Why Has Immigration Become So Polarizing? Evidence of the "Immigrant Next Door" Effect in U.S. Presidential Elections, 2012–2024

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Abstract

Immigration has become an increasingly polarized political issue in the United States, but the mechanisms linking local migrant inflows to voting outcomes remain underexplored. This paper re-examines these relationships using newly constructed measures of skill-specific migrant inflows, a shift–share instrument for exogenous variation, and an analysis window spanning the 2008–2024 Presidential Elections. In contrast with prior work, I find little evidence that low- versus high-skill inflows consistently push counties in opposite partisan directions under standard OLS; if anything, both types of arrivals are associated with small leftward shifts. However, allowing effects to vary by election year reveals sharp partisan reactions only during Trump-era elections: where indeed, high-skill inflows are associated with substantial Democratic gains, while low-skill inflows correlate with rightward shifts. These patterns are large and robust in the IV framework, suggesting a causal effect of Trump-era nativist rhetoric in polarizing how voters interpret local demographic change. I also find evidence of an Immigrant Next-Door (IND) mechanism, whereby counties with greater immigrant ancestry (proxied by Hispanic-native share) exhibit attenuated or reversed political backlash to low-skill arrivals. Interaction estimates imply that in a county where one-third of residents are Hispanic natives, a 10,000-person low-skill inflow predicts roughly a one–percentage-point leftward shift relative to otherwise similar counties. Finally, text analysis of presidential party platforms from 1992–2024 documents a major divergence in immigration rhetoric over the last two decades, with Republicans increasingly emphasizing universal restrictionism.

I. Introduction

Since the turn of the century, anti-immigration rhetoric on the political right has shifted to center nativism, stronger border security, and demographic threat in their platforms, potentially leading to electoral victories in the U.S. (Trump I and II), U.K. (Brexit referendum), Germany (AFD), Japan (nationalist factions in LDP) and other advanced economies.

Several factors might explain the rise in nativism among the political right. One reason could be that the Republican party is responding to increased nativist sentiment among Americans, arising from greater, or more "disruptive" migrant presence. A common theory of voter behavior suggests that voters punish perceived government failures when the consequences are salient and personally costly (Ferejohn 1986). As the share of immigrants in the U.S. population grows, potential concerns about labor-market competition, fiscal redistribution, and culturally-threatening demographic change may motivate affected natives to realign with anti-immigrant politics (Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013). If true, this dynamic provides political opportunity for Republicans to engage voters who feel economically or culturally left behind by recent migrant inflows through more polemic nativist rhetoric. Yet prior research also shows that positive or longer term exposures to immigrants and their families fosters warmer attitudes towards immigrants over time, which complicates a narrative that greater migrant presence mechanically creates opportunities for nativist politics (Bursztyn, Chaney, Hassan, and Rao 2024).

To study this underlying inconsistency, I ask the more specific question of *whether locally-experienced migrant inflows contribute to partisan realignment*. More specifically, I examine the correlative, and potentially causal effects of high- versus low-skill migrant inflows on county-level Republican vote share from 2008 to 2024, and study party rhetoric during a similar time horizon.

I document that partisan views on immigration are increasingly divided. In terms of political rhetoric, using LLM processing of party platforms from 1992 to 2024, I demonstrate that Republicans have gradually de-emphasized pathways to legal status and acceptance of refugee and asylum seekers, while Demographics are consistently open to unauthorized migrants. I show the Republican party under Trump more definitely portrays migrants as threatening toward American jobs and culture. The political left deemphasizes these concerns, moreso than twenty years ago. Public opinion trends among partisans mirror the rhetorical divide (ANES).

Next I turn to electoral outcomes. I broadly the heterogeneous effect of high- versus low-skilled immigrants emphasized in Mayda (2022), but only in certain contexts.

Among the election years of 2008-2024, I find meaningful partisan responses to migrant inflows occur mostly during Trump-era elections. In 2016 and 2024, I find low-skill inflows predict rightward shifts, and high-skill inflows predict leftward shifts, with effect sizes comparable to those in Mayda (2022). This effect is most pronounced when defining low-skill immigrants as having completed less than high school and high-skill immigrants as having completed a bachelor's degree. I also show that inter-election migrant inflows are far less predictive of margin shift in other years, and in some specifications, the direction of association even reverses. This suggests that partisan reactions to local migrant inflows may not be structural and depend on the party's framing of immigration, or context, of a given election cycle.

Endogeneity of migrant settlement decisions limit causal interpretation of such results. To correct for this, I implement a shift–share instrument that predicts county-level inflows using baseline (2000) national-origin shares. Under this specification, the estimated effects weaken but remain directionally consistent. In particular, high-skill inflows (under one skill split) retain a leftward impact, while low-skill effects become statistically noisy. This contrast suggests that earlier work may overstate the magnitude and consistency of the high-skill versus low-skill divide.

Finally, I investigate mechanisms. To explore whether the "Immigrant Next Door" (IND) mechanism operates in recent electoral cycles, I test whether exposure to natives with immigrant ancestry moderates reactions to new migrant inflows. Across specifications, I find clear evidence consistent with IND: counties with larger Hispanic native populations, which I claim are proxies for second- and third-generation immigrant presence, exhibit attenuated backlash to low-skill inflows and even more positive responses to high-skill inflows.

My study is the first to address the impact of local migrant inflows on political outcomes in the United States for the combined election cycles of 2008-2024. Nonetheless, I build on a large body of literature studying the political effects of immigration, as well as broader work examining the political impact of personally-experienced policy failure. Its closest antecedent is Mayda (2022), which provides a comprehensive analysis though 2016 of the how GOP vote share changes in response to high-skill versus low-skill immigrant inflows. In particular, they find that low-skill migrant inflows, since 1990, predict rightward shift; while high-skill migrant inflows predict leftward shift. I explain my additions to Mayda's work in Section II.

