

Immigration Politics in the 2016 Election

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When Donald Trump launched his candidacy for US president, he assigned Mexican immigrants and Latinos of all origins a major role in his campaign. Trump's xenophobic rhetoric set the tone of the immigration-politics debate and, in doing so, his characterizations divided US society and Americans' views toward immigrants and Latinos. Trump's anti-immigrant divisiveness clearly found audiences willing to hear him out; many who welcomed his message were in the region of the country where Latino immigration is reshaping centuries-old attitudes about race: the US South.

According to Pew Research, seven of the 10 fastest-growing Latino populations between 2010 and 2014 were in Southern states, where growth rates ranged from 120% in Virginia to 176% in Tennessee (Stepler and López 2016). Beyond demographics, growth among the Latino electorate is an important indicator of Latino influence in the South, where electoral competitiveness is increasingly shaped by new Latino voters (Medina Vidal and García Ríos 2017; Wilkinson 2015). Considering these demographic and political shifts, the Diane D. Blair Center of Southern Politics and Society conducted a national survey of 3,668 respondents to examine their attitudes toward immigration politics and policy in the days following the 2016 general election.¹ Of the Blair Center Poll (BCP) sample, 1,021 respondents were Latino/Hispanic (511 Southern, 510 non-Southern), 915 were African American (457 Southern, 458 non-Southern), and 1,732 were non-Hispanic white (860 Southern, 872 non-Southern). The sample's 1,828 Southern residents were those living in the 11 states that formed the Confederate States of America. Respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with building a wall between the United States and Mexico and with a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. The findings of this poll summarize important differences in opinion along ethno-racial and regional lines.

DIVIDED OVER THE CONSTRUCTION OF A BORDER WALL

The construction of a Southern border wall crystallized Trump's approach to addressing US immigration policy by extraordinarily divisive means. How divided or unified is US society regarding building such a wall? Figure 1 illustrates the level of public support for the construction of a wall along the entire US border with Mexico. Opinion about the border wall was sharply divided along racial lines and, among whites, Southern regional difference also was significant. Overall, white Americans were at least three times more likely than

African Americans and Latinos to support a border wall. Southern whites expressed the highest level of support for a wall (40.2%).

Non-Southern Latinos were decidedly the group most in opposition to the idea of constructing a border wall (73.1%), followed by Southern Latinos (64.6%), non-Southern African Americans (63.0%), and Southern African Americans (59.1%). Latinos, both Southern and non-Southern, were also the least ambivalent/neutral about the issue. Yet, the pattern of stronger support for a border wall among Southerners was consistent across ethno-racial groups. In fact, Southern Latinos were more supportive (16.1%) of a border wall than non-Southern Latinos and both subgroups of African Americans. At this summary level of analysis, and given the higher level of neutrality among Southern Latinos (19.3%) versus non-Southern Latinos (16.3%), a possible explanation for Southern Latinos' higher level of support of a border wall is that they, like many Southerners generally, are more conservative than non-Southern Latinos and their policy views are influenced by this ideology.

The BCP sample included 955 individuals reporting that they voted for Donald Trump and 1,598 respondents indicating that they voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 general election. Among all Trump supporters, average support for a border wall was 55.5%. Only small proportions of African Americans (2.9%) and Latinos (10.5%) supported Trump compared to 45.0% among white respondents. White Trump supporters (N = 811) were more supportive of a border wall than either Latino or black Trump supporters.

Among all Clinton supporters, there was resounding opposition to building a border wall and low levels of neutrality compared to Trump supporters. Nationally, African Americans expressed the most ambivalence toward the border wall: 23.3% versus 11.4% ambivalence among Latinos and 11.8% among whites.

MORE SUPPORT FOR A PATHWAY TO CITIZENSHIP FOR UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

A pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States is a more established policy proposal than a Southern border wall. As a topic of serious debate among Members of Congress, presidents, and presidential hopefuls for several years, Americans are better acquainted with this proposal. Figure 2 illustrates levels of agreement with a pathway to citizenship by region and ethno-racial group. In terms of region, again there were differences in opinion between Southerners and non-Southerners of all ethno-racial groups. Notably, these differences were muted

compared to the regional split on the border-wall question. Whereas these divisions may dictate differing normative attitudes about the specifics of “meeting certain requirements,” agreement appears more within reach on this issue compared to a border wall.

