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Will Immigration Spark a White Backlash in America?

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INTRODUCTION



Marisa Abrajano is associate professor in the department of political science at the University of California, San Diego. This paper is based off of her latest book, entitled *White Backlash: Immigration, Race and American Politics* (with Zoltan Hajnal) forthcoming from Princeton University Press.

Immigration is unquestionably one of the most important forces shaping America. Since 2000 the United States has absorbed almost 14 million immigrants bringing the total of all documented and undocumented immigrants currently in the nation to over 40 million (Urban Institute 2011). Immigrants and their children now represent fully one in four Americans.

These raw numbers are impressive. Yet they tell only part of the story. The current wave of immigration has also wrought dramatic changes in the social and economic spheres. Large scale immigration has produced a sea change in the racial and ethnic composition of the nation. The phenomenal growth of the Latino population has allowed Latinos to displace African Americans as the nation's largest racial and ethnic group. Asian Americans, once a negligible share of the national population are now the fastest growing racial and ethnic group. This means that white numerical dominance is on a steep decline.

What are the political consequences of such a dramatic demographic, racial, economic, social, and cultural makeover? In spite of the obvious social and economic changes wrought by immigration, its impact on the political world is much less clear. On one level the impact of immigration on politics is obvious and already well documented. Countless studies have demonstrated the growing strength of the minority vote, particularly of the Latino electorate, who are the largest immigrant group in the nation (de la Garza et al 1992, DeSipio 1996, Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003, Abrajano and Alvarez 2010). Many others have demonstrated the increasing attachment of immigrants and their offspring to the Democratic Party (Wong et al 2011, Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003, Hajnal and Lee 2011). These are certainly important developments in the course of American political history.

But we contend that these changes represent only a small fraction of immigration's potential impact on American politics. Immigrants may be arriving in historically high numbers but they account

for only a relatively small fraction of the nation's population. Native-born whites still represent 63 percent of the population and, perhaps more importantly, some 75 percent of its voters. Thus, how non-immigrant whites respond to this growing immigrant and Latino population is critical not only to the welfare of current immigrants but also to the future of immigration policy in the US. Acceptance is likely to bring assimilation and rising economic status among immigrants. Fear and resentment is likely to bring increased efforts at border enforcement, more migrant deaths, and strained relations between the nation's white (and primarily native born) population and its racial and ethnic minority groups.

Even more importantly, if immigration leads to a backlash that not only shapes views on immigration but also alters the basic political orientation of large number of Americans, then the entire direction of American politics hangs in the balance. A broad backlash could lead to increasingly strict and conservative policymaking, shift the balance of power between Democrats and Republicans, and advantage rightward leaning candidates throughout the country. In short, in order to fully understand how broadly immigration is transforming American politics we need to examine the attitudes and actions of the white population.

This is our primary focus. We delineate the different ways in which the partisan patterns, the electoral decisions, and the policy preferences of native white Americans are changing in response to immigration's imprint. Are whites responding with a broad backlash that results in more restrictive immigration policy, more punitive criminal justice policies, less generous public spending, and a large shift to the right that results in more support for Republican Party ideals and candidates? Or are whites embracing the benefits of immigration to such a degree that they seek to expand government and the services it offers to less advantaged segments of the population? Of course, Whites could also adopt a position somewhere in between.

The scholarly research has said very little about how views of immigrants in turn shape core political affiliations and basic voting decisions. To date there is almost no direct evidence that the basic policy positions, partisan affiliations, or voting decisions of individual white Americans strongly reflect their views on immigration or the Latino population.¹ Only two studies that we are aware of have demonstrated a connection between immigration and the white vote in national contests or revealed a link between immigration and white partisanship.² Despite the tremendous impact immigration has had on the demographics of the nation and the large scale social, economic, and racial change that has ensued, there is little direct evidence of that immigration has had an enduring impact on the basic political decisions of the white majority.

Moreover, many would be skeptical that immigration could have a profound impact on the basic political choices of white Americans. The near complete assimilation of American immigrants and their children (Alba and Nee 2005) and the rapid growth of inter-racial marriage (Bean and Stevens 2003) imply that immigrant-related considerations should not weigh heavily on the political calculus of white Americans.