The paper is structured as follows: Section II reviews the related literature. Section III describes the data and empirical strategy. Section IV presents the main results. Section V explores mechanisms and heterogeneity. Section VI concludes.

II. Related Literature

A significant body of research in the political economy of immigration focuses on the effect of immigrants at the ballot box. The existing evidence suggests that immigrants often, but not always, provoke nativist backlash by pushing native voters towards anti-immigrant parties (Alesina and Tabellini 2022). Across advanced economies and time periods, surges in immigration have coincided with rise of anti-immigrant sentiment. A classic example in American history is the rise of the “Know-Nothing” Party in the 1850s, when mass Irish and German immigration triggered a political movement whose entire platform centered on nativism (Higham 1955). Similar patterns have recurred throughout U.S. history—for example, during the early twentieth century, when large waves of Southern and Eastern European immigration fueled support first for a literacy test in 1917 and later for the restrictive Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924. More recently, in the 1990s and 2010s, immigration has emerged as a key political issue. Similar effects from the modern era are observed in Austria (Halla et al. 2017), Denmark (Dustmann et al. 2019), and Scandinavia (Knusden 2021).

While the consistency of this association is compelling, its causal evidence remains limited. Isolating the impact of immigration is a perennial challenge in the field because where immigrants choose to live is likely endogenous to political outcomes. One way economists have sought to work around this issue is by exploiting quasi-experimental variation. For example, Dustmann (2019) exploit a refugee placement program to show that areas in Denmark more exposed to recent inflows of asylum seekers or low-skilled migrants have shown higher vote shares for far-right parties, except in urban municipalities where refugee inflows increased support for pro-immigrant parties. Steinmayr (2020) finds that in places where refugees did not permanently settle but only crossed, exposure increased the Freedom Party of Austria (right wing) vote share, but the opposite happened when refugees settled for a longer period of time. Other studies rely on the method de jure of immigration economics, a “shift-share” instrument, which is the method I adapt in this study. Such work includes Mayda (2022), which finds a causal and heterogeneous effect, whereby low-skill immigrants inspire rightward margin shift (a nativist reaction), and high-skill immigrant arrivals inspire leftward shift (a moderating reaction), when studying the political effects of immigration in US Presidential elections from 1992-2016.

A key idea from this corner of the literature is that longer-term exposure to migrants can undo the “backlash” arising more in short-term contexts. For example, Steinmayr (2016) shows that anti-refugee backlash in Austria diminished as natives developed direct contact with newcomers, and Bursztyn (2021) document that personal exposure to immigrants softens support for anti-Muslim candidates in presidential elections. These

findings underscore that the political reaction to immigration depend on prior exposure and social interaction.

The most relevant piece of work that this analysis builds upon is Mayda (2022). I make three contributions to Mayda and the broader literature. First, I extend the analysis to the 2016–2024 period, an era in which immigration has become substantially more polarized and during which low-skill migrant inflows under the Biden administration reached unprecedented levels. This extension is conceptually and empirically important if the political effects of immigrant inflows have changed over the course of the 21st century, and political messaging changed which I show did in III. Second, I test a second skill-split to verify the robustness of Mayda's results to the educational cutoff required for an individual to be classified as high-skill. Third, I incorporate measures of immigrant ancestry, drawing on Bursztyn et al. (2024) to examine whether greater ancestry may attenuate nativism reactionism, through an Immigrant Next-Door Channel.

III. Data

Electoral Outcomes: To measure political outcomes, I utilize the County Presidential Election Returns dataset from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab, which tabulates Democrat and Republican vote share at the county-level for all elections from 2008 to 2024. I begin with election year 2008 because the ACS 1Y microdata I used begins in 2005. While both parties have emphasized "secure borders" over the past two decades, the GOP has consistently taken a more restrictive stance on immigration, whereas Democratic platforms from 2000–2024 have emphasized pathways to legal status and protections for immigrants and asylum seekers; for instance, the 2004 Democratic platform stated that "undocumented immigrants within our borders who work hard and pay taxes should have a path to earn full participation in America," a position not mirrored in Republican platforms. For that reason, I utilize GOP vote share as the primary voting outcome reflecting "anti-immigrant" political preferences.

Immigrant Inflows: Annual county-level demographic and socioeconomic characteristics are drawn from the 1Y American Community Survey (ACS) from 2005 onward. The ACS provides county-level aggregates on race, birthplace (which implies nativity), citizenship, and educational attainment. These variables serve both as controls and as inputs for constructing a standard shift–share instrument based on counties' baseline immigrant-origin composition. The main operational measure of local immigrant exposure is the percent foreign-born, supplemented by high-skill versus low-skill immigrant shares and measures of immigrant ancestry. I exclude PUMAS that are too small to have a county associated with them in the IPUMS. To construct the shift-share instrument, I used the decennial 2000 census, for base shares by national origin country.

Immigrant Ancestry: As a preliminary measure, I use ethnicity-based shares as a crude proxy for immigrant ancestry at the county level, such as the share Hispanic or Asian, as drawn from the ACS.

Party Sentiment: To demonstrate growing partisan divides on the policy issue of immigration, I utilize text-sentiment from the party platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties from 1992 to 2024. I collect text data for the party platforms from the Presidential Data Project, and construct an original dataset recording mentions of immigration, border security, or pathways to citizenship in Party Platforms, through which I can apply GABRIEL text analysis and ranking system, which is a specially designed LLM for social science research designed by recent Harvard grads.

