

Book Review

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White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics.
By Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal. Princeton, NJ:
Princeton University Press, 2015.

The ascendance of Latinos in the American population has brought a new dimension to race relations. As of 2014, there were more than 55 million people of Hispanic descent living in the United States, which accounted for approximately 17% of the total population, surpassing African Americans as the country's largest minority group. The result is a fundamental reconfiguration of American politics, according to Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan L. Hajnal, who seek to precisely identify the political consequences in their timely book *White Backlash: Immigration, Race, and American Politics*, published last year.

Starting from the consensus that Latino immigration to the United States has been "massive, local and long term," *White Backlash* sets out to study how this has altered the political behavior of white Anglo-Americans and if these electoral shifts have influenced political outcomes. The book centers around the question of what role immigration plays in the political life of the United States. What distinguishes this book is its consideration of a broad range of political outcomes. While there is a tradition of scholarship examining the causes of attitudes toward immigrants or immigration, *White Backlash* ambitiously explores the effect of mass immigration beyond immigration-specific opinions. The book puts forward the notion that immigration permeates other political issues and investigates how this propels the core political behaviors, such as partisanship, electoral decisions, and policy preferences of white Americans.

The book begins by introducing a theory of immigration backlash politics contending that immigration affects the political behavior of nonimmigrants through two important channels: direct geosocial exposure to immigrants in their local area and indirect exposure via the media. The media acts as a powerful conduit of the "immigrant threat narrative,"

which portrays immigrants, especially Latinos, as illegal residents, a welfare burden, a source of crime and disorder, and a menace to the national identity. The visible changes in local demographic composition together with the media's pervasive threat narrative arouse white fears and apprehensions about immigration, making it play a central role in their minds, which is then manifested in their defensive political behavior.

The backlash denoted in the book's title refers to the defection of white Americans from the Democratic to the Republican Party, not solely but in large part due to rising immigration. Relying on cross-sectional and longitudinal data from the American National Election Study (ANES), the first empirical section produces an impressive analysis that demonstrates that holding negative opinions about immigration causes individuals to shift their partisan identification to the right. A similar pattern is supported by the book's next chapter where we see that concern about immigration also translates into electoral support for the Republican Party in presidential, gubernatorial, and congressional elections. The book also goes on to show that the uneven geographic distribution of Latinos matches with the patterns of white political preferences. Readers acquainted with the existing literature will not be surprised when the book confirms that Anglos living in areas with large and fast-growing Latino populations are more concerned about immigration. What is novel, however, is the book's subsequent finding that this concern carries over to other policy preferences such as reducing welfare and public services or supporting punitive judicial policies. Yet the proximity of a large Latino population is not a *sine qua non* for individuals' concerns about immigration. The political behavior of Anglo-Americans is affected anyway by news media that continually perpetuates the immigration threat narrative.

White Backlash admits to telling a negative tale of American politics. While a burgeoning support for the political right is not an objectively negative outcome, it is worrying if, as the book argues, it is propelled by negative sentiments toward Latinos and results in a growing political polariza-

tion. It underscores that immigration is fueling American racial tensions and generating a political chasm between white Americans and minority groups. Even if Latinos are the biggest minority group in the United States, white voters still hold the most electoral clout, and their rightward bend may be reflected in policies that are unfavorable to Latinos and can perpetuate their disadvantage.

Altogether, the book can be appreciated as a convincing demonstration of the far-reaching political consequences of Latino immigration into the United States. The book's causal arguments between immigration and white defection to the Republican Party are put forward cautiously, and readers who are skeptical of its claims will be pleased to find their concerns addressed through rigorous empirical demonstrations and open discussions of their weaknesses. Still, its analysis of media coverage is somewhat disappointing, and it does not match the empirical rigor of the rest of the book. Although the media content analysis is temporally rich, it is limited to articles published by the *New York Times*, so it is a shame that it does not consider the range of immigration

narratives across the partisan media spectrum and how such competing frames struggle for public influence.

Despite its merits, readers who come to the book with an interest in political contexts beyond the United States will likely be left wanting. The main argument of the book is specific to American politics and its checkered past of race relations. In fact, the book's findings are only specific to Latino immigration as it admits that similar patterns are not found for immigrants of Asian descent, currently the country's fastest growing group. The book's conclusion stops short of offering general theories that might be extrapolated to other political contexts undergoing immigration. To be fair, the book does not aim to provide general claims, but it nonetheless misses an important opportunity to use the growth of the Latino population in the United States to assert a more general claim about the political consequences of immigration. Natural extensions might have been made to other countries, notably in Europe, which are also experiencing surges of nativism amid rising immigration while accompanied by a greater political polarization.