




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Fluctuations of immigration salience: testing alternative explanations of policy salience among US Latinos

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## Abstract

What makes immigration a salient issue among Latinos? We focus on immigration – one of the most pressing issues facing the United States (US) – and evaluate the factors that motivate immigration salience among Latinos over several election cycles. Although immigration policy has been linked with the Latino electorate over the period of our study due to high foreign-born rates and mixed-status families within this community, immigration policy has actually not been the dominant issue for the majority of Latino voters over this time period. Using survey responses from the 2008, 2012 and 2016 elections, we test multiple theories of issue salience by exploring social, political and individual determinants of policy salience among Latino voters. We find that in addition to nativity, consumption of ethnic media and group identity are associated with reporting immigration as a salient issue. These findings provide a valuable addition to literature of public opinion on immigration and the origins of policy issue salience among ethno-racial minorities in the US.

**Keywords:** immigration; issue salience; agenda setting; policy agendas; US Latinos

## Introduction

In recent years, immigration has become one of the most salient policy issues across the globe (Böhmelet and Ezrow 2020). In the United States (US), Americans have increasingly shown concerns with the issue, with more than 1 in every 5 residents reporting immigration as the most important problem facing the country (Newport 2018; Jones 2019) and over 50% of Americans reporting it as “very important” to their voting decisions in the 2020 elections (Pew Research Center 2020b). While these data highlight the national prominence of immigration, these hefty trends have not occurred across the board. Among US Latinos, who are the largest ethnic group and the largest minority group of eligible voters in the US (Pew Research Center 2020a), the salience of immigration has fluctuated – and even decreased – in recent presidential elections despite their personal experiences and close ties to the immigrant experience. Hence, this study examines what makes Latino voters think

**Table 1.** Distribution of immigration salience and top three issues

Top 3 Issues	2008 (CMPS)	2012 (CMPS)	2016 (CMPS)
#1 Issue	Economy (50.29%)	Immigration (57.08%)	Healthcare (31.84%)
#2 Issue	Immigration (42.47%)	Economy (54.04%)	Economy (24.42%)
#3 Issue	Education (11.81%)	Education (19.10%)	Immigration (21.16%)
<i>n</i>	1581.68	923.45	1276.49

immigration is a salient policy issue during times of heightened debates and policy activity at all levels of government (Beltrán 2010; Ybarra et al. 2016; Hare and Monogan 2020; Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020b).

While the economy and jobs have long been salient issues for the American public (Pew Research Center 2020a), racial and ethnic minorities tend to have distinct policy agendas from non-Hispanic whites (Frasure-Yokley et al. 2013; Barreto et al. 2014; Barreto et al. 2017). Among Latinos, who account for about 18% of the US population (Cillfio and Fry 2020), immigration has long been a wedge issue, leading many to conclude that Latino voters are a single-issue public who are only moved by immigration policy messaging of parties and candidates (White 2016). Nevertheless, more comprehensive analyses are needed due to rapid social and demographic changes that are taking Latinos away from the immediate immigrant experience. Today, for example, two thirds of Latinos are US-born citizens (US Census Bureau 2020). Additionally, immigration from Latin America has gradually decreased in the past decade, with the vast majority of foreign-born Latinos (78%) having continuously resided in the US for more than 10 years (Noe-Bustamante and Flores 2019). While almost 3 in every 4 Latinos are either immigrant or have at least one immediate relative who is foreign-born, only 16% of Latino voters identified immigration as important in 2020 (NALEO Educational Fund 2020). These trends give rise to the examination of the factors that have influenced Latinos to perceive immigration as a salient policy issue in the past general elections.

The policy agenda of US Latinos is diverse and has changed over time (Beltrán 2010). Health and healthcare, for example, were the most salient issues for Latino voters in 2016 and 2018, and were the second most important issues to Latino voters in 2020 – during a pandemic that had severe economic and health implications for this group (Decisions 2019; Krogstad and Lopez 2020; Gomez-Aguinaga et al. 2021; Jamieson et al. 2021). Moreover, the public agenda of Latino voters has evolved in the past presidential elections. Table 1 shows the top three policy issues that Latinos have identified as salient in the past presidential elections, including the percentage of Latinos who said immigration is important (CMPS 2008, 2012, 2016). Table 1 demonstrates that attitudes toward immigration salience increased from 42% in 2008 to 57% in 2012. In 2008, immigration was the second most important issue behind the economy and became the top issue among Latino likely voters in 2012. In 2016, however, only 21% of Latinos reported immigration as important, dropping to the third salient issue of the year, as Table 1 shows.

Fluctuations of immigration salience among the Latino electorate have occurred regardless of heightened policy activity on immigration at all levels of government.

The open seat presidential election in 2008 was preceded by prominent immigration marches across the country in 2006 and the failure of the DREAM Act<sup>1</sup> in the US Senate in 2007 (Morín et al. 2020). The passage of Arizona's SB 1070 in 2010 and Alabama's HB 56 in 2011, both considered by many to be the most restrictive state immigration laws, set the stage for the 2012 presidential election (Gómez-Aguinaga 2016; Ybarra et al. 2016), along with the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA),<sup>2</sup> the summer before the 2012 general election (Hipsman et al. 2016), which scholars argue mobilized the Latino electorate (Sanchez and Gomez-Aguinaga 2017).

Between 2014 and 2016, a series of policy developments and campaigns maintained the visibility of immigration at all levels of government. In 2014, the Obama administration issued an omnibus executive order, which not only replaced the Secure Communities Program with the Priority Enforcement Program but also aimed to create protections from deportation to undocumented immigrants who were parents of US citizen children (Rodriguez 2017).<sup>3</sup> The 2016 presidential election was also preceded by the nomination and election of Donald Trump, in which US Latinos and immigrants served as political targets of his policy proposals and campaign rhetoric (Gomez-Aguinaga and Sanchez 2020). Despite this heightened activity, immigration was no longer the most salient policy issue for Latinos in 2016 as Table 1 shows. Meanwhile, the issue of healthcare came to the forefront after Trump called for the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, which Latinos overwhelmingly opposed.<sup>4</sup>

This study presents a series of empirical analyses and rigorous robustness checks to examine predictors of immigration salience among US Latinos across time. Besides testing (1) personal connection to immigration, this study analyses whether alternative predictors of immigration salience such as (2) group identity and (3) consumption of Spanish-language news media impact perceptions of immigration salience among the Latino electorate in past presidential elections. Through a series of analyses using multiple post-presidential election surveys (Frasure-Yokley et al. 2013; Barreto et al. 2014; Barreto et al. 2017), this study allows for analyses of correlates to immigration salience that are not tied to any particular election cycle. In doing so, this study not only expands our understanding of one of the most prominent policy issues of our time (Böhmelt and Ezrow 2020; Hare and Monogan 2020) but also contributes to knowledge on the determinants of issue salience among racial and ethnic minority groups in the US.

