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Public Opinion Toward Immigration Reform: The Role of Economic Motivations

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This paper tests hypotheses concerning the effects of economic factors on public opinion toward immigration policy. Using the 1992 and 1994 National Election Study surveys, probit models are employed to test diverse conceptualizations of the effects of economic adversity and anxiety on opposition to immigration. The results indicate that personal economic circumstances play little role in opinion formation, but beliefs about the state of the national economy, anxiety over taxes, and generalized feelings about Hispanics and Asians, the major immigrant groups, are significant determinants of restrictionist sentiment. This restricted role of economic motives rooted in one's personal circumstances held true across ethnic groups, among residents in communities with different numbers of foreign-born, and in both 1992 and 1994.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is engaged in a new debate over immigration. The Immigration Acts of 1965 and 1990 widened America's door to newcomers, but in sharp contrast, the current legislative landscape is strewn with proposals to reduce immigration, seal the border with Mexico, and pare government expenditures by limiting immigrants' access to government services and benefits. And as the policy conflict intensifies, politicians and interest groups on both sides of the issue are striving to shape mass opinion with arguments about the costs and benefits of immigration (Clad 1994; Passel and Fix 1994). Now, as in the past, advocates of restricting immigration contend that newcomers displace native workers in the labor market and create a fiscal drain by costing the government more in services than they pay in taxes.

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The frequency with which elites frame the debate about immigration in economic terms raises the question of whether mass opinion is driven by economic concerns. Specifically, are those who experience job competition with immigrants, who bear a relatively heavy tax burden, or who have dimming financial prospects more likely to favor restrictionist policies than people who are feeling more secure economically? Is opposition to immigration more prevalent among those who perceive national economic conditions as declining than among those who believe the economy is getting better?

Immigration policy provides an excellent opportunity for investigating the interplay of economic motives and enduring values and attitudes in the formation of policy preferences. Historical research indicates that surges in anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States have followed sharp economic downturns, partly in response to the tendency of politicians and labor union leaders to blame foreign workers for unemployment and downward pressure on wages (Foner 1964; Higham 1985; Olzak 1992). The period under study here approximates this situation, in that a high level of immigration (Passel and Fix 1994) coincides with intense public concern about unemployment and economic decline (Pomper 1993). In addition, the dominant arguments of today's restrictionist leaders arguably have "primed" ordinary citizens to use economic criteria in forming their opinions about immigration policy (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Zaller 1992). At the same time, however, extensive research on the link between economic motives and public opinion has found relatively few instances in which policy preferences are strongly shaped by self-interest (Brody and Sniderman 1977; Citrin and Green 1990; Sears and Funk 1990).

The present study examines the extent to which Americans' attitudes toward immigration may be traced to their economic circumstances and concerns. We begin by gauging the links between restrictionist views and a wide range of potential indicators of economic vulnerability available in the 1992 American National Election Study (ANES).¹ We then replicate our findings using ANES data gathered in 1994, a year in which the issue of immigration grew in prominence and public opinion moved further toward support for restriction.² Our theoretical goals, then, are: (1) to determine whether, in the context of an apparent connection between economic stress and opposition to immigration at the *aggregate* level, personal economic interests undergird opinion formation at the *individual* level; (2) to identify the psychological processes that forge this connection, with particular reference to calculations of the costs and benefits of immigration; and (3) to establish whether economic motives are more influential in contexts in which policy questions, such as immigration reform, are especially salient.

¹We also consider whether such relationships are more likely to emerge among particular subgroups or in specific social or economic contexts.

²A count of the stories listed in *The New York Times Index* under the general heading of "Immigration and Emigration" shows that there were 192 such stories in 1993 and 195 in 1994, as compared to 76 in 1991 and 75 in 1992.

HYPOTHESES ABOUT ECONOMIC FACTORS

Both Olzak's (1992) model of ethnic competition, which emphasizes the influence of a shrinking job market on native workers, and the insights of relative deprivation theory (Gurr 1970; Runciman 1966), which stresses the influence of group comparisons on discontent, yield the general prediction that *at the individual level, economic threat, whether real or imagined, engenders opposition to immigration.*³ The structural factors stimulating a heightened sense of economic vulnerability, of course, may vary. One may be, or feel, insecure in relation to the labor market, the housing market, or the continued supply of government benefits (Hernes and Knudsen 1992). In addition, the tendency for personal economic discontent to be channeled into resentment of immigrants may be modified by the distinctiveness of newcomers, by media coverage of immigration issues, and by the mobilizing efforts of political organizations and leaders (Rule 1988).

This paper goes beyond previous studies of mass attitudes toward immigration (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Espenshade and Calhoun 1993; Hoskin 1991; Simon and Alexander 1993) in several ways. First, we address public opinion on specific policies concerning *legal* immigration rather than more generalized attitudes toward immigrants with particular ethnic or occupational characteristics. Second, we conduct a multivariate analysis of the impact of economic factors on public opinion using national, rather than state or local, data. Third, and most importantly, the available data make it possible to formulate a broadened set of conceptualizations of economic competition and insecurity. We assess the influences of the individual's financial resources, perceived economic prospects, labor market situation, and fiscal concerns in order to provide a more comprehensive test of the "economic" model of opinions about immigration.

Resources. According to a "resources" hypothesis, people who are experiencing financial stress will be more likely than the well-off to fear the implications of immigration. Insecure about their own future, the economically disadvantaged should be more likely to be hostile toward (or to scapegoat) immigrants and thus to support restrictionist policy proposals.⁴ Prior research furnishes mixed support for the postulated relationship between economic vulnerability and hostility to immigration (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Espenshade and Calhoun 1993; Hoskin 1991).

Pessimism. A "pessimism" hypothesis stresses the influence of the individual's perceptions of economic change. The prediction here is that, regardless of one's current level of financial resources, the belief that one is on a downward economic trajectory increases the tendency to view immigration as resulting in tangible

³This distilled statement of the hypothesis sets aside differences among its proponents concerning the specific indicators of economic threat and whether this concept should be defined in objective or subjective and absolute or relative terms.

