Anxious Politics: The effects of immigration anxiety on trust and attitudes

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Anxious Politics: The effect of fear on trust and political attitudes

TESS Proposal

How does anxiety affect the ways that people engage in democratic politics? We propose an experiment to investigate the effects of anxiety on trust and political attitudes in the context of the current debate over immigration. Political thinkers and democratic theorists express concern that anxiety may undercut citizens’ abilities to make rational political choices, yet recent research from political science and psychology paints a more hopeful picture of anxiety, suggesting that political fears may lead to more knowledgeable and trusting citizens (Marcus, Neuman et al. 2000; Marcus 2002; Wolak, MacKuen et al. 2003; McDermott 2004; Brader 2006; Neuman, Marcus et al. 2007).

We argue that it is crucially important to understand who anxious citizens trust and what types of policies they support in order judge whether anxiety benefits or detracts from democracy.

Anxiety and Trust

In a society with complex and potentially perilous threats, citizens must put their trust in institutions to manage risks. Thus, threats to the nation and the anxiety that accompanies those threats may increase public trust in government. In the aftermath of 9/11, trust in the federal government increased substantially to high levels not seen since the 1960s (Chanley 2002; Davis 2007) and more generally, external threats increase the public’s support for the president (Mueller 1973; Merolla, Ramos et al. 2007; Berinsky 2009) as well as the whole political system (Hetherington and Rudolph 2008). Yet, threats do not always increase trust in government (Hetherington and Rudolph 2008). When the public focuses on domestic threats such as the economy and crime, trust in government declines since these signal poor government performance. Immigration is an interesting topic for exploring the relationship between anxiety and trust because it can be viewed as an external threat, but it can also be blamed on poor domestic policy, and these attributions are not mutually exclusive. The majority of work on trust in government (Citrin 1974; Miller 1974; Hetherington 1998) focuses on trust in the federal government as a whole, and political scientists know little about how threat influences trust in particular parts of the government or citizen groups.
We argue that anxiety over immigration may increase trust in some political actors at the expense of others, and thus, it is important to measure trust in a variety of people and organizations—both governmental and those outside of government. Additionally, we argue that the effects of anxiety on trust may depend on whether political actors offer attractive policy solutions or whether they offer threatening messages about the problem. Researchers in public health demonstrate that fear appeals can motivate behavioral change; however, attitude and behavioral change is contingent on the perceived efficacy of the response—whether respondents believe that the course of action will be effective (Witte 1992). Conversely, in previous research we have found that anxious citizens are particularly attracted to threatening messages about immigration. Does anxiety cause people to trust individuals and organizations with solutions, and/or do people turn to those who reaffirm their feelings of anxiety? We test whether anxiety increases trust in different governmental actors offering either threatening messages or policy solutions. We expect that both threat and solutions can increase trust. We also expect that trust in political actors who offer policy solutions is moderated by respondents’ partisanship due to their political nature.

Current work on trust related to dealing with immigration is limited, but polling suggests a strong role for partisanship. Forty-five percent of Americans trust Republicans to do a better job of handling illegal immigration, while 43% trust Democrats more (Associated Press and GfK Poll, August 11-16, 2010). People appear to evaluate President Obama’s performance on immigration through a partisan lens. Only 8% of Republicans approve of President Obama’s handling of immigration policy, while 37% of Democrats approve (Pew Survey, May 6-9, 2010). Republicans are far more likely to approve of the Minutemen. According to a 2006 Pew Survey, 49% of Republicans approve, 12% disapprove and 37% have never heard of the Minutemen. This is in contrast to the 25% of Democrats who approve, 28% who disapprove, and 44% who have never heard of the Minutemen. Thus, we expect that for politicized actors such as President Obama, Arizona Governor
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Brewer and the political parties, solutions will increase trust for fellow partisans, but that threatening messages will increase trust for subjects regardless of partisanship.

