

Changes in Perceptions of Border Security Influence Desired Levels of Immigration

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Abstract

Security concerns about immigration are on the rise. Many countries respond by fortifying their borders. Yet little is known about the influence of border security measures on perceived threat from immigration. Borders might facilitate group identities and spread fear of outsiders. In contrast, they might enhance citizens' sense of security and control over immigration. We test these claims using survey experiments run on a quota sample of over 1 000 Americans. The findings show that allocating more government resources to border security increases desired levels of immigration. This effect is likely driven by a sense of control over immigration, induced by border security measures even when the number or characteristics of immigrants remain unchanged. Our findings suggest that border controls, which are widely considered as symbols of closure and isolation, can increase public support for immigration.

Keywords

border security, immigration attitudes, immigration policy, border controls

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article

Unprecedented numbers of refugees in recent years were met with a growing sense of threat surrounding international borders (Simmons and Shaffer 2019). Increasingly, destination countries respond to this perceived threat by hardening their borders (Simmons and Kenwick 2021). They deploy law enforcement personnel along their borders, and build walls, fences, and barriers to further secure them. From the United States to the European Union, from Hungary to France, Germany and Sweden, border controls are implemented not only by right-wing populist or anti-immigrant forces, but rather by a diverse set of political actors across the globe (Brown 2010). However, little empirical work examines the implications of increasing border security on the politics of immigration. Do border controls mitigate or magnify perceived threats from, and public opposition to, immigration?

One line of thinking generally assumes that borders facilitate group identities and define group membership. Thus, when nation states build more along their borders, they strengthen national bonds of belonging, spread fear of “the other,” and perpetuate the social exclusion of immigrants. The idiom “build bridges, not walls” draws upon this notion and suggests that the social construction of borders should intensify this sense of a “us against them.” Instead of building walls that divide natives and immigrants, both literally and figuratively, the slogan demands governments to build symbolic bridges that connect people together. According to this perspective, when governments implement border controls, natives’ hostility to immigrants should follow. This view was also shared by Pope Francis who said, in response to rising concerns about the global refugee crisis, that “...Europe is in difficulty, it’s true...We must find solutions. We must encourage dialogue between different nations...Walls are never solutions. But bridges are, always, always.”¹

Yet despite its prevalence, the belief that borders spread fear and perpetuate conflict is not unchallenged. Some have pointed out that when borders are perceived to be weakened by immigration, native citizens may experience a sense of external threat, which can prompt an *identity reaction*, where exclusionary identities emerge in other forms to “reclaim the group boundaries previously defined by geographic borders” (Simmons and Goemans 2021, 35). The political insight of Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard (2015) is in line with this prediction:

“My long experience in Australian politics has been that whenever a government is seen to have immigration flows under control, public support for immigration increases. When the reverse occurs, hostility to immigration rises.”

Consistent with Howard’s observation from Australia, historical changes in border security in the United States were positively associated with Americans’ desired levels of immigration. As Figure 1 shows, border patrol agents and spending on border security skyrocketed over the past three decades. Meanwhile, the share of Americans supporting for increasing immigration levels grew by 460 percent (or 22 percentage points). Other factors could account for the variation in both outcomes, of course. Whether this association reflects a spurious correlation or stems to some extent from the

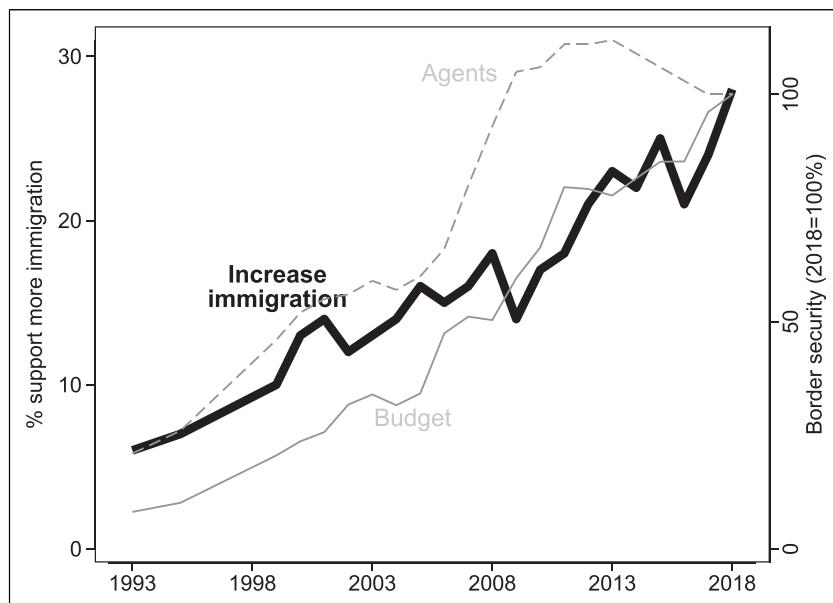


Figure 1. Border security and support for immigration, United States. Notes: Public attitudes toward immigration (black line) are from Gallup, based on the question: “Thinking now about immigrants – that is, people who come from other countries to live here in the United States, in your view, should immigration be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?” Data on personnel on the southern border (dashed gray line) are from the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Data on border security budget (solid gray line) are from the American Immigration Council, available at: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/the-cost-of-immigration-enforcement-and-border-security>. Both indicators of border security are set to show growth over time, where the final data point, 2018, equals 100% (agents: 16,608; budget: \$4.458 billion).

direct, causal effect of border security measures on desired levels of immigration remains an open question.