⁴This argument dovetails with the notion that prejudice toward out-groups is most virulent among those near the bottom of the status hierarchy.

costs to oneself and enhances restrictionist sentiment. As in the analysis of economic voting in national elections, the test of this hypothesis entails distinguishing between retrospective judgments and expectations about the future, and between people's assessment of their own, as opposed to the nation's, economic prospects (Kiewiet and Rivers 1985).

Labor market competition. A persistent complaint about immigrants is that they take jobs away from native workers and depress wages in selected occupations (Espenshade and Calhoun 1993; Harwood 1983). According to the "job threat" hypothesis, a vulnerable labor market situation, as indexed by such factors as occupation, unemployment, or anxiety about one's job security, is the crucial source of opposition to immigration. The threat of economic competition from today's immigrants is generally seen as greatest in the low-skill, low-wage occupations (Borjas 1990; Borjas and Freeman 1992; DeFreitas 1991; Muller 1993; Passel 1994). In addition, union members might be expected to be especially sensitive to the potential impact of immigration on their wages and jobs.

Tax burden. The leading argument against today's liberal immigration policy is that it imposes an increasingly heavy fiscal burden on state and local governments (Passel and Fix 1994). The governors of several states have sued the federal government for the costs of providing services to refugees and illegal immigrants (Brinkley 1994). According to a "tax burden" hypothesis, then, negative assessments of the impact of immigration on the cost or availability of government benefits will engender support for reducing immigration. Thus, resentment or anxiety about the level of taxes one pays and residence in states with relatively high taxes or large concentrations of immigrants should predict anti-immigration policy preferences.

Specifications. Each of these propositions presumes the existence of cognitive linkages that connect personal economic experiences to evaluations of immigration (Feldman 1982; Mutz 1992; Weatherford 1983). As noted above, therefore, it is relevant to consider whether the strength of the relationship between economic motives and negative views of immigration depends on the mediation of individual and contextual factors.

First, it is possible that material concerns are a more potent influence on the opinions of those who regard economic problems as the "most important" issue facing the nation. Second, several observers maintain that blacks are especially threatened by economic and political displacement by new immigrants (Miles 1992; Schuck 1994; Skerry 1995). If this is true, then the ethnic competition model would predict that economic anxieties have a stronger influence on the immigration attitudes of blacks than whites. Third, recent immigration to the United States is heavily concentrated in just a few states (Passel and Fix 1994). Olzak (1992) maintains that the presence of numerous immigrants in a region intensifies economic competition between native residents and newcomers. If it is true that a cognitive connection between economic distress and immigration is more readily made when there is a large foreign-born population, not only

should restrictionist sentiment be more widespread in these areas, but one also should expect the influence of material concerns on opinion to be greater there than in communities where the immigrant populations are small.

Clearly, determining the role of economic motives is just one facet of developing a complete explanation of attitudes toward immigration. But because in-group solidarity and out-group hostility themselves are often thought to change in response to material threat, we confine most of our attention here to these economic forces.

DATA, MEASURES, AND PLAN OF ANALYSIS

The principal source of public opinion data for this study is the 1992 ANES survey.⁵ The 1994 ANES data are analyzed in a more restricted way to replicate and extend our 1992 results. Finally, county-level data from the 1990 United States Census furnish contextual information about the ethnic composition of each respondent's residential environment.

The dependent variables refer to policy preferences rather than to broad images of immigrants as a group. We focus primarily on the issue at the top of the restrictionist agenda, the question asking whether "the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased, left the same, or decreased." Restrictionist sentiment among the respondents in the 1992 ANES survey was widespread: 26% of the sample favored reducing the current level of legal immigration "a little," and 23% wanted immigration decreased "a lot."

Budgetary stress has stimulated proposals for limiting or delaying the access of *legal* immigrants to government benefits. To assess public sentiment on this issue, we employ as our other dependent variable the 1992 ANES item asking whether immigrants should be immediately eligible for "government services such as Medicaid, food stamps, and welfare" or should have to wait "a year or more" for them.⁶ Fully 80% of the sample favored a residency requirement of at least a year before immigrants would be eligible for many government benefits. On this question at least, there is very little variation for either "economic" or "cultural" causes to explain.

Also included in the 1992 ANES survey are queries about the likelihood that the "growing number of Hispanics and Asians coming to the United States" would "take jobs away from people already here" and "cause higher taxes due

⁵These data were provided through the InterUniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research and the archive at UC DATA, Survey Research Center, University of California, Berkeley. Our analysis is based on the unweighted responses of the white, black, and Hispanic respondents in the sample ($n = 2,428$ for 1992; $n = 1,719$ for 1994).

⁶In 1992 when our respondents were surveyed, the law required no wait before legal immigrants could receive most government benefits. This fact was not pointed out to respondents in the 1992 ANES survey before they were asked the question. The 1992 ANES survey also did not ask about government services for *illegal* immigrants, the target of California's 1994 Proposition 187.

to more demands for public services.”⁷ Prior research has treated these beliefs about the tangible costs and benefits of immigration as indicators of economic interest (Espenshade and Calhoun 1993). The present analysis instead models assessments of “impact” as cognitive links in the hypothesized chain between economic circumstances and opinions about immigration policy.⁸

The statistical analysis utilizes a series of probit analyses of the two immigration policy questions to determine whether or not the influences of economic motives survive the imposition of controls and to interpret more fully the causal underpinnings of individual preferences.

