

National Debates, Local Responses: The Origins of Local Concern about Immigration in the U.K. and the U.S.

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November 10, 2008

*1737 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, MA, 02138. The author gratefully acknowledges the Yale Center for the Study of American Politics, the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard University, the Institute for Social Change at the University of Manchester, and the Department of Political Science at MIT for institutional support. Tom Clark, Rafaela Dancygier, Robert Ford, Matthew Klayman, Gabriel Lenz, Alison Post, and members of the MIT “Work in Progress” seminar kindly provided feedback on this research.

Abstract

Theories of inter-group threat hold that local concentrations of immigrants produce resource competition and thus anti-immigrant attitudes. Variants of these theories are commonly applied to Britain as well as the U.S. Yet the empirical tests have been inconsistent. This paper analyzes geo-coded surveys from both countries to identify when residents' attitudes are influenced by living near immigrant communities. Using Pew surveys of the U.S. from 2001 and 2006 and the 2005 British Election Study, it illustrates that local contextual effects hinge on national politics. Contextual effects appear primarily when immigration is a nationally salient issue, a finding which explains why past research finds threat in some cases but not others. Seemingly local disputes have national origins. The paper also demonstrates how panel data can eliminate the selection biases that plague research on contextual effects.

Introduction

In the 1970s, a native-born Briton complained about her West Indian neighbors, telling an interviewer: “There’s too much noise with the foreigners... We just can’t go where we want any more. Why should they get National Health Service benefits?” (Schoen 1977, pg. 261). For this London resident, immigrants at once fostered local concerns about neighborhood life and national concerns about the distribution of benefits. Similar anti-immigrant sentiments were common in many parts of Britain during the 1970s, when immigration and integration were salient issues (Husbands, 1983; Schoen, 1977; Lawrence, 1974). In recent years, these questions have reappeared on the British political agenda periodically, brought to the fore by riots, terrorist attacks, international events, and the political parties (Dancygier, 2007; Solomos, 1993; Messina, 1989).

In several respects, the dynamics of immigration politics in the U.S. are similar. Both countries have experienced significant immigration in the last half-century, with Britain’s foreign-born population increasing to 8.3% in 2001 and America’s foreign-born population reaching 12.5% by 2000. Those figures have doubled since 1950.¹ In both countries, immigration is not a stable component of the political agenda. It dominates public attention at certain moments and all but disappears at others (Dancygier, 2007; Tichenor, 2002; Barkan, 2003; Hansen, 2000; Solomos, 1993; Higham, 1992; Messina, 1989). In 2006, the share of Americans indicating that immigration was the nation’s most important problem spiked from 3% in January to 19% three months later.² In a 2000 survey, “race/immigration” ranked eleventh among Britons’ priorities. But by May and June of 2005, immediately following the general election campaign, it ranked first, with 31% naming “immigration” among the nation’s two most important issues.³

¹These estimates come from the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/> [accessed September 26, 2008]) and the U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov [accessed March 17 2008]) respectively.

²These results come from Gallup’s monthly telephone surveys.

³The first of these results comes from a MORI survey while the second comes from the British administration of the Eurobarometer. Both were accessed through *Polling the Nations*.

Even the specific aspects of immigration that Britons and Americans highlight can be quite similar. Compare the Londoner’s statement above with an anti-immigrant verse sent to a California official in the early 1990s: “everything is mucho good; soon we own the neighborhood; we have a hobby—it’s called breeding; welfare pay for baby feeding” (Reinhold, 1993). The comments differ markedly in tone and timing, to say the least. But both demonstrate how anti-immigrant views blend local anxieties about neighborhood takeover with national concerns about public spending and fairness.

The interplay between neighborhood conditions and national politics captured in these comments is not coincidental. In fact, the interplay proves critical in answering this paper’s research question: why are does immigration emerge as a major concern in certain localities at certain moments in time? Construed broadly, research in the inter-group threat tradition explains concerns about immigrants by emphasizing objective conditions such as the size of local immigrant populations (e.g. Laurence and Heath, 2008; Bowyer, 2008*b*; Coffé, Heyndels and Vermeir, 2007; Dancygier, 2006; Dustmann and Preston, 2001; Blalock, 1967; Key, 1949). Another theoretical approach explains anti-immigrant attitudes chiefly through subjective perceptions about immigrants’ impact on the nation as a whole (Sides and Citrin, 2007; Sniderman, Hagendoorn and Prior, 2004; Fetzer, 2002; Citrin et al., 1997; Citrin, Reingold and Green, 1990). This paper seeks a middle ground. It demonstrates that in the U.K. as well as the U.S., local conditions shape attitudes *in the presence of salient national rhetoric about immigration*. National discussions of immigration can call people’s attention to the immigrants in their neighborhoods, politicizing local demographics. In this view, even local concerns about the impact of immigrants on the neighborhood are partly national in origin.