Anxiety and Political Attitudes

Americans hold relatively positive views of immigrants themselves, yet are split over whether immigrants add to the United States economically and culturally or are a net burden on the state (Sevogia and Defever 2010). We expect that anxiety will weaken positive impressions of immigrants (e.g. they work hard) and trigger more punitive attitudes towards immigration policies (decreased access to government services, decreased support for pathways to citizenship). Politicians often evoke fear in their immigration rhetoric, and our experiment will test how anxiety affects citizens’ willingness to allow immigrant access to state services. Previous research suggests that attitudes toward immigration are responsive to shifting frames (Domke et al. 1999). For example, Brader, Valentino, and Suhay (2008) find that immigration attitudes depend on the ethnicity of the immigrants as well as whether immigration is framed as a threat or a benefit. Hopkins, Tran, and Williamson (2010) demonstrate that even brief Spanish language exposure can increase anti-immigration sentiment. We complement this work by focusing on how threatening campaign ads not only shape immigration attitudes but also trust in different levels of government and political parties to handle immigration. We expect that respondents made anxious about immigration will have more negative assessments of immigrants and prefer more punitive immigration policies.

Proposed Study

In order to test the hypotheses that anxiety will increase trust in political actors with solutions and increase support for punitive immigration policies, we propose a 2 x 3 between-subjects experiment with 850 respondents that manipulates the level of threat presented in an immigration ad (music and scary visuals vs. none (control)) and the statements attributed to various political actors (threats, solutions or none (control)). First, respondents will be shown an ad about the threat that immigration poses to the country. The treatment condition, designed to provoke
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heightened levels of anxiety, includes threatening music and scary visuals, while the control
condition advertisement offers the same message, stripped of the visuals and music. The advantage
of this technique, previously used by Brader (2006) and Gadarian (2010), is that the message is
contant across both conditions, but the music and images heighten anxiety in the treatment
condition. We are in the process of collecting pilot data to confirm that our manipulation is
successful. After exposure to the advertisement, a subset of the respondents will be asked a battery
of emotion questions. These questions will be used as a manipulation check as also as mediators
between the experimental manipulation and our dependent variables.

There are two main sets of dependent variables in this study: trust and policy attitudes. After
respondents view either the treatment ad or the control ad, they will be asked to rate how much they
trust a variety of actors to handle the issue of immigration. Those actors are: 1. President Obama, 2.
The Republican Party, 6. The Democratic Party, and 7. A hypothetical group called Citizens for a
New Immigration Policy. One group of subjects will rate their levels of trust in each actor with no
statement attached. This will provide baseline measures of trust, depending on levels of anxiety.
For the other two groups, each actor will be paired with a statement on immigration that either
offers a threatening message about immigration or offers a policy solution. One group will see
threats from President Obama, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, the Republican Party, and Citizens
for a New Immigration Policy and solutions from Governor Jan Brewer, the Minuteman Project,
and the Democratic Party. The other group will see the same actors paired with different statements
(solutions for President Obama, U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, etc.) Whenever possible, the
proposed solutions come from the individuals and organizations themselves. These solutions will
not be universally attractive, but by varying whether each actor is paired with a solution or simply a
problem definition, we can use respondents’ partisanship and ideology as moderators to determine
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whether anxious people are more trusting of like-minded elites who offer solutions or threats. We also vary the statements attributed to the hypothetical “Citizens for a New Immigration Policy” as a way to test whether the severity of the complaint (moderate threat vs. high threat) or the ideological direction of the solution (liberal vs. conservative) affects whether anxiety increases trust. The policy solution language will be taken from a political party (whichever party offered a threat rather than a solution for that subject), providing a further test of whether a partisan label affects the desirability of a proposed policy. After the trust items, respondents will be asked a series of policy questions to test our hypothesis that anxiety causes people to have more punitive attitudes towards immigrants. We ask whether immigrants should be allowed access to a variety of state resources varying from emergency room care to food stamps. In addition, we will test how anxiety influences support for birthright citizenship and current proposals like the Dream Act, which would allow a path to citizenship through education and military service.