MODELS I–V

Our aims in this section are to assess the various hypotheses and then to probe the psychological processes that forge the connections between material concerns and anti-immigration opinions. The analytic strategy is to include several distinct categories of explanatory variables as predictors and to introduce them sequentially in successive equations. The first equation (Model I) incorporates the economic factors which were significant at the bivariate level, along with demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, immigrant status) as controls.⁹ The next step adds measures of party identification and ideological self-identification (Model II).¹⁰

Three additional equations explore the substantive meaning of the respondents’ beliefs about the impacts of Hispanic and Asian immigration and their role in linking economic circumstances and policy preferences. We should, however, state at the outset that the wording of the survey questions we use is ambiguous as to whether the perceived costs (or benefits) refer to the self rather than to society as a whole. This said, Model III adds as predictors the *Job Impact* and *Tax Impact* indices described above. Model IV substitutes for these an index assessing the cultural rather than the economic impacts of immigration. The final equation (Model V) incorporates a measure based on feeling thermometer

⁷ Respondents were asked about each group and each possible impact separately. The coding procedure combined answers to separate questions about the consequences of Hispanic and Asian immigration, and scores on the *Job* and *Tax Impact* indices ranged from 8 (most likely negative impact) to 2 (least likely negative impact).

⁸ There is the endemic difficulty of distinguishing reasons from rationalizations in cross-sectional data, a problem magnified in this case because the *Impact* questions were asked after the *Level of Immigration* item.

⁹ Due to space limitations, we do not first discuss the bivariate relationships between the independent and dependent variables. Economic indicators excluded because of nonsignificant relationships were (a) an index of short-run financial stress, (b) prospective economic evaluations, (c) job anxiety, and (d) concern about taxes and state per capita tax burden. Contact the authors for these analyses.

¹⁰ This sequence is not intended to imply that current economic concerns temporally precede partisan affiliation or ideological self-definitions in a causal chain of explanation. Rather, we distinguish Models I and II in order to provide an initial estimate of the role of economic interests before incorporating the influence of enduring predispositions.

ratings¹¹ of Hispanics and Asians as an attempt to distinguish between the influence of affect toward these ethnic groups and more cognitively based judgments of the costs and benefits of immigration.

We employ the same set of specifications for the two dependent variables, the *Level of Immigration* and *Delay Benefits* survey questions. For both dependent variables, attitudes unfavorable toward immigration are coded with higher numerical values, and cases giving “don’t know” or “no answer” responses are omitted from the analysis (see Appendix for a full description of the coding procedures). We will first discuss the results for the *Level of Immigration* item, and then point out the differences that resulted from the analysis of the *Delay Benefits* item.

Our estimates are based on probit analysis techniques and, unless otherwise noted, all predictors have been recoded with values ranging from 0 to 1. In the case of *Level of Immigration*, we used an ordered-probit model (McKelvey and Zavoina 1975), which is an extension of the binary model employed in the *Delay Benefits* estimates.¹² The reported coefficients estimate the effect of a one-unit change in an independent variable on the unobserved dependent variable, expressed in terms of standard deviations of a normal distribution. In these equations, ethnicity and occupational status are coded as dummy variables with white and white collar respondents, respectively, treated as the excluded categories.

The results of Model I, the “basic” equation including only demographic variables and economic factors as predictors, reveal that the effects of labor market competition, pessimism about the state of the economy, and anxiety about rising taxes on opinions about immigration survive the imposition of controls for diverse background characteristics. This analysis indicates that the tendency of respondents in “high threat” blue-collar jobs to be more likely than those in white-collar occupations to favor a lower level of immigration is not a function of differences in their level of education.¹³ The probit estimate of .301 for *High*

¹¹We refer here to the familiar ANES instrument that asks respondents how warmly on a scale of 0 to 100 they feel about a particular group. Given the possibility that some respondents systematically judged every group “warmly” or “coldly,” our measure was constructed by computing the difference between an individual’s ratings of Asians and Hispanics and his or her rating of whites.

¹²Probit, which assumes an underlying normal probability model, is one of several discrete choice models. Others grow out of different assumptions about the underlying probability distribution. When dealing with estimation problems in which the observed probabilities are either very small or very large, the choice among probit, logit, and other models can be consequential, but that is not the case here. We opted to use probit on the assumption that readers will be more familiar with conversions between probabilities and standard deviations in a normal distribution than between probabilities and log odds.

¹³The “threat” distinction was developed as follows: a “high” threat occupation is one in which the number of immigrant workers as a proportion of all immigrant workers is greater than the equivalent figure for native workers. Applying this definition to the 1992 ANES data and using 1990 Census data to obtain the occupational distributions of immigrant and native-born workers results in the classification of 15% of the total sample as “high” threat blue collar workers.

Threat Blue Collar implies that, all other things being equal, if white collar respondents were equally divided on the question of decreasing the level of immigration, the probability of this more vulnerable occupational category favoring the restrictionist side would be .62.

Paralleling the results of studies of economic voting (Kiewiet 1983), however, unfavorable retrospective or prospective assessments of one's own financial situation were not associated with a restrictionist outlook. Furthermore, according to the labor market competition hypothesis, the unemployed and those who, by virtue of their occupation, face the specter of the loss of jobs, earnings, and promotions as a result of the influx of immigrant workers should be motivated by self-interest to favor restrictionist policies. However the unemployed were no more likely to say that the current level of immigration should be reduced than were respondents with steady jobs.

Aside from these economic factors, a number of demographic controls were also significant predictors of immigration attitudes. Black respondents, for example, were slightly less likely than either whites or Hispanics to advocate reducing the level of legal immigration.¹⁴

Confirming the results of previous studies (Citrin, Reingold and Green 1990; Day 1990; Hoskin 1991), Table 1 also reports that opposition to immigration decreases as the respondent's level of formal education rises. Because education is an increasingly important asset in a modern economy, some argue that a college education gives one a relatively protected labor market situation and instills confidence in one's future prospects (Hernes and Knudsen 1992). An alternative interpretation is that the more favorable outlook toward immigration among the better-educated segments of the population simply reflects the tendency of formal education to foster a more tolerant outlook toward all out-groups, including foreigners and ethnic minorities (McClosky and Brill 1983; Schuman, Bobo, and Steeh 1985).

