There is no denying the powerful role that an anti-immigrant backlash has played for Donald Trump. Before his now infamous speech about Mexican immigrants - “They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” – Donald Trump’s presidential campaign was floundering with polls placing him near the bottom of the 16 candidate Republican field. But after a month of non-stop coverage of his immigration remarks Trump sky rocketed to first place in the polls. Immigration continued to fuel his candidacy throughout the primary and the general election. His narrow victory rested in no small part on anger about immigration. Three quarters of Trump voters felt that illegal immigrants were “mostly a drain” on American society. Only 11 percent of Clinton supports agreed.

An anti-immigrant backlash has continued to be central to his presidency which started with an attempted ban on immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries and has continued with repeal of the DACA program, the elimination of Temporary Protected Status for tens of thousands of Central Americans, a limit on refugees, an increase in the number and scope of deportations, and a plan to build a massive wall along the entire Southern border with Mexico.

What is wrong is to see this purely as a Donald Trump phenomenon. The anti-immigrant threat narrative has had a lasting influence on American partisan politics and it will likely to continue to be an important factor in the future. In this essay, I put the anti-immigrant backlash of 2016 into its broader context. I trace the increasingly powerful impact of immigration on partisan politics since the 1990s and show how this anti-immigrant strategy emerges from a longer term ‘Southern’ strategy employed by Republicans to garner support from white Americans concerned about Black’s Civil Rights threat. I also highlight the parallels between this current wave of anti-immigrant sentiment and earlier periods of anti-immigrant campaigning in American history. I conclude with a more positive note about the limitations of this strategy and the prospects for an increasingly successful politics of inclusion.

**The Roots of the Anti-Immigrant Backlash**

Even though so many pundits and prognosticators seemed surprised by the rise of Donald Trump, nobody should have been. Trump’s narrative is far from new. It has been developed over decades by the Republican Party and it has proven to be enormously successful in the past. Despite the ubiquitous talk of 2016 being extraordinary, the truth is the patterns in the election mirrored decades of American campaigns and elections.

Well before Donald Trump arrived on the Presidential scene, I co-wrote a book documenting the widely employed and often successful Republican tactic of scapegoating immigrants. By blaming immigrants for much of what ails America and by promising to stem the tide of immigration, Republican elites have been able to garner more and more of the white vote (Hajnal and Rivera 2014, Abrajano and Hajnal 2015).

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That strategy begins most conspicuously in California in 1994 when Pete Wilson, the Republican Governor, campaigned on Prop 187 and the issue of undocumented immigration to help counter his low approval ratings and sagging poll numbers. The so-called ‘save our state’ measure ultimately passed and Wilson won re-election.

Republicans around the country took heed. Since then Republican elites have increasingly moved to the right on immigration (Jeong et al 2011; Wong 2013). Their tactics have garnered more and more white defections from the Democratic Party. By 2008, the link between immigration and partisanship had been firmly established. Analysis with Michael Rivera shows that even after controlling for a range of factors purported to drive vote choice including party identification, retrospective evaluations, issues positions, ideological views, racial attitudes, and demographic characteristics, there is a strong link between how white Americans think about immigration and their partisan choices (Hajnal and Rivera 2014). As Figure One illustrates, all else equal whites with more negative attitudes toward undocumented immigrants are significantly more likely to vote Republican. Net controls, those with more negative views of undocumented immigrants were 23.7 percent more likely to favor John McCain over Barack Obama than those with more positive views. The effect for intended vote choice is almost identical – a 22.9 percent increase in the probability of voting for McCain. Impressively, in an election that occurred in the midst of one of the nation’s sharpest recessions in history, that coincided with two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that included the nation’s first African American presidential major party nominee, views on immigrants still mattered.

Figure 1. The Estimated Impact of Views on Immigration on White Vote Choice

Moreover, it is clear that the direction of causality runs from immigration to partisanship. Our tests using panel data also showed that an individual’s past views on immigration predict future changes in their partisanship (Hajnal and Rivera 2014). Who we are on immigration is driving who will be become on party.

That is true whether we look at the individual or the aggregate level.