Pilot Data

In a previous study, we examined the effect of anxiety over the H1N1 flu and trust. This study relied on a student sample (n=156) and a thought listing manipulation of anxiety (thoughts vs. worries). After the manipulation, subjects were asked whether they trusted a variety of individuals and organization to provide information about H1N1. Figure 1 (see appendix) shows the differences in means between the treatment and control groups – anxiety increased trust in organizations such as the CDC and WebMD, but not the Department of Homeland Security. Anxiety appeared to boost trust in organizations and individuals that are 1) relevant to the source of the anxiety and 2) not explicitly political. Our proposed study builds upon this work in two main ways. First, it allows us to specify the appeal of relevant actors in times of anxiety. In particular, we are interested in whether people turn to relevant actors because they offer solutions or whether they prefer to hear relevant actors echo prominent threatening messages. The proposed study also builds upon our earlier work by relying on an explicitly political context.
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Survey questions

Include panel questions on knowledge and interest

Manipulation (Randomize)
Anti-immigration advertisement that stresses the effects of immigration on crime, jobs, and culture.
Control: no music, neutral visuals
Treatment: scary music, threatening visuals

Now, we’d like to ask you a few questions about your political attitudes.

1. How does illegal immigration make you feel? [vertical slider that goes from “Not [anxious]” to “[anxious]” scale goes from 0 to 100]
   a. anxious
   b. angry

We’re going to list a series of organizations and individuals, and we’d like to know how much you trust them to address immigration. (Please see Appendix B for the manipulations)
1. not at all, 2. not very much, 3. somewhat, or 4. a great deal

The groups are:
2. President Obama,
3. Jan Brewer, Governor of Arizona
4. US Customs and Border Control
5. Citizen groups such as the Minutemen
6. The Democratic Party
7. The Republican Party
8. Citizen groups such as “Citizens Concerned about Immigration”

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? [Randomize block]
9. Illegal immigration threatens traditional American customs and values.

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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Neither Agree</td>
<td>Nor Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
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10. Illegal immigrants are a burden to the US because they take jobs, housing, and health care.

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11. Illegal immigrants strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents.

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| 12. Illegal immigrants mostly take jobs that American citizens don’t want. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Strongly Disagree | Neither Agree | Nor Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

| 13. Illegal immigrants do not pay their fair share of taxes. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Strongly Disagree | Neither Agree | Nor Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

| 14. Illegal immigrants increase crime |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Strongly Disagree | Neither Agree | Nor Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

Here is a list of services that the government could provide for illegal immigrants. Do you think that illegal immigrants should be eligible for these services?

| 15. Elementary education (grades K-6) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Definitely not eligible | Probably not eligible | Unsure | Probably eligible | Definitely eligible |

| 16. In-state tuition at state universities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Definitely not eligible | Probably not eligible | Unsure | Probably eligible | Definitely eligible |

| 17. Emergency room treatment |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Definitely not eligible | Probably not eligible | Unsure | Probably eligible | Definitely eligible |

| 18. Food stamps |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Definitely not eligible | Probably not eligible | Unsure | Probably eligible | Definitely eligible |

| 19. Medicaid |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Definitely not eligible | Probably not eligible | Unsure | Probably eligible | Definitely eligible |
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20. Should federal spending on *tightening border security to prevent illegal immigration* be increased, decreased, or kept about the same? From decrease a lot to increase a lot

1. Decreased a lot  2. Decrease  3. Kept the same  4. Increased  5. Increased a lot

21. How much do you support the following policy proposals: [Randomize the order]

a. Make all illegal immigrants felons and send them back to their home country

b. Allow illegal immigrants to remain in the United States and become U.S. citizens, but only if they meet certain requirements like working and paying back taxes over a period of time work

1. Support strongly
2. Support
3. Neither support nor disapprove
4. Disapprove
5. Disapprove strongly

22. As you may know, under our constitution and current laws, all children born in the United States are automatically granted citizenship. Do you think we should continue to grant citizenship to all children born in the US or do you think this should be changed so children of illegal immigrants are not automatically granted citizenship?

1. Support strongly
2. Support
3. Neither support nor disapprove
4. Disapprove
5. Disapprove strongly

23. How much do you approve of a law that offers a path to citizenship for undocumented young people who complete two years of college or two years of military service?

1. Support strongly
2. Support
3. Neither support nor disapprove
4. Disapprove
5. Disapprove strongly
Appendix

Figure 1: Anxiety increases trust in political actors with solutions
Appendix B – Trust manipulations

Respondents will randomly receive either a threat or a solution matched with each group and will be asked to rate all groups

**President Obama**

Solution - 44

We need to create a pathway for legal status that is fair, reflective of our values, and works. We will set up enforcement against businesses who break the law by deliberately hiring and exploiting workers. Those living here illegally should also be held responsible.