This article provides a theoretical underpinning and empirical analysis to assess the *control hypothesis* that people condition their level of support for immigration on control of immigration flows. One major way to control immigration flows is to closely police borders. We propose that when people view the permeability of national borders as a security issue, they will respond to increases in border security by feeling more in control. This sense of security and control then enables people to be more willing to welcome outgroup members to their country. The inverse should also hold, with declines in perceived control over borders leading people to feel more insecure and thus turn towards ingroups and become less welcoming of immigrants.

We test the control hypothesis using two pre-registered survey experiments run on a sample of over 1,000 Americans. Both experiments suggest that respondents are

willing to have higher levels of immigration when spending on border security increases and that they want lower levels of immigration when spending on border security declines. Notably, though, we also find a ceiling effect: the marginal effect of increasing border security spending declines, indicating that in their influence on desired levels of immigration, relatively small investments in border controls are as effective as extremely costly border fortification projects. This suggests that large-scale investments in border fortification cannot be justified on the grounds of promoting public support for immigration.

A key problem faced by research on the impact of immigration policy is that policy changes almost always have expected implications on the number and characteristics of immigrants. If a host country implements stronger border controls, the number of unauthorized immigrants trying to cross the border might decrease. Natives might also expect that the economic or cultural composition of the immigrant population would change as borders become more secure. To explore whether the effect of border security stems from a regained sense of control over immigration, or rather from perceived changes in the number or characteristics of immigrants, we utilize a conjoint experiment that manipulates both the policy at the border and the size and composition of the immigrant population. The findings show that when the border is more closely policed, natives' perceived control over immigration significantly increases, even though the immigrants' number and characteristics are held constant.

The article's findings contribute to our understanding of the implications of borders on domestic and international politics. One widely held view in the literature is that borders facilitate divisions between insiders and outsiders, "us" and "them" (Longo 2017; Mendez and Naples 2014). Another view is that border security measures are usually counterproductive: i.e., they rarely meet their goals, be it curtailing immigration or countering terrorist attacks, and they have very little material benefits but significant ramifications to the nations that build them (Carter and Poast 2019; Linebarger and Braithwaite 2020; Longo, Canetti, and Hite-Rubin 2014; Schon and Leblang 2021).² In contrast, our analysis reveals that measures of border security can mitigate public backlash against immigration. This indicates that people might react to the symbolic meaning of the border more than to its material outcomes. But while some people see borders as symbols of division and isolation, others—those who more often perceive immigration as a potential security threat—see borders as symbols of security, sovereignty, and control.

Our findings also add to extant research on the effects of immigration policies (Abdelgadir and Fouka 2020; Fouka 2019; Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2015; 2017; Marbach, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2018; Solodoch 2021b). Specifically, this study suggests that those trying to increase immigration and advance immigrant inclusion should be aware of the potentially counterproductive effect of promoting the idea of "open borders" or abolishing immigration enforcement agencies. The case for open borders is still considered by many as a minority opinion in the political debate on borders and immigration, but it is often voiced by both social activists and scholars who are driven by various philosophical and empirical

perspectives (e.g., [Carens 1987](#); [Kukathas 2012](#); [Caplan 2019](#)).³ Yet opening the country’s gates and increasing levels of immigration is more likely to win public support when the national borders are perceived as secure and under control. Taken together with previous work, the cumulative evidence indicates that different domains of policy require different approaches to achieve what governments usually define as favorable outcomes. Whereas policy liberalization often enhances immigrant integration (e.g., [Marbach, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2018](#); [Abdelgadir and Fouka 2020](#)), the same approach on border security, our findings show, can reduce public support for immigration.

Theoretical Background

A long-standing intuition in extant literature is that interstate borders strengthen national identities and group categorization. Its philosophical roots date back to David Hume who observed that the national character of peoples is shaped by the boundaries of their governments’ authority.⁴ According to this view, in addition to defining the territory of nation states and the limits of their sovereignty, borders also delineate political communities. They determine group membership and define who belongs to the national community ([Longo 2017](#); [Migdal 2004](#)). According to social identity theory, a stronger perception of belonging to the in-group triggers intergroup discrimination favoring the in-group ([Tajfel et al. 1979](#)). These bonds of belonging and internal inclusion of a bounded citizenry, facilitate, by definition, external exclusion—the exclusion of the non-citizens who are on the other side of the border ([Brubaker 2009](#); [Joppke 2008](#)).

Importantly, however, social categorization alone is not always sufficient to cause outgroup discrimination. It depends, among other things, on the context of intergroup relations ([Brewer 2004](#)). Thus, situations that contain strong elements of group categorization “will move social behavior away from the pole of interpersonal patterns toward the pole of intergroup patterns” ([Tajfel et al. 1979](#), 35). According to this social identity perspective, tolerance for outgroups depends on the degree to which group categorization is institutionalized in, and activated by, the laws, rules, norms, and policies of the state ([Weldon 2006](#)).

The theory of social construction is also deeply embedded in this top-down line of thinking: government policies, such as border security measures, identify and construct groups as deserving (citizens) and undeserving (immigrants). These constructions, which amplify intergroup differences and become permanent lines of political cleavages, gain legitimacy. The result of this process of social construction is an “other,” a group of marginalized people widely viewed as undeserving outsiders ([Schneider and Ingram 2005](#)).

Indeed, scholars often posit that state borders not only mirror the transformations in the definitions of citizenship and national identity ([Donnan and Wilson 2021](#)), but also influence group identity, strengthen national loyalties, and deepen divisions between insiders and outsiders ([Miles and Rochefort 1991](#); [Newman 2006](#); [Simmons and Goemans 2021](#); [Sambanis and Shayo 2013](#)). Beyond group categorization, border

controls can also associate immigration with security issues and various external threats such as violent crime or terrorism.

Thus, according to the othering hypothesis, derived by social construction theory, more secured and well-defined borders increase public opposition to immigration due to heightening perceptions of “otherness”.

