Assessing the effect of social desirability on nativism attitude responses

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Attempts to measure and analyze public opinion attitudes toward racial/ethnic minorities often confront the "social desirability" problem: those who have prejudiced attitudes are rarely willing to admit them to surveyors. Instead, they may be more likely to give a socially acceptable answer rather an accurate reflection of their views. Previous research has clearly established that this effect presents a challenge for accurately measuring self-reported racial and policy attitudes that primarily affect African–Americans. It is less clear, however, how it might affect self-reported responses to attitudes dealing with Latinos and immigration. This study thus seeks to analyze the extent to which social desirability may affect survey measures of perceived levels of cultural threat (nativism). Results from two separate analyses using the Crowne–Marlowe "social desirability scale" and a survey "list experiment" demonstrate that social desirability is indeed a concern for accurately measuring nativism in the American public, but that it exerts an opposite effect from what has previously been observed: nativist attitudes tend to be over-reported in opinion surveys.

1. Introduction

For more than a decade, the U.S. federal government has been struggling with the issue of reforming the nation's immigration laws. Given the initial inability of the Bush and Obama administrations to successfully persuade Congress to support a comprehensive reform measure, action shifted to the various state legislatures. On April 23, 2010, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed into a law one of the strictest anti-immigrant measures in modern history. Among other things, it required local law enforcement officers to determine the legal status of anyone they had "reasonable suspicion" of being in the county illegally when encountered during routine law enforcement efforts (including seemingly innocuous activities such as traffic stops). Within a year, over 20 other states had proposed similar laws, versions of which passed in Georgia, Alabama, and Utah. While the bulk of these laws were struck down by the Supreme Court in 2012, the intensity of emotions and seemingly indefinite legislative deadlock are likely to keep the national immigration issue high on the political radar for some time to come.

For these reasons, research investigating the determinants of support for these and similar measures among the American public are both timely and relevant. This line of research fits within the wider body of literature investigating the determinants of racial/ethnic public policy attitudes in the United States. Most of the existing research has attempted to explain white opposition to racial policies that either explicitly or implicitly sought to marginalize or disadvantage African–Americans (Jacobson, 1985; Sears and Kinder, 1985; Tarman and Sears, 2005).

Over the last 20 years, scholars have extended this line of research by investigating the determinants of public policy attitudes that affect other minority groups, including Latinos and especially Latino immigrants. Relying almost exclusively on

self-reported responses from public opinion survey data, scholars have uncovered evidence that immigration policy attitudes are shaped by a variety of different factors, including feelings of economic and cultural threat (Citrin and Sides, 2008; Citrin, 1990; Citrin et al., 1997), social context and group competition (Hood III and Morris, 1997; Hopkins, 2009, 2010; Rocha and Espino, 2009; Rocha et al., 2011; Tolbert and Grummel, 2003), stereotypes toward Hispanics as an group (Ayers et al., 2009), as well as standard demographics and partisanship (Espenshade and Calhoun, 1993; Hughes and Tuch, 2003; Knoll, 2009; McDaniel et al., 2011; Neiman et al., 2006).

Because this research relies predominantly on data derived from public opinion surveys, it is crucial that responses to survey responses items are more or less an accurate reflection of public opinions and preferences. The accuracy of our understanding of the nature and determinants of immigration policy attitudes depends on the accuracy of survey responses measuring both the dependent (policy attitudes), as well as independent (economic threat, cultural threat, anti-Hispanic prejudice, etc.) variables.

Previous research has demonstrated that answers to survey questions regarding race and ethnicity are often subject to the "social desirability" problem (Berinsky, 1999; Karp and Brockington, 2005; Kuklinski et al., 1997a,b; Phillips and Clancy, 1972; Redlawsk et al., 2010; Streb et al., 2008). This is because those who have prejudiced racial attitudes are rarely willing to freely admit such opinions to public opinion surveyors. Thus, they are often more likely to give an answer that is seen to be socially acceptable or politically correct, rather than an answer which accurately reflects their attitudes. While this phenomenon has been clearly established in situations relating to attitudes racial public policy preferences that affect African–Americans, it is less clear how the social desirability problem may affect attitude responses dealing with racial/ethnic public policy preferences affecting Latinos and Latino immigrants.