Controls: Standard demographic and economic controls, including county population, age structure, racial composition, income, education, unemployment, and industry mix, are taken from the ACS to account for local characteristics that may influence both migrant inflows and political outcomes.

III. Empirical Strategy

The methods used for this analysis include ordinary least-squares regression, instrumental variable two-staged least squares regression, and text sentiment analysis with GABRIEL. All of my code may be found on my github repository, linked here.

As a baseline, I replicate and extend the approach of Mayda 2022 relating local immigrant inflows to political changes. I begin with OLS, controlling for lagged partisanship and log(population), as well as county and year fixed effects, and demographic controls. My main outcome variable is two-party GOP vote share in election years, from 2008 to 2024. My main independent variables are migrant inflows, including all migrant inflows, high-skill migrant inflows, and low-skill migrant inflows in the 3-Years prior to the election year. They are scaled so that the coefficient represents the percentage point (pp) change in GOP vote share ($GOPShare_{i,t}$) associated with a 10,000-person increase in migrant inflows ($\Delta M_{i,t}$).

I utilize two kinds of skill-splits to categorize migrants as high versus low skill. I first repeat the Mayda (2022) skill-split, which I coin as skill-split A. In this split, individuals who have not completed high-school are classified as low-skill. I second introduce skill-split B, where individuals who have at most completed high-school are classified as low-skill.

Since Mayda identify a heterogeneity in the impact of high-skill immigrant (finished high school) versus low-skill immigrant inflows, I will also separate the stock of immigrants similarly. For robustness, I employ a second skill split, where high-skill is defined as having more than a high-school education, and low-skill is defined as having at most completed high school. In another variant of the regression, I allow for time-varying effects to see if they have changed over time, by interacting the immigrant share with the election year. I also interact with a Trump Dummy. In a third variant of the baseline OLS, I interact the main effect of 3Y Migrant Inflows with the share of hispanic natives in a county, to proxy for immigrant ancestry. The specifications are below.

$$GOPShare_{it} = \beta_L \Delta M_{it}^L + \beta_H \Delta M_{it}^H + \gamma' X_{it} + \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{1}$$

where $X_{it} = \big(GOPShare_{i,t-1}, \log Pop_{it}, HispAnc_i, White_i, NativeLTHS_i\big)$.

In practice, I estimate variants of this specification using (i) total inflows $\Delta M_{it}^{\text{All}}$, (ii) $(\Delta M_{it}^{L,A}, \Delta M_{it}^{H,A})$ and (iii) $(\Delta M_{it}^{L,B}, \Delta M_{it}^{H,B})$.

$$GOPShare_{it} = \beta_L \Delta M_{it}^L + \sum_{t' \in \mathcal{T} \setminus t_0} \delta_{L,t'} \big(\Delta M_{it}^L \times \mathbf{1}\{t = t'\}\big) + \gamma' X_{it} + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{it}. \tag{2}$$

Here $\mathcal{T}$ is the set of election years, t_0 is the omitted base year, and I drop year fixed effects to avoid collinearity with the interactions. I estimate this separately for low- and high-skill inflows under each skill split.

$$GOPShare_{it} = \beta_L \Delta M_{it}^L + \theta_L \big(\Delta M_{it}^L \times Trump_t\big) + \gamma' X_{it} + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{3}$$

with analogous specifications for high-skill inflows. $Trump_t$ is an indicator for presidential elections in which Donald Trump heads the Republican ticket.

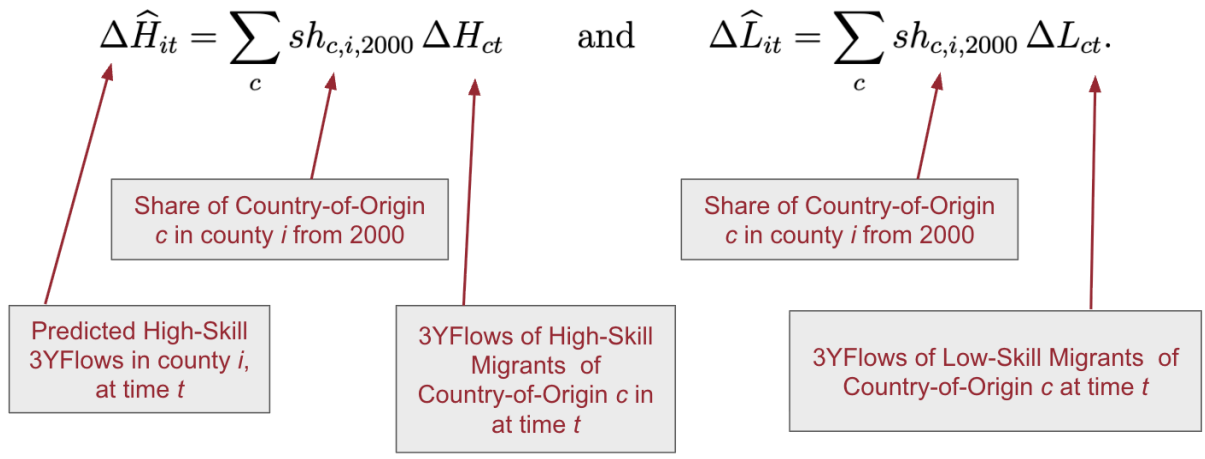
$$GOPShare_{it} = \beta_L \Delta M_{it}^L + \rho_L \big(\Delta M_{it}^L \times HispAnc_i\big) + \gamma' X_{it} + \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{4}$$

and similarly for high-skill inflows. The interaction coefficient ρ_L captures how immigrant ancestry moderates the association between low-skill inflows and GOP vote share.

