

Are policymakers out of step with their constituency when it comes to immigration?

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Abstract

Surveys on immigration in the US and European have, at least until recently, revealed that a majority of citizens favor greater restrictions on immigration. Scholars and some policymakers have taken these results as a sign that immigration policy is out of step with what the mass public wants. Yet as other scholars have shown, citizens tend to overestimate the level of immigration, which may bias responses towards restrictions. Thus, policy may be responsive but citizens may have underestimated its responsiveness. Using a new dataset of immigration polls in the US and Canada over the last 30 years, data on immigration policies, and voting behavior in the US Senate, we examine how well public opinion correlates with policy using a continuous-time latent variable approach to model the dynamics of public opinion and immigration policy. We find that the public has a good sense of immigration policy and that opinion reacts to changes in policy. Opinion has less effect on policy, however, except when immigration is highly salient.

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Introduction

How do we explain changes in immigration policy? In some theories of immigration policy formation, there is an assumption that policymakers will be constrained by the public. For example, Peters (2017) assumes that policymakers respond to public opinion on immigration; although, she does not test it. In other theories, the public plays little role. Freeman, for instance, argues that the limited information on immigration, the “boundaries of legitimate discussion of immigration policy,” and party consensus on immigration policy, “mean that governments typically enter office with no seriously binding commitments on immigration” (1995, 885). Instead, policymakers are free to create policy based on interest group lobbying, which leads them to privilege the better-organized pro-immigration camp. This leads to the question: does the public influence immigration policy?

We have reason to believe that the public can affect, or at least constrain, policymakers’ actions on immigration. Clearly, public opinion led to the demise of Comprehensive Immigration Reform in 2006, 2007, and 2013, when calls flooded into Congress against the bill. More recently, Republican presidential primary candidates were constrained in their choices of immigration policy by Tea Party advocates on the right, even though taking such a hard stance means losing the Latino vote. Similarly, when President Obama wanted to implement the DREAM Act, he had to act unilaterally through an executive order rather than through the Congress, due to the constraints of public opinion on many Republican members of congress (MoCs). Nonetheless, until recently, a majority or at least a large plurality of Americans preferred lower levels of immigration (Gallup 2017, Goldstein and Peters 2014). This suggests that immigration policy is not responsive, or at least not responsive enough, to public opinion.

For the public to constrain policymakers, three things must occur. First, the public must have some idea as to what the policy actually is and take a reasonable opinion about that policy. Second, the policy area must be salient enough for the public to actually hold politicians to account for policies not to their liking. Third, the policymaker has to fear the

electoral consequences of taking (or maintaining) a position that is far removed from the public.

There are many ways, then, for policy to be divorced from public opinion. The public might not know what is going on in a given policy area and so may not have a reasonable (or really any) opinion on the topic (Converse 2006, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). For example, many studies have shown that the US public thinks that foreign aid spending is vastly more than it is and so want to cut foreign aid (e.g Hurst, Tidwell and Hawkins 2017, Nair 2018), which would be reasonable if the foreign aid budget was as large as respondents thought it was. When their views are corrected, these same respondents often want to keep the foreign aid budget at its current level or increase it (Hurst, Tidwell and Hawkins 2017). Thus, it make sense that the foreign aid budget does not seem to respond to (naive) public opinion, since the public's perception is so far from reality. A second way in which policy could deviate from opinion is that even if the public has a clear idea of the policy and a coherent position on how to change it, much of the public may not care about the policy. If voters are not going to change their vote based on an issue, the representative is largely free to vote how she sees fit (Burstein 2003, Monroe 1998, Page and Shapiro 1983).

Finally, from the representation literature in American politics, we know there are many reasons why elected officials may not take the position of their district median voter. Elected officials may prioritize interest groups (Freeman 1995, Gilens and Page 2014) or donors (Bafumi and Herron 2010, Barber 2016) over constituents. They may just respond to primary voters (Brady, Han and Pope 2007). They may be able to put together a coalition of enough voters without representing the median if the district is more heterogenous (Gerber and Lewis 2004, McCarty et al. 2018). They may respond to wealthy voters, who tend to turn out in higher numbers in the US (Bartels 2008, Gilens 2012). Or, they may fear taking too extreme a position in fear of turning out the other side's base (Hall and Thompson 2018). Finally, when we consider national level policy, it is the case that it may be made with an eye to the "national interest," as Bailey, Goldstein and Weingast (1997) argues happens with

trade; with an eye to swing constituencies (Money 1997); or, in the case of countries like the US with several veto players, just be extremely hard to change, which means policy may lag behind opinion for a long time (Canes-Wrone 2015, Tsebelis 1995).

In this paper, we test whether the public holds US policymakers accountable for immigration policy by examining the relationship between public opinion, salience, policy on both the state level—examining votes on immigration policy in the Senate—and the national level—examining immigration policy. We argue that the public has a pretty good sense of what immigration policy is; although, it is less likely they understand how their senator voted on immigration. However, immigration is not a salient issue for most voters most of the time. This allows policymakers to vote on immigration policy as they see fit when immigration is not salient; when immigration becomes a more salient issue, immigration policy is more likely to move in the direction of the median voter.

To test our argument, we follow the American politics literature (e.g. Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002, Gilens 2012) and, instead of looking at current levels of support for immigration in the public and current levels of openness, we examine whether *changes* in public opinion change how senators vote on immigration and immigration policy. In order to understand the dynamics, we use a continuous-time latent variable approach. To preview the results we find that, first, the public does have a good sense of the overall immigration policy; when immigration policy opens, public support for immigration falls and when immigration becomes too restricted, support for immigration increases. This suggests that the public has an overall idea of the “proper” level of immigration and this level is not zero. Further, immigration becomes more salient when policy is more open. Second, we find that public opinion can translate into changes on policy when immigration is highly salient. Third, we find that senators are responsive to policy but not in the way we would expect; instead they seem to favor anti-immigrant constituents more at a time when overall opinion has become more favorable to immigration. This suggests that policymakers focus on the views of those to whom immigration is a highly salient issue, which tends to be the anti-immigrant

coalition.¹ Thus, Freeman (1995) is correct that opinion sometimes does not affect policy, but this is because immigration is not a salient issue to the majority of Americans.

As an extension, we use a similar strategy to examine how public opinion affects policy in Canada. While Canada has majoritarian elections like the US, the parliamentary system may produce different national dynamics due to different party coalition-building strategies (McGillivray 1997) or due to greater ease of changing policy in a system with fewer veto players (Tsebelis 1995). We find some consistent and some conflicting results. Policy changes still affect public opinion as they do in the US: a more open policy leads to more support for closure and a more closed policy leads to more support for openness. Yet there is little effect of opinion or salience on policy. This is likely because opinion and salience in Canada on immigration have been relatively stable, with support for decreasing immigration hovering at about 50%, allowing a re-election-minded policymaker to essentially choose any policy and garner a large plurality of support. In this case, Canadian politicians too have chosen to privilege anti-immigration voices, increasingly restricting immigration, especially for migrants with the fewest skills.

While this paper focuses on immigration policy, we believe that it has larger implications for the study of international political economy, international relations, and the role of public opinion in policy making. There is a large literature in IPE on the determinants of support for trade, immigration, and the like and the availability of relatively cheap survey technology combined with the use of survey experiments means that this literature is growing by the day. Yet there is very little connection between this literature and that on policy. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by assessing when public opinion can affect policy.

The paper continues as follows. First, because we are the first paper that we know of that links immigration opinion to policy, we draw on the representation literature from American politics and studies on the link between trade opinions and policy from the international political economy theory to discuss how public opinion may affect policy. Second, we discuss

¹In the one survey we have that asks about both opinion and salience of immigration, XXX.

the data we use and the pitfalls of using public opinion to measure sentiment on immigration. Next, we outline the approach we use to testing the data. Fourth we present our results, including the extension to the Canadian case, and finally, we conclude with implications for the broader public opinion literature in migration and IPE.

Public opinion, representation, and immigration

We, as political scientists, believe that within liberal democracies public opinion should affect policy. As policymakers are elected by their constituents, they should generally represent their constituencies' views. Theoretically, the policymaker should choose an immigration policy that gets her the most votes—i.e. in a majoritarian system like the US she should choose the immigration policy of the median voter. However, there are several reasons to think that the policymaker may not represent the views of the median voter. We categorize these reasons into four groups: first, voters may not understand the status quo policy, the placement of their representative on the issue, or may not have a coherent alternative policy to the status quo; second, voters may understand the status quo and have a coherent alternative but may not care much about the policy area; third, the representative may choose to privilege some constituencies over others or her own or party's position over the district median; and finally, the representative may accurately represent her constituency, but features of the American political system like its status quo bias, malapportionment, or the importance of swing states may mean that the policy does not reflect the national median. As any of these could occur it is an open question as to whether immigration policy will follow public opinion. We discuss each of these mechanisms in turn.

Do voters know what the status quo is, where their representative stands, and do they have a coherent alternative?

The first step in the chain from public opinion to policy is whether the public has a coherent idea of the status quo policy, whether they know the position of their representative, and if they have a coherent alternative. First, knowledge of the status quo policy matters if the voters want change in the policy. If voters have no idea what the status quo policy is, their representative could describe any policy change as one in their constituents' preferred direction. To return to the example of foreign aid, a member of congress (MoC) could choose to represent a vote on the foreign aid budget as a cut, even if there was little change in the budget. If voters overestimate the size of the foreign aid budget and say they want a smaller budget, then a vote for a small foreign aid budget could be seen as representing voters' interests.

