NATIONALISM & IMMIGRATION FEARS IN THE 2016 ELECTION

Kira Lowe

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University of Texas at Dallas

Dr. Harold Clarke & Dr. Karl Ho

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Introduction

Partisan voting behavior in the U.S. has been on the rise through the 21st century

(Abramowitz & Webster 2016). Parties are more ideologically divided than ever before, and

these rifts were on sharp display during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. One particularly

divisive issue in recent American politics is immigration; this issue was also a major component

of the Donald Trump campaign. Taking action to deport illegal immigrants as well as suspend or

cease immigration from predominantly Muslim countries and from Central America were highly

debated campaign promises. At many rallies during and since the campaign, supporters break

into chants of "build that wall," referring to Trump's promise to build a wall on the U.S-Mexico

border.

In media coverage of the 2016 election, many sources assert that the "America First"

stance of the Trump campaign incited nationalistic sentiments and fueled fears, real or imagined,

about the cultural and economic costs of immigration. After his unexpected victory, a general

narrative has emerged that American nationalism played a major role in Trump's election.

Despite this, there has been little empirical research published on the extent to which nationalist

ideologies and specific fears about immigration contributed to the 2016 election results.

Literature Review

Nationalism can be defined as "the attitude that the members of a nation have when they

care about their identity as members of that nation" and the actions they take as a result of these

attitudes (Miscevic 2015). The factors contributing to an individual's view of national identity is

central to defining nationalism and, therefore, measuring nationalistic attitudes. There are many

types of nationalistic ideologies which use different factors in defining nationalism; two

important approaches that will be discussed in this review are civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism.

Civic nationalism, sometimes called progressive nationalism, is akin to a patriotic love of the nation in which one is a citizen. In civic nationalism, citizenship is the only requirement for belonging to the national identity (Stilz 2009). Ethnic or cultural nationalism views national identity not only as having members with a common citizenship, but who also share a culture, language and ancestry (Stilz 2009).

Shook et al. (2020) evaluated the interaction of civic nationalism, sexism, and racism to identify effect on the election of Donald Trump. The study found that racism was the largest contributing factor to opinions about a candidate, voting intentions, and voting behavior. Nationalism, however, was associated with positive feelings about Trump but played a lesser role than both sexism and racism in determining voting intent or behavior. While interesting, this study was limited by defining questions about civic nationalism and did not cover nationalistic attitudes about ethnicity or culture or ideas about national superiority. Additionally, the sample was not representative of the full U.S. population.

The heavy focus on citizenship in civic nationalism paints an incomplete picture of the current nationalist sentiment. Ethnic or cultural factors are very important to some individuals' views of national identity. In their 2018 paper, Whitehead, Perry and Baker find that Christian nationalism, centered on an American Christian identity, was a significant predictor of voting for Trump in the 2016 election. They argue that Christian nationalists voted for Trump because they believed him to be a candidate that would preserve their perceived Christian American heritage despite being "a poor personal representative of a traditional religious conservative" (Whitehead

et al. 2018). This study also found a significant positive relationship between Christian nationalism, xenophobia, and islamophobia (Whitehead et al. 2018).

Because a great deal of Americans value culture and heritage as important components to their national identity, it is unsurprising that fears about immigrants exist among this population. A Pew Research poll found that almost all Republican voters leading up to the 2016 election who believed that higher levels of immigration to the U.S. "threatens traditional American customs and values" evaluated Trump positively or very positively (Jones & Kiley 2016). Trump fueled these fears by making claims such as "countless innocent American lives have been stolen because our politicians have failed in their duty to secure our borders," before promising to limit immigration from predominantly Muslim countries, build a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and deport illegal immigrants (Ball 2016).

At present, there have been very few studies attempting to quantify how ethnic nationalism and attitudes about immigration interact and the extent to which these ideologies impacted the outcome of the 2016 election. The following sections will attempt to address this topic with a structural equation model.

Method

Data

The present study uses the 2016 wave of the American National Election Studies (ANES) time series data. These data were collected by interview and web survey before and after the 2016 presidential election and contain a random sample of over 4,000 Americans of voting age, weighted to be representative of the national population. The survey covers a broad range of

topics beyond basic demographic and voter data, including attitudes about nationalism and immigration.