These results provide descriptive evidence of how GOP vote shares vary with high-skill versus low-skill immigrant vote share, but do not uncover the causal effect of such inflows, since immigrant location choice is endogenous. For example, immigrants may choose to settle more in areas with pro-immigrant (Democratic) partisanship; and as a result of a mean reversion effect, Democratic counties shift right more than Republican counties between elections. For that reason, I also utilize a standard shift-share

instrument at the county level. I interact each county's baseline immigrant composition with national immigrant inflows over time, split by-skill level, which yields a predicted immigrant share that varies with national supply shocks but by county is anchored in pre-determined shares.

My first-stage specification is as follows:



I run a baseline IV as well as two variants. In one variant,I interact with a "Trump year" (indicator for whether election year is 2016 or 2024). In a second, I interact with the immigrant ancestry proxy.

$$GOPShare_{it} = \beta_L^{IV} \Delta \hat{L}_{it} + \beta_H^{IV} \Delta \hat{H}_{it} + \gamma' X_{it} + \alpha_i + \lambda_t + u_{it}.$$

$$GOPShare_{it} = \beta_L^{IV} \Delta \hat{L}_{it} + \theta_L^{IV} \left(\Delta \hat{L}_{it} \times Trump_t\right) + \beta_H^{IV} \Delta \hat{H}_{it} + \theta_H^{IV} \left(\Delta \hat{H}_{it} \times Trump_t\right) + \gamma' X_{it} + \alpha_i + \lambda_t + u_{it}.$$

$$GOPShare_{it} = \beta_L^{IV} \Delta \hat{L}_{it} + \rho_L^{IV} \left(\Delta \hat{L}_{it} \times HispAnc_i\right) + \beta_H^{IV} \Delta \hat{H}_{it} + \rho_H^{IV} \left(\Delta \hat{H}_{it} \times HispAnc_i\right) + \gamma' X_{it} + \alpha_i + \lambda_t + u_{it}.$$

I finally use a tool called GABRIEL for text-based sentiment analysis. GABRIEL is an open source attribute-ranking tool developed in two recent Harvard senior theses (Asirvatham and Mokski 2023). GABRIEL leverages LLMs trained on human-labeled ranking data to score text along specified conceptual dimensions. I first manually extract any mention of immigration in the full Democratic and Republic presidential party platforms. I then feed the relevant sections of each platform to GABRIEL, which scores

each platform on six immigration-related attributes that I specified. I study six attributes: emphasis on pathways to legal status for all immigrants, emphasis on strengthening the border, tolerance of unauthorized immigrants, acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers, alignment with rhetoric that *immigrants take American jobs*, and alignment with rhetoric that immigrants threaten American culture. Higher values indicate stronger rhetorical emphasis or support for the attribute.

IV. Results

OLS Results

Baseline Model

I begin by estimating a baseline OLS model to measure the association between short-term migrant inflows, defined as the total inflow during the three years prior to an election, and county-level voting outcomes in that election year. In contrast with prior work, I find that county-level changes in the low- and high- skill migrant stock almost associate with small upticks in Democratic vote share (approximately 2pp per 10K inflows), at the significance level. I find these directions to be consistent with either skill-split. Such results are displayed in **Table 1**.

Time-Varying OLS

In a variant of the baseline OLS, I allow the effect of migrant inflows to vary by election year. I display the results in **Table 2a**. I find few significant effects for low-skill arrivals, such as in 2012 and 2020 of the skill split where those years' association trended more left. On the high-skill end, I find the association with leftward shift to be strongest in 2016, with approximately 1 percentage points of shift associated under skill split A and 1.2 percentage points of shift associated under skill split B, per 10,000 arrivals. I also find a significant association from the most-education group (High-Skill, Split B) in 2024. Since both election years coincide with Trump, I ran a second variant of the baseline OLS, interacting with a dummy variable for a "Trump Year." These results are displayed in **Table 2b**. Indeed, the trend suggested in Mayda is strongest in Trump-election years, where the association between high-skill inflows leans strongly leftward; and the association between left-skill inflows and margin shift leans strongly rightward. I provide evidence these effects are causal in the next section on instrumental variables

OLS With Ancestry Interactions

I find evidence that immigrant ancestry, as proxied by native Hispanic share, attenuates the association between —and in some cases reverses—the political association between low-skill migrant arrivals and Republican support. The negative interaction term ("Low-Skill × Hispanic Ancestry") implies that in counties with larger native Hispanic populations, low-skill inflows are associated with a *more Democratic* shift, consistent with both a direct effect (the voting behavior of Hispanic-ancestry natives themselves) and an indirect Immigrant Next-Door effect, in which exposure and cultural bridging generate greater tolerance among non-Hispanic residents. Substantively, the estimates imply that a 10,000-person low-skill inflow produces roughly a 1-percentage-point leftward shift in a county where one-third of residents are Hispanic natives, relative to otherwise similar counties.

Instrumental Variable Results

Shift-Share Instrumental Variable Results

All three instruments possess F-Stats approximately with exceeding 10[1]. The first-stage is displayed in **Table 3.** In the 2SLS version of my main regression, I find that the high-skill group, as defined by skill-split A, retains its explanatory power. I estimate a 4pp leftward (towards Democrats) margin shift per 10,000 migrant inflows who completed high-school. This aligns with previous literature. However, this effect disappears once I redefine the highest-skill group as having any additional education, limiting the interpretability of the first result. In the low-skill group, I find no significant effects, and the direction of association seems to vary based on the definition. In particular, the least-educated group—low-skill individuals as defined by skill-split A—correlate with substantial GOP shift, but the effect is not well-identified based on the standard errors.

