

Economic Anxiety or Ethnocentrism? An Evaluation of Attitudes Toward Immigration in the U.S. From 1992 to 2017

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Abstract

Does “economic anxiety” explain attitudes toward immigration or can we better understand attitudes toward immigration as an outcome of ethnocentrism? This is a long-standing empirical debate in immigration opinion research and a debate that has struggled to distinguish the relative effects. I help settle this debate with a battery of analyses on attitudes toward immigration across the American National Election Studies and Voter Study Group data, spanning analyses on immigration opinion for white Americans from 1992 to 2017 with economic data at levels as granular as the state, county, core-based statistical area (CBSA), and the ZIP code. My analyses are unequivocal that ethnocentrism is reliably the largest and most precise predictor of attitudes toward immigration. Further analyses and simulations from models most consistent with the economic anxiety argument show that a standard deviation increase in ethnocentrism is still a greater or equal magnitude effect than all economic anxiety proxies combined. I close with implications for immigration opinion research.