The process of politicization emphasized here addresses a weakness in existing contextual theories: it explains *when* local experiences are likely to shape people’s political views. If objective conditions alone explained local anxieties about immigration, it is not obvious why we would observe the punctuated patterns of anti-immigrant mobilization that scholars frequently

note (Bowyer, 2008*a*; Dancygier, 2007, 2006; Husbands, 1983). At the same time, if subjective perceptions alone explained anxieties about immigration, concern about immigration would not be concentrated in specific localities. This theoretical approach can explain why anti-immigrant contention is clustered in time and space.

The next section integrates research on immigrant contexts in the U.K. and the U.S., research that has developed in relative isolation. It contends that neither body of work explores the factors that moderate contextual effects. Put differently, past work typically focuses on whether or not contextual effects exist rather than investigating the conditions that dampen or strengthen such effects. Section 1 then develops the paper's theoretical claims by outlining the role that salient rhetoric plays in making the local context politically relevant. The resulting hypothesis holds that the effects of local context—that is, living in heavily immigrant neighborhoods, or rapidly changing ones—will hinge on the visibility of immigration as a national issue. For example, we should expect that Britons in heavily immigrant areas will be especially concerned about immigration when the issue is in the national headlines. The local context is not inherently political, but must be made so. The theoretical section also outlines mechanisms that could induce such changes. Salient rhetoric could influence perceptions of neighboring immigrants or it could create common knowledge that others see the issue as important.

To make inferences about contextual influence, one must overcome formidable methodological challenges including measurement error and selection bias (e.g. Johnston et al., 2000; MacAllister et al., 2001; Dustmann and Preston, 2001; King, 1996). Given the specific hypotheses being tested, one must also be attentive to the possibility that salient rhetoric emerges from local inter-group contention, and is endogenous. Section 2 presents approaches to these recurrent problems including the use of panel data where possible, the examination of demographic changes, the testing of multiple levels of aggregation, and the testing of hypotheses in multiple countries. Of the frequently cited articles on the influence of neighborhood contexts, none has tested its claims in more than one country. Yet to the extent that the same hypothesis explains

events in multiple countries, we have strong evidence in its favor.

Section 2 also presents empirical tests of these claims using the importance of immigration among nationally representative survey respondents as the dependent variable. In both countries, the goal is to identify whether concerns about immigration vary across local contexts as we would expect. These empirical examples were chosen both because the salient rhetoric at the time produces non-obvious predictions and because of the availability of geo-coded surveys including “most important problem” questions. In both the U.S. and the U.K., ethnic background and immigrant status are closely correlated, but the focus throughout this paper is squarely on the influence of living near immigrants.

The first test employs surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center at two points in time. In 2001, when immigrant inflows to the U.S. were near their peak (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008; Passel and Suro, 2006), not one of the 785 respondents cited immigrants or immigration as the most important issue facing their community. This challenges theories that see responses to immigration as a straightforward function of demographic trends. However, in early 2006, immigration became a salient issue as well as an objective fact. The 2006 survey data demonstrate that Americans in communities with growing shares of immigrants were more likely to cite immigration as a serious local problem. With newly available data, this test extends the claims made by this author using other U.S. examples (Hopkins, 2007).

Britain represents a harder case for the hypothesis that national rhetoric shapes local responses to immigrants. As Messina (1989) and Dancygier (2007) demonstrate, the two dominant British parties tried to keep immigration off of the national agenda as constituent pressure grew in the 1950s and 1960s. Local events such as the 1958 riots and the 1964 Smethwick campaign forced immigration onto the national agenda rather than the reverse. In more recent times, there is still good reason to expect that concentrated immigrant populations will produce local contention in Britain irrespective of national politics. British localities

oversee a significant share of local housing, providing concrete stakes that could fuel local inter-group disputes. Perhaps for that reason, scholars studying Britain find threatened responses to immigrant groups more consistently than do scholars studying the U.S.⁴ Britain appears to be a strong case for traditional theories of inter-group threat and a challenging case for theories emphasizing the national origins of local contention.

Yet even in the British case, this paper finds strong evidence that national politics shape local inter-group contention. Specifically, it uses panel data from the 2005 British Election Study (BES) to illustrate that local conditions interact with the information environment to produce concern about immigration. The 2005 campaign’s focus on immigration was an exogenous shock to local immigration politics, and the 2005 BES panel is uniquely suited to isolate the impacts of that shock. Panel data are valuable in identifying contextual effects because they allow us to compare the influence of local contexts at multiple points in time and to hold selection biases constant. *Selection bias cannot explain why a contextual effect would grow or shrink for the same people living in the same neighborhood at different points in time.* The 2005 BES also provides unusually comprehensive contextual information at various levels of aggregation. Section 2 demonstrates that Britons living in heavily immigrant neighborhoods grew concerned about immigration immediately after the 2005 general election campaign, a campaign that made immigration and asylum central issues. Here, too, we see the interactive effect of a changing information environment and local contexts.