Yet, the largest intragroup regional opinion gap was between Southern and non-Southern whites. Southern whites comprised the group with the highest level of disagreement with a pathway to citizenship (32.6%), compared to non-Southern whites (28.7%).

Southern whites (32.6%). Latino Trump supporters deviated sharply from white Trump supporters on their views toward a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Among Latino supporters of Donald Trump, nearly half (48.1%) supported a pathway to citizenship, which is 15.1 percentage points higher than white Trump-supporter agreement. Such inconsistency among Latino Trump supporters was likely a function of a higher level of issue saliency for a pathway to citizenship among this group. Although only 2.9% of African Americans are Trump

Certainly, the widest overall opinion gap on a pathway to citizenship was between Latino and white Southerners. Support for a pathway to citizenship among Southern Latinos (76.2%) was highest among all subgroups; support among Southern whites (44.6%) was the lowest.

As with border-wall opinion, Latinos had the lowest level of ambivalence toward the pathway to citizenship question and African Americans were the most ambivalent.

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Again, who one supported in the 2016 presidential race paints a picture of divisiveness on the pathway-to-citizenship issue. White Trump supporters expressed the most opposition to a pathway to citizenship (45.0%) among all groups, including

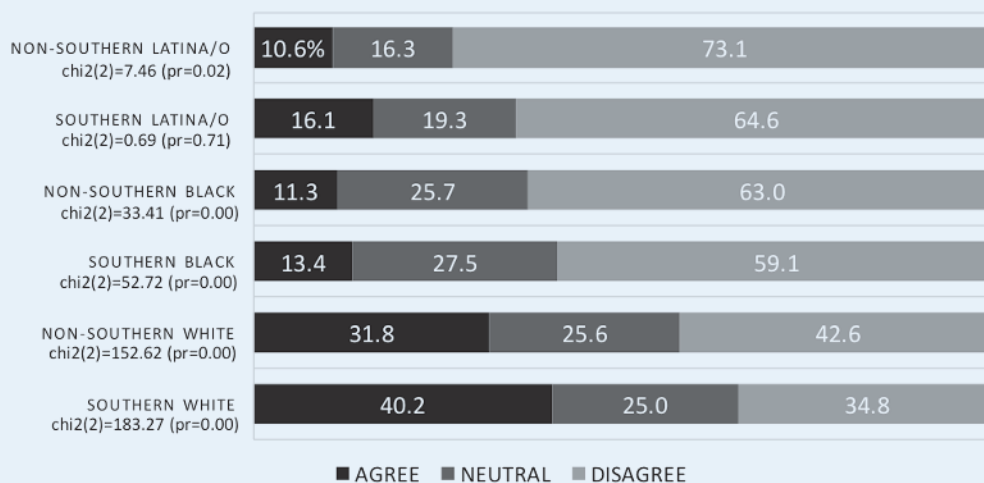
supporters, this group was close to evenly divided between agreement neutrality and disagreement on a pathway to citizenship.

Data revealed that among Clinton supporters, a pattern of opinion on a pathway to citizenship was consistent with opinion about a border wall. Black Clinton supporters were the most ambivalent and least supportive of this policy; however, 67.6% still supported a pathway to citizenship. White Clinton supporters expressed the most opposition (9.2%) whereas a large majority of this group (77.5%) endorsed a pathway to citizenship. For Latino Clinton supporters, there was marginally more ambivalence toward the pathway to citizenship (13.7%) than to the border wall (11.4%); however, 81.4% of Latino Clinton supporters favored a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants.

THE RACIALIZATION OF LATINOS, IMMIGRANTS, AND ATTITUDES TOWARD IMMIGRATION POLICY

Certainly, the racialization of Latinos and of immigrant politics was near the center of US politics long before the 2016 presidential race. As new Latino immigrants enter the US polity, they simultaneously have reshaped the political goals of their US-born co-ethnics (Schmidt et al. 2009) while being depicted by the dominant US immigration narratives as threatening foreigners and racialized savages (Sampaio 2015). This racialization of Latinos is highly salient in the US South, a new-immigrant destination. In the post-1965 protest era of

Figure 1
“A Wall Should Be Built along the Entire Border with Mexico.”



race and ethnic politics, immigrant “newcomers” seeking to become full members of political communities have faced challenges from US-born African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans who feel that with their own political incorporation being incomplete, immigrant newcomers threaten their status (Schmidt et al. 2009). A consequence of this phenomenon is the racialization of immigration politics (Chávez, Lavariega Monforti, and Michelson 2015; Schmidt et al. 2009). This leads us to question how opinion about a pathway to citizenship and a border wall relate to public perceptions about how much attention is given race and racial issues.