In a similar vein, voters may have a sense of the status quo but have no idea whether their representative accurately reflects their views. In American politics, voters typically use party as a heuristic to understand a politician's position on a given issue even if the politician is more or less extreme than expected given their party affiliation (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2018). Further, as Guisinger (2009) shows in trade, voters may have little knowledge of what position their MoC took on any given vote. The willingness of American voters to simply vote by party, rather than voting on the position taken by the politicians, means that politicians pay little penalty for taking a position more extreme than their district (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2018, see also Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan 2002, Hall and Snyder 2013, Wilkins 2012).

These problems—the lack of understanding about the status quo policy; their MoC's position; and a coherent alternative—may especially plague the immigration policy domain. Freeman (1995, 884), for example, argues that voters are particularly ill-informed about immigration due to scarcity of and ambiguity in the official data; the lagged effects of immigration; and due to the narrow boundaries of legitimate discussion on immigration based

on politicians' fear of being called a racist.² Thus, it is difficult for the median voter to have a clear understanding of what policy is and difficult for her to express an anti-immigration opinion. In line with this argument, Citrin and Sides (2008) find that Americans (and Europeans) overestimate the number of immigrants in the country. Similarly, it may be hard for voters to keep their MoCs accountable as immigration policy has long been an issue area that tends to create divisions within parties (Peters 2017).³ This makes the use of political party as a heuristic particularly ineffective when holding MoCs accountable. Finally, given the multidimensionality of an issue like immigration, it may be difficult for voters to form a politically coherent alternative—e.g. one that could pass Congress. For example, Americans are very supportive of making employers check the legal status of their workers (essentially supporting expansion of E-verify) and also supportive guestworker programs for undocumented immigrants (Gallup 2017). Not only do these policies run in opposite directions if we were to align them on a single dimension from restrictive (E-verify) to liberal (guestworkers) but these two policies are both opposed by major interest groups, employers and unions respectively, and so are unlikely to pass.

On the other hand, if we move away from specific immigration policies to the general issue of immigration in the country, voters may have a greater understanding of immigration policy than they do in more esoteric policy areas like the federal budget. First, immigrants themselves tend to be highly visible in their communities. Thus, a voter might notice an increase (decrease) in immigrants in their area and, perhaps correctly, assume that immigration policy was more expansive (restrictive). Alternatively, immigration tends to be an issue that receives a lot of coverage in the media and so voters may get an understanding of the general openness or restrictiveness and how it has changed from the media. Further, immigration is an issue area in which politicians sometimes take positions in advertisements; for example about 12.6% of Republicans and 6.2% of Democrats mentioned immigration in

²Although, the recent election of President Trump, the leave campaign in the Brexit vote, and the rise of far right politicians in Europe suggests this is no longer a relevant fear for many politicians.

³Although, this may be changing in recent years as the parties sort on immigration.

at least one general election ad in 2014 (Franklin Fowler, Franz and Ridout 2018), which provides their constituents with a sense of their position on immigration.⁴ Third, while Americans may not have coherent views on a given set of policy instruments that Congress might use to control immigration; they are likely to have a more coherent view of their preferred level of immigration. Thus, we might find more congruence when we examine whether public opinion on the level of immigration affects immigration policy in general.

Immigration as a salient issue area

Another reason that representatives may be able to take a position different from that of the district median is that the issue may not be salient to the majority of voters. We define salience as how much a voter cares about an issue or, similar to Guisinger (2009), the weight that a voter places on that issue area. If an issue area is not salient to voters or at least is less salient than another issue, voters may not care if their representative takes a position on that issue different from their own. Instead, voters may continue to vote for their representative as long as she votes in a manner similar to their position on their most important issues. However, when an issue area is salient to voters, they are more likely to punish (reward) a representative who takes a position different from (the same as) their own.

Salience may be an important reason why immigration policy is divorced from public opinion. As we show below, immigration is rarely the most important problem to a majority of Americans; instead, most Americans are often most worried about the economy. This may also allow MoCs to take positions on immigration that differ from that of the district median. Further, because immigration is a low-priority issue for most of their constituents, MoCs have an incentive to take the position of those voters for whom immigration is salient, even if these voters have positions on immigration far from the district median. In this case, immigration appears to be most salient to those who oppose immigration, which means MoCs should usually take a restrictionist stance (XXX%). Nonetheless, we still expect that when

⁴Although, Henderson (2013) argues that MoCs in recent years have an incentive to misrepresent their record in their ads to seem less ideologically extreme.

immigration becomes more salient to more people, policy should be responsive, as MoCs find that they face electoral consequences for inaction.

Divergence between the median voter and their representative

Even if voters have coherent preferences over an issue and that issue is salient to them, there are still many reasons why their representative may not vote with the district median. First, representatives may favor interest groups over their constituents, especially in countries like the US in which outside money plays a large role in politics.⁵ If the issue area is not highly salient or if it is difficult for the average voter to know the position of their representative, the representative has more latitude to favor interest groups, who may provide campaign contributions or other benefits; Freeman (1995) argues that this freedom leads to clientelistic politics on immigration. Politicians are then likely to favor the views of those who are most likely to organize on immigration. Freeman (1995) argues that immigration produces relatively concentrated benefits—to firms that use immigrant labor and to the immigrants themselves—but diffuse costs—in terms of the overall fiscal burden immigrants place on the country, their effect on the national labor market, and their effect on the national culture—immigration policy should be more open than the median voter desires. Similarly in their study of more issue areas, Gilens and Page (2014) find that interest groups have more influence over MoCs voting behavior than do constituents.

A second hypothesis is that representatives, especially senators, may only be responsive to public opinion as an election nears. Because voters tend to vote based on recent changes in economic conditions, policy, and the like (Healy and Lenz 2014, Huber, Hill and Lenz 2012), senators are likely to be more responsive during the last two years of their tenure rather than the previous four. Indeed, Warshaw (2018) finds that senators are particularly responsive to changes in public opinion in the last two years of their term. Thus, we might expect that senators are not particularly responsive to a change public opinion until those

⁵Although Peters (2017) shows that interest groups play a large role in other democracies and autocracies as well.

last two years.

Another hypothesis from American politics is that greater heterogeneity within the district allows policymakers greater flexibility in their ability to choose policy thanks to first-past-the-post elections. If there is great heterogeneity within the district on a given issue, the policymaker can essentially choose which “re-election constituency” to be responsive to, since she only needs to represent the views of a bare majority of voters. Given enough variety in the constituencies, this heterogeneity could free the policymaker from choosing the position of the median voter. There is some evidence that heterogeneity does, in fact, make legislators less responsive to the median voter (e.g. Bailey and Brady 1998, Ensley 2011, Gerber and Lewis 2004, Levendusky and Pope 2010). Alternatively, when districts are very polarized, there is likely to be uncertainty over which voters are likely to come to the polls and, hence, uncertainty over the position of the median voter in a given election (McCarty et al. 2018). With greater uncertainty over the position of the median voter, politicians have less incentive to move to the district median to ensure their election and instead are free to vote as they, their party, their primary base, or donors please (McCarty et al. 2018).

The role of heterogeneity may be particularly pronounced in immigration politics due to the broad range of policies that affect immigration. For example, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) contained both weak employer sanctions and an amnesty for undocumented immigrants. The weak employer sanctions appealed to employers and the amnesty appealed to immigrant groups while the bill in general was opposed by almost half of the voters in America. The policymaker could essentially choose to be either for or against IRCA and still ensure reelection given that the electorate was split on the issue. Further, many districts, especially at the state level, may have large contingents of immigration supporters in cities and large contingents of opponents in the suburbs and rural areas, making it less likely that the senator moves to the position of the district median but instead chooses one faction over the other.

A third hypothesis is that policymakers are tied to their partisan base, which is again

a facet of the US party system and the first-past-the-post nature of US elections, but also likely plays a role in different electoral systems as well. Policymakers depend on their base for support—in the primaries and the general elections—and therefore, the policymaker has to be responsive to it (e.g. Bishin 2000, Clinton 2006, Fenno 1978). If the policymaker deviates from the opinion of the median voter in her district, she should deviate towards the median voter of her party in her district (Brady, Han and Pope 2007). However, instead of moving to their base in the district, representatives may worry about bringing out extreme partisans from the other party; Hall and Thompson (2018) argue that taking more ideologically extreme views can lead to a larger turnout by the other party’s base. This leads candidates to take more moderate views closer to the district median. Further, within immigration politics in the US, it is less clear how partisan deviation might affect representation given that the parties tend to have conflicting preferences over immigration within the party. For example, Republicans represent both pro-immigration business groups and anti-immigration nativists; although the Republican party has become increasingly anti-immigrant as business support for immigration has waned (Peters 2017). Similarly, Democrats represent both pro-immigration immigrant rights groups and typically anti-immigration labor unions.