Yet the logic of social construction tends to amplify the divisive aspects of borders and dismiss their protective aspects—the possibility that some citizens see borders as providing protection from preexisting external threats. Namely, if social identities are already strongly held by people, then nationality and ethnicity will remain key determinants of group categorization and exclusion after policy changes at the border. People will not only adhere to their key identity characteristics when borders are removed or opened and external, physical boundaries erode, they will even further entrench themselves in their old inner boundaries of group identity (Newman 2006; Simmons and Goemans 2021). Such an identity backlash was observed following the fall of the iron curtain that led to the reopening of the border between Georgia and Turkey (Pelkmans 2011), as well as after the fall of the Berlin wall in Germany (Andrews 2003). In the words of Walzer (2008, 39): “To tear down the walls of the state is not to create a world without walls, but rather to create a thousand petty fortresses.”

In addition, immigration controls are understood as a national security issue in many countries (Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2006; Ibrahim 2005; Lahav and Courtemanche 2012). When cross-border flows of people are perceived as a threat, actions that reduce the policing of cross-border flows will be perceived as increasing threat.

The perception of porous borders and the sense of losing control over immigration seem to tap into deep-seated fears of a foreigner takeover and the loss of national sovereignty. In the face of threat, people turn more toward their familiar in-group (Gelfand et al. 2011; Stenner 2005). Consistent with this conjecture, Angela Merkel’s “open-door” policy was followed by the rise of the far right AfD party, while in the United Kingdom, “taking back control” over immigration policy after the Brexit referendum reduced anti-immigrant attitudes (Schwartz et al. 2020) and initiated the collapse of UKIP.

The control hypothesis we propose in this paper is: *when people feel that their national borders are uncontrolled or less secure they become less welcoming of immigration*. We also expect the inverse relationship to hold. If people think that their national borders are more secure then we expect that they will feel safer and thus be supportive of higher levels of immigration. Notably, these relationships should be stronger in countries where immigration is a salient national issue and where flows across borders are understood as threatening.⁵

In addition to perceptions of control, changes in border security measures might influence desired levels of immigration through a “perceived selection” channel. In particular, increases in border security might make citizens expect for a decrease either in the total number of incoming migrants or in the number of people from near-border countries of origins, leading to a change in the composition of the immigrant population. Since the number and characteristics of migrants shape public opinion on

immigration (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Margalit and Solodoch 2022; Solodoch 2021a), the effect of border security measures might also stem from changes in perceived selection.

We next turn to our three experiments. In line with the advice for testing for new causal effects in Brutger et al. (2022), all of our experiments use hypothetical scenarios with fairly sparse detail aside from our treatment conditions.

Experiment I: Testing the Control Hypothesis

We first test the control hypothesis using a survey experiment run on a Qualtrics-conducted survey of 1,015 respondents in the United States. The respondents were selected to create balance on gender, age, and region of the US, and following our pre-analysis plan we then calculated raked weights to achieve balance on the prior variables as well as education and state of residence.⁶ The analysis was pre-registered before the survey was run.⁷

The goal of the first experiment is to directly test if one's desired level of immigration changes in response to changes in the expected security of national borders. Following the theory above, we expect increases in border security to raise desired levels of immigration and decreases to lower desired levels of immigration. We change perceptions of border security by asking respondents to consider if the federal government increased or decreased spending on border security by between 1 and 25%. We use changes in spending on border security for four reasons. First, these changes are easily understood by respondents. By anchoring on current knowledge and scaling up or down in percentage points we avoid a situation where respondents need to have accurate information about baseline border policies or investments to understand the treatment. Second, resource changes are plausible. Third, working with resource changes allow for smooth and symmetric treatment values, which would not be possible with qualitative descriptions of increases or decreases in border security. Fourth, in referring to resources abstractly rather than describing specific investments like "building a wall" we aim to avoid directly activating partisan attitudes.⁸

The experiment runs as follows: we first inform respondents that the historical level of immigration to the US over the past decade has been about 1 million immigrants per year. We then ask respondents to "move the slider to show approximately how many immigrants you think the US should accept per year." The slider starts centered on 1 million and ranges from 0 to 2 million. This creates a control value that is intentionally anchored around the current rate.

We later ask respondents to do the same activity but the prompt is modified so that they are told to "Move the slider below to show approximately how many immigrants you think the US should accept if the federal government were to [increase/decrease] spending on border security by x percent," where increase or decrease is randomized and where x is a randomly selected number between 1 and 25 (inclusive). Finally, respondents are given the same prompt with another random value of x and with the opposite increase/decrease value that they saw before. In this setup, each person creates

first a control immigration value and then two treated immigration values, one from a randomly sized increase in border spending and one with a randomly sized decrease in border spending. We are ultimately interested in deviations from the control value under the treatment conditions. One drawback to this design is that it could lead to demand effects. However, recent research has suggested that demand effects may be very small if they exist at all across a range of topics and subfields in political science (Mummolo and Peterson 2019). Furthermore, an advantage of this approach is that we are capturing within-respondent information, which should have lower noise than a cross-respondent design, without introducing bias (Clifford, Sheagley, and Pisont 2021).⁹

The advantage of using sliders instead of a Likert scale to measure desired levels of immigration is that it allows us to get a better sense of the substantive size of the effect of changes in border security. A potential concern, however, is that the responses from the sliders might be noisy, largely because of extreme dragging behaviour. Following our pre-registration plan, we drop observations with control dependent variable values that are in the most extreme 1% of either end of the distribution. This was done to reduce the noise created by outlying people who unthinkingly dragged the slider to the hard limits of the range. We then calculate a change score, which is the difference between the treatment values and the control dependent variable, and we drop change score values that are in the most extreme 1% of either end of the change score distribution. Again the goal is to reduce noise introduced by respondents who may not have taken the exercise seriously.¹⁰

In the main text, we graphically present the relationship between the change score (desired immigration level under treatment - desired immigration level under control) and the randomly assigned changes to spending on border security. In appendix A, we present tabular results of a regression where we regress the desired level of immigration under the treatment condition on the randomly assigned change in spending on border security and the desired level of immigration under the control condition. In either case each respondent contributes two data points, and in the regressions we cluster standard errors by respondent.