Our analysis of national patterns in white macropartisanship – the relative share of Democrats and Republicans in the white population – found that over the last two decades, aggregate views on immigration at one point in time predict changes in white macropartisanship in subsequent periods. That analysis which is presented in Table One shows that there is a significant

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3 That analysis combines data from the two different data sets that most regularly ask about attitudes on immigration (The Gallup Poll) and partisanship (The CBS/NY Times Poll). For attitudes on immigration, we focused on answers
relationship between how we feel about immigration at one quarter in time and shifts in the balance of power between Republican and Democratic identifiers in the next quarter. The size of the effect is far from massive but it is meaningful. A shift from the minimum level of support for immigration to the maximum level is associated with a little over a tenth of a point shift on the 5 point macropartisanship scale.

| Table One. The Impact of Aggregate Immigration Views on White Macropartisanship |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Lagged Macropartisanship (High=Rep) | .39 (.15)* |
| Lagged Immigration Views (High =Pro Immig) | -.22 (.09)* |
| Constant | 1.81 (.45)** |
| N | 21 |
| Adj R Squared | .43 |

**P<.01 *P<.05      Source: Immigration Views from Gallup Series, Macropartisanship from CBS/NY Times series.

All of this adds up to major changes in the partisan leaning of the nation. As Figure Two shows, during this period of Republican anti-immigrant tactics, there has been a slow and sometimes uneven but also very clear movement of whites toward the Republican Party and its candidates. In 1990, before Republican candidates had embarked on the immigrant threat narrative, white voters were almost evenly divided between Democratic and Republican congressional candidates and there was almost no correlation between attitudes on immigration and white partisanship. In 2016, after years of Republican campaigning against immigrants, views on immigration were tightly linked to the vote and whites had become decidedly Republican in their house vote. In 2016, only 38 percent of white voters favored Democratic candidates in Congressional contests. Trump simply represents the apex of a long term anti-immigrant backlash strategy.

Source: National Exit Polls

to the question: “Should immigration be kept at its present level, increased, or decreased?” To get quarterly data, we average the party identification responses and immigration attitudes for all respondents in a given survey and then average across surveys in a given quarter of a given year.
It is also worth noting that the anti-immigrant threat narrative was not invented by Pete Wilson in California in 1994. Every wave of immigration to American shores has been met with mixed reactions by the native born population and in almost every case, savvy politicians have attempted to use anxiety about immigration to garner more votes. It is also very much an international phenomenon. Trump’s rise is analogous to the rise of extreme right in Europe and mirrors the success of the UK Independence Party in Britain, the Freedom Party in Austria, the National Front in France, and many others.

**Race and Party**

In many ways the anti-immigrant phenomenon is not just about immigration. The anti-immigrant story is part of a broader white backlash story. Race, broadly speaking, has been part of the Republican playbook for quite some time (Carmines and Stimson 1989, Edsall and Edsall 1991, Valentino and Sears 2005). A little over five decades ago, the Republican Party decided on its infamous Southern Strategy. Personified by George Wallace’s segregationist rhetoric, the strategy was to dismiss black demands for ever greater government handouts and to highlight all of the failings of the black community and in so doing attract racist white Southerners who had faithfully supported the Democratic Party. Through Goldwater, Nixon, Reagan and onto George H. W. Bush, the campaign tactics were sometimes subtle and sometimes not so subtle. While Wallace would proclaim, “Segregation now, segregation forever,” George H.W. Bush would more delicately run an ad about Willie Horton, an African American felon. Almost always there was a hint of race in the air and at least an implicit denigration of African Americans.

For white Southerners it was all too attractive. White Southerners went from overwhelmingly siding with the Democratic Party in 1960 to overwhelming voting for Republican candidates in 1990. And it is probably not just white Southerners. Since 1990, racial views and partisanship have only become more and more inter-twined at the national level. For much of this recent period, racial resentment has been one of the strongest predictors of party affiliation (Kinder and Sanders 1996, Valentino and Sears 2005). Barack Obama’s presidency only served to make racial views matters even more. As Michael Tesler has so aptly demonstrated, how people think about health care and a host of other ostensibly non-racial issues is now highly correlated with their racial views (Tesler 2012).

All of this has also translated back into the Trump phenomenon. Research during the general election campaign showed that white independents and Republicans who think their identity as whites is extremely important were more than 30 points more likely to support Trump than those who think their racial identity is not important (Tesler and Sides 2016). Another study found that racial resentment, more than populism or authoritarianism, determined who supported Trump and who didn’t (Enders and Small 2016).

In short, Trump’s rise is neither surprising nor unusual. It is a logical outgrowth of decades of a conscious Republican strategy on immigration and race.