Finally, the results from Model I counter the argument that the presence of numerous immigrants in a community acts as an index of ethnic competition for

This is a relatively high number which would diminish with a more stringent definition of job threat. In classifying respondents, we employed data for the occupational distributions for both the recent immigrant working population (defined as working adults who immigrated to the United States between 1982 and 1989) and the native-born working population first reported by Meisenheimer (1992).

¹⁴ Given that opposition to restricting immigration and defense of "immigrant rights" has become a virtual litmus test of ethnic loyalty among Mexican-American activists and political organizations (Gutierrez 1991; Skerry 1995), the fact that Hispanic respondents were not distinctively pro-immigrant is surprising. The *Los Angeles Times* exit poll indicated that only 27% of Hispanic voters in California supported Proposition 187, compared to 64% of the non-Hispanic whites and 52% of the black voters. This suggests that if the ongoing national debate cues feelings of ethnic solidarity, a similar polarization of mass opinion will result; as we shall note below, in the 1994 ANES survey Hispanic respondents, indeed, were more opposed to reducing immigration than were whites, and to a lesser extent, blacks.

TABLE I
ORDERED-PROBIT ANALYSES OF LEVEL OF IMMIGRATION ITEM

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV	Model V
<i>Demographic variables^a</i>					
Age	-.107 (.211) ^b	-.200 (.212)	-.024 (.218)	-.030 (.215)	-.095 (.219)
Education	-.597* (.280)	-.537* (.285)	.102 (.295)	-.287 (.279)	.229 (.299)
Sex	.024 (.074)	.037 (.075)	-.014 (.077)	.006 (.075)	-.020 (.077)
Hispanic	.083 (.150)	.052 (.152)	.097 (.151)	.194 (.153)	.157 (.155)
Black	-.199* (.110)	-.147 (.122)	-.202* (.112)	-.082 (.115)	-.136 (.114)
Immigrant Status	-.168* (.099)	-.151 (.100)	-.158 (.099)	-.162 (.100)	-.147 (.101)
Percent Foreign Born in County	-.010* (.005)	-.009* (.005)	-.004 (.005)	-.006 (.005)	-.003 (.005)
<i>Economic Factors</i>					
Occupation (dummy variables):					
Pink Collar	.104 (.105)	.075 (.106)	.088 (.102)	.050 (.106)	.073 (.108)
Low Threat Blue Collar	.183 (.128)	.178 (.128)	.126 (.134)	.144 (.129)	.111 (.134)
High Threat Blue Collar	.301** (.125)	.273* (.125)	.199 (.129)	.260* (.125)	.174 (.130)
Retired	.158 (.146)	.141 (.146)	.014 (.146)	.062 (.147)	-.009 (.146)
Homemaker	-.030 (.158)	-.060 (.158)	-.091 (.156)	-.041 (.163)	-.068 (.156)
Student	.394 (.324)	.384 (.312)	.392 (.327)	.356 (.310)	.410 (.334)
Unemployed	.132 (.183)	.130 (.184)	.018 (.188)	.128 (.182)	.019 (.190)
Union Member	-.129 (.099)	-.125 (.100)	-.114 (.100)	-.118 (.100)	-.107 (.100)
Income	.246 (.164)	.208 (.161)	.127 (.166)	.155 (.162)	.132 (.167)
Personal Retrospective Evaluations	-.009 (.156)	.020 (.156)	-.014 (.161)	.067 (.155)	.037 (.162)
National Retrospective Evaluations	.592** (.229)	.851** (.238)	.529* (.238)	.769** (.236)	.487* (.239)
Expect Income Tax Increase	.166* (.097)	.097 (.098)	.019 (.099)	.116 (.098)	.018 (.100)

<i>Political Orientations</i>					
Party Identification	.168 (.124)	.149 (.120)	.148 (.124)	.140 (.121)	
Ideological Identification	.588**(.159)	.470**(.172)	.474**(.169)	.448**(.173)	
<i>Impact of Immigration</i>					
Job Impact Index		1.095**(.141)		1.040**(.143)	
Tax Impact Index		.688**(.154)		.637**(.157)	
Cultural Impact Index			1.349**(.153)		
<i>Group Affect</i>					
Normed Hispanic + Asian Feeling Thermometer Index				1.493**(.379)	
Number of cases in analysis = 1,066					
<i>Measures of fit</i>					
-2 Log-likelihood (full model):	2773.6	2604.1	2680.4	2589.5	
-2 Log-likelihood (restricted model):	2819.6	2819.6	2819.6	2819.6	
Percent correctly predicted	42%	49%	46%	49%	

^a Coding of predictor variables in probit equations is explained in Appendix

^b The first of two paired figures is the probit estimate; standard error follows in parentheses.

* = significant at .05 level (one-tailed test)

** = significant at .01 level (one-tailed test)

jobs or services, which in turn serves as a stimulus for restrictionist sentiment among the native-born. Respondents living in areas with a heavy concentration of foreign-born residents were no more likely to advocate a lower level of immigration than were those from areas with very few immigrants.¹⁵

These results are generally unaffected by the inclusion of *Party Identification* and *Ideological Orientation* in Model II. The weakness of the connection between party affiliation and opinions about immigration is striking. This may reflect the political reality that immigration reform in the 1980s was a divisive issue for political leaders in both major political parties (Tichenor 1994). Ideological self-description was more closely aligned with policy preferences. Because conservatives tend to worry more than do liberals about the prospect of rising taxes, controlling for ideological self-designation lowered the coefficient for *Expect Tax Increase* below a statistically significant level.