Results

Figures 2(a) and (b) graphically present the results from the first analysis, where the y-axis shows the change in the desired number of immigrants from the control condition to the treatment condition and the x-axis is the magnitude of the change in border security spending in the treatment condition. **Figure 2(a)** shows means (in blue) for each value of the treatment variable. The red line is a loess fit. In **Figure 2(b)**, we show the average desired change in the number of immigrants in response to changes of up to 10 percent and between 11 and 25 percent in border security spending.¹¹

Respondents want higher levels of immigration to the United States when spending on border security increases, and they want lower levels of immigration when spending on border security decreases. These results are consistent with the control hypothesis.

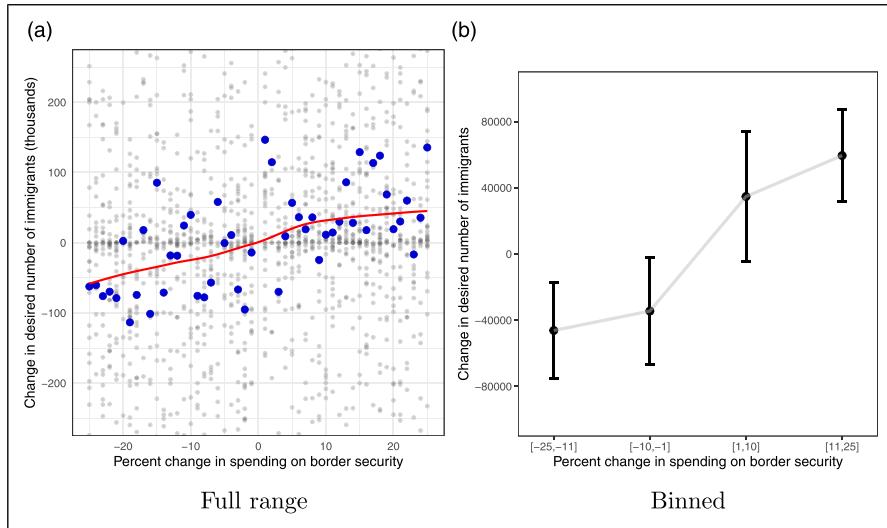


Figure 2. Effect of border spending change on desired level of immigration. Notes: Both panels show the effect of change in spending on border security (horizontal axis) on change in desired number of immigrants (vertical axis, in thousands only in panel (a)). Panel (a) shows means for each value of the treatment variable (in blue). The red line is a loess fit. Panel (b) shows means for four grouped ranges of values, indicating more clearly a decreasing marginal effect on both sides of the continuum.

When fitting a linear model to the same data, the effect of border spending on immigration changes is significant at $p < .001$.¹²

As Figure 2(b) shows, respondents prefer approximately 35,000 more (less) immigrants in response to an increase (decrease) of between 1 and 10 percent in border security spending. This amounts to 3.5% increase over the approximate historical flow of 1 million immigrants per year. Yet compared to relatively modest changes in spending, the marginal effect of more substantial changes is small, indicating that excessive modifications in border security measures have a similar impact on desired levels of immigration. The significant and sizable treatment effect is therefore driven more by a change in desired immigration levels around the shift of from negative to positive spending on border security.¹³ Table A-4 shows that a relatively small increase in border security spending of up to 5%, compared to a small decrease in spending of up to 5%, leads to an 11 percentage points increase in support for higher levels of immigration.

Experiment 2: Robustness of the Control Hypothesis

The first experiment offers a direct test of the claim that resources devoted to border security cause changes in desired levels of immigration. The second experiment was designed to test an observable implication of the control hypothesis and was embedded

in the same Qualtrics national survey. This is an example of a paired design, where a “second experiment is conducted to determine whether the results of the first are robust before knowing the results of the first” (Sniderman 2018, 270). If it is true that one’s desired level of immigration is conditioned by perceptions of border security, then one should be more likely to desire policy changes that increase immigration when they are paired with an increase in border spending, and the inverse should also be true. We test to see if this pattern exists with a conjoint experiment that we run after the first experiment. Respondents see two modifications to current policy, each with two attributes: resources devoted to border control and the official immigration rate. Each attribute of each policy has a randomly assigned value that proposes an increase or decrease in border spending or the immigration rate.¹⁴ Respondents are then asked to select the modification that they prefer. An example screen is shown in Figure 3.¹⁵ Respondents do this 7 times, producing a total of 14 observations per respondent.

We are interested in testing for an interaction between the two independent variables, and we test for this in two ways. First, we split the sample by whether or not border spending increased or decreased in each profile and then we run a simple bivariate regression of the binary dependent variable in the level of immigration for both subsamples.¹⁶ The key prediction here is that people will be more likely to select profiles with higher levels of immigration when border spending is increasing. Second, we simply run an OLS regression of the binary dependent variable on each of the two independent variables and their interaction, where each independent variable runs from 1 to 9 and is treated as continuous.

We present results for the full sample and then in the appendix also for the subgroups of people who claimed in experiment one to want: less immigration, more immigration, and those who prefer the current rate.¹⁷ The results of the second experiment are consistent with the results of the first, which further substantiates our main conclusions.