Fourth, scholars like Bartels (2008) and Gilens (2012) have argued that policymakers respond more to wealthier constituents. Wealthier constituents are more knowledgeable about the issues; more likely to have well-formed opinions about issues; more likely to vote (at least in the US); more likely to contribute resources to a campaign; and more likely to have direct contact with policymakers (Bartels 2008).⁶ We also know that more educated citizens, who tend to be wealthier, are more likely to support open immigration (e.g. Goldstein and Peters 2014, Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007, 2010). Therefore, if immigration is more open than the average citizen would like, it could be that it reflects the views of wealthier, typically more educated citizens.

⁶But Tausanovitch (2016) finds less empirical support for this hypothesis.

Divergence between the national median and the final policy outcome

Finally, even if voters have coherent and salient opinions on immigration and representatives are faithfully representing their district median voter, it could still be the case that immigration policy does not reflect the position or even the change in the direction of the national median voter. First, there is status quo bias in policy, especially in the US where a bill must pass the House, the Senate, and be signed into law by the president (Canes-Wrone 2015, Tsebelis 1995), which is unlikely to be as strong elsewhere in the OECD. Status quo bias means that while public opinion on the issue may change, policy may not reflect that change even over a long period of time. This has clearly been a factor in comprehensive immigration reform in the US in which the Senate has been able to craft legislation but the House has not.

Beyond status quo bias, there are additional reasons that the final policy outcome may not reflect the national median. First, the need to win swing constituencies may play a role. As Money (1997) points out, immigrants are not evenly distributed across any country. The costs of immigrants in terms of government outlays, employment, and congestion tend to be relatively geographically concentrated while the benefits of immigration to voters as consumers and to the fiscal system are likely to be felt nationally. If the areas with many immigrants are not pivotal to an election, then their preference for immigration restrictions may not translate into policy even if they represent the majority of constituents in the country (Money 1997). Additionally, in a country like the US, it may be the case that malapportionment adversely affects citizens in areas with high concentrations of immigrants; states like California and Texas are greatly affected by immigration and have large populations, but still only have two senators. Thus, a majority of Americans could be against (for) immigration but be unable to restrict (open) policy because they do not have the votes in the US Senate. When we move the analysis to Canada, we might expect policy to be more responsive as there are fewer veto players and less malapportionment (since the Canadian

Senate does not play the same role that the American one does). On the other hand, we might expect less responsiveness as the relatively stronger parties in Canada mean that there is a greater weight placed on swing constituencies (McGillivray 1997), which may or may not represent the national median.

Predictions for the data

Thus, while we generally believe that policymakers should represent the median voter by choosing policies that reflect their constituencies' views, there are several reasons why policy may deviate from the views of the median voter. It is an open question, then, how public opinion should affect immigration policy. In this paper we examine five hypotheses deriving from the literature on representation and immigration policy. First, we examine the hypothesis that the public has a hard time forming an opinion on immigration in part due to the lack of information and the inability to discuss immigration (Freeman 1995). If this hypothesis is correct, then the actual immigration policy should not have much of an effect on public opinion on immigration. However, if voters can gauge the level of immigration from the media or from their interactions with immigrants in their communities, then opinion on immigration should be affected by policy.

Next we examine whether public opinion actually affects the way policymakers vote on immigration by examining data from the US Senate. From the median voter theorem, public opinion in the state should affect immigration policy.⁷ On the other hand, from our other theories on representation and immigration, we think that mean public opinion may not affect votes on immigration.

Third, we examine whether changes in public opinion actually lead to changes in policy. If policymakers respond to the median voter, then we would expect policy to follow the opinion of the median voter. However, as the discussion above shows, there are many reasons to believe that policy may deviate from public opinion, even if legislators represent their

⁷Given our data we cannot actually test the opinion of the median voter, but instead must infer the position of the median voter from the mean voter.

districts faithfully. Fourth, it may be that policy only responds to public opinion when immigration is a highly salient issue. Voters do not have unlimited resources to devote to politics, let alone to every issue. As such, it may be the case that public opinion only translates into policy change when it is highly salient. Finally, we examine if policymakers are more responsive to wealthier voters.

Data

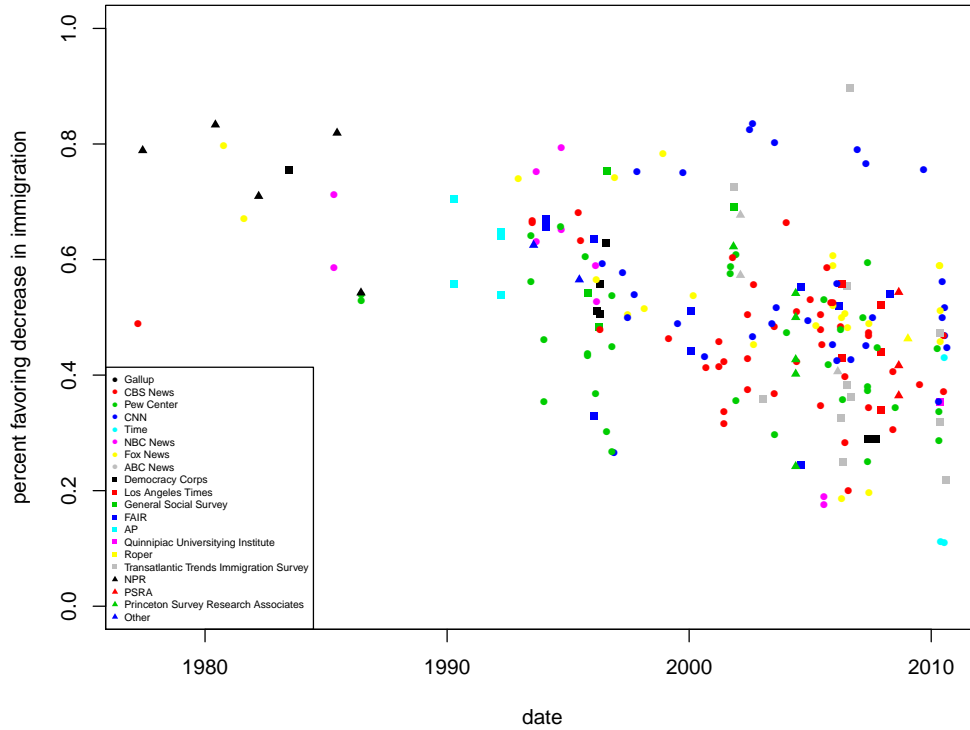
Public opinion data

The data on public opinion in the US were collected from the Roper Center. The database was searched using the terms “immigration” and “immigrants.” Only data from polls with nationally representative samples were included. This search produced several hundred questions on immigration, including general opinion on immigration, opinion on undocumented immigration, opinion on the effects of immigrants on jobs, crime, and welfare spending, and opinion on enforcement, resulting in 768 questions from 1937–2010 (the timespan was limited by data on voting and policy). However, opinion on immigration greatly varies depending on the question wording used, making the use of all the questions suspect. Figure 1 shows this variation for the US for 1980–2010. The different dots represent different polling firms, which typically have a preferred question wording that they consistently use. We might have expected that the different question wording that each firm uses would have different means but have similarly trends overtime. Instead, there seems to be little correlation across polls.

Given the problems with using all the polls in the analysis that follows, we examine general opinion on immigration, based on the following questions:

1. Do you think the number of immigrants allowed to enter the U.S. each year should be increased somewhat, decreased somewhat, or kept at about the present level?
2. Should immigration be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?

Figure 1: Polling on all questions



These two questions best capture the overall opinion on immigration in the US and therefore should capture Freeman’s (1995) argument that public opinion on immigration does not affect immigration policy due to the clientelistic politics of immigration. This leaves us with 60 polls from 1964 to 2010. About a third of the polls (24) ask specifically about legal immigration using the same question wording but with the phrase “legal immigrants” and “legal immigration” instead of “immigrant” and “immigration.” The use of the term “legal” in the question occurs after 1995 and is likely the result of increasing attention to undocumented immigration. The use of “legal” does not seem to have a great effect on the opinions reported and therefore we pool the questions. The first panel of Figure 2 shows how public opinion in the US has changed on immigration over the years using these question wordings.