Model III clearly reveals the strong effects of beliefs about the likely impact of Hispanic and Asian immigrants on the jobs and taxes of "people already here" on support for restricting future immigration into the United States. At the same time, this equation underscores the robustness of the independent statistical effect of the *National Retrospective* index tapping pessimism about the overall state of the economy. The mediating effects of the *Job Impact* and *Tax Impact* indices on the association between *High Threat Blue Collar* and *Level of Immigration* also point to a role for subjective calculations of self-interest in opinion formation in the immigration policy domain (Espenshade and Calhoun 1993). In other words, once concerns over jobs and taxes are taken into account, employment in a "high threat" occupation is no longer a significant predictor of support for reducing immigration.

Beliefs about the economic impacts of immigration also seem to account for the strong statistical association between respondents' level of formal education and their opinion about reducing immigration shown in Models I and II. The "economic" explanation of this result is that the more favorable attitude toward immigrants of the better-educated is founded on their relative invulnerability to competition from Hispanic and Asian immigrants.

However, we repeat the need for caution in interpreting responses to our survey questions about the impact of immigration as valid measures of tangible costs and benefits. As noted, the wording of the items does not refer explicitly to the personal as opposed to the collective consequences of Hispanic and Asian immigration. While the questions call on respondents to make a factual judgment, affective reactions cued by the particular ethnic groups named or by a more global ethnocentrism undoubtedly influence, possibly strongly, their answers. To the extent that this is the case, the mediating role of the *Job Impact* and *Tax Impact*

¹⁵The contextual variable employed is the 1990 Census figure for the proportion of foreign-born in a county. The same result is obtained if one categorizes respondents according to the proportion of Hispanic and Asian immigrants in their county.

indices in Model III may simply reflect the reluctance of the better-educated respondents to say anything negative about minority groups (Jackman and Muha 1984).

Models IV and V represent an effort to isolate the economic component of the strong statistical effects of the *Job Impact* and *Tax Impact* variables. In Model IV, we replace these predictors with a *Cultural Impact* index based on beliefs about whether “the growing number of Hispanics (Asians) will improve our culture with new ideas and customs.”¹⁶ In this new equation, the coefficient for *Education* once again was not statistically significant. The coefficient for the *High Threat Blue Collar* category of respondents, however, did attain statistical significance, which was not the case when the *Job Impact* and *Tax Impact* variables were included as predictors in Model III.

Model V reinforces these results and suggests that opinions concerning the economic effects of immigration are best regarded as an amalgam of material concerns and more purely affective responses to particular ethnic groups. This final equation in Table 1 contains both of the economic impact indices and a measure combining the familiar ANES feeling thermometer ratings of Hispanics and Asians as predictors of responses to the *Level of Immigration* item. “Cooler” feelings toward these minority groups, which make up the majority of recent immigrants, were strongly related to a preference for restricting immigration. However, while the inclusion of this measure of group affect reduces somewhat the magnitude of the coefficients for the *Job Impact* and *Tax Impact* indices, they do remain significantly related to support for reducing immigration. In this elaborate model, no demographic variable or measure of personal economic situation has a statistically significant coefficient, but negative retrospective assessments of national economic conditions continue to bolster support for cur-tailing legal immigration into the United States.

There are some differences between these results and the probit analyses of responses to the *Delay Benefits* item which are reported in Table 2. In all five models, respondents with lower incomes were more likely to oppose delaying benefits for immigrants. This “resources” effect is contrary to what self-interest, conceptualized in terms of restricting competition for government spending, would predict, but the coefficient for income was significant at the $p < .05$ level even in the most fully elaborated Model V. A second difference is that in the case of the *Delay Benefits* item, party identification rather than liberalism-conservatism is a statistically significant predictor in Models II–V, suggesting that

¹⁶This two-item measure was constructed by summing responses to the questions about the likelihood that increasing Hispanic and Asian immigration would improve “our culture” as was done with the *Job* and *Tax Impact* indices described above.

Green and Citrin (1994) have suggested that this “positive” item about cultural impact and the questions concerning the negative labor market and fiscal impacts of Hispanic immigration identify a single latent affective orientation toward this minority group. The results of Model IV reinforce this conclusion.

TABLE 2
 PROBIT ANALYSES OF DELAY BENEFITS ITEM

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV	Model V
<i>Demographic variables^a</i>					
Age	.283 (.268) ^b	.313 (.271)	.428 (.275)	.451 (.276)	.374 (.278)
Education	-.821* (.377)	-.861* (.380)	-.539 (.390)	-.706* (.385)	-.434 (.393)
Sex	.051 (.096)	.053 (.096)	.023 (.098)	.026 (.097)	.020 (.098)
Hispanic	-.237 (.188)	-.243 (.188)	-.238 (.190)	-.157 (.191)	-.187 (.192)
Black	-.322* (.150)	-.249 (.153)	-.284* (.155)	-.202 (.155)	-.220 (.157)
Immigrant Status	.039 (.127)	.041 (.127)	.037 (.128)	.026 (.128)	.050 (.129)
Percent Foreign Born in County	-.008 (.006)	-.008 (.006)	-.006 (.006)	-.006 (.006)	-.005 (.006)
<i>Economic Factors</i>					
Occupation (dummy variables):					
Pink Collar	.216 (.135)	.201 (.136)	.215 (.138)	.187 (.137)	.202 (.138)
Low Threat Blue Collar	.210 (.170)	.175 (.171)	.123 (.173)	.135 (.172)	.120 (.174)
High Threat Blue Collar	-.000 (.156)	-.031 (.157)	-.089 (.159)	-.049 (.158)	-.117 (.160)
Retired	.173 (.196)	.143 (.197)	.066 (.201)	.078 (.200)	.042 (.201)
Homemaker	-.018 (.195)	-.045 (.196)	-.075 (.198)	-.019 (.198)	-.056 (.199)
Student	.125 (.339)	.099 (.340)	.073 (.344)	.059 (.342)	.096 (.345)
Unemployed	-.045 (.217)	-.071 (.219)	-.137 (.220)	-.086 (.221)	-.129 (.221)
Union Member	-.044 (.118)	-.011 (.120)	-.005 (.121)	-.001 (.121)	.004 (.122)
Income	.455* (.203)	.429* (.204)	.375* (.206)	.385* (.206)	.383* (.207)
Personal Retrospective Evaluations	.015 (.203)	.044 (.204)	.033 (.206)	.070 (.206)	.070 (.208)
National Retrospective Evaluations	.483* (.275)	.668* (.289)	.488* (.296)	.614* (.292)	.451 (.298)
Expect Income Tax Increase	.125 (.128)	.075 (.131)	.026 (.133)	.088 (.132)	.033 (.134)