The objective of this study is to address this issue by analyzing the extent to which social desirability may affect self-reported survey responses on questions dealing with perceived levels of cultural threat (i.e. nativism). This is an important question to examine because nativism has previously been shown to be a significant determinant of immigration policy attitudes (Citrin et al., 1990, 2001; Citrin and Sides, 2008; Citrin, 1990; Higham, 1955; Sides and Citrin, 2007), but these studies have assumed that responses to nativist survey response items are an accurate reflection of the opinions of the respondents. Because feelings of cultural threat often carry implicit racial/ethnic overtones (Fry, 2006; Galindo and Vigil, 2006; Higham, 1955; Roberts, 1997), it is possible, and even likely, that nativism survey questions are subject to the same social desirability concerns as those measuring explicitly racial/ethnic attitudes and prejudices. On the other hand, nativism has historically also been associated with more socially desirable attitudes like nationalism and patriotism (e.g. Higham, 1955). Thus, the social desirability may affect nativism survey responses in more than one direction.

This study will proceed by describing nativism as a concept and examining its prevalence in the United States public. The social desirability phenomenon will then be discussed in more detail, along with the corresponding hypotheses and expectations for the analysis. Two distinct statistical methods for assessing the social desirability problem regarding nativist attitude responses in public opinion surveys will then be examined. To briefly preview: the results presented in this study suggest that social desirability is indeed a concern for researchers studying cultural threat and its effect on immigration policy attitudes, but it exerts an opposite effect from what conventional wisdom would predict and what has previously been observed in other areas.

2. Nativism as a concept: What it is and what it is not

Nativism, as an individual-level attitude, has manifested itself in some form or another throughout most of American history. Whether the target was the French in the 1790s, the Chinese in the 1880s, the Irish Catholics in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, the southeast Europeans at the beginning of the 20th century, Hispanic immigrants of the late 20th century, or Muslim immigrants in the early 21st century, nativist attitudes frequently emerged in opposition to those groups who represented a perceived threat to the American way of life and its valued cultural resources (Higham, 1955; Hofstadter, 1955; Knobel, 1996; Perea, 1997; Schrag, 2011). Following a number of previous theoretical treatments on the subject, nativism can be defined as the perception that a uniquely American culture or way of life needs to be protected against "foreign" influence, broadly considered (Fry, 2006; Higham, 1955; Perea, 1997).[1] While sometimes using the equivalent label of "cultural threat," nativism has previously been identified and examined by political scientists (e.g. Citrin et al., 1990, 2001; Citrin and Sides, 2008; Citrin and Wright, 2009; Citrin, 1990; Paxton and Mughan, 2006; Sides and Citrin, 2007) and it has shown to be a significant, and independent, determinant of restrictionist immigration policy attitudes in the United States.

It is important to note that nativism is not the conceptual equivalent of other related attitudes with which it is often conflated or intermingled. For example, nativism is not simply possessing conservative immigration policy preferences. This important distinction has often been blurred by journalists as well as researchers who define nativism *as* conservative anti-immigrant policy preferences (Alvarez and Butterfield, 2000; Simcox, 1997; Tatalovich, 1995). Rather, nativism is a conceptually distinct attitude which independently exerts an influence on policy attitudes. Consider that there are many legitimate justifications for supporting a restriction on immigration into the United States. The nativist explanation would be that people perceive a threat to a uniquely American culture and way of life that might possibly accompany increased levels of

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[1] For a sampling of the recent scholarship on identifying the boundaries of American national identity in the first place, see Schildkraut, 2010; Theiss-Morse, 2009, and Wong, 2010.