To be sure, the role of immigration in British and American history differs markedly. Americans understand their country as a “nation of immigrants,” a self-conception that is not found in Britain. The immigrants arriving in both countries differ as well, since many of the immigrants to the U.K. are Muslim while very few immigrants to the U.S. are. The evidence outlined below also suggests that the critical aspect of the local context—sudden changes in

⁴Compare the consistent findings of threat in Britain (e.g. Laurence and Heath 2008, Bowyer 2008*b*, Bowyer 2008*a*, Dancygier 2007, and Dancygier 2006) with the inconsistent findings in the U.S. (e.g. Fox 2004, Cain, Citrin and Wong 2000, and Taylor 1998).

demographics in the U.S. case, and high levels of immigrants in the British case—differ across the two countries. Still, immigrants in both countries become a source of local political concern primarily when salient national rhetoric highlights their presence and connects them to politics. Despite the differences between the two countries, there is a fundamental similarity in the processes that lead immigration to become a prominent local concern.

1 Theories of Contextual Influence

By “contextual effect,” this paper means the influence of casual interactions and observations within a bounded space, a definition that draws on Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995).⁵ By “threat,” it means negative political attitudes or behaviors directed at a group that is viewed as distinctive in ascriptive terms such as race or national origin. Concern about immigrants’ political power, their impact on social spending, or about immigration levels are all potential manifestations of threat. This section outlines contextual theories of the inter-group threat. It then details the limits of these theories, especially when applied to immigrants. In response, it offers a new theoretical approach contending that people politicize their local contexts only with the help of salient political rhetoric.

Since at least V.O. Key’s research on the U.S. South (1949), scholars have studied the influence of living near minority groups on political attitudes and behaviors. Key’s work saw inter-group conflict as a product of competition for political power and other scarce resources. It predicts that as the share of a minority group in an area rises, and especially as it nears a threshold enabling it to contend for political power, inter-group conflict will rise as well. In Britain, anti-immigrant politician Enoch Powell advanced a similar argument, saying: “numbers are of the essence: the significance and consequences of an alien element introduced into a country or population are profoundly different according to whether that element is 1 percent

⁵“Neighborhood effect” (MacAllister et al., 2001) is a synonym.

or 10 percent” (Hansen, 2000, pg 185). Threat might apply in Britain as well as the U.S., and to immigrants as well as African Americans.

Subsequent research has found variants of threat in Britain (e.g. Bowyer, 2008*b,a*; Dancygier, 2006; Dustmann and Preston, 2001), the U.S. (e.g. Oliver and Wong, 2003; Tolbert and Grummel, 2003; Hero, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Glaser, 1994; Giles and Buckner, 1993), and elsewhere in Europe (e.g. Coffé, Heyndels and Vermeir, 2007; McLaren, 2003; Gang, Rivera-Batiz and Yun, 2002). Related approaches contend that inter-group contention stems from economic competition (Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Olzak, 1992) or from a combination of economic motives and out-group animus (e.g. Gay, 2006; Branton and Jones, 2005; Tolnay and Beck, 1995). Although not identical, these theories all locate the origins of inter-group contention in objective conditions such as demographics or labor market conditions. The specific contextual unit varies from theory to theory, but all predict variation in inter-group contention across localities.

1.1 Challenges to Inter-group Threat

Still, the U.S. case also offers considerable dissenting evidence. Several studies have failed to find threatened responses to immigrants or Hispanics (e.g. Campbell, Wong and Citrin, 2006; Fox, 2004; Dixon and Rosenbaum, 2004; Oliver and Mendelberg, 2000; Taylor, 1998). These non-findings are not necessarily empirical failures: there are strong theoretical reasons why immigrants might not produce threatened responses. In the U.S., significant fractions of immigrants are not naturalized citizens and cannot vote, reducing the political threat they pose. In both the U.S. and the U.K., some immigrants’ plans to return to the sending country might further limit their political mobilization (Jones-Correa, 1998; Lawrence, 1974), again reducing the threat they pose. Additionally, immigrant populations are often residentially segregated (Fischer, 2003; Phillips, 1998), limiting housing market competition and casual, day-to-day encounters. Inter-group threat might be a less consistent response to immigrant

groups than is commonly assumed.