The data on public opinion in Canada were collected from the Canadian Opinion Research Archive. We examine Canada mostly due to data constraints as we could not find enough public opinion data for a similar analysis in other OECD states. In order to have consistent

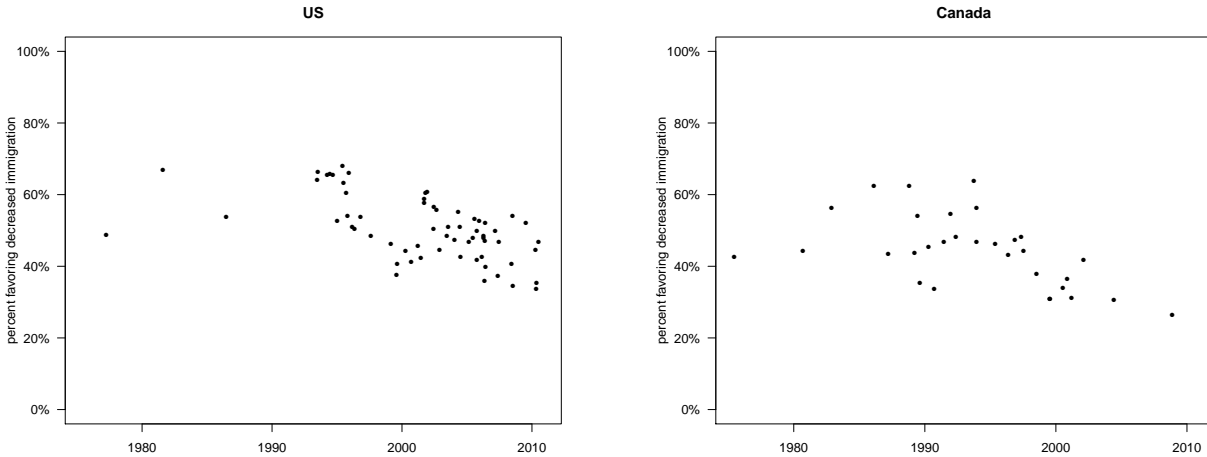


Figure 2: Polling on the level of immigration

data, we used two questions from these polls:

1. If it were your job to plan an immigration policy for Canada at this time, would you be inclined to increase immigration, decrease immigration, or keep the number of immigrants at about the current level?
2. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with each of the following statements? a) Overall there is too much immigration to Canada

These two questions were asked 36 times since the early 1980s. The second panel of Figure 2 shows the distribution of Canadian opinion over the last 30 years. The similarity in the level of support for immigration in the two countries is somewhat surprising, given the conventional wisdom that Canadians are more tolerant of immigrants than Americans. In the mid-1990s, both countries had relatively low levels of support (or high levels of opposition) to immigration. Since then, opposition to immigration has fallen in both countries; although it has fallen farther in Canada than in the US.

Additionally, we have 27 US polls from 1995–2010 for which we were able to access the raw data. We use these polls to examine how opinion affects voting behavior in the US Senate. We also can examine whether policy reacts to the opinion of wealthier versus poorer

respondents.⁸

Finally, we collected data on the salience of immigration as an issue in Canada and the US. In the US we collected data from the following question:

How important are each of the following issues to you personally...not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important or extremely important? How about...immigration?

Over our time period, this question was asked 44 times over our time period. In the case of Canada, we used the “most important problem” question to gage the salience of immigration, in which there were 40 polls with at least one respondent listing immigration as the most important problem over our time period.⁹ Figure 3 shows how salience has changed in the US and Canada. It is clear from the figure that the problem with using the “most important problem” question is that immigration is rarely raised as the most important problem, which is why we do not use it for the US analysis. We believe that the question of how important immigration is to a respondent is a better measure of salience, but this question was not asked on Canadian polls. Thus, while there has been variation in the salience of immigration policy in Canada, this may be driven by a small number of people.

Data on immigration policy

In order to examine how public opinion affects policymakers and policy, we need a measure of immigration policy. We use the measure developed by Peters (2015, 2017). This measure captures the overall openness of the state to low-skill immigrants. We focus on low-skill immigrants because they are the vast majority of both potential and actual immigrants and because native populations oppose low-skill immigrants to a greater degree than high-skill immigrants (e.g. Goldstein and Peters 2014, Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007, 2010).

⁸One poll does not adequately distinguish between the wealthy and the middle class. We use 27 polls therefore to test the argument for poor voters and 26 polls to test the argument for wealthy voters.

⁹We drop the surveys where no respondents list immigration as we are not sure whether immigration was listed as a choice opinion or was listed among “other” issues in these surveys.

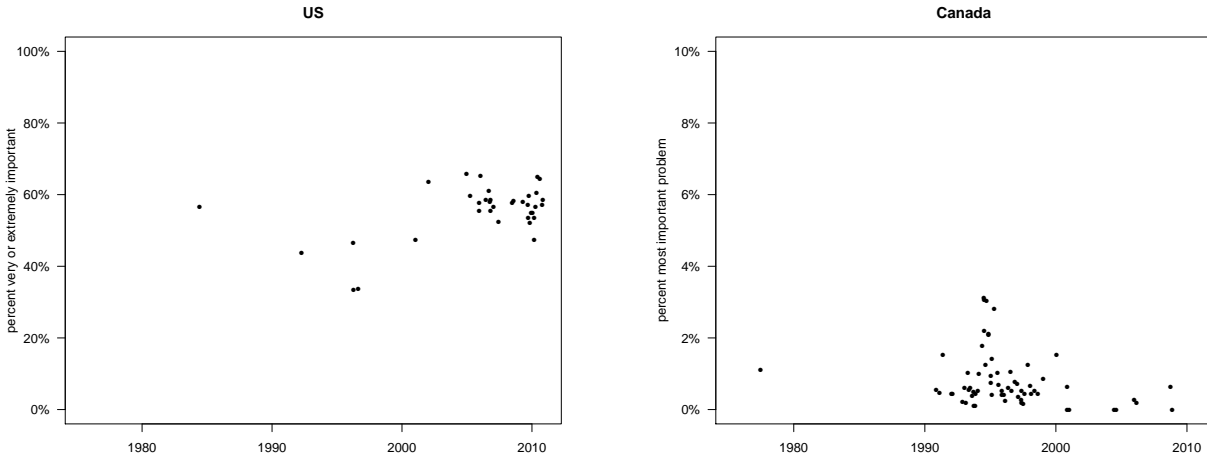


Figure 3: Salience of Immigration as a Policy Issue in the US and Canada

Thus, the Freeman (1995) model of clientelistic politics better applies to low-skill workers because there is less opposition to high-skill workers.¹⁰ Additionally, as Hanson, Scheve and Slaughter (2007) argue, when the average American (and probably Canadian too) think about immigration they think about low-skill immigration.

Figure 4 shows how immigration policy and public opinion has varied in the US and Canada in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Higher values mean more openness to immigration and lower values mean greater restrictions. We see that, again, contra to the conventional wisdom, the US restricts low-skill immigration to a greater degree than Canada. Additionally, both states have increased their restrictions to low-skill immigration over the last 30 years.

Data on voting in the US Senate

Finally, we use Senate roll call votes to gauge how the voting behavior of senators changes with variation in public opinion in the state calculated from the raw survey data. The voting data from the US Senate is from Peters (2014, 2017). The data consists of each roll call vote on immigration in Vote View (Poole 2009, Poole and Lewis 2009, Poole and McCarty 2009).

¹⁰Nonetheless, it could be that US policymakers are out of step with public opinion given that a majority of respondents favor high-skill immigration and yet the US has a very limited high-skill immigration program.

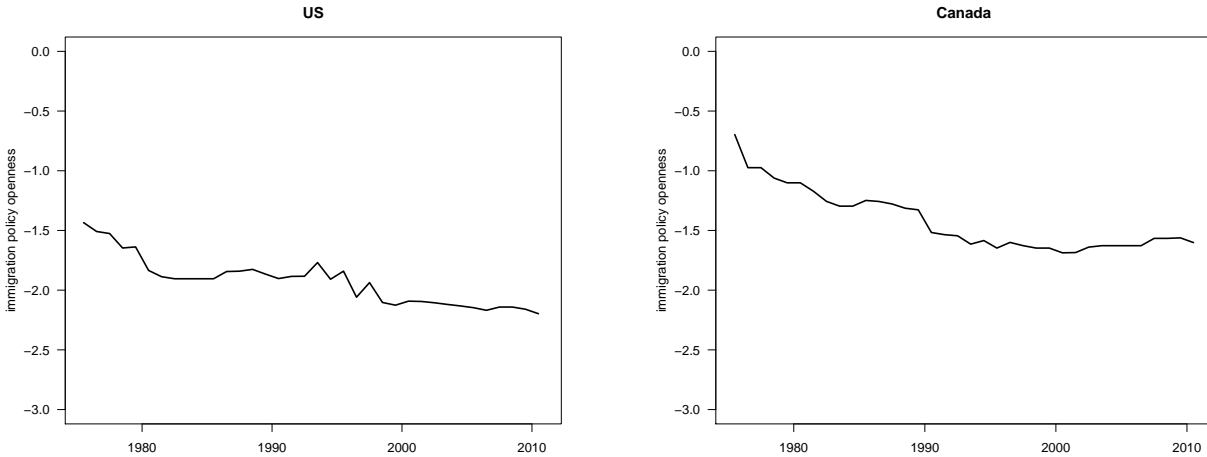


Figure 4: Immigration Policy in the US and Canada

The substance of each vote—what the senators were actually voting on, whether amendment, procedural, cloture or final passage—in the Senate is coded as restrictive or expansive.¹¹ Votes that sought to restrict immigration were given a score of 0 and votes that sought to open immigration were given a score of 1. Each vote by each senator was given a score of 0 or 1. A zero indicates that the senator voted in the restrictive direction—either by voting for a restrictive bill or voting against an expansive bill. A one indicates that the senator voted in the expansive direction—either by voting for an expansive bill or against a restrictive bill.¹² Figure 5 shows how the voting behavior of the mean senator from each party has changed over time. While the average of senator of both parties votes for more liberal immigration policy about 50% of the time, this masks a fair amount of variation. Figure 6 shows the average voting by region and provides evidence of some of this variation. There has been more convergence among the regions of the US since the late 1990s, suggesting that concerns about immigration have moved from local level concerns to a national issue.

¹¹Procedural and cloture votes were included because they were often used to kill amendments or bills on the floor of the Senate.