Results

The first experiment directly tests how desired immigration levels respond to changes in spending on border security. The second experiment tests one implication of the theory,

Modification A		Modification B
10% less spent on border security	Resources devoted to border control	15% more spent on border security
10% decrease from present rate of immigration	Official immigration rate	5% decrease from present rate of immigration
Which modification to current immigration policy would you prefer? Modification A <input type="radio"/> Modification B <input type="radio"/>		

Figure 3. An example of the conjoint experiment.

which is that people should be more willing to select policies that increase immigration if these policies are paired with increases to spending on border security.

Figure 4 shows that people are more likely to select profiles with higher rates of immigration when they are paired with increases in border security spending.¹⁸ When border security spending is reduced or unchanged, respondents are 10 percentage points more likely to opt for a substantial 20-percent reduction in immigration. In contrast, when border security spending is increased, respondents are not more supportive of curtailing immigration (compared to no change), and even tolerate a sizable increase of 10 percent in the level of immigration. Only the largest two values of immigration changes affect respondents when border security spending is increased, and even then, the 8-point effect is more than twice as large when border security spending is reduced or unchanged ($p < 0.05$).¹⁹

Finally, in Table A-10, we divided our sample to three groups based on their pre-treatment immigration preferences: those who wanted less immigration, those who wanted more immigration, and those who favored the current level of immigration. For

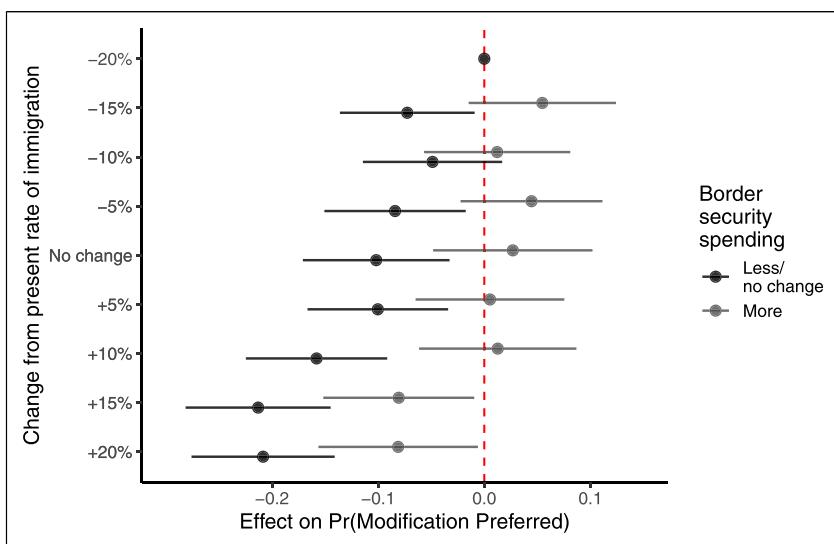


Figure 4. How immigration levels and border spending interact to change the probability of profile selection. Notes: This figure shows estimates of the effects of the randomly assigned values of changes in the rate of immigration on the binary outcome variable that equals 1 if the modification is preferred by respondents. Estimates are based on two linear probability models controlling for respondent fixed effects (since each respondent evaluates seven paired profiles): one model for modifications that include either less or no change in border security spending (black coefficients) and a second model for modifications in which border security spending is increased (gray coefficients). Bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The point without horizontal bars denote the attribute value that is the reference category.

each group, we regressed the binary dependent variable marking profile selection on the change in border spending and the change in immigration and the interaction of the two. The effect of immigration levels is most significantly and consistently moderated by border security spending for the group who preferred a decrease in current levels of immigration. This suggests that border security measures increase support for immigration primarily by appeasing people closer to the anti-immigration side of the debate, rather than uniformly affect the electorate or further heightening support in the pro-immigration camp.

In sum, the analyses of the second experiment largely affirm the results of the first experiment. The average respondent was less likely to select a profile if it had a higher rate of immigration, but this effect was significantly weaker if the increase in immigration was paired with an increase in border spending. Like the results of the first experiment, this evidence is consistent with the control hypothesis.

Experiment 3: Distinguishing Between Perceived Control and Composition Effects

The third experiment was designed to test the causal mechanism underlying the control hypothesis—that border security affects public attitudes toward immigration by increasing people’s sense of control over immigration. We do so by (1) neutralizing the selection channel—the number and characteristics of immigrants—through which border controls might also affect public attitudes; and (2) measuring respondents’ perceptions of control over immigration directly.

The experiment presents survey respondents with randomly assigned scenarios of immigration. These scenarios are comprised of two key components. One component is a border security policy.²⁰ Border controls could be completely lacking, tight, or based on a border fence or a border wall. A second component randomly allocates immigrant characteristics, broadly defined. For example, the annual authorized flow of immigrants could be as low as 10,000, or as high as 1,000,000 visa admissions. The same levels of immigration flows apply for annual *unauthorized* entries. Holding the level of immigration constant ensures that the causal effect of policy does not stem from expected changes in immigration flows following the policy. Similarly, the experiment also manipulates the cultural background and the professional skill set of immigrants in each potential scenario. Therefore, border security effects on perceived control over immigration, if found significant, will not be driven by immigrant selection.

The paired conjoint experiment presents two scenarios at a time, side by side. Then, subjects are asked to rate each scenario, using two survey items: (1) “On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates that the US has absolutely no control over immigration and 10 indicates that the US has complete control over immigration, how would you rate each scenario?”, and (2) “On a scale from –5 to 5, where –5 indicates that the impact of immigration on the US as a whole is very negative and 5 indicates that it is very positive, how would you rate each scenario?” Thus, the experiment begins with collecting people’s perceived control over immigration and only then proceeds to

estimating whether policy also shapes people's evaluations of immigration as a negative or positive phenomenon. Notably, the paired conjoint design was found to perform remarkably well in capturing real-world behavior (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015). It also reduces potential social desirability bias in estimating the effects of sensitive attributes (Horiuchi, Markovich, and Yamamoto 2022).