Figure 3 illustrates ethno-racial and regional divides on opinion toward the amount of attention we as a society give race and racial issues: too much, the right amount, or too little.

opinion between these two groups. Given these views toward attention to race, it is important to closely examine the relationship between opinions about attention to race and immigration-policy issues.

Pairwise correlations between support for these two immigration policies and perceived attention to race provide insight into this relationship. The strongest correlations are related to white opinion. The belief that we give *too much* attention to race is *positively* correlated with support for a border wall at 0.38 ($p < 0.01$) for white respondents, compared to 0.15 ($p < 0.01$) for African Americans and 0.20 ($p < 0.01$) for Latinos. This same pattern holds for white respondents’ *negative* associations of giving *too little* attention to race and support for a border wall, which is *negatively* correlated at -0.36 ($p < 0.01$),

The historical importance of white and black attitudes toward race and racial issues in the US South—together with Latinos’ and immigrants’ growing demographic, linguistic, and electoral influence in politics in the region (Hopkins, Tran, and Williamson 2013; Medina Vidal and García Ríos 2017; Wilkinson 2015)—point to an assessment of the effects of both African Americans’ and whites’ perceived attention to race on their views of the two immigration-policy issues examined here.

It is immediately obvious that Southern whites’ thinking about the attention given race is very different from that of their Southern counterparts. With 35.3% expressing “the right amount,” Latinos living in the South are more comfortable with the level of attention given race. Most notably, opinion on this question is sharply divided between Southern African Americans and whites, with almost an inverse distribution of

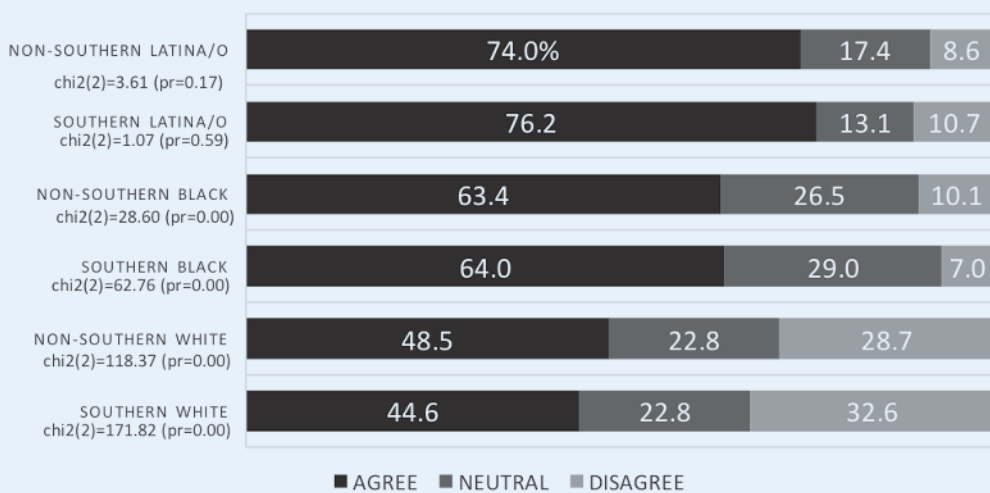
whereas for African Americans, it is -0.21 ($p < 0.01$) and for Latinos, -0.22 ($p < 0.01$). The same patterns hold when examining correlations between perceived attention to race and support for a pathway to citizenship. The strongest *negative* correlation between the view that *too much* attention is given to race and a pathway to citizenship support, -0.29 ($p < 0.01$), is for whites; the weakest, -0.06 ($p < 0.05$), is for African Americans.

For Latinos, these are correlated negatively at -0.13 ($p < 0.01$).

The correlations linking attention to race and the two immigration-policy questions suggested a relationship between immigrants and race, especially in the mind of white Americans. Compared to African Americans and Latinos, whites draw much stronger associations between race and Latino immigration and immigrants. These correlations suggested a racialization of immigration politics and of Latinos among white

Figure 2

“Undocumented Immigrants Living in the US Should Be Able to Remain in the US to Become Citizens after Meeting Certain Requirements over Time.”



Americans who have stronger negative associations with pro-immigrant and pro-Latino policy positions and the view that too much attention is given to race and racial issues. This called for a test of whether white Americans consistently hold stronger opinions than African Americans, consistent with the racialization of Latino immigrants.