<sup>1</sup>The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act of 2007 or DREAM Act of 2007 set a series of conditions for conditional permanent resident status to young undocumented immigrants who met certain criteria such as educational attainment, good moral character and age limits. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/senate-bill/2205>

<sup>2</sup>DACA is an executive order that began in August 2016. This initiative provided a two-year deportation reprieve and temporary eligibility to work legally in the US to young undocumented immigrants who met a series of criteria, most of which overlapped with the failed DREAM Act of 2007 (Hipsman et al. 2016).

<sup>3</sup>The former program, called the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA), was blocked from going into effect and later on rescinded by the Trump administration (Rodriguez, 2017).

<sup>4</sup><https://latinodecisions.com/blog/doj-attack-on-obamacare-has-big-implications-for-latinos/>

## Personal experiences & issue salience

Past studies have found that self-interest motivates concerns on policy issues. The appraisal theory posits that individuals pay attention and evaluate issues, situations and events in relation to their personal relevance (Scherer 2005). Studies have found that citizens tend to have higher levels of cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement with issues that are personally relevant to them (Lazarus and Smith 1988). For example, individuals who have had negative experiences with the criminal justice system are significantly more likely to be politically mobilized (Walker 2014, 2020). Similarly, Americans who have been personally impacted by environmental hazards or who have ancestral or historical connections to the land are more likely to report climate change as a salient policy issue (Brown and Perkins 1992; Kingsley et al. 2013). In contrast, studies have found that when an issue is not personally relevant to individuals, it is unlikely to elicit cognitive or behavioral responses (Scherer 2005; Miller et al. 2017; Eberl et al. 2020). Therefore, self-interest and personal experiences can have important implications on policy attitudes.

Extensive research has been conducted on the attitudes towards immigration from various groups. US Latinos tend to have more positive attitudes towards liberal immigration policies than non-Hispanic Whites, African Americans or Asian Americans (Cain and Kiewiet 1986; Gramlich 2019). Studies have found that among Latinos' connections to immigrants, whether personally being an immigrant or having relatives who were born abroad, are associated with more positive attitudes towards immigration (Bedolla 2005; Abrajano and Singh 2009; Kerevel 2011; Len-Ríos 2017). However, there have been significant fluctuations in the political attitudes of Latinos towards immigrants and immigration policies in the past decade. Scholars have argued that the evolving political attitudes of Latinos towards immigration have changed as a result of economic environments (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Ybarra et al. 2016), assimilation or acculturation (Michelson 2003; Abrajano and Singh 2009), perceived group discrimination (Michelson and Pallares 2001; Michelson 2003; Pedraza 2014) and xenophobic rhetoric and environments (Pérez 2015; Sanchez and Gomez-Aguinaga 2017; Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020b). These sources reveal a contested puzzle for public opinion towards immigration among US Latinos, most of whom are immigrant themselves or have immediate connections to immigrants.

Studies of policy salience have continuously shown that personal experiences and self-interest are positively associated with perceptions of greater importance of the issue area (Lavine et al. 1996; Cochran and Warren 2012; Demski et al. 2017; Howe 2018; Bromley-Trujillo and Poe 2020). However, the immigrant experience among US Latinos has changed in the past decade. For example, Latin American and Caribbean countries are no longer the fastest growing source of migrants internationally or to the US (Noe-Bustamante and Lopez 2019). Moreover, recent patterns reveal a net loss of immigrants from Mexico, meaning that "more Mexican immigrants have returned to Mexico from the US than have migrated" to the US since the end of the Great Recession (Villarreal 2014; Gonzalez-Barrera 2015). While immigrants from Latin American countries still represent the majority of foreign-born residents in the US, the majority of recent immigrants in the US come from Asia (Smith 2019; *About Foreign Born* 2020). These recent demographic changes

call for a reexamination of the personal experiences of US Latinos and their public opinion towards immigration issues.

Based on the appraisal theory, we predict that connections to immigration is a self-interest that continues to have an impact on Latinos' policy views. Hence, we present the Personal Experience Hypothesis 1, which posits that regardless of the recent demographic changes of the group, foreign-born Latinos are more likely to report immigration as a salient policy issue than their counterparts. This is a result of this subgroup of Latinos not only having direct experience with the immigration policy environment in the US but also potentially benefiting from more protective immigration policies.

**H1:** Latina/os who have a personal stake in immigration are more likely to report immigration as an important issue to the Latina/o community across the years.

### Group identity & issue salience

Other scholars argue that while personal relevance can be associated with issue salience, there are stronger predictors of issue salience, including group identity. Although 3 in every 4 US Latinos are immigrants or have at least one immediate relative who is foreign-born, studies have shown significant fluctuations in the public opinion and political attitudes of US Latinos towards multiple issues. Specifically regarding immigration and immigration policy, US Latinos have a wide range of attitudes that have oscillated in the past decade. In 2013 and 2016, for example, about 40% of US Latinos said they worried about deportations, compared to over half of them in 2008, 2010 and 2018 (Lopez et al. 2018a). Similarly, in the early 2000s, over 40% of Latinos believed that there were already too many immigrants coming to the US annually, compared to only 25% of them in 2018 (Noe-Bustamante and Gonzalez-Barrera 2019). Additionally, while in 2016, 31% of US Latinos were immigrants, and only about 20% of Latino voters identified immigration as important in the same year (Pew Research Center 2017; Gallup n.d.). Hence, alternative explanations of immigration salience among Latinos are worth exploring, particularly in the recent elections.

Studies have found that group identity can help explain the changing political attitudes of ethno-racial minorities, including US Latinos (Dawson Michael 1994; Masuoka 2006; Sanchez 2006; Michelson 2016; Schildkraut 2015, 2016). Group identity “refers to an individual’s awareness of belonging to a certain group and having a psychological attachment to that group based on a perception of shared beliefs, feelings, interests, and ideas with other group members” (McClain et al. 2009, 474). This concept is based on the Social Identity Theory (SIT), which aims to explain inter-group dynamics and differences “as a function of group-based self-definitions” (Islam 2014, 1781); in this way, group identities are based on the identification of people’s “in-group” against “out-group” individuals who do not belong to such group, with warmer feelings towards in-group members (Sidanius et al. 1997; Gibson and Gouws 2005; McClain et al. 2009; Islam 2014; Schildkraut 2015).

Among Latinos, group identity has served as a strong predictor of public opinion towards some policy issues, including attitudes towards immigration. Sanchez and Medeiros (2016), for example, find that group identity predicts Latino public opinion on healthcare. Sanchez (2006) argues that in addition to nativity, measurements of group consciousness predict Latino's political attitudes towards Latino-salient policy areas, such as immigration and bilingual education. Johnson (1998) argues that instead of personal experiences or the legal conceptualization of nativity, group identity shapes US Latinos' opinions on issues that are salient for the group, such as affirmative action programs and policies. These studies suggest that group identity can serve as a stronger predictor than personal experiences.