IV With Trump Interaction

Second, I interact the instrument of predicted migrant inflows with the "Trump Year" dummy. We find in **Tables 4a** and **4b** that predicted migrant inflows exhibit a clear partisan response pattern: while inflows generally increase GOP vote share, the negative and statistically significant interaction with Trump-year elections indicates that counties react more nativistically during the 2016 and 2020 cycles. Under both the A and B skill-split definitions, low-skill inflows show modest baseline effects but consistently positive Trump-year interactions, while high-skill inflows generate substantially larger baseline shifts toward the GOP alongside strongly negative Trump-year interactions. Taken together, these estimates suggest that Trump-era

[1] Another approach to fashioning this shift-share instrument would utilize base shares for origin x skill group. I repeat the experiment with that instrument and achieve similar results, which are in Appendix.

elections uniquely activated nativist sentiment: inflows that ordinarily benefit Republicans became more politically polarizing, with counties responding more sharply—and in opposite directions by skill composition—during Trump election years.

The consistency of this relationship between the baseline OLS and the I.V. suggests a causal effect. I discuss limitations to interpretation in Section X.

IV With Ancestry Interactions

My third experiment with the IV utilizes share of natives with Hispanic ethnicity or Asian race to proxy for immigrant ancestry. I evaluate the effect of the interaction between immigrant ancestry and predicted inflows. The results of this experiment are displayed in **Table 5.**

I find consistent evidence of an Immigrant Next-Door Effect: counties with larger Hispanic native populations—used here as a proxy for immigrant ancestry—exhibit *attenuated political backlash* to predicted migrant inflows. For low-skill inflows (specifications 2a and 2b), the interaction terms are negative and statistically meaningful, indicating that ancestry moderates or even reverses the GOP-leaning response seen in counties with fewer co-ethnic residents. In contrast, high-skill inflows show a *much stronger* negative interaction with ancestry, implying that in places with deeper immigrant roots, high-skill arrivals are associated with substantially lower Republican vote share, consistent with longer-term social integration or cultural affinity reducing nativist reactions. The magnitude of these coefficients—large, precisely estimated, and robust across A and B skill definitions—suggests that immigrant ancestry plays a significant role in shaping how communities politically interpret new migrant inflows. Taken together, these findings imply that immigration's political impact is not universal but conditional: proximity to and familiarity with immigrant-origin populations dampens the backlash that emerges elsewhere.

GABRIEL Results

Finally, as a descriptive exercise to understand how political rhetoric may respond to or drive these effects, I utilize a LLM attribute ranking tool called GABRIEL and apply it to party platforms. This allows me to graph party sentiment towards various aspects of immigration policy over time. I study six attributes: emphasis on pathways to legal status for all immigrants, emphasis on strengthening the border, tolerance of unauthorized immigrants, acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers, alignment with rhetoric that *immigrants take American jobs*, and alignment with rhetoric that immigrants threaten American culture.

Analysis of party platform text using GABRIEL text ratings reveals how the divide in U.S. immigration rhetoric between the Democratic and Republican Party grew substantially between 1992 and 2024. Across attributes emphasizing legal pathways, tolerance of unauthorized immigrants, and acceptance of refugees, the Democratic party platforms show a steady upward trend, converging on consistently pro-immigrant positions by the 2010s. In contrast, Republican platforms move in the opposite direction: modest openness in the early 1990s gives way to persistent emphasis on border enforcement and sharp declines in rhetorical support for legalization, refugee acceptance, or tolerance for the undocumented.

The divergence is particularly pronounced in labor-market and cultural threat frames. Since 2008, Republican platforms increasingly stress that immigrants take American jobs or threaten American culture, whereas Democrats nearly eliminate threat-based language altogether. These patterns indicate that what was once a relatively bipartisan issue has transformed into a highly sorted, identity-linked domain of political messaging, with Republicans adopting a consistently restrictionist and threat-focused narrative as Democrats consolidate a pro-immigrant rhetorical stance. This polarization provides important context for the voting results in the paper: shifts in county-level responses to migrant inflows—especially during Trump-era elections—occur against a backdrop of rapidly widening rhetorical distance between the major parties.

There are some exceptions to this trend, such as in 2024, when the Democratic party placed an unprecedented level of emphasis on securing the border. This most likely reflects a correction for challenges faced at the Southern border during the Biden administration.

Since 2008, Republican platforms increasingly stress that immigrants take American jobs or threaten American culture, whereas Democrats nearly eliminate threat-based language altogether. These patterns indicate that what was once a relatively bipartisan issue has transformed into a highly sorted, identity-linked domain of political messaging, with Republicans adopting a consistently restrictionist and threat-focused narrative as Democrats consolidate a pro-immigrant rhetorical stance. This polarization provides important context for the voting results in the paper: shifts in county-level responses to migrant inflows—especially during Trump-era elections—occur against a backdrop of rapidly widening rhetorical distance between the major parties.

V. Discussion, Limitations, and Future Directions

This analysis makes several contributions to the literature's understanding of how experiencing local migrant inflows affect national political outcomes.

First, I document that indeed the Republican party has solidified its position as an anti-immigrant, and nativist-leaning party in recent decades through GABRIEL analysis. Historically, Democrats and Republicans found common ground on immigration issues like acceptance of asylum and refugee, but that era is no longer. Future studies of the political effects of immigration thus may treat the GOP as the anti-immigrant party with relatively little ambiguity, though analyses would benefit from modeling attitudes along a continuous spectrum of immigrant tolerance, and distinguishing between local versus federal political responses, given how the two may differ in their capacity to impact immigration.