¹²Abstaining (or simply not voting) and votes of “present” were excluded as it is unclear what they signal in this context.

Figure 5: Support by the mean senator from each party

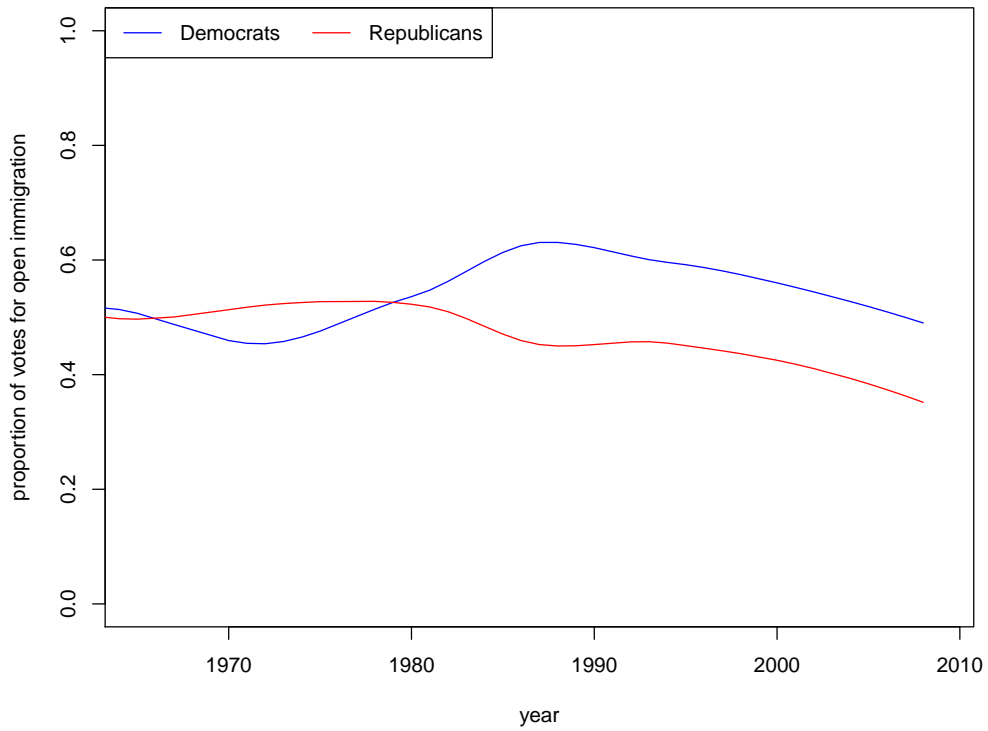
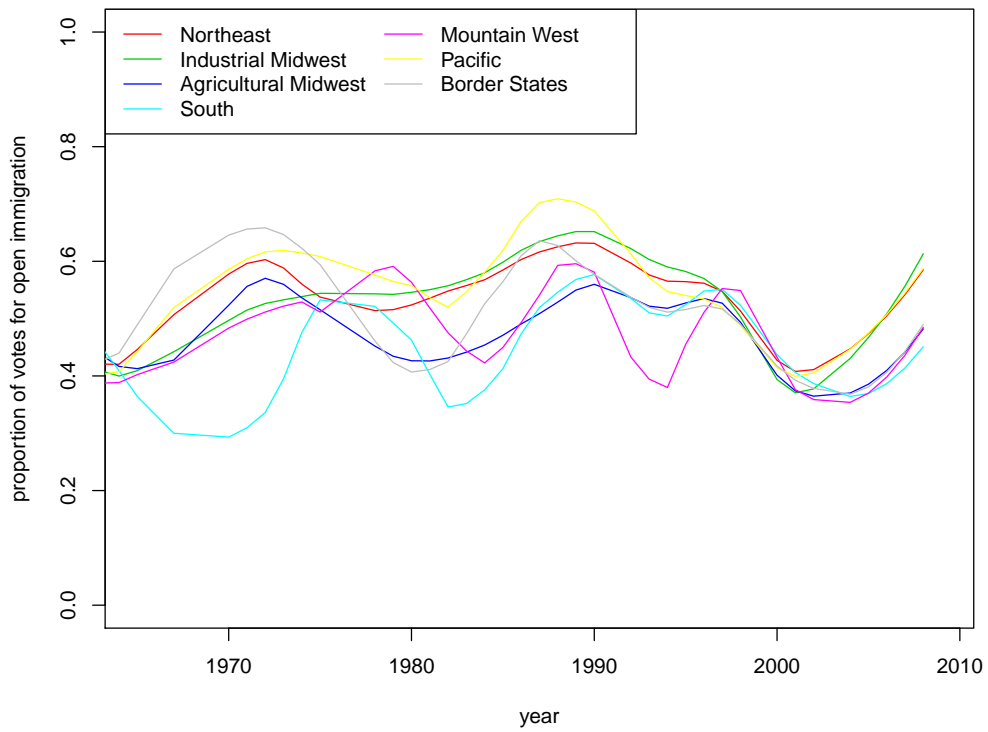


Figure 6: Support by the mean senator from each region



Methods

Public opinion and policy

We do not observe public opinion on immigration or its importance, but only polls. These polls necessarily include sampling error as well as more systematic sources of error. Moreover, polls are not collected simultaneously, but over a period of time. In some cases in our data, this period is several months long.

We thus turn to a model that treats these observations as noisy measurements of a latent variable measured over an interval—specifically, the model developed in Tahk (2015).¹³ Mathematically, we assume that

$$\begin{aligned} poll_i &\sim \text{Normal} \left(\frac{1}{end_i - start_i} \int_{start_j}^{end_j} opinion(t) dt, \zeta_0 + \frac{\zeta_1}{4size_i} \right) \\ observedpolicy_j &\sim \text{Normal} \left(\int_{start_j}^{end_j} policy(t) dt, \xi \right) \end{aligned}$$

where i indexes the poll, j indexes the year of a policy measurement, $start_i$ and end_i are the start and end times for poll i , $poll_i$ indicates the fraction of respondents who favor decreasing the level of immigration, $size_i$ indicates the sample size of poll i , $opinion(t)$ indicates the unobserved true level of public opinion at time t , $observedpolicy_j$ indicates the measured immigration openness during year j , and $policy(t)$ indicates the true level of immigration openness at time t . Policy measurements are always taken over a year, so $start_j$ and end_j always indicate the beginning and end of year j . Three parameters also adjust the variance of the observations. ζ_0 and ζ_1 are parameters which adjust the variance beyond that implied by sampling error to account for systematic biases in a poll as well as the use of weighting. Finally, ξ is the variance of the policy measurements.

Finally, we assume that the unobserved levels of public opinion, salience, and policy follow a multivariate Ornstein-Uhlenbeck process, which is essentially a continuous-time analog of

¹³We treat the policy measure similarly as it was coded by human coders and subject to error.

a vector-autoregressive process. Formally,

$$\begin{aligned}\partial opinion(t) &= \alpha_{0,1} + \alpha_{1,1} opinion(t) + \alpha_{3,1} policy(t) + \sigma_1 \partial U(t) + \rho \partial V(t) \\ \partial salience(t) &= \alpha_{0,2} + \alpha_{2,2} salience(t) + \alpha_{3,2} policy(t) + \sigma_2 \partial V(t) \\ \partial policy(t) &= \alpha_{0,3} + \alpha_{1,3} opinion(t) + \alpha_{2,3} salience(t) + \alpha_{3,3} policy(t) + \sigma_3 \partial W(t)\end{aligned}$$

where $opinion(t)$ and $policy(t)$ are the instantaneous levels of public opinion and policy, respectively, at time t ; $U(t)$, $V(t)$, and $W(t)$ are independent Weiner processes, which provide a continuous-time analog to normally distributed errors; and $\partial x(t)$ indicates the instantaneous rate of change of x at time t .

Although not apparent mathematically, this model includes the vector-autoregressive model (with similar restrictions) as a special case in which no sampling error or other measurement error occurs and observations are simultaneous and regularly spaced. It is, thus, a generalization of the vector-autoregressive model which allows us to account for these limitations. For more details, see Tahk et al. (2010).

More intuitively, this model allows public opinion and policy to affect each other as well as themselves. A high level of public opinion favoring a decline in immigration could push policy away from immigration openness at a rate determined by $\alpha_{1,3}$. Opinion may also tend to return to a long-run equilibrium level at a rate, determined by $\alpha_{1,1}$. Likewise, a high level of immigration openness might cause public opinion to favor decreasing the level of immigration at a rate determined by $\alpha_{3,1}$ (or, more accurately, $-\alpha_{3,1}$) and policy might return to a long-run equilibrium at a rate determined by $\alpha_{3,3}$. Of course, these effects might occur in the opposite direction or not at all.

It is also worth noting that a series can be mean-reverting in combination with the other series without being mean-reverting on its own. For example, policy might not be self-correcting in reverting to a mean (if, for example, $\alpha_{3,3} = 0$), but might be in combination with public opinion if public opinion served to pull policy away from extremes.

Because public opinion on immigration policy and the salience of immigration policy are both measures of public opinion, we do not allow these two series to directly affect one another. Instead, we allow movements in these two series to be correlated, which occurs so long as $\rho \neq 0$. This correlation is estimated as part of the model. Thus, we can capture co-movements in the series without one series causing the change in the other. Indirect effects—in which one might affect immigration policy which in turn affects the other—are also possible.