<i>Political Orientations</i>			
Partisan Identification	.350* (.156)	.338* (.159)	.342* (.158)
Ideological Identification	-.066 (.218)	-.171 (.222)	-.179 (.221)
<i>Impact of Immigration</i>			
Job Impact Index		.493** (.186)	.446** (.187)
Tax Impact Index		.437* (.210)	.387** (.212)
Cultural Impact Index			
<i>Group Affect</i>		.934** (.205)	
Normed Hispanic + Asian Feeling Thermometer Index			1.484** (.549)
Number of cases in analysis = 1,066			
<i>Measures of fit</i>			
-2 log-likelihood (full model):	2708.0	2857.5	2906.9
-2 log-likelihood (restricted model):	1151.7	1151.7	1151.7
Percent correctly predicted	23%	23%	23%

^a Coding of predictor variables in probit equations is explained in Appendix

^b The first of two paired figures is the probit estimate; standard error follows in parentheses.

* = significant at .05 level (one-tailed test)

** = significant at .01 level (one-tailed test)

this facet of immigration policy engages the enduring division between Democrats and Republicans over social spending. Finally, blacks were more likely than whites to oppose delaying the access of immigrants to government services in Models I and III.¹⁷

The dominant finding, however, is consistency in the results for the two policy questions. In both cases, pessimism about the national economy, beliefs about the negative consequences of immigration for jobs and taxes, and relatively “cool” feelings toward Hispanics and Asians are the statistically significant predictors of support for reducing the level of immigration and delaying benefits for those admitted.

SPECIFICATIONS

How does the economic model of mass opinion about immigration fare? The failure of the “resources” hypothesis and the near absence of support for the labor market hypothesis in our data are consistent with earlier research showing that personal economic circumstances, whether defined in objective or subjective terms, fail to exert a strong influence on preferences on public policy questions and vote choice (Citrin and Green 1990; Kiewiet 1983).¹⁸ The economic concerns that do influence preferences on immigration issues are more diffuse and collectively oriented. Unhappiness about the state of the national economy, anxiety about the prospect of rising taxes, and negative assessments about the economic and social costs of immigration are persistently related to restrictionist opinions.

Still, our calculations show that the 12 putative indicators of personal self-interest in Model I were not jointly significant at the .05 level in predicting support for restricting immigration.¹⁹ And even if one interprets pessimism about the national economy as an indirect measure of personal anxiety, the overall predictive power of economic motivations is modest.

There may, of course, exist subgroups of the general public or particular contexts in which personal economic concerns assume a larger role in shaping opinions about immigration and immigrants than suggested by the findings reported above. We addressed this possibility by comparing the relations between various economic factors and the *Level of Immigration* and *Delay Benefits* items across groups of respondents categorized by race, level of concern about economic problems, and the number of foreign-born in one’s state of residence.²⁰

¹⁷ It is possible that this result reflects a general tendency of some black respondents to reject the idea of cutting any government benefits whenever that idea is presented in a survey item, rather than the expression of generous feelings toward immigrants.

¹⁸ We refer here to the lack of relationships between income, financial stress, retrospective or prospective judgments of one’s financial situation, and employment status on opinions about immigration.

¹⁹ We refer here to the occupation dummy variables, the *Personal Retrospective* index, *Presence of Foreign-Born*, and fear of higher taxes, as well as the standard demographic indicators.

²⁰ Due to space limitations, we cannot provide the analyses here. Please contact the authors for the particular results, which are only cursorily summarized here.

The data reveal a strong similarity in opinion formation across diverse groups conventionally thought to be differentially impacted by immigration. Specification tests establish that fear of job competition and anxiety about taxes are not more potent predictors of restrictionist views in areas where there is a large immigrant presence. For example, the correlation between *Immigration Level* and *Job Impact* was .31 in low immigration states and .26 in high immigration states. Similarly, financial stress is no more significant in influencing attitudes about immigration among blacks than among whites (Pearson's $r = .07$ and $.04$, respectively). And pessimism about the national economy is not more strongly related to restrictionist sentiment among those who named economic issues as the most important problem facing the country in 1992. For the latter group, the correlation between *National Retrospective Evaluations* and *Immigration Level* was .06; for respondents who chose another issue as the most important problem, the correlation was .08. In sum, while the salience of the immigration issue may vary depending on one's locale, ethnicity or level of concern over economic issues, the nature of the economic concerns influencing mass preferences and the relative weakness of their effects seemed quite uniform throughout the public.

1994

The 1992 ANES data were collected during a national economic recession. Over the next two years the economic climate improved, yet, somewhat paradoxically, the political salience of immigration issues grew. These changed circumstances provide a theoretically promising context in which to replicate and extend our findings concerning the economic sources of attitudes toward immigration.

At a minimum, the aggregate movement in opinion between 1992 and 1994 contradicts the idea that an economic downturn is a necessary stimulus for boosting anti-immigrant sentiment. Despite the improvement in the business cycle (the annual increase in the gross domestic product was 3.1% in 1993 and 4.1% in 1994, compared to $-.6\%$ in 1991 and 2.3% in 1992) and a decline in economic pessimism (35% of the 1994 ANES survey said the country's economic situation had improved in the past year, compared to just 4% in 1992), the proportion of the public favoring a reduced level of immigration grew from 49% to 66%.