We contend that the group identity of US Latinos is increasingly important, particularly in the recent presidential elections as it has increasingly become politicized. Migration rates from Mexico and Latin America, for example, have continuously been on decline since the Great Recession (Burke 2017). Furthermore, there has been a substantial rise in second and third-generation Latinos in the US (Flores 2017). However, Latinos continue to be racialized as outsiders regardless of their nativity. For example, a provision of Arizona's SB 1070<sup>5</sup>, which was not upheld by the Supreme Court, requires local law enforcement officials to investigate the immigration status of anyone arrested or stopped; this provision has led to racial profiling of Latinos and people of color in Arizona (Alegria 2014; Peard 2018). The increasing number of detention and deportation of immigrants from Latin America also has had detrimental implications among US-born children, youth and families (Vargas and Ybarra 2017; Juárez et al. 2018). Moreover, US-born Latinos continue to be a targeted group during political campaigns. In 2015, when Donald Trump announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination, he condemned Mexican and Latin American immigrants as rapists and drug traffickers (Sanchez and Gomez-Aguinaga 2017). Also, throughout his presidential campaign, Trump slammed prominent Latino political figures such as federal judge Gonzalo Curiel, the US-born son of Mexican immigrants who oversaw the lawsuit against Trump University, and Susana Martinez, the first Latina governor of a US state (Gomez-Aguinaga and Sanchez 2020).

These attacks, along with the politization of US Latinos and the ongoing xenophobic rhetoric against immigrants and racial minorities, have been proven to influence Latinos' ethnic identity and their political views (Pérez 2015; Schildkraut 2015; Michelson 2016; Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020b). Furthermore, they have had tangible spillover effects on the lives of US Latinos who, regardless of their nativity, have reported increasing feelings of exclusion and discrimination (Lopez et al. 2018b) and have experienced a growing number of hate crimes as reported by the FBI (Brooks 2019). These issues show the continuous politicization and racialization of Latinos regardless of their nativity or citizenship status. The rise in discrimination directed towards Latinos is important to our theory as scholars have found a meaningful link between discrimination and political behavior for Latinos (Sanchez 2006, 2008; Schildkraut 2015). In fact, perceived discrimination is one of the components or dimensions of group consciousness, one of the dominant measures of group identity (Miller et al. 1981). Although we do not have the

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<sup>5</sup>Section 2(B)

capacity to include all dimensions of group consciousness in our analysis, our study does have the ability to include perceived discrimination across all years.

Linked fate is a specific form of group identity that has been particularly useful in explaining why racial and ethnic minorities will often make political decisions based on the collective interests of their racial or ethnic group (Dawson Michael 1994). While Dawson Michael's (1994) linked fate theory was originally developed specifically for the African American experience in the US, scholars have found that although the mechanisms that drive linked fate may be different for Latinos (Sanchez and Masuoka 2010; Sanchez et al. 2019; Gomez-Aguinaga 2021a), linked fate influences Latino political behaviour (Schildkraut 2013; Bejarano et al. 2021). We rely on this particular form of group identity in our analysis given the advantage it has of being "a sophisticated and parsimonious alternative" to the operationalization of racial group consciousness (McClain et al. 2009). Linked fate has also the practical benefit of being a common measure across each data set in our analysis, whereas other forms of group identity – such as group consciousness – are not.

Based on the Social Identity Theory, the racialized and politicized experiences of US Latinos, and existing literature on the implications of group identity on public opinion, we present Hypothesis 2, which predicts that group identity serves as a predictor of identifying immigration as a salient policy issue among Latinos. Our analysis has the advantage of being able to account for the two most dominant forms of Latino racial or ethnic group identity, linked fate and group consciousness. This is an important distinction given that measures for the two forms of group identity have been found to be empirically distinct from each other when applied to Latinos (Sanchez and Vargas 2016).

**H2:** As perceptions of Latino linked fate increase, so does the likelihood that Latina/os report immigration as a salient issue to their community.

### News consumption & issue salience

Media scholars have argued that, beyond personal experiences and group identity, news media and news consumption can drive perceptions of issue salience among the public (Dearing et al. 1996; Lowry et al. 2003; Diefenbach and West 2007). The theory of agenda setting emphasises the news media's ability to promote the salience of certain issues or events among the public through content coverage (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Zaller et al. 1992; McCombs and Valenzuela 2007; Dumitrescu and Mughan 2010). According to this theory, the more attention a topic receives in the media, the more likely the public is to think the issue is important (Cohen 1963; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Peake 2001; Jones and Baumgartner 2004). Studies have repeatedly found that judgements about salient issues among the public change with news coverage, even in today's environment of abundant information and social media (Mazur and Lee 1993; Miller and Wanta 1996; Iyengar and Reeves 1997; Althaus and Tewksbury 2002; Feezell 2018). For example, multiple studies have found that exposure to crime news is a stronger predictor of crime salience than personal experience with crime (Einsiedel et al. 1984; Gross and Aday 2003;

Lowry et al. 2003; Diefenbach and West 2007). Similar patterns exist with news coverage of terrorism (Ullrich and Cohrs 2007; Spencer 2017) and mass shootings (Chyi and McCombs 2004; Muschert and Carr 2006; Schildkraut and Muschert 2014).

Existing studies on agenda setting, however, are mostly centered on mainstream media (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Cohen 1963; Peake 2001; Abbe et al. 2003; Baumgartner and Jones 2010). This issue is problematic given that the emergence and growth of new information technologies have given rise to alternatives to traditional media, including ethnic media (Jeffres 2000; Viswanath and Arora 2000). Ethnic media are commonly defined as “broadcast, print, and digital communication” alternatives to mainstream media designed to “serve a particular cultural or racial group” (Jeffres 2000). This area of study is relevant for the study of the political attitudes of the American electorate not only because of the rapid socio-demographic changes in the country but also because ethnic media, including Spanish-language news media, are known for having agendas that substantially differ from mainstream media (Lozano 1989; Tirodkar and Jain 2003; Lin and Song 2006; Dunaway et al. 2010; Kerevel 2011; Gomez-Aguinaga 2021*b*). Specifically, studies have found that Spanish-language news media generates a larger volume of news related to certain policy issues, such as immigration and health care, compared to English-language media (Branton and Dunaway 2008; Abrajano and Singh 2009; Dunaway et al. 2010; Kerevel 2011; Villar and Olson 2013; Gomez-Aguinaga 2021*b*). These differences are important not only because of language differences but also because the growing consumption and diverging agendas of nontraditional media (Bendixen and Associates 2005; Allen 2009; Lopez 2013).