A suite of four questions asking respondents to report their ideas about the importance of birthplace, ancestry, language, and customs for being truly American were identified as a proxy for ethnic nationalistic values. The questions began:

Some people say that the following things are important for being truly American. Others says they are not important. How important do you think the following is for being truly American?

Respondents were asked to rank importance of being born in the U.S., having American ancestry, the ability to speak English, and following American customs and traditions on a Likert-type rating scale of very to not at all important. One question new to the 2016 study asking the extent to which the respondent agreed that "the world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Americans" was also included as a measurement of ethnic nationalism. Perceptions that "America's culture is generally harmed by immigrants," "immigrants increase crime rates in the U.S.," and that it is likely "immigration will take away jobs" were ranted using a similar scale and used as a measures for fears about immigration.

Analysis

Analysis was performed using StataIC 16. After some exploratory factor analysis, a confirmatory factor analysis was designed to test the hypothesis that the observed measures selected from the ANES 2016 data describe the latent constructs of immigration fears and nationalism. Because the data were not normally distributed, an asymptotic distribution free estimation method was used. Additionally, nonresponses in ANES data have been shown to be

not missing at random (deBell 2010) so nonresponses were coded with a value of -1. To facilitate

clarity in model interpretation, variable values were reversed from their original order so that

higher levels of fear or more agreement with nationalistic statements are higher numeric values.

The model shown in figure 1, below, reveals a strong model with significant factor

loadings for every observed measure and relatively low error terms. There is also a very strong

covariance between fears about immigration and nationalistic attitudes. The model was a good fit

regardless of group differences in gender and survey mode (face-to-face or via the web).
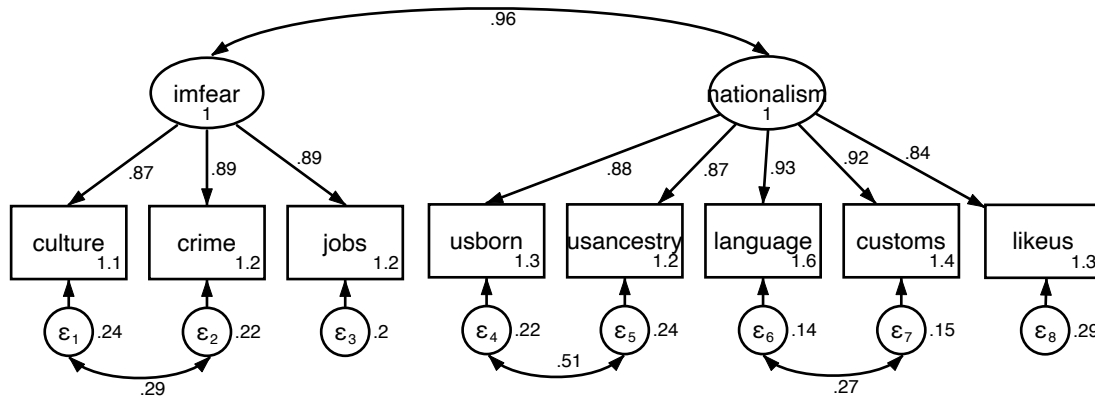
Figure 1

Table 1	
Fit Statistic	Value
chi2(16)	125.638
RMSEA [90% CI]	0.040 [0.034 – 0.047]
CFI	0.970
TLI	0.948
SRMR	0.015
CD	0.975

After confirming that the observations in the ANES data are good measures for the two latent constructs, a full structural equation model was tested using an independent variable of whether the respondent indicated in the post-election survey that they had voted for Trump, with a 1 value for Trump voters and 0 for those voting for other candidates. As with nonresponses in other variables, responses of no vote or missing values were coded as -1. Additional observed factors for self-reported socioeconomic status (sses), age, gender, and level of education were also included in this model.