We recruited survey respondents on Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in March 2020.²¹ Respondents were invited to take part in a survey on social policy in the United States. Each of the 166 respondents rated five pairs of profiles of potential immigration scenarios, which generated a sample size of 1,660 observations.

Results

Figure 5 shows the effect of the policy at the border on people's perceived control over immigration (left panel) and positive evaluations of immigration (right panel). Markers represent point estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Reference categories are represented by the upper dots in each set of values with no confidence intervals. All coefficients are drawn from an OLS fixed-effects model, where the outcome variable is

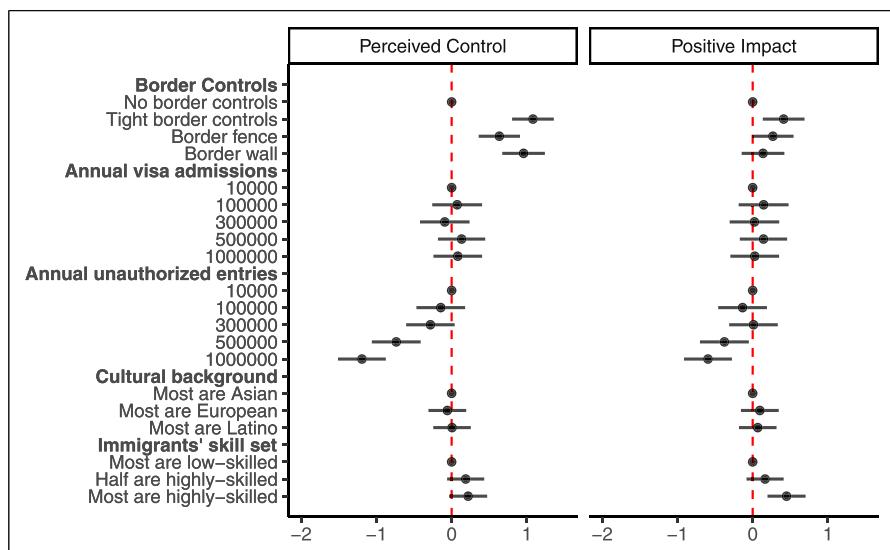


Figure 5. Border controls, immigration flows, and attitudes toward immigration. Notes: This figure shows estimates of the effects of the randomly assigned values of immigration attributes on two outcome variables: perceived control over immigration (left panel), and stating that immigration has a positive impact on the nation (right panel). Estimates are based on ordinary least squares models controlling for all treatments including respondent fixed effects (since each respondent evaluates ten immigration scenarios); bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The points without horizontal bars denote the attribute value that is the reference category for each attribute.

the 0–10 perceived control scale, and all of the treatments are the independent variables. The individual-level fixed effects control for all respondents' characteristics that remain fixed over the evaluation of the ten conjoint scenarios.

Results show that the marginal effect of having border security measures over no border controls increases perceived control over immigration by 1 point on the 0–10 scale, which also equals to a 16 percentage points increase in the probability of positive control evaluations. An annual flow of 500,000 unauthorized immigrants over a flow of 10,000 unauthorized immigrants (the lowest value) reduces perceived control over immigration by 0.7 points. This suggests that border security measures in and of themselves and the number of unauthorized migrants have an independent effect on perceived control over immigration.

Both factors also shape views on the impact of immigration on the country as a whole. As shown by the panel on the right, compared to no border controls, tight border controls increase positive evaluations of immigration by 0.41 points on a 0–10 scale (or 6 percentage points). A large annual influx of one million unauthorized migrants compared to a minor amount of ten thousands decreases positive evaluations by 0.59 points on the same scale. Notably, the level of authorized immigration has no attitudinal effects.

Overall, the results demonstrate that border controls increase public support and perceived control over immigration even when annual immigration levels are held constant. Yet the analysis also indicates that this effect is not driven by border walls. Compared to a border wall, tight border controls either more strongly or similarly increase support for immigration. To foster a public sense of control over immigration, it seems that border barriers, which are more costly and have considerable economic repercussions ([Carter and Poast 2019](#)), are unnecessary. Instead, border patrol agents and officers, surveillance devices and other controls appear as similarly if not more effective. This finding is consistent with the results of the first experiment showing that substantial increases in border security spending have a minor marginal effect on desired levels of immigration compared to smaller increases in spending.²²

Conclusion

A long-standing notion holds that borders are not just lines on a map but rather symbolic boundaries that bound together citizens and foster separation from outsiders and external threats ([Hartshorne 1933; Kristof 1959](#)). This notion feeds into the intuition that de-bordering—softening borders, de-funding security measures, or tearing down physical interstate barriers—should also mitigate perceived threat from immigration and promote immigrant inclusion.

However, borders turn to symbolic lines of defense against threats in a process of centuries-old framing ([Massey 2016](#)). Such primordial symbolism of the border is sticky and durable, and does not easily disappear when borders are removed or weakened ([Andrews 2003; Pelkmans 2011](#)). Along with actual external threats that do exist in many cases but are also regularly exaggerated, such symbolism seems to create

a situation where people condition their attitudes toward immigration on their sense of control over borders. We tested this hypothesis using three survey experiments. The results of all three experiments support the control hypothesis: increasing border security heightens desired levels of immigration, and decreasing border security reduces support for immigration. Furthermore, the effect of border security measures is not entirely driven by their expected material outcomes in terms of the number or characteristics of immigrants. Rather, perceived control over immigration increases as the border is more closely policed even when there is no change in the size or composition of the immigrant population.