State-level public opinion and Senate voting

To study the relationship between public opinion and legislative behavior on an individual level, we modify the model to separate polling data out by state. We then look at the voting behavior of each senator over time in comparison with the views of the senator’s constituents.

Mathematically, our model assumes that

$$\begin{aligned} poll_{k,m} &\sim \text{Normal} \left(opinion_{k,year(m)}, \zeta_0 + \frac{\zeta_1}{4size_{k,m}} \right) \\ pro_{i,j} &\sim \text{Bernoulli} \left(\Phi \left(\alpha_{0,j} + \alpha_{1,j} \left(senator_i - \beta opinion_{state(i),year(j)} \right) \right) \right) \end{aligned}$$

where Φ indicates the cumulative distribution function of the normal distribution, k indexes the state, m indexes the poll, i indexes the senator, j indexes the bill, $opinion_{k,t}$ indicates the unobserved level of public opinion in state k during year t , $poll_{k,m}$ indicates the fraction of respondents in state k who favor decreasing the level of immigration measured in poll m , $year(m)$ indicates the year of poll or bill m , $size_{k,m}$ indicates the sample size of poll m in state k , $pro_{i,j}$ indicates whether senator i ’s vote on bill j favored more open immigration policy, $senator_i$ indicates the ideal point of senator i , and $state(i)$ indicates the home state of senator i . The parameters $\alpha_{0,t}$ and $\alpha_{1,t}$ determine the relationship between the probability of taking a pro-immigration position and the senator’s ideal point and public opinion in her home state for year t —in essence, describing the immigration legislation agenda during year

t . Finally β represents the degree to which changes in home-state public opinion affects a senator’s vote.

Because separating public opinion by state greatly increases the number of parameters, we simplify the model of public opinion to allow only changes from one year to the next, with a common level of correlation in changes between states. Thus,

$$\begin{aligned} opinion_{k,t} &= opinion_{k,t-1} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{k,t} \\ \delta_t &\overset{iid}{\sim} N(0, \rho) \\ \varepsilon_{k,t} &\overset{iid}{\sim} N(0, \tau) \end{aligned}$$

where δ_t represents a national change in public opinion between years $t - 1$ and t , $\varepsilon_{k,t}$ represents a state-specific shock to state k during this time period, and ρ and τ are parameters giving the variances of the national and state-specific shocks. This creates a correlation of $\frac{\rho}{\rho+\tau}$ between the changes to different states.

Intuitively, our model allows public opinion to move separately within each state, but also allows for common movement in public opinion across the nation. We then assume each senator’s voting pattern is a combination of the senator’s time-invariance preferences and public opinion in her home state. Note that we do not assume the source for the senator’s preferences—they might include party, personal ideology, and characteristics of her home state—but they are not allowed to vary over time, unlike public opinion. If public opinion does not impact voting behavior, then we would expect $\beta = 0$, leaving each senator’s voting behavior to be described only by her own time-invariant preferences combined with the properties of the legislative agenda on which the senator must vote in a given year.

State-level public opinion and Senate voting by income

Finally, to study the theory that legislators are more responsive to high-income constituents, we modify this model to distinguish between public opinion among these two types of con-

stituents. Thus,

$$\begin{aligned}
poll_{high,k,m} &\sim \text{Normal} \left(opinion_{high,k,year(m)}, \zeta_0 + \frac{\zeta_1}{4size_{k,m}} \right) \\
poll_{low,k,m} &\sim \text{Normal} \left(opinion_{low,k,year(m)}, \zeta_0 + \frac{\zeta_1}{4size_{k,m}} \right) \\
pro_{i,j} &\sim \text{Bernoulli} \left(\Phi \left(\alpha_{0,j} + \alpha_{1,j} \begin{pmatrix} senator_i - \\ \beta_{low} opinion_{low,state(i),year(j)} - \\ \beta_{high} opinion_{high,state(i),year(j)} \end{pmatrix} \right) \right),
\end{aligned}$$

where β and *opinion* are now additionally indexed by income group. This leaves us with the same model as before, but separates between public opinion among high-income and low-income respondents. Thus, if the preferences of high-income constituents were given more weight, we would expect $\beta_{high} > \beta_{low}$.

Estimation

All estimation and inference was performed in a Bayesian framework using Markov-chain Monte Carlo. Sampling from the first model of the relationship between public opinion and policy was performed using the “CARMAGEDDON” (Tahk 2016) and “LaplacesDemon” (Hall et al. 2016) R packages. Computation of the second model was performed in a Bayesian framework using JAGS (Plummer et al. 2003) and the “rjags” R package (Plummer 2016).¹⁴

Results

Public opinion and immigration policy in the US

We now turn to our results; we begin by examining how immigration policy and public opinion affect each other in the US. Figure 7 shows the fitted public opinion in the upper

¹⁴A total of 50,000 iterations were run with a burn-in of 12,500 iterations and thinning interval of 10 iterations.

frame, the fitted salience in the middle frame, and fitted immigration policy in the lower frame. From the fitted public opinion data, we see that anti-immigrant sentiment in the US was quite high in the 1970s through the mid-1990s, dropping off after that except for a spike right after September 11th. In contrast, it appears that immigration as a policy issue has become more salient in recent years. Finally, immigration policy has become more restrictive over time. It appears, then, that there is a relationship between public opinion, salience and immigration policy. Public opinion has become more supportive (less opposition) toward immigration as immigration has become more restrictive. Immigration has become a more salient issue at the same time immigration policy has become more restrictive.

Table 1 shows the relationship between public opinion, salience and immigration policy. First, we see that all three series are mean reverting, as the mean reversion speed of each series is positive and does not include zero in the 95% credible interval. Given that we generally expect that public opinion and salience on immigration tend to certain distributions over time (i.e. it is stationary), this result is not surprising. If public opinion or salience were not mean reverting, then it could tend to be infinite or non-existent. We have no prior expectation as to whether immigration policy is or is not mean reverting. Immigration policy could theoretically become infinitely open—i.e. the government recruits workers—or completely closed—i.e. the government expels the foreign born—or it could tend to be pulled from these extremes back to a moderate policy. We find that during this time period it is mean reverting.

Next, we examine the relationship between opinion and policy. We find that policy has a positive effect on anti-immigrant sentiment—the coefficient is positive and the 95% credible interval does not include zero—with greater openness leading to less support for immigration and greater restrictions leading to more support, as we might expect. As can be seen in figure 7 as policy has become more restrictive since the 1980s, opinion towards immigration has become more positive.¹⁵ This suggests that the average citizen is more aware of immigration

¹⁵This result is similar to the Soroka and Wlezien (2010) thermostatic model of public opinion.

Figure 7: Fitted public opinion, salience and immigration policy in the US with 95% credible regions

