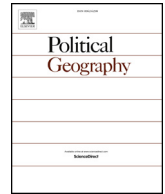




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Politics, time, space, and attitudes toward US–Mexico border security

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ABSTRACT

The tumultuous 2016 US presidential election featured a range of policy proposals to address the issue of illegal immigration. Channeling anxieties around the economic and social consequences of illegal immigration with claims of porous, unsecured borders, Republican candidate Donald Trump notably committed to building a wall the length of the US–Mexico border. At the same time, border security is not a new issue on the American policy agenda. Drawing on spatially-referenced survey data from 2006 to 2016, this article explores two questions. First, how have attitudes toward border security shifted over time in response to changes in the partisan political environment? Second, how does spatial context – namely proximity to the US–Mexico border – shape attitudes toward the proposed border wall? Findings point to both time and space, in conjunction with individual-level political attitudes, as key factors shaping attitudes toward US–Mexico border security.

Introduction

The territorial borders of states have long had an important (if implicit) role in the study of politics. Indeed, border control is a key function of the state, and a constitutive element of state sovereignty (Andreas, 2003b). Borders serve to demarcate which authorities may legitimately exercise coercive power – that is, use force, and levy taxes – within a territory (Weber, 1992). As an element of “social morphology” like other features of the natural and built environments, borders shape the social phenomena within which they occur (Durkheim, 1899).

When placed at the center of inquiry, different fields of study have approached borders in various ways. In quantitative studies of international conflict, borders have been conceptualized narrowly and concretely as the physical boundaries across which states either cooperate or enter into conflict (e.g., Starr, 2005). Critical international relations and critical geopolitics scholars have approached borders as sites where state sovereignty is both asserted and contested through a variety of practices, including border policing, immigration controls, passport and visa requirements, and biometric identification as means to combat human trafficking and drug smuggling, and to guard against putative terrorists (Andreas, 2003b, 2009; Jones, 2012; Salter, 2004; Vaughan-Williams, 2009). Since the 1990s, international political economists have debated the continued relevance of national borders in light of the globalization of production, trade, and finance (Strange, 1996). Within normative political theory, scholars have engaged with borders in exploring the moral and political bases by which sovereign states might justify restrictive border control policies (Abizadeh, 2008; Carens, 1987). The power relations inherent in borders and border

control have also approached from the perspectives of philosophy (Nail, 2016) and anthropology (Donnan & Wilson, 1999). In spite of their disparate theoretical frameworks and research methods, these varied strands of scholarship converge on the conclusion expressed succinctly by both Agnew (2008) and Starr (2006): “Borders matter.”

The study of contemporary American politics and policy confirms that borders do indeed matter. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States closed its land borders and airspace, asserting control over US territory while concomitantly disrupting continental trade relations. This event highlighted the need to develop “smarter” border security policies that would allow goods to continue to flow freely (Andreas, 2003a; Coleman, 2005; Heyman & Ackleson, 2010). Subsequently, the *Secure Fence Act* of 2006 authorized the construction of approximately 1100 km (700 miles) of fencing along sections of the US–Mexico border from California to Texas. Then-President George W. Bush stated that the fence was intended to secure the US southern border, and to impede the activities of human traffickers and drug smugglers. Most recently, US–Mexico border security featured prominently in the 2016 presidential election. Making repeated claims of porous, unsecured borders allowing criminal elements to enter the US from Mexico, Republican candidate Donald Trump pledged to build a wall the length of the US–Mexico border – and to compel Mexico to pay the estimated \$12–22 billion cost. Trump has since sought to move forward on his campaign pledge, signing an executive order in late January 2017 to begin construction of the border wall, and recommitting to that goal in his address to Congress a month later. In January 2018, the border wall was used as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Congress for a legislative

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solution to the issue of Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

Given the recent prominence of US–Mexico border security in American electoral politics, and given that cognate issues such as immigration policy and defense spending have been researched extensively, it is surprising that public opinion research has paid little attention to America's borders. Even though scholars have noted that the map-image of the state and the lines that demarcate the limits of state territory are imprinted on public consciousness (Agnew, 2002; Jones, 2012), and further that concerns about porous borders provoke public anxiety (Ackleson, 2005; Andreas, 2003b; Newman, 2006), careful study of public support for specific border security initiatives (and the factors shaping support) is sparse. This paper endeavors to fill this gap. Motivated by spatially- and contextually-oriented approaches to studying political behavior in political science, (e.g., Dyck & Hagley, 2012; Enos, 2017; Getmansky & Zeitzoff, 2014; Moore & Reeves, 2017) and political geography (e.g., Agnew, 1996; O'Loughlin, Flint, & Anselin, 1994), I draw on survey data from 2006 to 2016 to explore how political factors such as party identification and ideology, time (in terms of growing partisan and ideological polarization over time), and space (specifically, physical geographic space in the form of proximity to the US–Mexico border) influence American attitudes toward a US–Mexico border fence or wall.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. First, I review existing public opinion research on border issues. Second, I advance the hypotheses to be tested in a series of regression models. Third, I present the survey data employed and describe my methods, including geocoding, imputation of missing data, and regression modeling. I then present the results and discuss their substantive implications before concluding with reflections on avenues for future enquiry.