1 Scholars have, however, found clear evidence that immigration fundamentally shapes the views of Latinos (Nicholson and Segura 2005 but see Abrajano et al 2008, Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003).

2 The first study is work on California which alternately shows that Proposition 187 led to growing white support of the Democratic Party (Bowler et al 2006) or that the episode had no impact on white partisanship (Dyck et al 2012). The other is a recent study by two psychologists, Craig and Richeson (2014) who find a relationship between changing racial demographics and White Americans' political ideology.

Other skeptics would point to the immobility of partisanship (Green et al 2002, Campbell et al 1960). Can immigration lead to substantial changes in party identification when party identification is a deeply ingrained psychological attachment that is instilled early in life and largely impervious to change? From this perspective, immigration is likely to be one of many issues that fails to make much of an impact on the fortress of partisanship.

IMMIGRATION'S IMPACT ON PARTISAN POLITICS: A THEORY

Nevertheless, we believe that immigration and the Latino population do impact whites' core political calculus. We offer a theory of how large scale immigration can result in real partisan shifts in the white population. First, the sheer size of the racial and demographic change that has occurred and that continues to occur is impossible for whites to miss (US Census 2010). It would be surprising if such a massive change in the makeup of the nation did not result in immigration playing a more central role in the minds of whites.

Second, irrespective of the actual fiscal consequences of immigration, there is an ongoing and oft repeated threat narrative that links America's immigrant and Latino populations to a host of pernicious fiscal, social, and cultural consequences (Perez forthcoming, Chavez 2008, Hopkins 2010, Brader et al 2008, Santa Ana 2004). This narrative emphasizes cultural decline, immigrants' use of welfare, health, and educational services, their propensity to turn to crime, and their tendency to displace native citizens from jobs (Huntington 2005, Borjas 2001). Each of these concerns has been spelled out repeatedly and in great detail in the media, in the political sphere, and in scholarly outlets (Perez forthcoming, Valentino et al 2013, Chavez 2008, Santa Ana 2004).

Moreover, although many inside and outside of the political arena dispute the threat narrative, it appears that the narrative has been absorbed by a significant segment of the white population. Across the white population attitudes on Latinos and immigration are diverse, but there is little doubt that many white Americans express real concerns about immigration and hold negative attitudes toward Latinos. Recent polls suggest that well over half of white Americans feel that immigrants are a burden on the nation³. For many, the changes that are occurring in America represent a real threat.

Third, and critically for our account, this threat narrative has recently taken on increasingly clear partisan implications. Although there is still considerable variation within each party's leadership on the issue of immigration, empirical studies demonstrate growing partisan divergence on immigration between leaders of the two parties. For those who are concerned about the Latino population and the growth of immigration, this may be reason enough to support the Republican Party. As such, many white Americans will see that America is changing, will believe that immigration is driving many of the negative changes they see, and will know that the two parties represent two different responses - one largely on the side of immigrants and one largely in opposition to immigration.

WHY IMMIGRATION IS DIFFERENT

But what about the supposed stability and immovability of party identification (Green et al 2002, Campbell et al 1960)? Can immigration shape such fundamental and stable political attachments? We believe that the answer is yes and that in fact there are clear circumstances under which party identification can be responsive and more

³ Pew Research Center. 2006. "America's Immigration Quandary: No Consensus on Immigration Problem or Proposed Fixes." <http://www.people-press.org/2006/03/30/americas-immigration-quandary/> (accessed July 13, 2014).

malleable. When the social groups associated with each party change, mass shifts in partisanship can occur and have occurred (Green et al 2002).

Immigration today is a unique phenomenon in that it has changed the social group imagery of the parties. The Democratic party, once supported by lower class white interests increasingly became a party that was supported by the black community and since the 1980s has increasingly become a party that is also supported by Latinos and other immigrants. What it means to be a Democrat has therefore changed. This means that even for inattentive Americans who may have little knowledge of the issues of the day and who may have strong attachments to a political party, immigration could still change their partisanship.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF WHITE AMERICAN POLITICS

The results from our analyses demonstrate the wide-ranging impact of immigration on the politics of white America. We show a massive shift in aggregate white partisanship. In 1980, white Democrats dominated white Republicans numerically. As immigration's impact on America has grown, whites have fled to the Republican Party in every larger numbers. The end result is that the principal partisan choice of white America has been totally reversed.