That said, it would be misguided to conclude from our findings that what liberal democracies need to enhance political openness to immigration and, more broadly, globalization, among the nations of the world is more border barriers. Rather than portraying borders and the security measures that aim to control them as either intrinsically bad and counterproductive or good and effective, our findings call for looking beyond this false dichotomy and advancing a more nuanced examination of border security measures that would take into account their various potential implications.

For example, while there is evidence showing that border barriers can substantially reduce terrorist attacks when they are monitored by law enforcement agents ([Avdan and Gelpi 2016](#); [Linebarger and Braithwaite 2020](#)), there is also evidence suggesting that they could radicalize the target population ([Gade 2020](#); [Longo, Canetti, and Hite-Rubin 2014](#)). And whereas border walls decrease crime and smuggling in protected towns, they also turn not-protected towns to the new target of smugglers ([Getmansky, Grossman, and Wright 2019](#)). Similarly, borders seem to have a divergent effect on group identities and intergroup relations. On the one hand, the drawing of national borders can define ethnic and national loyalties ([Miles and Rochefort 1991](#)), which could lead to exclusionary attitudes toward outgroups.²³ On the other hand, once such national identities are embedded in people's minds, securing national borders makes people more open to accept outgroup members, as our findings suggest. Still, our analysis also reveals that substantial and more modest changes in border security spending have a similar impact on desired levels of immigration. In other words, relatively small investments in border security could induce a public sense of control of immigration similarly to the one produced by highly costly projects of border fortification and walling.

To examine the scope conditions of the theory, future research could test for the presence of a causal link between border spending and desired levels of immigration in other countries. It was posited that the theory will carry to other countries where immigration is common and where border spending is perceived as a national security issue.

In many cases, this means that we would expect our explanation to apply well to richer, 'global north' countries and that some developing countries, in particular those with stronger transnational co-ethnic networks, will have different dynamics around migration and borders ([Blair 2022](#); [Blair, Grossman, and Weinstein 2022; 2022](#)). More

generally, the causal relationship between border spending and desired levels of immigration should be weaker in countries that do not have highly securitized understandings of national borders or countries where immigration is simply not a salient topic for citizens.

The analyses also have a number of limitations that could be addressed in future work. Many of the limitations stem from the details of the survey experimental designs. For example, while we randomized the treatment of experiment 1 it is possible that information about border spending applied a compound treatment which included information about immigrant characteristics or the party in power ([Dafoe, Zhang, and Caughey 2018](#)). While we addressed the former with experiment 3, we did not address the latter. We see that the effects of border security measures are similar—in terms of the sign of the effect—across partisan groups ([Table A-7](#)), but future work could more conclusively test this potential source of influence.

In addition, the political discourse used by either the incumbent government implementing border controls or by opposition parties might be an important source of influence. For example, anti-immigrant parties might persistently push the “spinning-out-of-control” narrative even when the incumbent government more silently increase spending on border security and hardens the country’s borders. Notably, the cumulative findings in the literature indicate that a similar pro-immigration effect to the one we find here at the time of the Trump Administration can be found across various political contexts, including outside the survey environment and in cases where right-wing populist parties or candidates are in the opposition pushing the out-of-control narrative that could fuel anti-immigrant sentiments ([Heinrich, Kobayashi, and Cilizoglu 2023](#); [Schwartz et al. 2020](#); [Solodoch 2021b](#)). Yet to test this proposition and get a definitive answer in future work, our experiments should be replicated with the addition of party cues and the identity of the incumbent government randomly assigned to respondents simultaneously with the original set of treatments.

The results also have a number of practical implications for those concerned with strategies for reducing global poverty and global inequality. This is because migration from a low to a high income country can increase the income of migrants by a factor of four or more ([Clemens, Montenegro, and Pritchett 2019](#)), making immigration from poor to rich countries probably the best known anti-poverty intervention ([Pritchett 2018](#)).²⁴ For similar reasons, the paper has implications for debates around how best to address global inequality and improve the efficiency of the global economy, as migration barriers are the largest remaining source of global economic distortions ([Clemens 2011](#)). Indeed, the distortions created by migration barriers are so large that a majority of the variation in incomes or years of schooling across people is explained simply by the country where you live ([Milanovic 2015](#)). This has profound implications for global inequality, a topic which deserves more interest in international political economy ([Lockwood 2020](#)).

One response to these startling facts has been for some social movements to try to normalize the idea of allowing large numbers of people to move from low to high-income countries. These movements have sometimes operated under a banner of “open

borders” or “abolish ICE.”²⁵ The present paper suggests that this approach may be counterproductive, as the public is more willing to support higher immigration when it is paired with stronger border controls.²⁶ Policy entrepreneurs hoping to increase immigration rates should think twice before pushing ‘open borders’ or similar concepts, as reducing border security seems to lower the desire of the public to accept immigrants.

Notably, in many cases, including the United States, significant controls over borders and immigration already exist, but citizens are unaware of them or misinformed about their effectiveness. For example, and quite strikingly, fewer than half in the United States surveyed in 2018 knew that most immigrants in their country are there legally.²⁷ Although correcting for misperceptions about the number or characteristics of immigrants does little to affect attitudes toward immigration and does not change policy views (Grigorieff, Roth, and Ubfal 2017; Hopkins, Sides, and Citrin 2018), the effect of correcting for misperceptions about existing immigration controls and border security measures has not yet been tested. Our analysis therefore opens up a new avenue for research on potential interventions that can promote public support for immigration.

Authors' Note

Author names are in alphabetical order with equal authorship implied.