Second, I show the separation in association between low-skill inflows and high-skill inflows is less salient as presented in the Mayda work. For example, under a different skill split, which includes individuals who completed high school in the lowest skills category, I do not get significant results from the OLS. What I do find, though, is that the separation is very true (and plausibly causal, according to IV results) during Trump years of 2016 and 2024. These election years featured particularly inflammatory rhetoric surrounding immigration. Trump ran for re-election in 2020, retaining his 2016 party platform. At that point, priorities may have shifted to center COVID, which may explain the lack of effect then. At the same time, I do find causal evidence from my IV results that high school inflows tend to push counties towards the Democratic Party in any year.

There are many ways to interpret the double effect during the Trump years of 2016 and 2024. One is that polemic or inflammatory speech about immigrants tends to polarize voters into nativist and non-nativist camps. Future studies may surely tackle this mechanism via more fine-grained speech analysis, and link to other rhetoric of “zero-sum” thinking, like protectionism.

Third, I provide evidence of an Immigrant Next-Door Mechanism whereby the presence of immigrant ancestors (which I proxy utilizing the share of Hispanic natives) attenuates the reaction. I observe this result in both the baseline OLS and IV specification. Much empirical work is needed to fully characterize the IND channel, building on the great foundation established by Burstyzn 2024.

From an econometric standpoint, my current IV setup raises a potential endogeneity concern. The interaction between Hispanic-native share and predicted inflows may not

satisfy the exclusion restriction[2]. There are certainly ways of fashioning of shift-share instrument for this interaction that are above the technical level of this paper.

From the more interesting and broader theoretical standpoint, many questions remain about how the IND channel materializes. For example, as the immigrant share of the U.S. has grown, it is puzzling that nativist rhetoric has become *more* successful in mobilizing voters (at least, according to my and Mayda's IV results). Such analysis may benefit from an underlying microeconometric model for a voter.

My analysis faces a number of empirical limitations that motivate updating. For instance, I only utilize PUMAs large enough to contain a county label[3]. Therefore, I am missing whether there are biases in effects in less populated PUMAs. Also, I use 2000's decennial census for base shares, which may cause endogeneity concerns. I recommend in future work to go farther back to 1980, in line with Mayda. My measurement of immigrant ancestry utilizes a proxy instead of linking Finally, as I mentioned, more work could be done to test the robustness of my instrument or fashion a separate one to include the interactions with ancestry.

VI. Conclusion

This paper revisits the political consequences of local migrant inflows in an era of sharply polarized immigration rhetoric. Using newly assembled county-level data, skill-specific inflow measures, and shift–share instruments, I show that the relationship between immigration and voting has evolved in ways that depart meaningfully from earlier findings such as Mayda (2020). Broadly, I find that the low-skill versus high-skill distinction is less consistently predictive today, with little evidence of separation under OLS and only selective separation under IV. Instead, political responses to immigration appear highly contingent on *context*—most notably the Trump-era rhetorical environment, in which counties exhibit pronounced nativist reactions to low-skill inflows and more favorable responses to high-skill inflows. These patterns underscore the importance of political framing, party messaging, and the broader information environment in shaping how voters interpret local demographic change.

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[2] Hispanic ancestry is itself an equilibrium outcome of historical migration and subsequent residential sorting, and counties with larger Hispanic-native populations may have unobserved characteristics, such as stronger migrant networks, or cultural openness, that simultaneously affect both contemporary inflow dynamics and Democrat-leaning political preferences. If so, the ancestry measure could capture endogenous selection into places with longstanding migration histories rather than serving as a purely exogenous moderator. Burstzyn 2024 outline an approach to instrument for ancestry.

[3] I justify this change with the fact that a large proportion of all migrant inflows select well-populated PUMAs to live in, but I acknowledge more precise measurement requires including the county crosswalk.

I also document evidence of an Immigrant Next-Door mechanism: counties with larger immigrant-ancestry populations—proxied by the Hispanic-native share—exhibit attenuated or reversed political reactions to new low-skill arrivals. This moderation arises in both OLS and IV specifications, suggesting that proximity, familiarity, and cultural bridging play a meaningful role in mitigating backlash. At the same time, the ancestry interaction raises identification challenges, as ancestry may be shaped by historical sorting and network-driven migration patterns. Future work would benefit from more rigorous instrumentation of the interaction term and from richer microdata linking individual voting behavior to exposure and social networks. More broadly, the findings invite further investigation into why nativist rhetoric has grown more electorally potent even as the nation has become more immigrant-origin—a puzzle that connects U.S. dynamics to rising anti-immigrant sentiment internationally. Continued progress will require blending causal inference with political communication, social identity, and network-based approaches to understand how demographic change is processed into political behavior.

VII. Acknowledgements

Anne, thank you for all your help in putting this together! I have learned so much in this course.

VII. Tables and Figures

Figure 1. Growing Divide in Partisan Views on Immigration, As Measured by Text Sentiment of Party Platform Across Six Attributes

Ratings are generated using GABRIEL, a large-language-model–based text classifier trained on human-coded judgments. I feed the full Democratic and Republican presidential party platforms and score each platform on multiple immigration-related attributes, including legalization pathways, border enforcement, tolerance of unauthorized immigrants, acceptance of refugees, and economic or cultural threat framing. Higher values indicate stronger rhetorical emphasis or support for the attribute. The figure illustrates the widening partisan divergence in immigration rhetoric over time.