Concurring with the theory of agenda setting, a handful of studies of ethnic media across the globe have found that consumers of nontraditional media are more likely to identify different policy issues as salient when compared to their counterparts who predominantly or exclusively consume traditional media (Tirodkar and Jain 2003; Ojo 2006; Villar and Olson 2013). While specific examination of the issue salience has been limited in the US context among racial and ethnic minorities, scholars have examined the extent to which the consumption of ethnic media – and SL news – influences the public opinion of the Latino electorate. In the early 2000s, Branton and Dunaway 2008 found that SL news media in the US generated more and more positive coverage of immigration news compared to traditional media; this issue, at the same time, resulted in more positive attitudes towards immigration among Latino consumers of Spanish-language news media. Similarly, Abrajano and Singh (2009) found variations on content among Spanish and traditional news media, which were associated with more positive attitudes towards immigration policies among Latino consumers of SL news. Besides the lack of specific studies analyzing issue salience among the Latino electorate by news consumption, existing studies on political attitudes and behaviour have been limited to cross-sectional data (Dunaway, Branton and Abrajano 2010; Kerevel 2011; Gomez-Aguinaga 2021*b*). While we are unable to study to conduct longitudinal analyses due to data limitations, the availability of multiple post-election surveys from the past two decades allows us to test the theory of agenda setting among US Latinos across different points in time. This contribution is important not only because the public opinion of immigration among the Latino electorate has



constantly shifted but also because it can help us understand the complexity and homogeneity of Latino voters from a more comprehensive approach (Beltrán 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Ybarra et al. 2016).

Based on the theory of agenda setting, the increasing prominence of Spanish-language media and the fact that Spanish-language news media covers immigration stories to a much greater extent than mainstream media, we expect that the consumption of Spanish-language news media will have an impact on the perceptions of issue salience among US Latino voters. More specifically, we expect that Latino consumers of Spanish-language news media are more likely to identify immigration as a salient issue than their Latino counterparts who consume mainstream media:

**H3:** Latina/os who get their news from Spanish-language media are more likely to report immigration as an important issue to their community.

## Data and methods

To test our hypotheses, we employ the 2008, 2012 and 2016 Collaborative Multi-Racial Post-Election Surveys (CMPS), a widely used survey among social scientists.<sup>6</sup> The surveys were administered over telephone in 2008 and online in 2012 and 2016. Moreover, they were conducted in either English and Spanish and were weighted to reflect a host of census demographics. The survey instruments are particularly appropriate because they provide an opportunity to observe similar items over time with similar control variables available for analysis. To ensure similarity across data sets, we limit our analysis to Latino registered voters. Although this limits our ability to generalise about Latinos, it provides a more rigorous test of our hypotheses since citizens, to some degree, may be less concerned with the issue of immigration than noncitizens.

Our main dependent variable is immigration salience. We measure immigration salience using survey items that ask respondents to identify the most important problem facing the Latino community. All three surveys include items that are reasonably close to this particular question wording.<sup>7</sup> In the 2016 and 2012 CMPS surveys, the items are close-ended, with 14 randomized responses, whereas respondents can select up to two answers. In the 2008 CMPS survey, the questions are open-ended with an opportunity to also select up to two answers. Respondent's answers are then matched against a precoded list of 14 issues or problems – a strategy that reduces code variance<sup>8</sup> (Lavrakas 2008). Respondents are coded as 1 if they indicated that immigration was important as a first or second answer. Respondents who did not mention immigration were coded as 0.

Next, we include three clusters of independent variables. The first cluster accounts for respondents' personal stake in immigration, measured with nativity;

<sup>6</sup>The 2012 CMPS will become publicly available at ICPSR in the near future. The 2016 CMPS data set is embargoed and will become publicly available on January 2021. The 2008 CMPS survey can be found at: <https://cmgsurvey.org/>.

<sup>7</sup>See Appendix B for a complete list of all survey items used to measure the dependent variable.

<sup>8</sup>While this operationalization strategy reduces code variance, it is the only approach available due to data availability. Please see Online Appendix B for the wording and list of the survey items used in this study.

this variable, referred to as foreign-born in the tables and figures, is based on a survey item that asks respondents if they were born in the US, the island of Puerto Rico, or in another country. Respondents who were born in another country or the island of Puerto Rico are coded as 1. Respondents born in the mainland US are coded as 0 (Valle 2019). According to Table A.1, the distribution of our nativity measure shows that less than half of Latino likely voters are foreign-born.<sup>9</sup>

Following Social Identity Theory (SIT), the second cluster of variables measures politicized group identity, including perceptions of discrimination – a key dimension of group consciousness – and Latino linked fate. Perceptions of Discrimination is measured with the following survey item: “How much of a problem do you think discrimination against (Hispanics/Latinos) is in preventing (Hispanics/Latinos) in general from succeeding in America?” Response items include: 1 = Not a Problem, 2 = Minor Problem, and 3 = Major Problem. Linked fate is perhaps a stronger measure of Latino identity (McClain et al. 2009). Latino Linked Fate is measured by the following survey question: “Do you think what happens generally to Latino people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life?” The survey question in 2008 is somewhat different, however. Specifically, it asks, “How much does your ‘doing well’ depend on other [Insert Group /S3] also doing well?” Although we prefer all questions to have the same wording across surveys, we recognize that this is not always possible. Still, we take comfort in knowing that both survey items have been well utilized by scholars to measure Latino’s perceptions of linked fate (Sanchez et al. 2019). Linked fate is an ordinal variable whereby 1 = No, 2 = Not Very Much/Little, 3 = Some, 4 = A Lot. Across the three surveys, 62% in 2008, 30% in 2012 and 51% 2016 reported saying they either have “Some” or “A Lot”. While the percentage of Latinos who say they either have some of or a lot of linked fate has remained above 50% in 2008 and 2016, the results from the 2012 CMPS are somewhat of an outlier across the election cycles in our analysis.<sup>10</sup>

The third cluster captures Latinos who get their news from Spanish-language media outlets. Spanish-language media is an ordinal variable, whereas 4 = Mainly Spanish 3 = Both Spanish and English, 2 = Mainly English, 1 = Never. We include “Never” in our coding sequence since respondents who get their news mainly in English will be more likely to receive media cues than those who say they do not get their cues from the media at all. Unfortunately, the 2012 CMPS does not include a specific question that asks about Latino’s preference for Spanish language media. Since language preference is correlated with the language in which Latino’s consume their news, we created a new variable that equals the product of two survey items: a survey item that captures Latino’s primary language (4 = English Dominant, 3 = Bilingual, 2 = Spanish Dominant) and a survey item that captures whether Latino’s consume their political news by any amount in at least one of the following mediums: television, radio, newspapers magazines,

<sup>9</sup>In Appendix D, Table D1 of the Online appendix, we also controlled for Spanish language preference in our 2008 and 2016 election models. We could not account for Spanish language preference as a stand-alone variable in the 2012 model since we relied on the measure to construct our Spanish Media variable (see below). The results indicate that Latinos who prefer to speak Spanish are more likely to say immigration is an important issue. Moreover, inclusion of the variable does not substantively change the main results.