A further challenge to inter-group threat comes from its underlying assumptions. To feel threatened by an immigrant group, one must first know that that group is present in the locality and know its relative size. Put differently, theories of inter-group threat assume reasonably accurate local perceptions. Yet citizens' knowledge of local demographics is surprisingly weak, leading some scholars to question the mechanisms underpinning theories of inter-group threat (see especially Wong, 2008, 2007). In the U.S., Chiricos, Hogan and Gertz (1997) find that the correlation between actual and perceived neighborhood racial composition is just 0.17. A survey of 113 respondents conducted by this author in February, 2008 found that Americans' guesses about the share of immigrants in their ZIP code correlated at just 0.23 with the correct figure. Theories of inter-group threat assume that demographics are a salient feature of the local context, but the survey evidence disagrees.

The third challenge in applying inter-group threat to immigrant populations stems from the possibility that anti-immigrant animus is rooted primarily in national concerns, not local ones. In this view, anti-immigrant attitudes come from subjective perceptions about immigration's impact on the nation as a whole. If this is correct, fears about immigration are primarily about the threat it poses to national identity and cultural cohesion. Scholars find considerable evidence for this claim both in the U.S. (Citrin et al., 1997; Higham, 1992; Citrin, Reingold and Green, 1990) and in Europe (Sides and Citrin, 2007; Fetzer, 2002; Sniderman, Hagendoorn and Prior, 2004).⁶ As Sides and Citrin (2007) note in describing Europe, "attitudes towards immigrants have become increasingly divorced from social reality; that is, people's perceptions of immigration and immigrants come to rely more on vivid events... and messages from politicians and media" (501). Here, the geographic frame of reference is itself subjective: cultural threat could operate locally, regionally, or nationally depending on how people conceive of the threat posed by immigrants. This alternate, culturally rooted view of anti-immigrant contention was

⁶For parallel claims about African Americans in the U.S., see Kinder and Sanders (1996, Chapter 4).

given voice in Britain by Margaret Thatcher among others. She told an interviewer that the British were “afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture”(Hansen, 2000, pg 210).

The cultural threat approach raises new questions that have yet to be answered. If perceptions of immigration’s cultural impact dominate concerns about economic or political impacts, what leads long-time residents to deem immigrants a threat at some moments but not others? Put differently, what explains the sudden punctuations in attention to immigration as an issue? One might speculate that whether immigrants are perceived as a threat to the nation will hinge on the attention they receive in national political discourse and on how their impact is framed in that discourse.⁷⁸ If politicians and journalists are ignoring the issue of immigration, it is hard to see how long-time residents will come to conceive of immigration as a threat to the nation.

1.2 Positing an Interaction

At first glance, the two major bodies of theorizing appear to differ sharply in their assumptions as well as their predictions. Theories of inter-group threat emphasize the role of objective local conditions in generating political contention between groups. Theories based on culture instead highlight subjective perceptions of immigration’s impact on the nation as a whole. The theories also fall short in different ways. Theories of inter-group threat fail to acknowledge that many people do not accurately perceive their local contexts, while theories of cultural threat do not explain the sources of threats or why threat perception varies. Still, elements of the two approaches can be synthesized into a theory that addresses these defects—and that is capable of explaining both cross-sectional and longitudinal variation.

⁷Here, we define frames as conceptual frameworks that “define what the problem is and how to think about it”(Kinder, 1998, pg 170).

⁸Although the make-up of the immigrant population is an alternative explanation (Card, Dustmann and Preston, 2005), it changes too slowly to explain the relatively swift shifts in concern about immigration.

The updated theory, dubbed the theory of politicized change, contends that local inter-group contention is the product of two factors operating at different geographic scales. As theories of inter-group threat suggest, the first is the local demographic context, meaning either significant shares of immigrants (e.g. Key, 1949) or increasing shares of immigrants (Green, Strolovitch and Wong, 1998). Long-time residents might fear a large out-group population because of concerns about resource competition, while they might fear sudden changes because of their impact on home values (Gould, 2000) or concerns about the neighborhood's future (Horton, 1995). But since people only pay close attention to their local environments on occasion, the updated theory also requires a politicizing agent which encourages people to connect their day-to-day observations to politics. That is where salient political rhetoric comes in. It calls attention to certain aspects of people's contexts or day-to-day lives (Kinder, 1998; Mutz, 1994), leading them to update their political views in light of local experiences. This is an information-based approach, so the relevant geographic unit is the neighborhood in which people observe immigrants or have casual encounters with them.

The process of politicization might work through two mechanisms. The first is psychological. People are exposed to thousands of pieces of information in their everyday lives which might be politically relevant, from the cost of milk to signs in foreign languages. Salient political rhetoric could serve a priming role (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987), indicating which of those thousands of observations should influence one's opinions. At the same time, salient political rhetoric might play a sociological role by promoting common knowledge (Chwe, 2001) and encouraging conversations and political mobilization on specific issues. After being exposed to anti-immigration political rhetoric, people might be more willing to discuss the issue with neighbors or might have added confidence in expressing their views. Such social reinforcement could be especially important on sensitive issues of ethnicity or race, where people initially fear social sanctions for introducing a difficult topic (e.g. Monin and Miller, 2001).