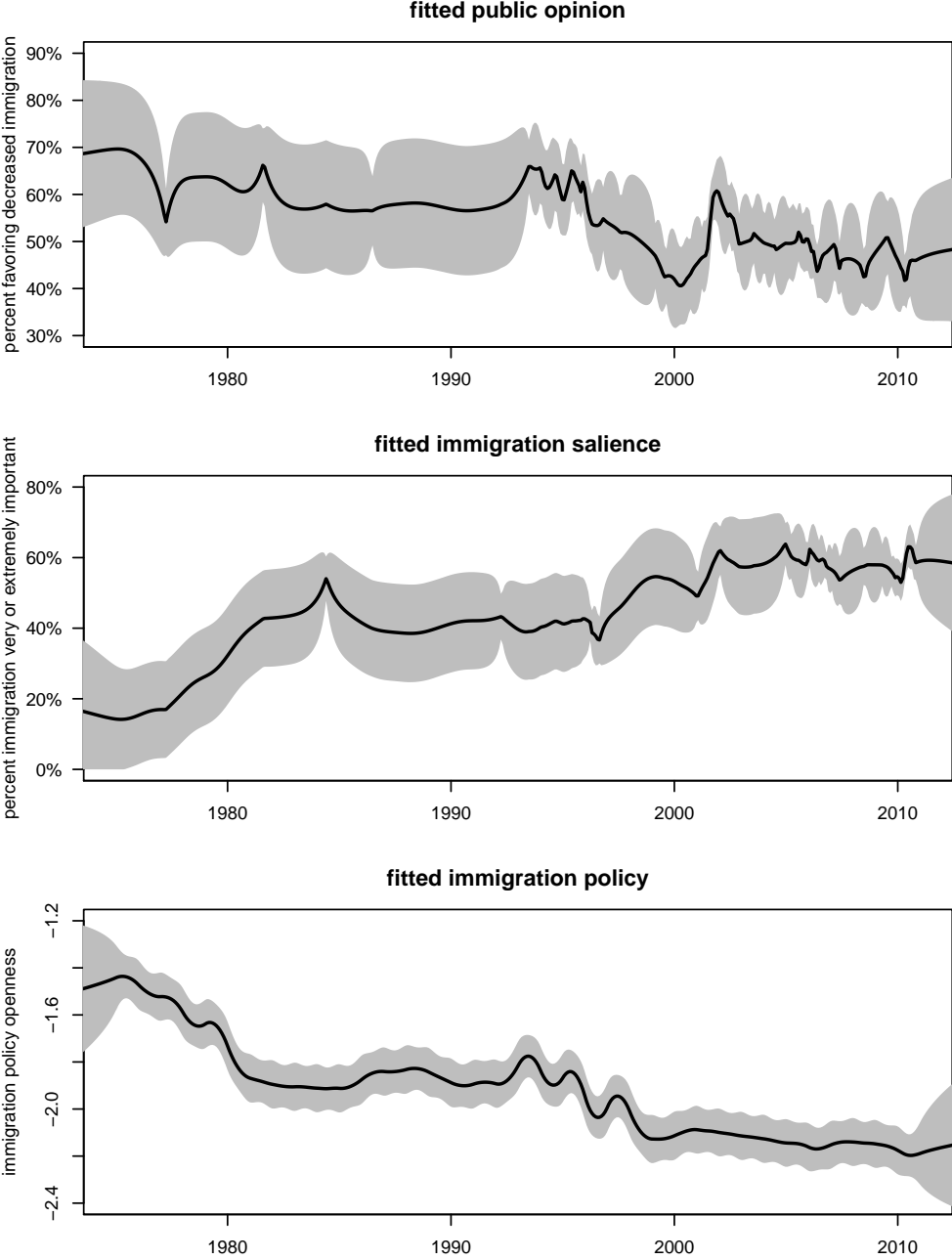


Table 1: Estimated relationship between public opinion, immigration policy, and immigration salience in US

	Estimate	95% credible interval
Mean reversion speed of opinion	1.95*	[1.26, 2.72]
Mean reversion speed of salience	1.70*	[0.67, 3.14]
Mean reversion speed of policy	0.87*	[0.25, 1.66]
Effect of opinion on policy	0.43	[-0.25, 1.22]
Effect of salience on policy	-0.99*	[-2.11, -0.08]
Effect of policy on opinion	0.58*	[0.30, 0.92]
Effect of policy on salience	-1.03*	[-2.03, -0.27]

*0 outside the 95% credible interval. Estimates are posterior means.

policy than Freeman (1995) gives her credit for: when immigration policy tends to go too far one way or the other, public opinion seeks to bring it back to a more moderate policy. It may be that media reports on immigration or the effects of immigration within the community provide the average citizen with enough information to form an opinion on immigration.

Policy also has an effect on salience. The coefficient of the effect of policy on salience is negative and does not include zero in the 95% credible interval. As immigration policy becomes more restrictive, the public's attention and interest in it increases.

We find, however, that opinion does not an effect on immigration policy (the 95% credible interval includes zero). Nor is the sign of the coefficient is in the logical direction; instead it suggests that decreased (increased) anti-immigrant sentiment leads to more restrictions (greater openness). This suggests that public opinion alone does not affect policy.

Yet while policy is not responsive to public opinion in general, it is responsive to salience. Greater salience leads to a more restrictive immigration policy, as seen in the negative and statistically credible coefficient of the effect of salience on policy. During this time period, a majority, or at least a large plurality, of the population opposed open immigration and, further, immigration is more salient to those who oppose it. Therefore, when immigration is highly salient, we would expect that if there was a change in policy, that it would be a negative change in policy and this is what we find. Thus, while public opinion on immigration

Table 2: The effect of public opinion on Senate voting for all respondents and by income

	Estimate	95% credible interval
All respondents	6.300*	[3.192, 10.191]
High income respondents	1.417	[-2.364, 4.738]
Low income respondents	3.669	[-0.384, 7.055]
<i>Difference: High–Low Income</i>	-2.252	[-8.982, 4.088]

*0 outside the 95% credible interval. Estimates are posterior means.

does not always affect policy, it does have a greater effect when immigration is more salient.

Public opinion and voting in the US Senate

Next we examine the effect of public opinion on voting in the US Senate. Table 2 shows the results of the analysis of public opinion of all respondents in the senators' districts. The estimate does not include zero in the 95% credible interval, but has the opposite sign of what we would expect. In this case, greater anti-immigrant sentiment leads to greater openness and greater pro-immigration sentiment leads to closure. Senators, then, seem to be voting in the opposite direction of the majority of their constituents.

Perhaps this odd result is a product of different constituencies holding different views on immigration and that one constituency is favored over the other. We test this idea by splitting the sample between wealthy and poor voters. Wealthy, (typically) more skilled individuals are generally more pro-immigration than poorer, less skilled individuals. It is possible that immigration is a policy area in which the views of the less skilled are more favored. Table 2 also shows the effects of the opinions of respondents, based on their income level, on the voting behavior of senators in the year of the poll. However, the estimates of the effect of the high-income voters (those making greater than \$50,000 per year), the effect of low-income respondents (less than \$30,000 per year), and the difference between the two all include zero in their 95% credible intervals.

Instead, it appears that senators are also not in step with their constituents on immi-

gration policy, at least when we examine all constituents or the difference between wealthier and poorer constituents. Yet this result is inconsistent with Freeman's (1995) assertion that immigration policy is set through clientelistic politics, primarily affected by pro-immigration groups. If Freeman (1995) is correct, we would expect no relationship between opinion and policy, not a positive one. Instead, it appears that immigration policy has become more restrictive even when public opinion overall has become less anti-immigrant. This suggests that the nativist constituency is gaining more weight in the policy making process, consistent with Peters (2017) who argues that nativist constituencies have gained more influence as businesses have reduced their lobbying on immigration.

Additional analyses & robustness checks

We conducted three additional analyses. First, as noted, it could be the case that senators are only concerned with public opinion as they approach re-election. We ran the analysis dropping the first 4 years of each senator's term (table ??). We find

Second, we examined the data using the percent who want to increase immigration, rather than those who want to decrease immigration, as our measure of opinion to see how sensitive our analysis was to this choice (table ??). We find

Third, we examined the votes on bills that were only about low-skill immigration to ensure our votes measure was closer to our policy measure (table ??). We find

Public opinion and immigration policy in Canada

Finally, we examine data from Canada to see if what we have learned about the US can be generalized to other countries. We examine Canada mostly due to data constraints as we were unable to find enough data on public opinion on immigration for other OECD states to run a similar analysis. Figure 8 shows the fitted public opinion in the upper frame, the fitted salience in the middle frame, and the fitted immigration policy in the lower frame. Again there appears to be a correlation between public opinion and immigration policy. Public

Figure 8: Fitted public opinion, salience and immigration policy in Canada with 95% credible regions

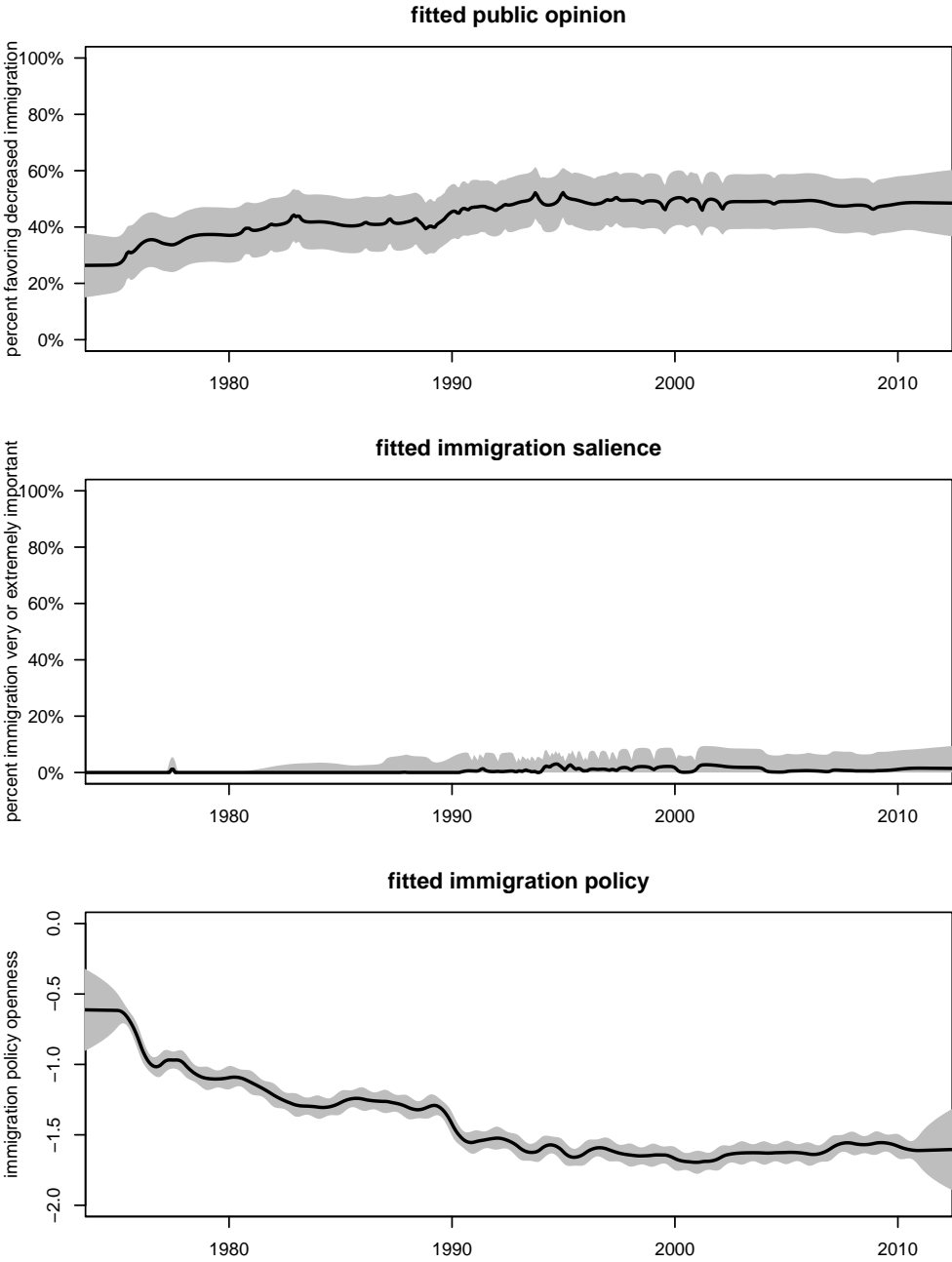


Table 3: Estimated relationship between public opinion, immigration policy, and immigration salience in Canada