<sup>10</sup>The distribution of the linked fate variable suggests that linked fate is measurably lower for all groups in the 2012 data set. This may be due to the sample being drawn from all web-based interviews.

Internet news, social media and blogs. The distribution of the Spanish-language news consumption variable indicates growing popularity (and accessibility) for Spanish-language media. In 2016, 20% of Latino likely voters said they consumed their news mainly in Spanish compared to 17% in 2012 and 10% in 2008.

Additionally, we account for a host of other factors that may potentially explain Latino's attitudes towards immigration as an important policy issue to the Latino community. First, we include a control variable that accounts for Latino's partisan affiliation (Hajnal and Lee 2011; Ocampo et al. 2021). We expect Latinos who identify with a political party to be less likely to identify immigration as a salient issue compared to Independents since they are easier to persuade with elite messaging (Iyengar, Kinder et al. 1987; Albertson and Gadarian 2015). Our partisan measure is based on a survey item that generally asks if respondents are Republican, Democrat, Independent or something else. Partisan is a dichotomous variable, whereas a coding of 1 indicates Latinos that identify as Democrat or Republican and a coding of 0 indicates political Independents or something else.<sup>11</sup> Second, we control for Ideological Strength and Political Interest since Latinos who are ideologically more conservative or liberal or keep up with politics may have more interest in policy issues, such as immigration. Ideological Strength is based on survey items that ask respondents to identify how they think of themselves ideologically. We then constructed a four-point scale whereas 4 indicates respondents who are ideologically "Strong", 3 indicates respondents who ideologically liberal or conservative, 2 indicates "Slightly" or "Somewhat" ideological, and 1 indicates respondents who say "Moderate", "None of These" or "Do Not Think in These Terms". Political Interest is based on survey items that ask respondents about their level interest in politics either more generally or about a specific presidential election. In the 2016 survey, respondents were asked the following: "Some people are very interested in politics while other people can't stand politics, how about you? In the 2012 and 2008 surveys, respondents were asked the following: 'Thinking back to October and November of this year, how closely did you follow the news about the 2012/2008 presidential race?' A coding of 4 indicates 'Very Interested' or 'Very Closely', 3 indicates 'Somewhat Interested' or 'Somewhat Closely', 2 indicates 'Not That Interested In Politics' or 'Not Too Closely', and 1 indicates 'Not Interested At All In Politics' or 'Not Closely At All'".

Finally, the analysis includes a host of demographic characteristics, including gender (female), age, college education, national origin (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban), Catholic identification (Branton 2007; Knoll 2009a, 2009b), US-Mexican Border State (Branton and Dunaway 2008; Dunaway et al. 2010) and the percentage change in the Latino population from 2000 to 2010 by zip code (Wilkinson 2014; Morin et al. 2011; Frasure-Yokley and Wilcox-Archuleta 2019; Gomez-Aguinaga et al. 2021). Table A.1 in Appendix A shows summary statistics for all independent

<sup>11</sup>The 2008 and 2016 surveys provided an opportunity to introduce an alternative measure that captures partisan strength. The measure is based on two survey items. The first question asks Republicans and Democrats, "Do you consider yourself to be a strong partisan?" The second question asks Independents, "if you had to choose, do you consider yourself closer to Republicans or Democrats?" Partisan Strength is coded as follows: 4 = Strong Partisan, 3 = Moderate Partisan, 2 = Weak Partisan, 1 = Independent, Other Party, None/Don't Know. The results in Appendix D, Table D2 of the Online appendix indicate partisan strength to be unrelated to immigration salience.

**Table 2.** Logit results. Perceptions of immigration salience among Latino likely voters

	Dependent variable:					
	Immigration Salience					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	(2008)	(2008)	(2012)	(2012)	(2016)	(2016)
Linked fate	0.050 (0.051)	-0.001 (0.055)	0.086 (0.076)	0.061 (0.078)	0.179*** (0.064)	0.170** (0.068)
Perceived discrimination	0.209*** (0.076)	0.228*** (0.083)	0.646*** (0.112)	0.599*** (0.116)	-0.071 (0.139)	-0.109 (0.146)
Spanish media	0.245*** (0.093)	0.356*** (0.105)	0.343*** (0.121)	0.326** (0.130)	0.830*** (0.114)	0.845*** (0.122)
Foreign born	0.670*** (0.128)	0.762*** (0.146)	0.430** (0.183)	0.444** (0.209)	0.430*** (0.154)	0.568*** (0.175)
Catholic	-0.290** (0.121)	-0.430*** (0.134)	0.053 (0.164)	-0.007 (0.171)	0.147 (0.145)	0.109 (0.155)
Percent change Latino pop.	0.014** (0.006)	0.009 (0.007)	0.009*** (0.003)	0.007*** (0.003)	-0.001 (0.031)	0.012 (0.032)
US-Mexico Border		0.099 (0.158)		-0.484** (0.200)		-0.241 (0.172)
Partisan		0.094 (0.137)		0.009 (0.176)		-0.344* (0.180)
Ideological strength		-0.122** (0.060)		-0.029 (0.084)		0.245*** (0.093)
Political interest		-0.115 (0.083)		0.038 (0.092)		0.136 (0.102)
Female		0.153 (0.126)		-0.350** (0.160)		-0.268* (0.157)
Age		-0.245*** (0.065)		0.169** (0.082)		0.191** (0.080)
College education		0.189 (0.163)		0.097 (0.196)		-0.398** (0.201)
Mexican		-0.012 (0.152)		0.123 (0.224)		0.357* (0.196)
Puerto Rican		-0.224 (0.253)		-1.194*** (0.274)		-0.898*** (0.294)
Cuban		-0.369 (0.340)		-0.320 (0.329)		-0.253 (0.353)
Constant	-1.673*** (0.277)	-0.648 (0.465)	-2.727*** (0.400)	-2.381*** (0.550)	-3.724*** (0.498)	-4.707*** (0.693)
Observations	1,306	1,164	854	852	1,800	1,798
Log likelihood	-832.641	-722.348	-465.886	-445.501	-564.983	-542.557

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

and control variables. Appendix B in Online Appendix shows the list of all survey items in the analysis.

## Results

Table 2 presents “partial” Logistic regression models, which include the three variable clusters measuring Latino identity, Spanish-language news consumption, and personal experience based on nativity. The “fully specified” models include the three variable clusters and additional control variables. All models are based on the 2008,

2012 and 2016 CMPS surveys.<sup>12</sup> To interpret the substantive effects of our main independent variables on the dependent variable (immigration salience), we present in Figures 1, 2, and 3 the marginal effects or the change in the predicted probability from their minimum to maximum values while holding all other variables to their respective averages. In the plots, all independent and control variables are ordered according to their effect size from positive to negative.