Table 1. Baseline Relationship Between Migrant Inflows in Three Years Before Election And GOP Two-Party Vote Share

	1	2A	2B
Δ Migrant Stock (3Y) per 10,000	−0.002***		
	(0.001)		
Δ Low-Skill Migrant Stock (3Y) per 10,000		−0.002***	−0.001
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Δ High-Skill Migrant Stock (3Y) per 10,000		−0.001	−0.002*
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Num.Obs.	1605	1605	1605
Std.Errors	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips
FE: county_fips	X	X	X
FE: YEAR	X	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Model controls include log(population), hispanic native share, white share, native less-than-high-school share, lagged GOP vote share, as well as county and year fixed effects. Outcomes span presidential outcomes for 2008-2024, and are specified as the two-party vote share. Skill-split A (2A) define low-skill as not having completed high-school; Skill-Split B (2B) define low-skill as having completed at most high-school. Migrant inflows are scaled such that the coefficient represents the percentage change in vote share explained by a 10K increase in migrant flows for the three-years prior to that election year.

Table 2a. Year-Varying Relationship Between Migrant Inflows in Three Years Before Election And GOP Two-Party Vote Share

	A: Low & High Skill (A) × Year	B: Low & High Skill (B) × Year
Δ Low-skill per 10,000	0.001	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.001)
Δ High-skill per 10,000	0.003	0.006*
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Low-skill × 2012	−0.004	−0.005+
	(0.004)	(0.003)
Low-skill × 2016	0.001	−0.000
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Low-skill × 2020	−0.004	−0.003+
	(0.003)	(0.002)
Low-skill × 2024	−0.002	−0.001
	(0.004)	(0.002)
High-skill × 2012	−0.004+	−0.005*
	(0.002)	(0.002)
High-skill × 2016	−0.013***	−0.018***
	(0.002)	(0.002)
High-skill × 2020	−0.002	−0.002
	(0.003)	(0.003)
High-skill × 2024	−0.003	−0.006+
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Num.Obs.	1605	1605
Std.Errors	by: county_fips	by: county_fips
FE: county_fips	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Flows are scaled so coefficients represent the change in GOP two-party vote share associated with a 10,000-person increase in 3-year migrant inflows. Interaction terms capture year-specific effects by skill group. Model controls include log(population), hispanic native share, white share, native less-than-high-school share, as well as county and year fixed effects. Outcomes span presidential outcomes for 2008-2024, and are specified as the two-party vote share. Skill-split A (2A) define low-skill as not having completed high-school; Skill-Split B (2B) define low-skill as having completed at most high-school. Migrant inflows are scaled such that the coefficient represents the percentage change in vote share explained by a 10K increase in migrant flows for the three-years prior to that election year.

Table 2b. Trump vs. Non-Trump Year Relationships Between Migrant Inflows in Three Years Before Election And GOP Two-Party Vote Share

	1	2a: Low & High A × Trump	2b: Low & High B × Trump
Total Inflow (3Y, per 10k)	0.001		
	(0.001)		
Total Inflow × Trump	−0.004**		
	(0.001)		
Low-Skill Inflow		−0.001	−0.000
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Low-Skill Inflow × Trump		0.007**	0.005*
		(0.003)	(0.002)
High-Skill Inflow		0.003*	0.004*
		(0.001)	(0.002)
High-Skill Inflow × Trump		−0.008***	−0.012***
		(0.001)	(0.002)
Num.Obs.	1605	1605	1605
R2	0.965	0.966	0.966
R2 Within	0.272	0.283	0.290
Std.Errors	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips
FE: county_fips	X	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Coefficients represent the change in GOP two-party vote share associated with a 10,000-person increase in 3-year migrant inflows. Interaction terms capture year-specific responses by migrant skill group. All models control for log(population), Hispanic-native share, White share, and native less-than-high-school share, and include county and year fixed effects. Outcomes cover presidential elections from 2008–2024. Skill-Split A defines low-skill migrants as those without a high-school diploma; Skill-Split B defines low-skill migrants as those with at most a high-school degree. Scaled inflow variables allow coefficients to be interpreted as percentage-point changes in GOP vote share attributable to a 10K increase in migrant inflows over the preceding three years.

Table 2c. Trump vs. Non-Trump Year Relationships Between Migrant Inflows in Three Years Before Election And GOP Two-Party Vote Share

	1	2a	2b	3a	3b
Inflow (10k)	0.001				
	(0.002)				
Low-Skill (10k)		0.003	0.003		
		(0.002)	(0.002)		
High-Skill (10k)				−0.000	−0.001
				(0.002)	(0.003)
Inflow × Hispanic Ancestry	−0.016+				
	(0.008)				
Low-Skill × Hispanic Ancestry		−0.030*	−0.026*		
		(0.012)	(0.010)		
High-Skill × Hispanic Ancestry				−0.012	−0.002
				(0.011)	(0.013)
Num.Obs.	1605	1605	1605	1605	1605
R2	0.973	0.973	0.973	0.973	0.973
R2 Within	0.334	0.331	0.336	0.331	0.326
Std.Errors	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips
FE: county_fips	X	X	X	X	X
FE: YEAR	X	X	X	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

This table estimates how 3-year migrant inflows (scaled by 10,000) affect GOP vote share and how these effects differ in counties with greater Hispanic ancestry. Positive or negative interaction terms indicate whether immigrant ancestry mitigates or strengthens political responses to inflows across low- and high-skill groups (Skill Splits A and B). Models include county and year fixed effects and demographic controls. Models 2a and 3a utilize Skill-Split A; models 2b and 3b utilize skill-split B.