A possible explanation for this counterintuitive trend is that heightened media attention to immigration issues, culminating in extensive coverage of the intense, highly partisan campaign over Proposition 187 in California. This arguably increased the public's exposure to and acceptance of arguments about the economic costs of immigration, thereby overcoming the potentially liberalizing impact of a recovering economy. The omission of questions about the perceived costs of immigration from the 1994 ANES survey precludes a direct test for this interpretation. Instead, we consider whether the increased salience of immigration

policies and the potential priming effect of elite debate enhanced the influence of economic motives on individual preferences.

To test whether the underpinnings of opinions about immigration had changed between 1992 and 1994, we estimated probit models closely resembling Model I and II from Table 1 above.²¹ As Table 3 shows, there is virtually no difference between the two sets of results. For example, the overall predictive power of Model II is roughly the same in both years. The economic factors with significant, albeit modest, effects are the same in 1994 and 1992: pessimism about the nation's economy and the sense that one's federal income tax burden is rising boost support for cutting immigration. And once again, formal education and a liberal ideological orientation, but not Democratic party affiliation, diminish approval of restriction. We should point out that the impact of education on a favorable opinion toward immigration is substantially stronger in 1994 than in 1992. While there was a drift toward more opposition to immigration at all levels of education, this movement was most pronounced among the less-educated.

Interestingly, the small differences that do emerge fail to support the proposition that economic motives had become more potent. In 1994, Hispanics were distinctively more opposed to cutting immigration than whites, probably due to a sense of ethnic solidarity with a major target of restrictionist policies. And the lack of a significant effect for the *High Threat Blue Collar* variable in the 1994 probit model suggests, if anything, a diminished role for concerns about job competition.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the underpinnings of public opinion pertaining to the ongoing national debate over immigration reform. After testing several variants of the hypothesis that economic threat, whether defined in objective or subjective terms, motivates opposition to immigration, we conclude that this policy domain constitutes another case in which narrow self-interest is not a significant influence on preference formation (Citrin and Green 1990; Sears and Funk 1990). Our results also confirm the impact of enduring values and identifications on mass opinion about public policy questions; ideology and affective orientations toward particular ethnic groups had persistent links to opinions about the level of immigration and the access of immigrants to government benefits.

Yet our results do identify an important role for certain economic concerns. Using public opinion data collected in both good times and bad, multivariate

²¹This limited replication was necessitated by the absence of the *Delay Benefits* variable, the *Immigrant Impact* items and an Asian feeling thermometer in the 1994 study. We also note that the measure of national retrospective assessments is a single item about the state of the economy rather than a three-item index, and that the tax anxiety measure was a retrospective, not prospective, judgment in 1994.

TABLE 3
 PROBIT ANALYSES OF 1994 LEVEL OF IMMIGRATION ITEM

	Model I	Model II
<i>Demographic variables^a</i>		
Age	-.090 (.206) ^b	-.130 (.207)
Education	-1.505**(.294)	-1.429**(.288)
Sex	.022 (.071)	.033 (.072)
Hispanic	-.263* (.150)	-.286* (.149)
Black	-.285**(.098)	-.300**(.102)
Immigrant Status	-.182* (.096)	-.178* (.096)
<i>Economic Factors</i>		
Occupation (dummy variables):		
Pink Collar	.141 (.103)	.138 (.104)
Low Threat Blue Collar	.020 (.125)	.021 (.125)
High Threat Blue Collar	.168 (.118)	.159 (.119)
Retired	.224 (.141)	.226 (.141)
Homemaker	-.077 (.153)	-.081 (.153)
Student	.009 (.253)	.018 (.258)
Unemployed	.119 (.198)	.115 (.196)
Union Member	.038 (.088)	.042 (.089)
Income	.423**(.152)	.394**(.153)
Personal Retrospective Evaluations	.027 (.130)	.024 (.130)
National Retrospective Evaluations	.389**(.143)	.359**(.145)
Expect Income Tax Increase	.353**(.143)	.353**(.144)
<i>Political Orientations</i>		
Party Identification		-.122 (.119)
Ideological Identification		.396* (.189)
Number of cases in analysis = 1,210		
<i>Measures of fit</i>		
-2 Log-likelihood (full model):	2936.0	2931.1
-2 Log-likelihood (restricted model):	3017.7	3017.7
Percent correctly predicted	46%	46%

^a Coding of predictor variables in probit equations is explained in Appendix

^b The first of two paired figures is the probit estimate; standard error follows in parentheses.

* = significant at .05 level (one-tailed test)

** = significant at .01 level (one-tailed test)

analyses incorporating numerous controls found significant relationships between anti-immigrant attitudes and pessimism about the current state of the national economy. In addition, beliefs that immigration would have harmful effects on employment opportunities and taxes were associated with support for restricting access to America. These beliefs accounted for the differences in outlook among racial, educational, and occupational groups.

Given that most observers characterize immigration as the movement of people seeking to improve their lot, with diverse consequences for the “receiving” country, why is the impact of personal economic circumstances on opinions about immigration so limited? One reason may be that people generally do not blame their own situation on competition from immigrants. Scholars on opposite sides of the debate about the economic consequences of immigration agree that the short-run effects, whether beneficial or harmful, tend to be moderate in strength and restricted in scope. This may help explain our somewhat unexpected finding that respondents living in states and counties with greater concentrations of recent immigrants were no more likely than their counterparts in the rest of the country to express restrictionist opinions. A possible reason for this result is that the economic threat posed by immigrants may only be felt in specific locales and job categories that are not adequately sampled in a national survey.

While anxiety about a national economic downturn does boost opposition to immigration, this finding is subject to ambiguous interpretations from the perspective of a self-interest model of opinion formation. It could be argued that putatively sociotropic judgments are indirect expressions of self-regarding concerns. On this reasoning, people are often unable to see the personal implications of remote policies and events and therefore use information about the state of the nation as evidence of their own present or future circumstances (Lane 1986). In other words, what I learn about the experiences of others may change my expectations concerning what ultimately may happen to me. So, if an influx of immigrants threatens to raise the general level of taxes in California, this may mean that my own taxes also will climb.