In Table 2, we limit our discussion to the fully specified models (models 2, 4 and 6) since the results are mostly consistent with the models without the added control variables (models 1, 3 and 5). First, the models show support for Hypothesis 1, as our Foreign Born variable is significant across all three models. The positive coefficient suggests that foreign-born Latinos are more likely to say immigration is an important issue to the Latino community. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show foreign-born status influenced immigration attitudes by 16.8 percentage points in 2008, 9.2 percentage points in 2012 and 7.2 percentage points in 2016. Still, it is worth noting that nativity remains a substantive predictor; in fact, a top two predictor of immigration salience in all three models. Thus, immigrant experiences, at least for foreign-born Latinos, play an on-going role in influencing Latino's perceptions of issue salience across election years.

In line with our second hypothesis, the findings further indicate that group identity has played a prominent role in shaping Latinos' attitudes towards policy issues. In 2008 and 2012, for example, Latinos who said discrimination prevents Latinos from succeeding in the US were more likely to say that immigration was an important issue to the Latino community. According to Figures 1 and 2, perceptions of discrimination increased the probability of saying immigration is an important issue by 5 and 12.4 percentage points, respectively. In 2012, perceptions of discrimination had the greatest effect on immigration attitudes, which was at least in part attributed to immigration policies, such as Arizona SB 1070 and subsequent copy-cat legislation, that led to concerns over the racial profiling of Latinos.<sup>13</sup> By 2016, perceptions of discrimination failed to achieve statistical significance. However, Figure 3 indicates that Latino linked fate – an arguably stronger measure of politicized group identity – played a greater role in shaping attitudes compared to our discrimination measure. In that year, Latinos who said their individual circumstance was dependent on Latinos as a whole were more likely to say immigration is important by 2.1 percentage points.

The three models also show consistent support for our third hypothesis. Table 2 indicates that Spanish-language news consumption is positive and significant in all models. Figures 1 and 2 show that consuming news mainly in Spanish versus nothing at all increased the probability of saying immigration is a salient policy issue by 7.9 percentage points in 2008 and 6.7 percentage points in 2012. In the 2016 model, Spanish-language media had the greatest substantive effect on immigration attitudes, increasing the probability of reporting immigration as important to the Latino community by 10.7 percentage points. During the 2016 presidential election, for instance, Spanish-language media outlets, such as Telemundo and Univision, routinely reported on Trump's negative rhetoric towards Mexicans and

<sup>12</sup>We rely on Logistic regression given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable (Manning, 2007).

<sup>13</sup><https://latinodecisions.com/blog/latinos-overwhelmingly-oppose-supreme-court-decision-sb1070/>

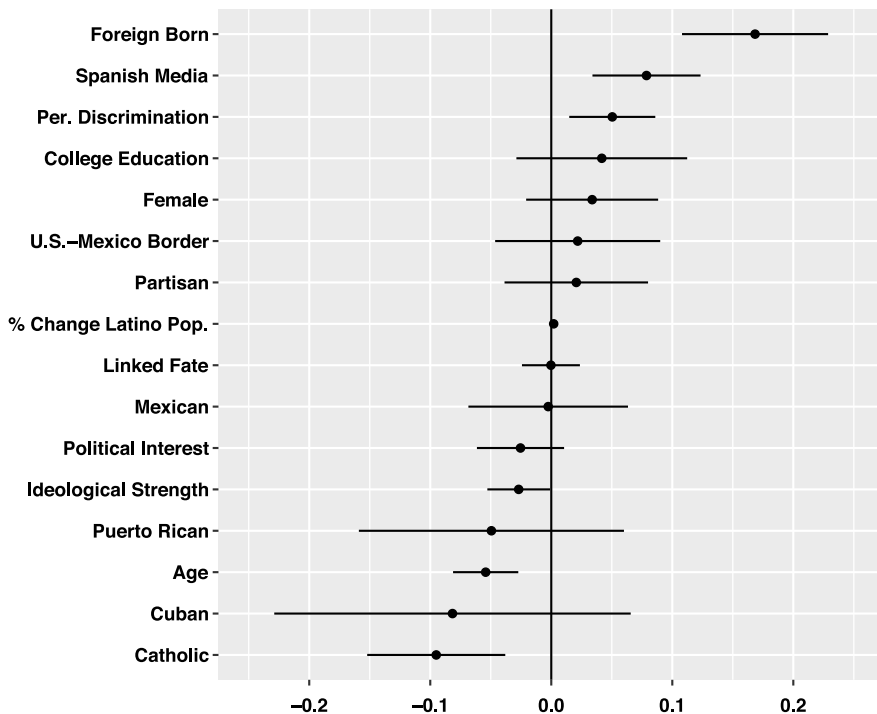


Figure 1. Determinants of immigration salience in 2008 (marginal effects).

anti-immigrant platform, which included among other things, a border wall. Moreover, Trump's attack on the media, including journalist Jorge Ramos, also may have heightened the media's agenda setting effect.<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the findings show support for our expectations regarding personal stake, group identity, and Spanish-language news consumption. However, there is a possibility that immigration attitudes are driving both group identity and Spanish-language media consumption. For example, concern for immigration policies affecting the Latino community may influence respondents to consider their relative group status and ties to the Latino community more generally. Additionally, it may also be the case that Spanish-language media outlets are responsive to Latino's concerns for immigration-related issues. Due to these possible endogeneity concerns, we estimate a full match (Ho et al. 2007) using the Matchit package in R. The main findings with respect to our identity measures (linked fate and perceptions of discrimination) and Spanish-language media consumption across all three election years continue to hold. In other words, it is likely that both factors are indeed influencing perceptions of immigration salience among Latino voters.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/univision-2016-election/491903/>

<sup>15</sup>See Appendix C of the Online Appendix for a more complete description of the matching procedure and results.

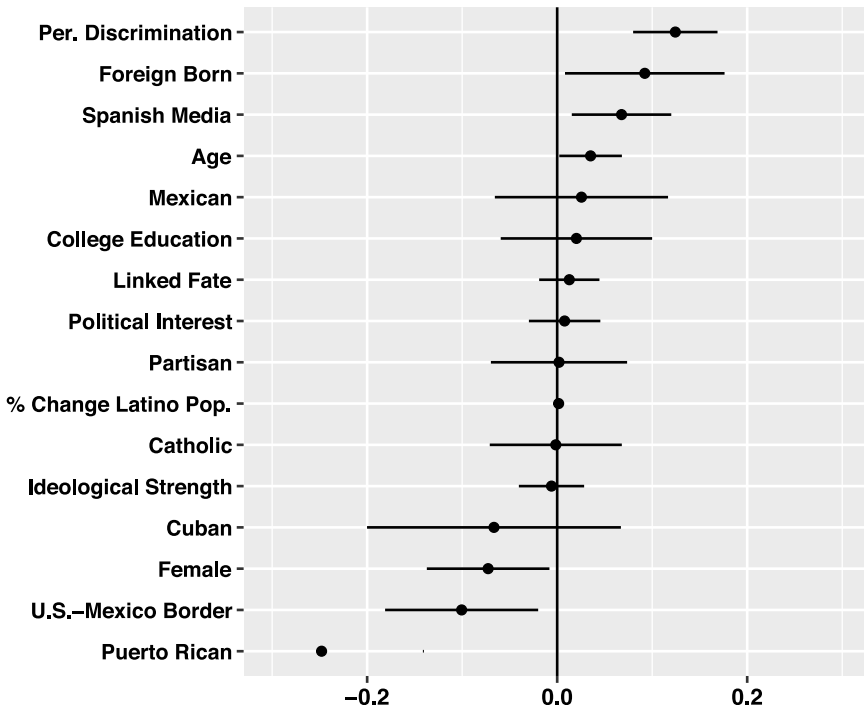


Figure 2. Determinants of immigration salience in 2012 (marginal effects).