**Anti-Immigrant Policy in the States**

As the discussion of Pete Wilson and Prop 187 hinted, the anti-immigrant backlash is also not only a national level phenomenon. Events on the national stage have garnered much of our attention. But activities at the state level have been just as important and perhaps just as threatening to the well-being of immigrants around the nation.
There are ample signs that the backlash is proceeding at the state level. Since 1992 states have passed over 3,000 bills that explicitly deal with immigration (NCSL 2018). Although many of these laws are ‘welcoming,’ analysis of the content of state laws reveals that the clear majority of substantively significant bills have served to limit rather than expand immigrants’ rights or interests (Monogan 2013, Rivera 2015). During this period states have done everything from reducing or eliminating immigrants’ access to public services in education, health, and welfare to allowing the police to target individuals suspected of being undocumented. Of all of the laws that directly impact an immigrant’s ability to reside in a state, 84 were coded as ‘hostile’ (Monogan 2013).

Critically, our analysis in White Backlash indicates that the backlash is not confined to measures that explicitly mention immigrants or immigration. The immigrant threat narrative has been so pervasive that it has crept into debates about policy issues that are ostensibly not about immigration. Public discussions related to welfare, health, education, criminal justice, taxes, and many other subjects have been infused with images and stories of the undocumented and the heavy economic, cultural, and criminal costs that these immigrants put on American society.

The net result is that state policy across a host of different arenas has become intricately connected to the immigrant population. In particular, how states raise and spend their money is closely linked to the size of the immigrant population. In Table 2, I demonstrate this relationship at its simplest level. I compare basic state policy in heavily Latino states to policy in states with smaller Latino populations. I focus on the size of the Latino population because I believe that the broader Latino population is the most visible shortcut for the immigrant population in the minds of many white Americans. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that when white Americans think about immigration, the image they have in their head is an undocumented Latino. The analysis centers on the proportion of the state budget that goes to each policy area. By focusing on the proportion I get a measure of the government’s priorities relative to other functions and I avoid some of the variation caused by the fact that some states are richer than others and are thus able to spend more money.

<table>
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<th>TABLE 32 GOVERNMENT POLICY IN HEAVILY LATINO STATES IS MORE REGRESSIVE (SHARE OF ALL STATE SPENDING)</th>
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4 Interestingly, whereas the size of the Latino population has a consistent, robust effect on policy, alternate analysis reveals relatively few connections between the size of the undocumented population or the size of the foreign-born population and state policy.
As Table 2 reveals, larger concentrations of Latinos tend to lead to state level policies that are more regressive, more punitive, and less generous. Redistributive spending – money for healthcare and education – is lower in states with more Latinos where the beneficiaries of the policies are often Latinos. In the case of healthcare funding, the gap is sizeable. Medicaid spending drops 32 percent in heavily Latino states. The pattern is the opposite for punitive criminal justice spending. In states where Latinos represent a large share of the population and could be the target of tougher laws and harsher sentences, spending on prisons is substantially higher. Again, the absolute difference in the share of the budget going to prisons is small but gap represents a 21 percent increase in the share of the budget going to prisons.

How governments spend their money is only half of the fiscal story. State governments also have to make weighty decisions about how they raise their revenues. States can choose to raise revenue through more progressive tax measures like property taxes or they can favor more regressive means like sales taxes. Regressive taxes like sales taxes will fall most heavily on immigrants, Latinos, and the poor for whom retail sales represent a large share of their spending. By contrast, progressive taxes like property taxes will benefit those on the lower end of the spectrum because they generally don’t own property. Thus, the extent to which states favor sales over property taxes could say a lot about who they seek to penalize and who they seek to benefit.

What tax patterns do say is very clear. States that are heavily Latino tend to raise much more of their revenue through regressive sales taxes and much less of their revenue through progressive property taxes. The differences are substantial. There is, in fact, a 32 percent increase in the share of revenue raised through sales taxes in states where Latinos represent a large share of the population. Likewise, there is a 78 percent decrease in the share of revenue raised through progressive property taxes in those same states (compared to states with small Latino population shares).

Critically, these relationships persist in regressions after controlling for the share of citizens identifying as conservative, the share of state legislators who are Republican, the unemployment rate, median household income, the professionalization of the legislature, and a range of racial and demographic factors. As the Latino population grows, Americans become less willing to invest in public services like education, health, and welfare and are more willing to fund prisons. In other words, when the policy is more apt to impact Latinos, benefits decline and punishment increases. All of this indicates that America’s increasingly diverse population is generating a real, wide ranging backlash.

