based my analysis on.

Finally, this proposal has focused on the levels of political participation, but the possibility of studying how immigration enforcement has change the political preferences of Hispanic voters would be interesting. First, note that the SC program was introduced by the Democratic Party, even if the Republican Party tends to have stricter immigration-measures. Second, Hispanic voters were decisive in the 2020 elections and can play a more important role in American politics from now on. Therefore analyzing how immigration enforcement policies affect voting patterns is key to understanding the electoral landscape of the U.S.

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