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of the effects of both African Americans' and whites' perceived attention to race on their views of the two immigration-policy issues examined here.² Calculated via logistic regression and controlling for demographic and cultural-identity factors,³ estimates of the predicted probabilities of border-wall support (figure 4) show a positive relationship between perceived attention to race and border-wall

Figure 3
Perception of Amount of Attention Given Race and Racial Issues

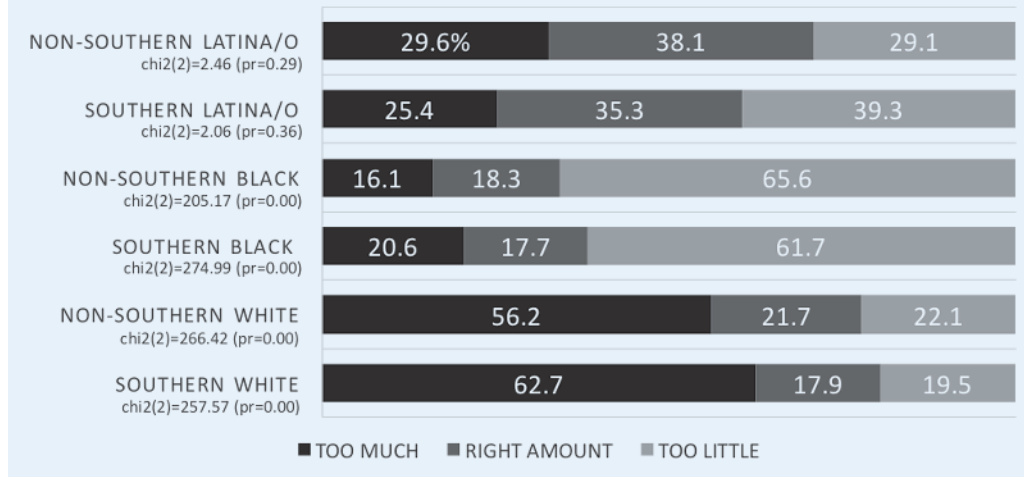
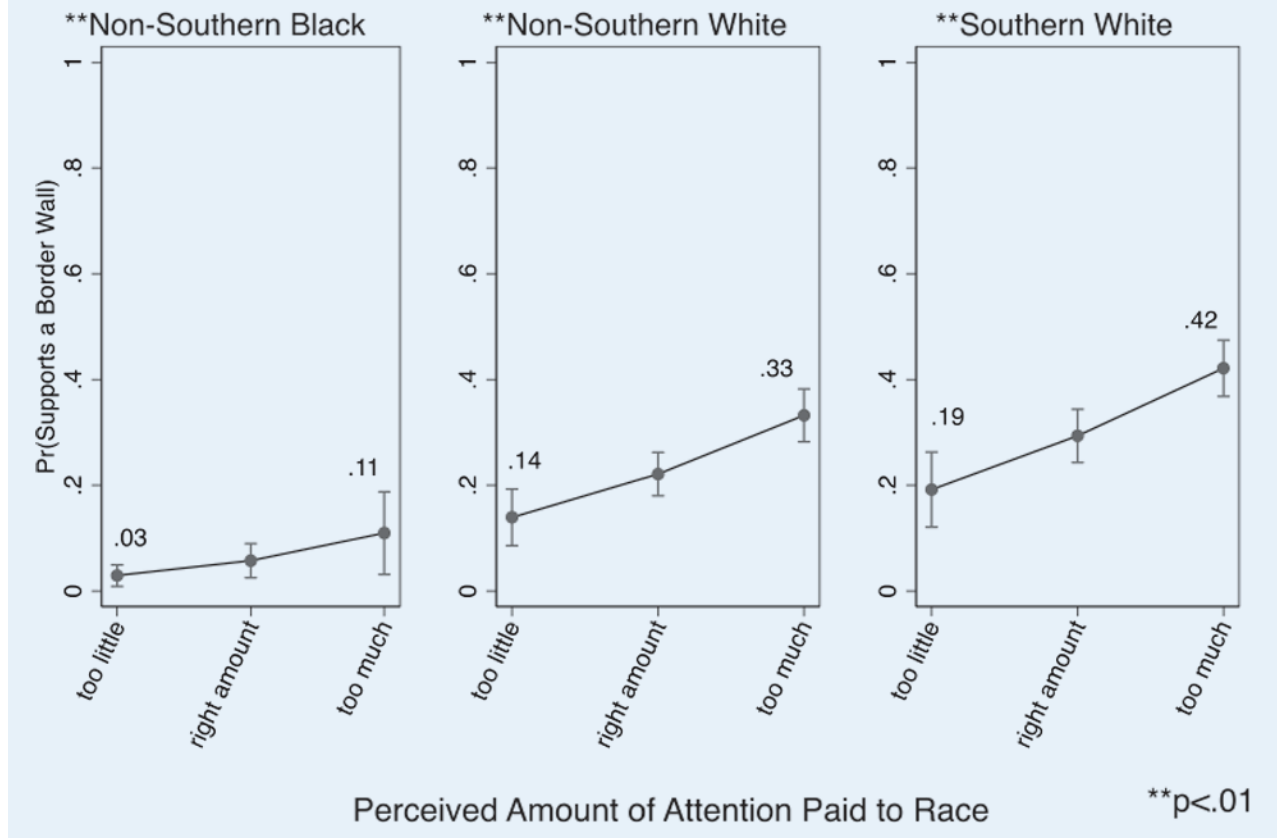