The results in Table 2 also indicate a number of substantive findings. For example, the surrounding ethnic environment – measured by the percentage change in the Latino population – is significant and positive. However, the finding is limited to the 2012 model, and the effect of living in growing Latino communities is substantively small.<sup>16</sup> The table also shows Ideological Strength to have a varied effect on attitudes across the three election cycles. In 2008, for example, liberals and conservatives were less likely to say immigration is a salient issue. In 2012, however, the difference in attitudes disappeared, as they were as likely to say immigration is an important issue as ideological moderates. By 2016, ideological liberals and conservatives were more likely to say immigration is an important issue. The shift in attitudes among Latino voters on both ends of the political spectrum is likely due to the nomination of Republican presidential candidates who increasingly relied on anti-immigrant rhetoric and hardline positions to appeal to their base. For instance, John McCain, the Republican Senator from Arizona, supported an immigration package

<sup>16</sup>In Table D3 of the Online Appendix, we replaced our context measure with a measure that accounts for the percentage of the foreign-born population within a zipcode (2008 and 2016) or metropolitan area (2012) using the American Community Survey. We find the percentage of the foreign-born population to be positively associated with immigration attitudes in the 2016 model only. We suggest the finding is largely driven by Trump's criticism of sanctuary cities, which likely brought the issue of immigration to the forefront of the political agenda in geographical regions with larger foreign-born populations.

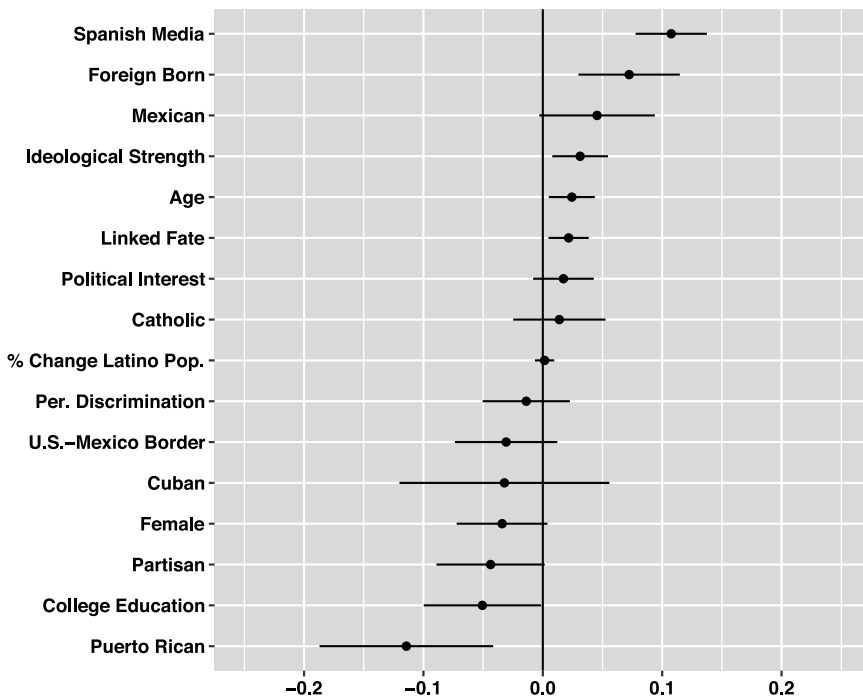


Figure 3. Determinants of immigration salience in 2016 (marginal effects).

that included a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants during his presidential run in 2008 while Mitt Romney in 2012 and Donald Trump in 2016 attempted to appeal to a more conservative base by proposing more restrictive immigration policies, such as self-deportation and a border wall. Donald Trump also took his campaign a step further than his Republican predecessors by relying on inflammatory rhetoric towards immigrants. While the trend in these candidate positions likely alienated a large percentage of Latinos who tend to support progressive immigration policies, more recent evidence indicates that hardline positions appealed to a large segment of conservative Latinos (Alamillo 2019; Gutierrez et al. 2019; Ocampo et al. 2021), especially in regions such as South Texas and Florida.

In addition to ideological strength, partisan is significant and negative in the 2016 model, suggesting that political Independents were more likely than Democrats and Republicans to be swayed by elite messaging (Iyengar, Kinder et al. 1987; Hajnal and Lee 2011; Albertson and Gadarian 2015). In Table D4 of the Online Appendix, we replaced the partisan measures with controls for Latinos identifying as Democrat and Republican with Independents as the comparison group. Notably, the addition of the partisan-specific measures does not substantively change the main results. Similar to the results in the main analysis, Democrat and Republican are statistically insignificant in the 2008 and 2012 models. However, the negative and statistically



significant coefficient for Democrat in 2016 model suggests the partisan finding in the main analysis is primarily driven by a difference in immigration attitudes between Independents and Democrats. More specifically, political Independents are more likely to say immigration is an important issue compared to Democrats, while the difference in attitudes between Independents and Republicans is negligible.

Lastly, the demographic controls reveal important variation in immigration attitudes. For example, age is significant in the 2008 and 2012 models. Age is negatively associated with immigration salience in 2008 and positively associated with immigration attitudes in 2012 and 2016. In 2008, for example, older Latinos were likely responding to other issues – particularly the issue of healthcare (e.g. Affordable Care Act) that was the centerpiece of Obama’s presidential campaign. By 2012 and 2016, though the issue of immigration rose to political prominence with the Obama passing DACA and making immigration reform a centerpiece of his campaign, placing greater emphasis on the policy issue. The findings also demonstrate national origin to be a significant predictor of immigration salience, as Puerto Ricans were less likely to say immigration to be an important issue in 2012 and 2016. Overall, the finding makes intuitive sense given that Puerto Ricans are citizens by birth and, therefore, more likely to consider other policy issues as salient. Conversely, Latinos of Mexican ancestry were more likely to say immigration is the most important issue facing the Latino community in 2016. Finally, Catholics, women, college-educated Latinos and Latinos living in states along the US-Mexico border were less likely to say immigration is a salient issue. While Catholics, women and college educated Latinos were likely concerned with other policy issues, such as morality issues and the economy, the unanticipated negative and significant coefficient for the US-Mexico Border variable is due to multicollinearity, as preliminary analysis indicates no association between US-Mexico Border and Immigration salience at the bivariate level.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Immigration has been an important policy issue for Americans, including Latinos who are the largest ethnic group and have close ties to the immigrant experience in the US. Nonetheless, relatively little is known about what factors influence the salience of immigration policy across the Latino electorate beyond one particular election cycle. This is an important area of research not only because of the growing share of immigrants residing in the US but also because immigration salience has substantially fluctuated in recent years (Frasure-Yokley et al. 2013; Barreto et al. 2014; Hipsman et al. 2016; Barreto et al. 2017). In this paper, we set out to address this gap in the literature by examining several determinants of immigration salience among Latino voters in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 presidential elections. In line with our expectations, this study finds that Latino identity, Spanish-language news consumption, and personal connections to policy shifts based on nativity increase the likelihood of reporting immigration as one of the most important policy issues to the Latino community. While these predictors are relatively consistent across time,