The diagram below in figure 2 shows the full structural equation model (significance reported in table 2).
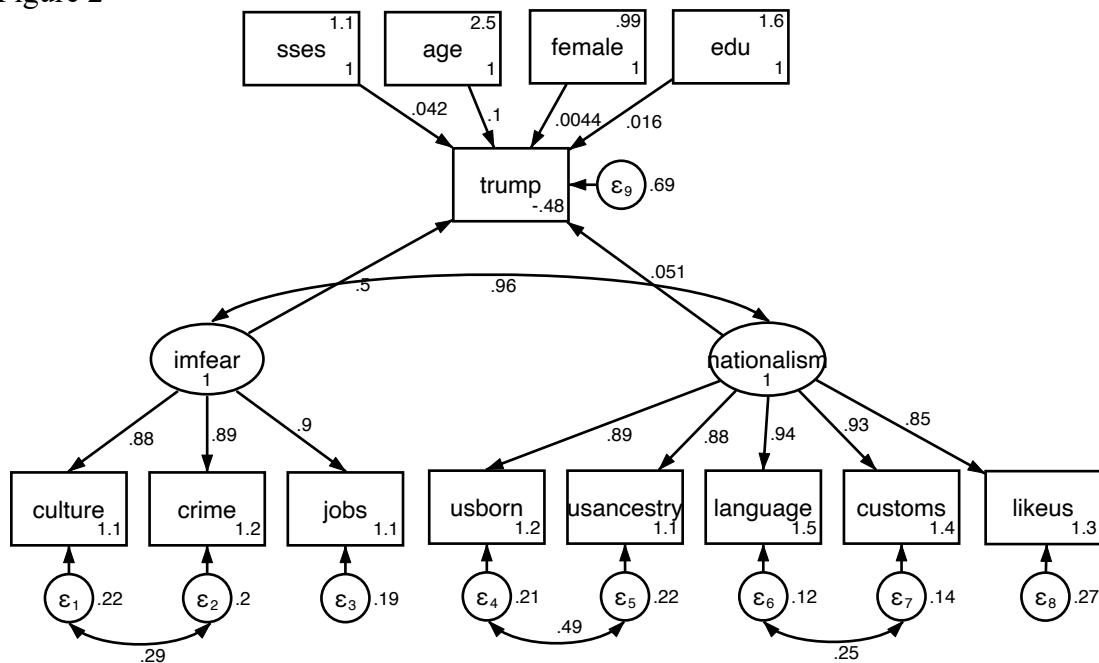
Figure 2

Table 2				
Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	z	P > |z|
sses	0.0422	0.1270	3.32	0.001***
age	0.1027	0.0128	8.01	0.000***
female	0.0044	0.0127	0.35	0.729
edu	0.0613	0.0109	1.50	0.134
imfear	0.4974	0.0141	35.16	0.000***
nationalism	0.0507	0.0102	4.98	0.000***
constant	-0.4813	0.0423	-11.37	0.000***

Even when controlling for demographic variables, immigration fears and nationalistic attitudes were positive and statistically significant predictors of voting for Trump ($p < 0.01$). Older age and higher self-reported socioeconomic status were also statistically significant predictors of a Trump vote ($p < 0.01$) whereas education and gender were not found to be significant factors. Fearful beliefs about immigration had the strongest effect on vote share with a very high coefficient and strong probability scores. Goodness of fit statistics shown in table 3 indicate that this model is a very good fit.

Table 3	
Fit Statistic	Value
chi2(54)	433.556
RMSEA [90% CI]	0.041 [0.037 – 0.044]
CFI	0.910
TLI	0.880
SRMR	0.041
CD	0.978

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to determine whether fears about immigration and nationalistic ideologies, specifically cultural or ethnic nationalism, were significant factors leading to the electoral college victory of Donald Trump in 2016 presidential election. Findings indicate that cultural nationalism, as defined by placing a high degree of importance on the role

of birthplace, ancestry, culture, and language in being "truly American" over accepting simply residency or citizenship, did significantly predict a vote for Trump. Nationalism was closely associated with immigration fears like loss of jobs, culture, or safety. High levels of these fears had an even stronger effect on voter behavior. These factors were both significant predictors of Donald Trump's presidential win in 2016.

There were some limitations of this study primarily regarding nonresponses. Specifically, in the dependent variable, roughly one third of survey respondents either did not vote or would not provide information about their vote for the survey. Because these responses were coded with a numeric value of -1 to make analysis possible, this could have negatively skewed results.

Implications for Future Study

In future studies, racial identities and attitudes should be explored to see if the ethnic nationalism and fears of immigration shown in this study could perhaps be driven by racial bias. These data are available in the ANES study and could be incorporated in future models. Additionally, the data used from the 2016 election is just one wave of a time series study conducted every four years by ANES. It could be very interesting to test the effects of time to see if these ideologies grew stronger or whether they were significant predictors for the outcomes of other Republican presidential candidates. Finally, a future analysis could be performed using the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies data in an attempt to validate the findings outlined in this analysis.

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