Both mechanisms lead to the prediction that people will respond to the same contextual

experiences in very different ways depending on the issues that are salient in national politics.⁹ In this view, inter-group threat is one potential response to the presence of a significant immigrant community, but it is not a necessary response. At times when immigration issues are politically salient, long-time residents might indeed feel competition with neighboring immigrants. They might connect their immigrant neighbors with their difficulties finding a job. But when immigration is not a major issue, people might not draw political conclusions from the presence of immigrants next door. In short, the influence of local contexts is moderated by national information environments. Having identified our theoretical expectations, we now turn to empirical observation.

2 Testing the National-Local Interaction

The national-local interaction posited above could shape a variety of opinions about immigrants and immigration policy. But it is not always clear in what direction opinions will move, as one could imagine salient rhetoric calling attention to positive local experiences as well as negative ones. These analyses thus focus on concern about the issue of immigration as their dependent variable, allowing us to sidestep questions about the specific content of people's views. In the U.S. and then the U.K., the analyses examine whether people in places with many immigrants or growing immigrant populations become more concerned about immigration.

To reduce concerns about endogeneity or reverse causation, we must clearly differentiate the explanatory and dependent variables. One key explanatory variable is salient national rhetoric, defined as the topics discussed by politicians and journalists. Since national rhetoric operates relatively evenly throughout a given country, this factor varies over time rather than across space. Our goal is to explain local variations in concern about immigration among the

⁹For simplicity, this analysis assumes that the salience of national politics outweighs that of sub-national politics. But the same argument applies to salient rhetoric at all levels of a political system, from state governments in the U.S. to the governments in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

public. It might seem that we are explaining immigration's salience among the public with salience among political elites, and that reverse causation is a major alternative explanation. But the core hypothesis is more subtle. It holds that salience among political elites produces predictable cross-sectional variation in the salience of immigration among long-time residents. For the causal arrow to run in the opposite direction, national elites would have to be paying disproportionate attention to increasingly immigrant areas in setting the agenda. This makes reverse causation less plausible as an alternative explanation in the U.S. case. And through the use of panel data, we can eliminate reverse causation as a potential explanation altogether in the British case.

Even when scholars agree on the definition of a contextual effect, methodological problems remain. The most common approach is to define the context as the available geographic unit in which a survey respondent lives, and then to use multiple regression or related statistical techniques to test whether the share of immigrants in one's locality predicts her attitudes. At least three methodological problems plague such an approach (Johnston et al., 2000; MacAllister et al., 2001; Dustmann and Preston, 2001; King, 1996). First, there are two different selection processes, as the survey respondents have selected their place of residence and immigrant groups have selected theirs. Either process could confound contextual effects estimated in this way. Also, there is likely to be substantial measurement error, as aggregate units defined for administrative purposes rarely are coterminous with the neighborhoods that structure people's everyday lives.

This paper confronts these challenges by using multiple strategies and data sets. By confirming the same basic patterns with different surveys collected in different nations, it hopes to overcome the potential biases inherent in any one survey. These findings are not driven by the idiosyncrasies of settlement patterns in either country. Another methodological approach is to look for changes in contextual effects over time, as doing so removes selection biases that are constant over time. A third is to use panel data where possible, since we can observe whether

a contextual measure becomes a stronger predictor of attitudes after an exogenous shock. Yet another strategy is to use the smallest contextual unit available and to use multiple contextual units where possible, reducing the measurement error inherent in our estimates.

2.1 The U.S. from 2001 to 2006

In the U.S., earlier work by this author (Hopkins, 2007) has provided initial tests of these hypotheses. That research demonstrated that Americans in rapidly changing communities—communities that were seeing increases in their share of foreign-born residents—were notably less supportive of immigration. But that relationship held only during the early 1990s and in 2006, when immigration was a topic of national debates. It did not hold in 1998, 2000, or 2004, when immigration was less prominent. Using panel data over the September 11th terrorist attacks, that research also demonstrated that respondents in changing counties or ZIP codes adopted more anti-immigrant views. However, those local patterns faded several months later along with the salience of immigration itself. Even for the same individuals, contextual effects appear to vary with time. In short, there is already some evidence that whether contexts are politicized matters.