the study also shows that Latino group identity and Spanish-language news consumption have become increasingly influential in shaping Latino's policy priorities.

Overall, the findings add to our understanding of the origins of immigration salience and the Latino public opinion more generally. First, the findings reinforce existing surveys suggesting that Latinos are not single-issue voters (Beltrán 2010).<sup>17</sup> Over the course of three presidential election cycles, immigration has remained a top priority issue, but it is not always the most important issue facing the Latino community according to Latino voters. Additionally, the main findings reveal meaningful variation in opinion among Latino voters within specific electoral contexts. Such findings not only reflect Latino's diverse and evolving demographic make-up but they are also in line with prior research on immigration attitudes related to immigrants and public policy (Michelson 2001; Schildkraut 2005; Rouse et al. 2010; Rocha et al. 2011; Wallace and Zepeda-Millán 2020a).

These findings have important implications for immigration salience moving forward. In the near future, we expect immigration to remain a policy priority among Latino voters given the relatively large percentage of foreign-born Latinos and the heightened political debates in the US and across the world. However, it is unclear if such an opinion will hold over the long run given the large number of US-born Latinos who are coming of age and the more recent decline in the foreign-born population.<sup>18</sup> In 2020, immigration fell behind the coronavirus pandemic, healthcare costs, the economy, discrimination, and education as an important issue facing the Latino community.<sup>19</sup> Still, it is worth noting that a potential decline in immigration salience can be countered by a sense of group identity brought about by the racialization of Latinos in the United States and the Spanish-language media's continued coverage of immigration.

Given this study's focus on Latino voters, we suggest that political parties and candidates shall push to make comprehensive immigration reform a policy priority. Although Republicans in more recent years have placed greater emphasis on immigration, the GOP's platform fails to align with Latino's policy preferences. Democrats, by contrast, have historically supported reform measures in line with Latino's interests and have passed measures (e.g. DACA) viewed by many to be a band-aid fix to the current immigration system (Morín et al. 2020). Yet passage of any comprehensive immigration reform package remains elusive. More recently, House Democrats in 2021 placed comprehensive immigration reform on the legislative agenda despite a global pandemic and subsequent economic downturn. Still, it remains to be seen if an immigration reform package will pass a largely divided Senate in a highly polarized political climate. Latinos, therefore, may not reach their full electoral strength until this electorate sees the fruits of their labor reflected in immigration policy that is reflective of their preferences.

One goal of this study was to examine the determinants of immigration salience among Latinos while controlling for similar measures across time. The CMPS

<sup>17</sup>See for example, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2016/10/11/views-of-the-nations-direction-and-2016s-top-issues/>

<sup>18</sup><https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2016/04/20/the-nations-latino-population-is-defined-by-its-youth/>

<sup>19</sup><https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/AEEP-2020-Latino-National-Crosstabs.pdf>

surveys provided a unique opportunity to analyze a large sample of Latino voters and incorporate survey items that measure key predictors of immigration attitudes. Despite this added leverage, however, our analysis was limited to a subset of Latinos (likely voters) and smaller number of survey questions. Although costly, we hope that future surveys of Latinos will include comparable measures across time and expand the scope of the sample by including citizens and noncitizens alike. Additionally, we encourage scholars to continue to examine the relationship between connection to immigration and public opinion, including issue salience. Previous scholars have found that personal connections to immigrants can influence political behavior and opinion of Americans (Cruz Nichols et al. 2018; Walker 2020); unfortunately, due to data limitations, we are unable to expand on this specific area of work. We also hope that future studies will extend our analysis by examining other ethnic groups, such as Asian and Middle East and North Africa Americans, that are likely to consider immigration to be a salient policy issue. By focusing on Latinos and immigration, we advance our understanding of issue salience among a key and growing voting bloc in the US.

**Data availability statement.** Replication materials are available in the *Journal of Public Policy* Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/IU8XCC>

**Supplementary material.** To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0143814X23000016>

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## Appendix A. Summary statistics

Table A.1. Summary statistics

	Year	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Linked fate	2016	2.221	1.172	1	4
	2012	1.836	1.058	1	4
	2008	2.719	1.165	1	4
Perceived discrimination	2016	2.136	.554	1	3
	2012	2.213	.728	1	3
	2008	2.156	.770	1	3
Spanish media	2016	2.223	.598	1	4
	2012	2.761	.795	1	4
	2008	2.396	.664	1	4
Foreign born	2016	.332	.471	0	1
	2012	.416	.493	0	1
	2008	.374	.484	0	1
Catholic	2016	.532	.499	0	1
	2012	.630	.482	0	1
	2008	.622	.484	0	1
% Change Latino pop.	2016	.808	2.269	-10	12.9
	2012	48.687	32.379	10.642	257.586
	2008	8.08	9.474	-50.86	53.22
US-Mexico Border	2016	.509	.500	0	1
	2012	.495	.500	0	1
	2008	.616	.486	0	1
Partisan	2016	.761	.426	0	1
	2012	.693	.461	0	1
	2008	.682	.465	0	1
Ideological strength	2016	2.744	.831	1	4
	2012	2.139	.955	1	4
	2008	2.063	1.059	1	4
Political interest	2016	2.104	.811	1	4
	2012	2.973	.920	1	4
	2008	3.440	.773	1	4
Female	2016	.452	.497	0	1
	2012	.517	.499	0	1
	2008	.481	.499	0	1
Age	2016	2.646	1.038	1	4
	2012	2.568	1.071	1	4
	2008	2.485	1.045	1	4
College education	2016	.184	.387	0	1
	2012	.222	.416	0	1
	2008	.190	.393	0	1
Mexican	2016	.545	.498	0	1
	2012	.556	.497	0	1
	2008	.552	.497	0	1
Puerto Rican	2016	.145	.352	0	1
	2012	.150	.357	0	1
	2008	.094	.292	0	1
Cuban	2016	.055	.228	0	1
	2012	.087	.282	0	1
	2008	.039	.195	0	1

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