Figure 4
Marginal Effects of Perceived Attention Given Race on Support for a Border Wall



support for non-Southern blacks and for Southern and non-Southern whites. The minimum-to-maximum marginal effect of an 8% probability increase in support for a border wall among non-Southern blacks was modest compared to the 19% probability increase in non-Southern whites and the 23% increase in Southern white support for a border wall associated with increasing levels of attention to race and racial issues. Similar tests of the effects of perceived attention to race on support for a pathway to citizenship revealed that both non-Southern whites and Southern whites who believe that too much attention is given to race are 27% and 24% less likely, respectively, to support a pathway to citizenship than those who believe too little attention is given to race.

CONCLUSION

Compared to previous election cycles, Latinos and immigrants played a prominent role in 2016. However, this prominence was not directly attributed to their growing political clout. Instead, the threat that Latino immigrants (Mexicans in particular) pose to the way of life in the United States is what the Trump campaign and the Republican Party emphasized. For Latinos, Trump's statements regarding Mexicans, other Latinos, and immigrants are more than off-the-cuff remarks. Like Muslims, who Trump stated he would like to see banned from entering the United States, Latinos must live with the consequences of his statements. They live and work alongside people who have no reservations about voting for someone who wants them removed from the United States.

In the deeply divided political climate of 2016, whites, African Americans, and Latinos were divided on questions regarding immigration politics and policy. We observed that a Southern regional divide in the United States along these policy issues also was prevalent: white Southerners deviated most sharply from non-Southerners, Latinos, and African Americans in their views toward immigration politics and policy. Additionally, by significant margins, white Trump supporters—whose anti-immigrant/anti-Latino views were validated by his election—are the strongest supporters of anti-immigrant policies. Finally, the divisions among Latino, black, and white views concerning attention to race in the United States and policies directly affecting Latinos reveal that, compared to blacks and Latinos, whites vigorously racialize immigration politics. The continued racialization of Latinos and immigration politics reveal divisions in policy opinion by region and race. As this article illustrates through the analysis of policy opinion, it is predictable that immigration-policy shifts—such as the rescinding of Deferred Action for

Childhood Arrivals in 2017—are being driven by racialized views toward Latinos and immigrants.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517002402> ■

NOTES

1. For more information about the 2016 BCP and analyses, please contact the author.
2. These statistical tests focus on white and black opinion toward two immigration policies controlling for, among other factors, contact with and affect toward Latinos, which does not allow for a direct comparison of Southern and non-Southern Latinos' views toward these policies. By omitting the number of respondents' friends who are Latino, the Latino feeling thermometer from the multivariate logistic regression tests of Southern and non-Southern Latinos' views revealed (1) positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) effects of perceived attention to race and racial issues on border-wall support among both subgroups, and (2) a negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) effect of attention to race on support for a pathway to citizenship among non-Southern Latinos.
3. Predicted probabilities calculated from four logistic regression models testing for the effects of perceived attention given race on support for a border wall among black Southerners, black non-Southerners, white Southerners, and white non-Southerners controlled for the effects of strength of American identity, strength of ethnic identity, boundaries to Americanness, number of Latino friends in personal networks, Hispanic feeling thermometer, bible literalism, conservative ideology, and socioeconomic status, and held these variables constant.

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