Table 3. First-Stage for Shift-Share Instrument

	Overall inflow	Low-skill inflow (A)	High-skill inflow (A)	Low-skill inflow (B)	High-skill inflow (B)
Overall instrument Z	0.008**				
	(0.003)				
Low-skill instrument (A): Z_lowa		0.004**			
		(0.002)			
High-skill instrument (A): Z_higha			0.016**		
			(0.006)		
Low-skill instrument (B): Z_lowb				0.006**	
				(0.002)	
High-skill instrument (B): Z_highb					0.032***
					(0.009)
Num.Obs.	6316	6316	6316	6316	6316
R2	0.426	0.362	0.509	0.361	0.573
R2 Within	0.005	0.003	0.006	0.005	0.010
Std.Errors	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips
FE: county_fips	X	X	X	X	X
FE: YEAR	X	X	X	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

This regression presents the first-stage estimates for the shift–share instrument used to identify the causal effect of migrant inflows on county-level voting outcomes. The instrument is constructed by interacting county-level baseline shares of foreign-born residents from each country of origin (measured in 2000) with national 3-year inflows from the same origin groups, at different skill-levels. Intuitively, counties with historically higher exposure to migrants from origin o receive larger predicted inflows when the U.S. as a whole experiences increased arrivals from that group. That is why the coefficient is positive.[4] Aggregating these origin-specific predicted inflows yields shift–share instruments for total, low-skill, and high-skill migrant inflows at the county level.

[4] An ongoing limitation is that the coefficient on the instrument is small. The estimates in Mayda 2022 achieve somewhat higher magnitudes. Outside of this paper, I utilize a more refined instrument which calculates base-shares at the origin x skill group. Under that setup, the first-stage is similarly weak.

Table 4a. Second-Stage Least Squares Using Shift-Share Instrument

	Total inflow (IV)	Low-skill inflow A (IV)	Low-skill inflow B (IV)	High-skill inflow A (IV)	High-skill inflow B (IV)
Total inflow (3Y) per 10,000	−0.067				
	(0.067)				
High-skill inflow (3Y) / 10,000				−0.043*	0.022
				(0.022)	(0.023)
Low-skill inflow (3Y) / 10,000		0.512	−0.388		
		(2.565)	(1.939)		
GOP share, last election	0.702**	−0.152	1.243	0.555***	0.395***
	(0.264)	(2.888)	(4.107)	(0.060)	(0.053)
Num.Obs.	1605	1605	1605	1605	1605
R2	0.973	0.973	0.973	0.973	0.973
R2 Within	0.335	0.332	0.335	0.336	0.327
Std.Errors	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips
FE: county_fips	X	X	X	X	X
FE: YEAR	X	X	X	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

This regression presents the 2SLS estimates for the shift–share instrument used to identify the causal effect of migrant inflows on county-level voting outcomes, for the outcome variable of two-party GOP share. The regression is at the county-level. Controls include lagged partisanship, hispanic native share, white share, share of individuals in the county in the least-educated bin, log(population), and county and year fixed effects.

Table 4b. Second-Stage Least Squares with Interaction of Trump-Year Dummy

	1	2a	2b	3a	3b
Fit Inflow	0.035***				
	(0.005)				
Fit Inflow × Trump	−0.007***				
	(0.002)				
Fit Low-Skill Inflow		0.009	0.032***		
		(0.013)	(0.006)		
Fit Low-Skill Inflow × Trump		0.011*	0.004+		
		(0.004)	(0.002)		
Fit High-Skill Inflow				0.069***	0.079***
				(0.006)	(0.011)
Fit High-Skill Inflow × Trump				−0.012***	−0.014***
				(0.002)	(0.002)
Num.Obs.	1728	1728	1728	1728	1728
R2	0.966	0.965	0.965	0.968	0.967
R2 Within	0.291	0.261	0.275	0.324	0.300
Std.Errors	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips
FE: county_fips	X	X	X	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Fitted inflow measures (per 10K migrants over 3 years) are constructed separately for low- and high-skill migrants under two skill-splits. Models 2a and 3a use split A, where the lowest-skill group did not complete HS. Models 2b and 3b use skill-split B, where the lowest-skill group may have completed HS. Each model includes an interaction between predicted inflows and an indicator for Trump election years, capturing whether counties responded differently to migrant inflow shocks in 2016 and 2024. I exclude 2020 because nativist rhetoric was less that year.

Table 5. Second-Stage Least-Squares, Interaction Between Predicted Migrant Inflows by Skill-Level and Immigrant Ancestry Proxy (Hispanic Native Share)

	1	2a	2b	3a	3b
Fit Inflow (10k)	−0.000				
	(0.009)				
Fit Low-Skill (10k)		−0.027	−0.014		
		(0.020)	(0.010)		
Fit High-Skill (10k)				0.009	0.054***
				(0.015)	(0.016)
Fit Inflow × Hispanic Ancestry	−0.071***				
	(0.019)				
Low-Skill × Hispanic Ancestry		−0.078+	−0.062**		
		(0.041)	(0.021)		
High-Skill × Hispanic Ancestry				−0.144***	−0.244**
				(0.031)	(0.082)
Num.Obs.	1728	1728	1728	1728	1728
R2	0.973	0.973	0.973	0.974	0.973
R2 Within	0.355	0.348	0.352	0.360	0.354
Std.Errors	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips	by: county_fips
FE: county_fips	X	X	X	X	X
FE: YEAR	X	X	X	X	X

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

This table reports second-stage IV estimates evaluating how predicted migrant inflows, overall, low-skill, and high-skill, affect county-level GOP two-party vote share, and how these effects vary with local immigrant ancestry, proxied by the Hispanic native share. All inflow measures are scaled so coefficients represent the effect of a 10,000-person increase in predicted 3-year migrant inflows. Interaction terms capture how ancestry moderates political responses to immigration exposure. All models include county and year fixed effects and control for log population, white share, and native lowest-education bin share. Models 2a and 3a utilize Skill-Split A, whereby the lowest-skill group is defined as having not yet completed high-school. Models 2b and 3b utilize Skill-Split B, whereby the lowest-skill group is defined as having completed no more than high-school.

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