Public opinion and border issues

As previously noted, borders and border security have been addressed only tangentially in public opinion research (but see Gries, 2014, pp. 144–145), and then usually in the context of broader discussions of regional economic integration. For example, results from the US from the 2000 World Values Survey found that only 18 percent of Americans supported doing away with the US–Mexico border. By contrast, 42 percent supported doing away with the Canada–US border (Basáñez, Inglehart, & Nevitte, 2007). Similar results were obtained in the 1990 World Values Survey (Inglehart, Nevitte, & Basáñez, 1996). Following 9/11, a 2002 survey found that 69 percent of the American public supported a common border security policy with Canada. When asked about the competing goals of facilitating trade (on the one hand) and improving border security (on the other), 72 percent of Americans prioritized border security over trade (Cole, Kincaid, & Parkin, 2002).

While border issues themselves have not been prominent themes in public opinion research, several studies have explored how proximity to (or conversely distance from) international frontiers shapes policy attitudes in related domains. In studying attitudes toward regional economic integration in Europe, Berezin and Díez Medrano (2008) and Kuhn (2011) find that residing near a border with another European Union member state leads to more positive perceptions of the EU. Cross-border social and economic interactions emerge as the likely mechanism through which such pro-integration sentiments are created (Kuhn, 2011). Examining Canadian attitudes toward North American regional integration, Gravelle (2014b) finds that proximity to the Canada–US border shapes attitudes toward Canada–US relations, with closer proximity increasing support among supporters of right-of-center parties, while decreasing support among supporters of the main leftist party. Additionally, broad attitudes toward neighboring countries also bear the imprint of spatial proximity. Mirwaldt (2010) finds that proximity to the German–Czech border increases Germans' positive affect toward Czechs, while Gravelle (2014a) finds that proximity to the Canada–US border shapes Canadians' views of the US as well as Americans' views of Canada.

The effect of border proximity has also been explored in studies of American immigration policy attitudes. Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano (2010) find that residents of US–Mexico border states are more likely to identify immigration as the “most important problem” in political surveys. Examining support California ballot initiatives designed to restrict undocumented immigrants' access to health and social services, Branton, Dillingham, Dunaway, and Miller (2007) find that Democrats residing closer to the US–Mexico border are more likely to support such initiatives than Democrats further away; Republicans exhibit consistent support for such ballot initiatives. Drawing on national US data, Gravelle (2016) finds that proximity to the US–Mexico border amplifies the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans on the issue of illegal immigration. Among Democrats, border proximity increases support for allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the US; among Republicans, border proximity decreases support.

In exploring the spatial dynamics relating to proximity to international frontiers at work in mass public opinion, these studies have substantiated Eagles (1995, p. 499) contention that “one of the more exciting developments in the study of political behavior to emerge in recent years is the rediscovery of the importance of a variety of spatial and contextual influences.” My task, then, is to extend this line of inquiry to the study of present-day US–Mexico border security.

Theory and hypotheses

Building on existing research in political behavior, political geography, and social psychology, I advance a set of theoretical expectations that link attitudes toward US–Mexico border security to individual-level political factors (that is, party identification and ideology), time (interacting with political variables), and proximity to the US–Mexico border.

The expectations relating to the effects of party identification and ideology on policy attitudes are well established in the study of American political behavior. While the average citizen often possesses relatively little knowledge about politics and policy (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), individuals may nevertheless form attitudes toward the issues of the day via elites with whom they share a partisan or ideological affinity. As Zaller (1992) has argued, messages from political elites (elected politicians, activists, and other prominent figures) serve as a heuristic through which members of the mass public form attitudes toward specific policy issues. Further, there is no need for members of the mass public to have detailed knowledge about border security, immigration policy, or any other issue, or for that matter, “to know why a given set of policies is conservative or liberal, in order to take positions that are consistent with their ideological predispositions; they need only be able to recognize which elites share their predispositions and take cues from them” (Zaller, 1992, p. 328).

Using a different conceptual vocabulary but arriving at the same expectations as Zaller's elite cue theory, recent work in political psychology grounded in social identity theory (Greene, 1999; Weisberg & Greene, 2003) argues that identification with a political in-group (e.g., as a Republican or a Democrat, or as a conservative or a liberal) also involves differentiating oneself from opposing groups. Within a social identity theory framework, this differentiation is known as out-group derogation (Greene, 2004), and implies negative views of the other group alongside positive views of one's own group. Both positive (in-group affinity) and negative (out-group derogation) facets of partisanship have been shown to influence voting behavior (Medeiros & Noël, 2014). A logical extension of this work is that out-group derogation also implies a rejection of high-profile policies or policy proposals originating from the opposite (or competing) party. Thus, identifying as a Democrat (or liberal) means rejecting the policy proposals advanced by Republicans (or conservatives), and vice versa.

Major border security initiatives in the past decade – including the *Secure Fence Act* enacted by George W. Bush, and the recent executive order by Donald Trump to begin work on his promised US–Mexico

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