**Latino Power and a Future of Immigrant Inclusion**

All of the news is not, however, bad. If we dig deeper, there are also signs of more positive and inclusive policy making. The tests so far suggest that immigrants are a powerless pawn in a game played by the rest of the American population. But are immigrants really without agency? What about the millions of immigrants who participated in the 2006 immigrants’ rights protests? Or the countless Dreamers who are fighting for their rights? And shouldn’t the fact that Latinos

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5 Others have found similar patterns for welfare (Fellowes and Rowe 2014, Hero and Preuhs 2007)
6 Aside from property and sales taxes, most other tax revenue comes from income taxes which can range from regressive to progressive and are harder to characterize.
now make up about a fifth or more of the legislature in states like California and Texas make a
difference? Once the immigrant population passes a certain threshold, are immigrants able to
mobilize to influence policy outcomes more in their own favor?

One way to test immigrant power is to see if the patterns in Table 2 change after the Latino
population passes a certain threshold (see also Rivera 2015 on this point). And the simplest way
to do that is to add an additional measure of the size of the Latino population (Latino population
share squared) to regressions modelling state policy. That tests shows that Latinos do have
agency. On criminal justice, healthcare, and taxes, once the Latino population becomes large
enough and crosses a demographic threshold, politics and policy begins to shift back toward
inclusion and generosity. Figure 3 illustrates the predicted effect of Latino population size on
corrections spending. The figure shows that all else equal growth in the Latino population first
leads to a rise in the proportion of state funds that go to corrections, but as Latinos become a
larger and larger share of the state, the amount of corrections spending declines substantially.

Figure 3. Signs of Latino Power in State Spending

In other words, the Latino population serves as more than just a threat to the rest of the
community. Latinos, themselves, appear to have an impact on policy. If Latinos grow to a third
of the national population and become large majorities in many states as they are expected to do
by the middle of the 21st Century, then Latinos might have much more of a say than they do now
and state policies might look very different than they do now.

The California Lesson

California’s history with immigration and its policy response aptly illustrate this complex
relationship. As one of the first states to face large scale Latino immigration, California was one
of the first to try to actively impose restrictions on services to undocumented immigrants, as
evidenced with the now infamous Proposition 187. With Proposition 187, the “Save Our State”
initiative of 1994, the voters of California overwhelmingly passed a measure that sought to
exclude undocumented immigrants from access to range of public services. That omnibus anti-
immigrant legislation was quickly followed by passage of a Prop 209, a measure that outlawed
affirmative action in the state, and Prop 227, a measure that sought to enshrine English and end
bilingual education. Many other states followed suit. But California was the first.
Over time, whites in the state became more conservative, with more and more moving to the Republican Party, and policy on immigration, education, and corrections shifted decidedly to the right. California fell from among the top half of all states in per pupil education funding in 1980 when whites represented the overwhelming majority of school children to near the bottom (44th place) in 2009 when Latinos were the single largest racial/ethnic group among school age children (CBP 2010). Likewise corrections funding more than tripled as a proportion of the budget from only about 2.9 percent of the budget in 1980 to well over 10 percent in 2005 (CBP 2012). Driving this growth in prison spending was a series of stricter sentencing laws like California’s famous 1994 ‘Three Strikes Law” which imposed mandatory life sentences for all three-time felons.

As the Latino population has grown and amassed enough influence to be an important part of the state’s Democratic majority, policy has once again shifted back to the left. With the active support of Latinos who now account for 38 percent of the population and with the strong backing of Latino legislators who now hold 23 percent of the seats in the state legislature, a series of pro-immigrant measures has passed the legislature. This includes measures offering undocumented immigrants in-state tuition, drivers’ licenses, and the opportunity to practice law. Education and corrections funding are also now slowly following suit. In the last few years, state education funding has already seen a slight but noticeable uptick. With voters passing Prop 30, a tax measure that is expected to raise billions for K-12 education, the state is likely to see even more growth in education spending. On the other end of the spectrum, corrections funding has dropped markedly and the state has initiated a number of steps to gain early release of prisoners. As well it has shifted efforts from imprisonment toward greater rehabilitation. A range of different factors has contributed to these policy changes in California but Latino context and the immigrant threat narrative appear to be an important part of the story.

Latinos can not only influence spending decisions, they also appear to impact tax policy as well. I also find that states with larger Latino populations are more likely to favor regressive means of raising revenue like sales tax but the effect of the Latino population size is attenuated after the Latino population reaches a certain threshold. Once that threshold is reached and Latinos are large enough to influence policy on their own and larger Latino populations are associated with more progressive tax policy.

In a diversifying nation, the Republican threat narrative only works for so long. And then it begins to crumble.
Bibliography