Pew Research Center surveys from 2001 and 2006 allow us to examine the impact of demographics on local concerns about immigration and subject the theory to additional tests. Looking at the period from 1990 to 2004, Passel and Suro (2006) estimate that total annual migration to the U.S. from legal and illegal sources peaked in 1999-2000 before declining.¹⁰ If local concerns about immigrants grew in a straightforward fashion out of demographics, we should have expected many Americans to express concerns about immigrants during that same period. The Pew survey in February 2001 gave Americans an opportunity to voice their concerns, asking an open-ended question about the most important problem facing their com-

¹⁰The *International Migration Outlook* confirms that annual immigrant inflows to the U.S. declined by 0.8 percent from 2000 to 2006 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008, pg. 41).

munities.¹¹ Of the 785 respondents, not a single one named immigration. Threat is not purely a question of numbers.

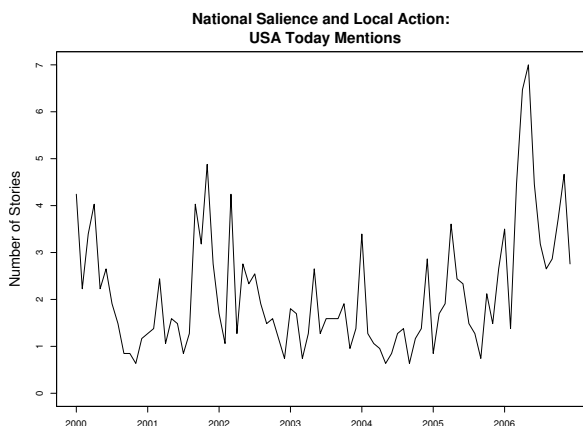


Figure 1: This figure depicts by month the number of stories in *USA Today* using the words “immigration” or “immigrants” that were about the U.S.

Economic conditions were not identical in 2001 and 2006, but neither was an especially likely time to foster anti-immigrant sentiment. The unemployment rate throughout the spring of 2006—4.7% according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics¹²—was only half a percentage point above the 4.2% recorded in February 2001. Moreover, in 2006, the unemployment rate had been *falling* consistently for more than two years, while unemployment had risen slightly into 2001. If national attention to immigration was driven by economic conditions, the peak of 6.3% unemployment in June 2003 seems like a more likely time for immigration to take center stage than 2006.

What made 2006 distinctive was chiefly the salience of immigration as a national issue, as Figure 1 makes clear. It presents monthly counts of articles mentioning “immigration” or “immigrants” in *USA Today*, the most widely read American newspaper.¹³ Articles about

¹¹Both the 2001 and 2006 Pew surveys are available for download at: <http://people-press.org/dataarchive/> [accessed October 4, 2008].

¹²See www.bls.gov [accessed November 9, 2008].

¹³*USA Today* coverage of immigration also correlates highly with coverage on television channels such as Fox News (Pearson’s correlation of 0.73) and CBS News (Pearson’s correlation of 0.69), making it an effective

immigration in countries other than the U.S. were excluded. Immigration began to generate headlines in December of 2005 following Congressional action, and grew more salient during the pro-immigrant marches in March, April, and May of that year (Hopkins, 2007). In a 2006 Pew survey, 19 respondents out of 864 named immigration as the single most important issue facing their local community through an open-ended question. In a separate question, 19% of respondents called immigration “a very big problem in my local community.”

The 2006 survey included a nationally representative sample with 1,687 respondents born in the U.S. who are non-Hispanic whites or African Americans.¹⁴ Although the U.S. Census is only conducted every 10 years, county-level demographic information from the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS) is available for 70% of these respondents, allowing us to reduce measurement error by using contextual measures that reflect recent population movements.¹⁵ Missing data for contextual and other variables were multiply imputed (King et al., 2001), although we obtain the same substantive results through listwise deletion. The same results also hold when using older, ZIP code-based contextual measures from the decennial census.¹⁶ The Pearson’s correlation between the percent immigrant at the county level and at the ZIP level was 0.82 in 2000, indicating the higher level of aggregation does not substantially impact measurement.

To better gauge the impact of local demographics, the analysis used an ordered probit to model the factors making respondents more likely to say that immigration was “a very big problem.”¹⁷ The individual-level independent variables include the respondent’s ideology, partisanship, income, age, race, sex, and education.¹⁸ At the county level, the models include

metric of media attention overall.

¹⁴196 respondents born outside the U.S., 103 U.S.-born Hispanics and 14 U.S.-born Asian Americans were removed owing to the possibility that these groups might respond to neighboring immigrants in very different ways. The results are not sensitive to this choice.

¹⁵Currently, the ACS samples many but not all U.S. localities.

¹⁶The median U.S. county had 250,000 residents as of 2000, making these large contextual units. By contrast, the median ZIP code had just 22,300 residents.

¹⁷One finds substantively similar results analyzing the question about the most important problem facing the community despite the reduced variation in response categories.