Still, it is not obvious how discontent about the state of the national economy comes to be directed at immigrants. One explanation is the psychodynamic theory of scapegoating, which holds that economic adversity acts as a trigger for the displacement of anxiety and anger onto minority groups. Rational fear of competition for scarce resources is another interpretation. In other words, when times are bad and there is less to go around, people resist adding to the list of claimants for jobs or governmental assistance. Thus, an important area for future research is to identify the specific cognitive and emotional processes that may underlie the fusion of economic uncertainty and ethnic tensions, including opposition to immigrants. In this regard, it is worth exploring the role of subjective conceptions of national identity. For many people, sociotropic impulses may stop at the nation’s border, inhibiting a willingness to share benefits with those not currently members of the political community.

More research is also needed to disentangle the meaning of stated beliefs about the costs and benefits of immigration. We have emphasized the difficulty of establishing the degree to which these causally significant responses represent utilitarian calculations based on personal experience or factual knowledge, casual reactions to cues in the national news, or expressions of cultural affinity or bias.

Clearly, ethnic attitudes condition current preferences on immigration policies, but it is unknown whether the public would be more receptive if the main body of immigrants more closely resembled the dominant segment of the “native” population in appearance and culture (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Hoskin 1991).

Whatever their conceptual status, beliefs about the economic consequences of immigration have political ramifications when they serve as legitimating arguments for restrictionist policies in a culture that discourages open expressions of nativism or xenophobia. In the same vein, economic motivations may be important in triggering political protests among the relatively restricted segment of the electorate directly threatened by immigration even if they do not figure in opinion formation for the public as a whole (Green and Cowden 1992). The diffusion of information about the supposed economic effects of immigration stimulated by such protests or by the rhetoric of political leaders may subsequently frame the thinking of those for whom these economic implications are minimal. As noted above, this is one way of understanding the impact of change in aggregate economic conditions on individuals whose personal circumstances are unaffected.

While we found no relationship between the number of immigrants in a state or county and the opinions of its residents on immigration issues that could survive the imposition of basic demographic controls, the influx of newcomers to a community and the nature of their local impacts almost surely will affect the level of anti-immigrant collective action (Olzak 1992). At the local level, hate crimes directed at Asians and Latinos have been found to increase when these groups move into traditionally white neighborhoods (Wong and Strolovitch 1996). The current restrictionist movement was sparked by dramatic events such as the bombing of the World Trade Center and interception of ships smuggling Chinese immigrants, but the ground was prepared by a decade of heavy immigration flows. The victory in California of Proposition 187, the initiative aimed at eliminating benefits for illegal immigrants, had immediate political reverberations, spawning imitative proposals in other states with a large immigrant presence—such as Florida, Texas, and Arizona—but not in states with few immigrants.

The historical connection between restrictionist policies and economic downturns may have more to do with the mobilization of activists and interest groups than with the material calculations of the general public. And to the extent that public opposition to immigration is animated by economic fears, these concerns are traceable to perceptions about collective trends rather than to feelings of immediate personal vulnerability. Our findings also suggest that adverse economic developments stimulate anti-immigrant sentiment by engaging cultural anxieties and group identifications. Immigration policy thus provides a fertile domain for exploring the dynamic interplay between symbolic and economic politics.

APPENDIX

CODING OF PREDICTOR VARIABLES IN PROBIT ANALYSIS IN TABLES 1-3

All predictor variables, except where noted, were coded to range from 0 to 1.

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

Age: actual age in years recoded with 0 = 17 years, 1 = 91 years (maximum).

Education: number of years completed, recoded with 0 = 1 year, 1 = 17+ years.

Sex: 0 = male, 1 = female.

Hispanic: dummy variable, 0 = non-Hispanic, 1 = Hispanic.

Black: dummy variable, 0 = non-Black, 1 = Black.

Immigrant Status: 0 = third generation or more, 1 = first- or second-generation immigrant.

Percent Foreign Born in County: percentage of county residents born outside U.S. in 1990 Census, ranges from 0 to 100.

ECONOMIC FACTORS

Occupation: all variables listed are dummy variables, with white collar occupations comprising the excluded category.

Union Member: 0 = nonmember, 1 = self or family member belongs to labor union.

Income: recoded from 24 categories, with 0 = low income, 1 = high income.

Personal Retrospective Evaluations: This is an additive index of two items, personal financial situation and income over the past year. Recoded from two-item index, 0 = positive evaluation, 1 = negative.

National Retrospective Evaluations: This is an additive index of three items, the state of the economy, unemployment, and inflation over the past year. Recoded from three-item index, 0 = positive evaluation, 1 = negative.

Expect Income Tax Increase: recoded from 3-category variable, with 0 = don't expect increase, 1 = expect increase.

POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS

Party Identification: recoded from 7-point variable, with 0 = strong Democrat, 1 = strong Republican.

Ideological Identification: recoded from 7-point scale, with 0 = extreme liberal, 1 = extreme conservative.

IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION

Job Impact Index: summed index of two Hispanic and Asian Job Impact items, with 0 = no likely impact, 1 = high negative impact.

Tax Impact Index: summed index of two Hispanic and Asian Tax Impact items, with 0 = no likely impact, 1 = high negative impact.

Culture Impact Index: summed index of two Hispanic and Asian Culture items, with 0 = high positive impact, 1 = no likely impact.

GROUP AFFECT

Normed Hispanic and Asian Feeling Thermometers: responses on 100-point Hispanic and Asian feeling thermometers were normed by subtracting a respondent's score on White Feeling Thermometer. These two normed thermometers were then summed and recoded so that 0 = intense like of Hispanics and Asians, and 1 = intense dislike.

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