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All data and replication materials for this article can be found on the publisher's website. Briggs, Ryan, and Omer Solodoch. 2023. Replication Data for: "Changes in Perceptions of Border Security Influence Desired Levels of Immigration." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, OnlineFirst. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027231195066>.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. AA Politics, September 28, 2015. "Europe urged to build bridges, not walls for refugees." Available at: www.aa.com. This view was also shared by many other politicians, world leaders, and international organizations, including UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, London Mayor, Sadiq Khan and Presidential Candidate, Hillary Clinton.
2. But see [Avdan and Gelpi \(2016\)](#).
3. For recent reviews of perspectives promoting "open borders" or "no border" policies, see [Wilcox \(2009\)](#) and [Bauder \(2015\)](#).
4. "The same national character commonly follows the authority of government to a precise boundary; and upon crossing a river or passing a mountain, one finds a new set of manners, with a new government" ([Hume 2018](#), 167).
5. Many of these countries are richer and in the 'global north.' We would expect different dynamics to hold in many developing countries ([Blair 2022](#); [Blair, Grossman, and Weinstein 2022; 2022](#)).
6. Qualtrics interviewed 1374 respondents between May 16, 2019 to May 24, 2019. As noted in our pre-registration documents, people who completed the survey in less than 30% of the median response time, people who said they were under 18, or people who did not consent to the study were dropped. This left 1015 respondents. See [Appendix B](#) for further discussion of the survey weights.
7. EGAP 20190503AB. [Appendix C](#) notes all deviations from the pre-registration plan.
8. In the third experiment, instead of changes in border security spending we assess the effect of tight border controls, a border fence, or a border wall, compared to having no border controls.
9. Moreover, the results are substantively similar in our second and third experiments, where it will be much more difficult for the respondent to work out which of the profiles would best match our theory (which of course was not revealed to the respondent).
10. In addition, [Table A-3](#) shows that our results are statistically and substantively similar when we use a binary indicator for the dependent variable, which is not affected by the extreme values of the original variable.
11. For clarity [Figure 2\(a\)](#) shows a crop of the full figure containing approximately 71% of all observations. This crop was not pre-registered. [Figure A-2](#) in [Appendix A](#) shows the same figure but zoomed out to show all the data points.
12. Comfortingly, there is no desired change in the number of immigrants when the change in border spending is zero (see [Figure 2\(a\)](#)). Tabular results are in [Appendix A](#). As per our pre-

- registration plan, the tabular results come from a linear model that regresses the desired immigration level under the treatment condition on the change in border spending and the desired immigration level under the control condition.
13. In [Table A-5](#), we also show that the effect of increases in border security is similar among men and women, younger and older respondents, less-educated and highly-educated respondents, and both those who live in states bordering with Mexico and those who live in other states.
 14. The values range from -20 to $+20\%$ in 5% increments. The middle value is “No change from present policy.”
 15. One may worry about question fatigue when doing the same conjoint task 7 times, but existing evidence suggests that respondents exhibit similar behavior when completing up to 30 such tasks ([Bansak et al. 2018](#)).
 16. While this analysis uses the same variables as those listed in the pre-registration plan, it is a somewhat different setup. [Appendix C](#) reports the results of the pre-registered test and explains why we shifted to this analysis strategy after seeing the data.
 17. Following our pre-registration plan, we made the subsamples by dividing respondents by their response to the control dependent variable slide question from the first analysis. Respondents who wanted fewer than 925,000 immigrants are classified as wanting to “allow fewer immigrations” while those who wanted an immigration level of more than 1,075,000 people per year were classified as wanting to “allow more immigrants.” Those in between were said to “prefer current rate.”
 18. As shown in appendix A, these effects are quite similar when we show marginal means instead of average marginal component effects because the base level is roughly similar across our two groups. For a discussion of when to use marginal means, see [Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley \(2020\)](#).
 19. To formally test the interaction effect we run an OLS regression of the binary dependent variable on the immigration treatment that runs from 1 to 9, the dummy for increased border security spending, and their interaction terms (see [Appendix Table A-9](#), column 3). Seven out of eight interaction terms are statistically significant ($p < .05$).
 20. To reduce demand effects, the experiment manipulated five different policy types. All of these treatments are fully controlled for in the analysis, but we choose to present only border controls in the main text for the sake of clarity. The full version of this analysis is presented in [Figure A-4](#).
 21. To collect American respondents, we restricted the location of MTurk workers allowed to answer the survey to the United States only and their “special characteristics” to be at least with a US high-school diploma.
 22. We only collected data on party ID in the third experiment. As shown in appendix B, border security measures increase perceived control and pro-immigration attitudes across partisan groups, although the pro-immigration effect is larger among Republicans. [Appendix tables A-5 and A-6](#) show fairly homogeneous treatment effects in experiment 1 across many demographic variables, including whether or not the respondent lives in a state bordering Mexico.

23. Moreover, border barriers might increase unauthorized migration flows and asylum applications (Massey, Pren, and Durand 2016; Schon and Leblang 2021). Such changes in immigration flows might heighten hostility to immigration (Wright, Levy, and Citrin 2016).
24. This holds regardless of whether best is defined in terms of payoff to the recipient or in terms of a cost-benefit analysis. One summary of the evidence concluded “there is nothing wrong empirically with the idea of using immigration policy to alleviate poverty” (Oberman 2015, 247).
25. See, for example: “How ‘Abolish ICE’ Went From Social Media to Progressive Candidates’ Rallying Cry. The New York Times, June 29, 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/29/us/politics/abolish-ice-midterms-immigration.html>
26. Hatton (2017, 474) makes a similar point when he argues that if the EU is to reform immigration or refugee laws then “border controls need to be tightened and enforced” in order to limit “policy backlash” and the “salience of immigration as a policy issue.”
27. Pew Research, June 28, 2018. Available from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/06/28/shifting-public-views-on-legal-immigration-into-the-u-s/>

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