¹⁸Ideology indicates responses to the question, “In general, would you describe your political views as very

the percent immigrant, the percent with a college degree, the percent black, and the log of the median household income, all measured through the 2000 census. The models also include the changes in each contextual estimate from 2000 to 2006.

From the ordered probit model, we can estimate the probability that a respondent's answer would fall into the most concerned category. If an otherwise average respondent lives in an area where the immigrant population shrunk by 2/10s of a percentage point, the probability that she calls immigration a very big local problem is 11.2 percent. Had the same respondent lived in a county where the immigrant population grew by 3.2 percentage points between 2000 and 2006, she would have called immigration a very big local problem 27.1 percent of the time. Put differently, when shifting from a county at the 10th percentile in terms of its changing immigrant population to one at the 90th percentile, the probability of responding in the most concerned category more than doubles. Holding continuous variables at their means and ordinal variables at their medians, we find that those living in counties with growing immigrant populations 2006 were far more likely to be concerned about immigration. The same is true for people living in counties with large baseline immigrant populations, with an effect of similar magnitude. To the extent that selection bias influences these results, it likely drives them downward, since some subset of people who are especially worried about immigration's impacts might select away from heavily or increasingly immigrant areas.

Given the prominence of resource competition as an alternative explanation, it is worth devoting special attention to economic variables as potential confounders. The initial models condition on the respondent's education and income as well as aggregated measures of education and median household income and their changes from 2000 to 2006. To ensure the results' robustness, the analysis then added the 2005 county-level unemployment rate and its change from 2005 to 2006 to better capture local economic conditions. It also added an indicator variable for respondents who were employed full-time, reasoning that labor market participants

conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal." Partisanship indicates a seven-category partisan identification question. Income is the respondent's total annual family income.

Predicting Immigration as Big Local Problem

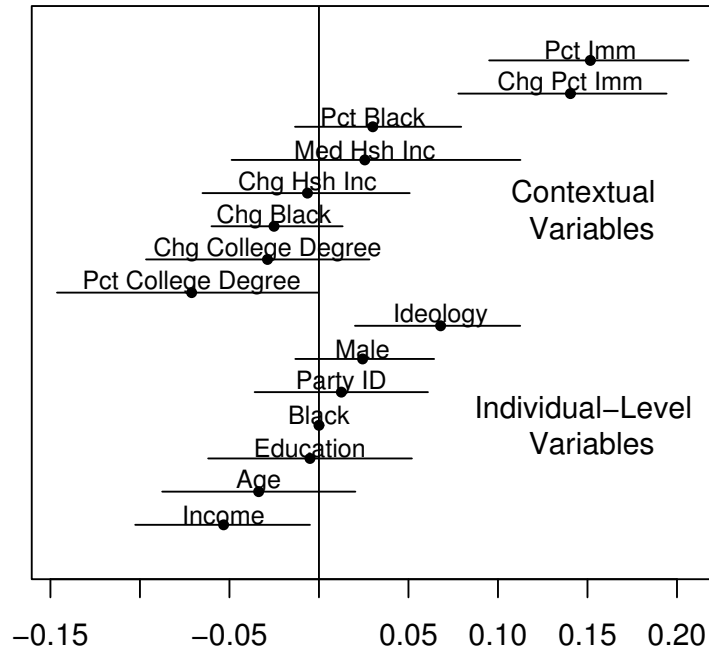


Figure 2: This figure depicts the first difference and 95% confidence interval when each variable is shifted from its 10th percentile to its 90th while holding others at their means or medians.

might be more responsive to economic threats than students or retirees. Using an interaction term, we learn that those with full-time jobs are actually *less* responsive to the changing local context than are other respondents. The other variables have little influence, either on their own or interacting with the measure of local inflows of immigrants. Economic threat does little to explain these findings.

Returning to the main model, Figure 2 depicts the first differences for each independent variable when holding other variables at their means or medians. Each dot represents the estimated change in the probability of being very concerned about immigration when the variable in question moves from its 10th percentile to its 90th percentile. The lines represent

95% confidence intervals for these changed probabilities. The figure makes it clear that the share of immigrants in 2000 and changes in that metric from 2000 to 2006 are the strongest predictors of increased local concern about immigration. At a time when immigration was a prominent national topic of debate, the presence of many immigrants or growing numbers of immigrants in the area produced concerns about immigration’s local impact as well. Given national attention to the issue, local contexts can indeed generate threatened responses. But as we saw in 2001, demographic changes alone are not always threatening. Nor are large local immigrant populations.