At the aggregate level, we find that when media coverage of immigration uses the Latino threat narrative, the likelihood of whites identifying with the Democratic Party decreases, and the probability of favoring Republicans increases. At the individual level, we find that how we think about immigration tells us a lot about our policy preferences, our partisan ties, and our voting decisions. Whites who are fearful of immigration tend to respond to that anxiety with a measurable shift to the political right. Similarly, where we live and in particular whether we live in states with large numbers or few Latinos greatly influences those same political choices. As immigration encroaches more and more on different neighborhoods, whites who live in those areas are more and more apt to want to disinvest in public spending and less and likely to offer support to less advantaged segments of the population. In short, who we are politically is driven in no small part by immigration.

One direct result of all of this is the passage of a conservative policy agenda in the areas most affected by immigration. Our analysis shows a close connection between the size and growth of the state Latino population and state policymaking. In states with larger and faster growing Latino population - states where immigrants and Latinos could benefit from public support - whites have been exceptionally successful at reducing educational funding, decreasing welfare support, and cutting health care spending.

IMPLICATIONS

In a political era, in which many claim that the significance of race has faded, we find that Latino or immigrant related views impact the political orientation of many members of the white population. Party identification - the most influential variable in American politics - is at least in part a function of the way individual white Americans see Latinos and immigrants. So too is the vote in national contests for President and Congress. In short, who we are politically at our core is shaped substantially by deeply felt concerns about immigration and racial/ethnic change.

What is also clear from this pattern of results is that the Latino population has become a more central factor in American race relations. In American history, the issue of race has traditionally been viewed through the lens of a black-white dichotomy. That is no longer true today. The increasing visibility of immigration and its widespread

impact on the nation's economic, social, cultural, and political spheres appear to have brought forth a real change in the racial dynamics of our politics.

There are also implications for the future balance of power in American politics. The pattern of results presented here suggests that at least over the short to near term, determining which party will dominate American electoral politics is very much an open question. The conventional view of pundits and prognosticators and maybe even most social scientists is that the dramatic growth of the minority population and its strong ties to the Democratic Party portend the demise of the Republican Party. That may be true in the long term. But that prediction ignores the white population and the possibility of a widespread white backlash in the short term. Given that whites still makeup about three-quarters of the voters in the nation and will likely be the clear majority for decades to come, there is every reason to believe that whites will have a real say in who governs. Indeed, the white population's rapidly growing allegiance to the Republican Party points toward a very different short term future - one that might more likely be highlighted by Republican victory than by Democratic dominance.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the dramatic surge in white support for the Republican Party has disquieting implications for the future of race relations in this nation. While many have hoped for the end of large-scale racial tensions and some have even acclaimed the election of Barack Obama as the first sign of a post-racial America, the political impact of immigration seems to be leading America in the opposite direction. The rightward shift of many white Americans on one hand and the leftward drift of much of the racial and ethnic minority population on the other is exacerbating already large racial divides (King and Smith 2011). The last presidential election, for example, was by some calculations the most racially divided presidential contest in American history. Immigration and other factors appear increasingly to be pitting the declining white majority against the growing non-white minority. Some degree of polarization is a normal and a healthy part of democracy. Yet when the core dividing line in a nation becomes closely aligned with racial and ethnic demography, larger concerns about inequality, conflict, and discrimination emerge. Thus, when race becomes the primary determinant of political decision-making, the potential to divide the nation's population emerges.

Hanging in the balance is the fate of America's immigrants, its racial and ethnic minorities, and other less advantaged segments of the population. To this point, our results suggest that the white backlash has in many ways been successful. Our analysis of policy outcomes across the states indicates that whites have been especially effective in disinvesting in public goods in the states where immigration is most deeply felt. Precisely where the number of immigrants is largest and where the need is the greatest, these public funds have become less and less available. All of this has distressing implications for the welfare of these different groups. Unless the partisan politics of immigration shift dramatically, more newcomers will simply mean a greater white backlash and greater disinvestment. Immigrants and racial/ethnic minorities themselves will have more and more of a say as they increase in size but they are a long way off from becoming a majority of the voting public. That means, unfortunately, that things may get worse before they get better.

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