	Estimate	95% credible interval
Mean reversion speed of opinion	1.06*	[0.54, 1.75]
Mean reversion speed of salience	21.29*	[17.86, 24.76]
Mean reversion speed of policy	0.11	[-0.11, 0.43]
Effect of opinion on policy	0.18	[-0.14, 0.46]
Effect of salience on policy	-2.86	[-10.64, 7.37]
Effect of policy on opinion	0.21*	[0.06, 0.38]
Effect of policy on salience	-0.11	[-0.93, 0.61]

*0 outside the 95% credible interval. Estimates are posterior means.

opinion become more favorable (lower opposition) to immigration as immigration policy becomes more restrictive. There is also some variation in salience over time; immigration was a more salient issue in the mid 1990s.

Table 3 shows the relationship between public opinion, salience and immigration policy in Canada. Similar to the US, we find that opinion and salience are mean reverting — the coefficient on the mean reversion speed is positive and does not include zero in the 95% credible interval. Yet policy on its own is not mean reverting but is in combination with the other two series.

We also find that Canadians’ opinion on immigration are similarly affected by immigration policy in the same way; although the effect is much smaller. If immigration policy becomes too open, Canadians oppose immigration more and if immigration policy becomes too restrictive, Canadians favor immigration more. Policy changes also have a similar effect on salience in Canada as they do in the US—as policy becomes more restrictive, salience has increased—although these changes are not statistically credible at conventional levels.

There is no effect of opinion or salience on policy. Part of the result on salience may be due to the fact that our measure of salience is very crude and can be easily influenced by a small number of respondents. These respondents could have very different preferences on immigration than the rest of the population. Another factor is likely the stability of

opinion on immigration in Canada. For the last twenty years or so, support for decreasing immigration has hovered around 50%. With the population split on immigration, it would be relatively easy for governments to choose either openness or closure and garner much support. Yet it is not the case that Canadian politicians have taken this stability in opinion as a license to open low-skill immigration; in fact they have done the opposite, increasingly restricting low-skill immigration while placing more weight on immigrants with ever more skills (Peters 2017). This suggests that Canadian governments have prioritized anti-immigration voices rather than the pro-immigration voices that Freeman (1995) suggests.

Discussion of results

To summarize, we find that the public responds to changes in immigration policy in both the US and Canada, changing their opinions in a logical manner. When policy becomes more open, support for immigration declines and when it becomes more restrictive, support for immigration increases. This suggests that the public has an idea of the “right” level of immigration and reacts when policy seems to move too far away from that “right” level. Changes in policy also lead to changes in salience. In particular, in the US as immigration has gotten more restrictive the salience has increased.

Yet there is a divergence between the two countries of the effects of opinion and salience on immigration policy. In the US, only salience seems to affect policy at the national level. When immigration is more salient, policymakers respond by increasing immigration restrictions. When we examine the effect of immigration on the way senators vote, we find a greater role for opinion but it is in the opposite direction of what we would expect. In Canada, however, we find no effect of either salience or opinion on policy.

In the US, immigration policy has become more restrictive at a time when immigration has become more popular but also more salient. This suggests that policy may be driven by the smaller portion of anti-immigrant voters for whom this is a very important issue. This could be due to the nature of US institutions. Following Money (1997), overall opinion

in the US may not affect policy due to the geographic concentration of immigration and the importance of swing constituencies. The president and the leadership of the House and Senate may ignore the opinions of the public in non-swing states with few consequences. It could be the case that immigration policy reflects the views of the constituents in swing states and not the general public. Additionally, this result could be driven by malapportionment in the US Senate. The views of those who live in small rural states disproportionately affect immigration policy. Rural voters typically hold more anti-immigrant views than urban voters. Therefore, median public opinion on immigration may not affect immigration policy because only a subset of voters—in swing states or in rural states—affects immigration policy due to US institutions.¹⁶

Alternatively, this result may be driven by partisan differences. Overall public opinion may not affect immigration policy; however, it could be the case that partisan public opinion affects immigration policy. Given the need of politicians to gain support from their base (Bishin 2000; Clinton 2006; Fenno 1978), it is possible that immigration policy follows the opinions of the partisans whose representatives are in Congress. In the 1990s through late 2000s, immigration may have better reflected the views of Republican constituencies, which have become more anti-immigrant over time (Peters 2017).

Finally, the disconnect in opinion and policy may reflect the ability of policymakers to use heterogeneity in opinion to their advantage. In both the US and Canada, the public is relatively split in their views on immigration. Most of the time, support for decreasing immigration ranges from 40% to 60%. There is, thus, a large plurality of the public who supports decreasing immigration and a large plurality who support the status quo or increasing immigration. The policymaker, therefore, can use the heterogeneity in the public to craft a policy that, while it does not reflect overall views on immigration, can gain enough support to be reelected.

¹⁶See also Hopkins (2010) on this point.

Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to examine the relationship between public policy and public opinion on immigration in order to reexamine the argument that immigration politics are clientelistic. We find some confirmatory and some contradictory evidence. First, we find that the public, in fact, seems to respond to the level of immigration openness when forming their opinion on immigration. This result contradicts Freeman's (1995) argument that the public has a hard time forming their opinion on immigration due to the lack of official data on immigration. It seems that the public can in fact infer the level of immigration policy from the media or from the effects of the policy in their community. Unsurprisingly, when immigration policy is more open, the public desires a lower level of immigration and when immigration policy is more restrictive, the public desires a higher level of immigration. The public seems to have a particular level of immigration in mind and when policy deviates from this level, public opinion shifts to move policy back in line with its preferred level.

Second, we find that public opinion has little effect on policy. In the US, national opinion seems to have no effect, while opinion affects US Senators but not in the way we would expect. When the senator's constituents prefer less immigration, she is more likely to vote for openness; when the senator's constituents prefer more immigration, she is more likely to vote for restrictions. Policy in the US follows salience, with more salience leading to more restrictions. These results in combination with the fact that immigration policy is becoming more restrictive in the US while national opinion is favoring greater openness suggests that greater weight is being placed on anti-immigration constituents today. Similarly in Canada, immigration policy for low-skill immigrants has become more restrictive at a time when opinions on immigration have remained relatively stable. This suggests that Canadian policymakers too have favored anti-immigration constituencies over other constituencies. This paper, thus, provides some contradictory and some confirmatory evidence for the immigration literature. Policymakers are not completely out of step with their constituents on immigration; but institutions seem to moderate this effect and they seem to place more

weight on anti-immigration constituencies.

In this study we examined how opinion on immigration informs policy in two majoritarian states, including the US that has multiple veto players, and found that when immigration is more salient, it can affect policy. We had set out in this project to examine additional countries but were stymied by a lack of data. As scholars collect more data on both opinions and policy on immigration, we hope that they replicate this study elsewhere. We conjecture that opinion on immigration likely has a stronger effect on policy in many OECD states because they tend to have proportional representation, which is thought to allow greater voice for the public, and fewer veto players due to parliamentary systems. We may already be seeing this effect: while recent survey data shows that Europeans are becoming more positively disposed towards non-EU migrants on average,¹⁷ recent electoral victories for the far right, increased restrictions on asylum seekers, and increase enforcement on the Mediterranean suggest that it is the anti-immigrant population, for whom immigration is more salient, whose views are integrated into policy. Outside the EU, many large receiving countries are autocracies, in which we expect public opinion to have less influence (but not zero influence) on policy. We leave testing these conjectures to future scholars.

Further, this study also prompts the question of why immigration becomes more salient at some times but not others. While an influx of migrants—whether they be economic migrants or asylum seekers—likely increases the salience of immigration, it is also clear that politicians and other elites play a role. Scholars should continue to study both the structural conditions and the role of elite entrepreneurs that lead immigration to become a highly salient issue.

Finally, in this paper we began to tackle the link between public opinion and public policy. Survey research has become a more popular tool as the costs of this research have decreased, especially in International Political Economy. Yet this research is often divorced from the research on public policy. Using new methods, this paper takes a step in bringing these literatures back together and we hope others will continue this research.

¹⁷<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2018/07/25/european-xenophobia-reflects-racial-diversity-no>

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