Threat - 43

There are an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. Because they live in the shadows, crimes go unreported as victims and witnesses fear coming forward. This makes it harder for the police to catch violent criminals and keep neighborhoods safe.

**Governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer**

Solution - 44

It should be a crime for an alien to be in this country without carrying the required documents. I support a law that requires that the police determine a person’s immigration status if there is reasonable suspicion that the person is an illegal alien.

Threat - 43

Border-related violence and crime due to illegal immigration are critically important issues to the people of our state and to the country. We cannot sacrifice our safety to the murderous greed of drug cartels. Kidnappings and violence are compromising our quality of life.

**Democratic Party**

Solution - 39

We support comprehensive reform grounded in the principles of responsibility and accountability: Our plan includes demanding responsibility from unscrupulous businesses that break the law. Employers who exploit undocumented workers undermine American workers, and they have to be held accountable.

Threat - 44

We cannot ignore the nearly 12 million immigrants currently living in the United States illegally. The exploitation of undocumented immigrant workers threatens to drive down wages, benefits and working conditions for middle-class workers and low-income Americans.
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striving to earn a middle-class standard of living.

Republican Party

Solution - 45
We must be able to track who is entering and leaving our country. Our determination to uphold the rule of law begins with more effective enforcement, completing the border fence quickly and securing the borders, and employing complementary strategies to secure our ports of entry.

Threat - 39
We cannot ignore the nearly 12 million immigrants currently living in the United States illegally. Illegal immigration undercuts the American middle class, places unsustainable burdens on our social service programs, and poses a significant risk to our national security.

The Department of Homeland Security/ Border Patrol

Solution -42
The Secure Border Initiative is a multi-year plan to secure America's borders and reduce illegal migration. We propose more agents to patrol our borders, secure our ports of entry and enforce immigration laws and expanded removal capabilities to eliminate “catch and release.”

Threat - 45
Most illicit drugs available in the United States and thousands of illegal immigrants are smuggled into the United States across the nearly 2,000-mile Southwest Border. Intercartel warfare has resulted in unprecedented violence in northern Mexico and the potential for increasing violence in the United States.

The Minuteman Project

Solution - 39
The Minuteman project will launch a six-month recruiting campaign inviting Americans from all 50 states to join me in southeast Arizona to observe, report, and deter an overwhelming incursion into Arizona by criminal drug and illegal alien smuggling cartels.

Threat - 40
The failure of elected and appointed officials to enforce immigration laws poses a threat to the security, sovereignty, and prosperity of our nation, particularly to our middle class and labor union work forces and to the safety of our families.
Rule of Law Ad (based on 2008 Ron Paul Ad)

Control Condition
- Voice (constant)
- Neutral visuals
- No music

Treatment Condition
- Voice (constant)
- Scary visuals
- Threatening music

For generations, Lady Liberty welcomed immigrants who came here legally, who followed the rules and led productive lives.

Today, illegal immigrants violate our borders and overwhelm our schools, hospital and social services.

We need border security now. Physically secure the border,
no amnesty, no welfare to illegal aliens, end birthright citizenship, no more student visas from terrorist nations.

Standing up for the rule of law. Say no to illegal immigration.
Enough is Enough Ad (based on 1994 Pete Wilson Ad)

Control Condition
- Voice (constant)
- Neutral visuals
- No music

Treatment Condition
- Voice (constant)
- Scary visuals
- Threatening music

*It’s how most of us got here. It’s how this country was built. American citizens is a treasure.*

Images used in both conditions

But now the rules are being broken. Today more than 11 million illegal immigrants overwhelm our borders, our economy, and our hospitals.

Control Images:

Treatment Images:

Illegal immigrants take American jobs.
On screen text: Immigrant labor depresses American wages by $200 billion a year.

Control Images:

Treatment Images:

Open borders bring crime and a threat to national security.
On Screen Text: More than 10% of federal prisoners are serving time for immigration crimes.

Control Images

Treatment Images

Illegal immigrants take welfare, health care, and education dollars that should go to hard working Americans.

Control Images

Treatment Images
There is a right way to do things and a wrong way. Enough is enough. Say NO to illegal immigration.