2.2 2005 British Election

The idea of an interaction between salient political rhetoric—typically at the national level—and local experiences has precursors in qualitative research about anti-immigrant politics in Britain (Hewitt, 2005; Solomos, 1993; Husbands, 1983). In their narratives, each of those studies illustrates how groups mobilize locally in response to national rhetoric and shifts in national politics. Husbands (1983), for example, points out that the National Front’s “fortune has risen and fallen according to the occurrence of race-related events, and in particular, to the type of coverage these events have been given by the media” (8). This section provides a test of whether local-national interactions can explain which Britons are especially concerned about immigration.

This section employs BES panel data collected during the 2005 general election campaign in Britain to confront these possibilities and test the argument in an unlikely case. It shows not only that contextual effects vary systematically in a period of months, making explanations based on economic conditions or other slow-moving variables less likely. At the same time, these data allow us to eliminate alternative explanations based on selection bias and endogeneity. By observing the same respondents before and after the exposure to significant rhetoric about immigration, we can identify whether contexts become a stronger predictor of concern about

immigration. Whatever selection processes are taking place are held constant in such a design, since they cannot explain the *change* in a contextual influence. Also, attitudes observed after the campaign cannot explain the salience of rhetoric during the campaign, removing concerns about the endogeneity of political rhetoric. The dependent variable is whether respondents report that “immigration” or “asylum” is the most important problem facing Britain.

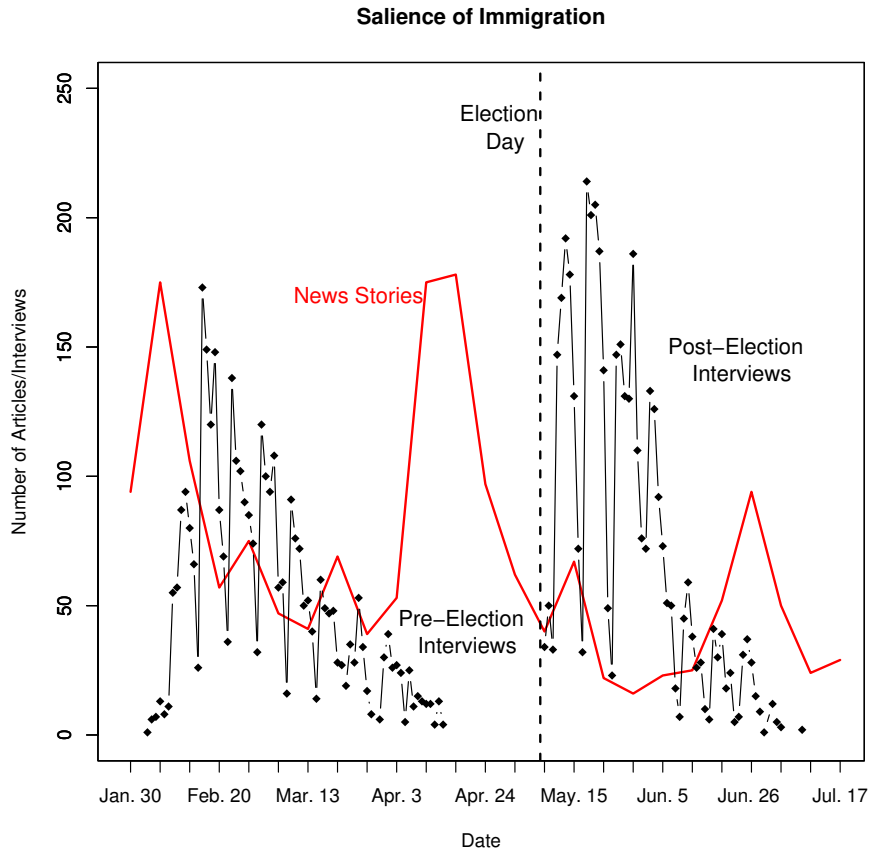


Figure 3: This figure shows interviews by day as well as the attention to immigration-related issues each week in Britain in 2005.

Figure 3 demonstrates the research design underpinning these analyses. The two dotted lines indicate the number of respondents interviewed by day both before and after the election. In total, 3,589 respondents were interviewed prior to the election, and 2,959 of those respondents were re-interviewed afterward. We see from the figure that the vast majority of

the pre-election interviews took place prior to the April 11th announcement of the election, and the vast majority of post-election interviews were completed within two months of the May 5th election. In these analyses, all interviews were face-to-face.

The solid line in Figure 3 indicates the number of news stories by week mentioning “race,” “immigration,” “immigrants,” or “asylum.”¹⁹ As other researchers have noted (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005; Whiteley et al., 2005), elite attention to immigration spiked during the early phase of the campaign. In part, that was driven by the Conservative Party’s election theme, “Are you thinking what we’re thinking?” which was thought by some to be a subtle attempt to evoke unease about immigration. This type of politics, which attempts to send signals to one constituency that go unheeded by another, earned the name “dog-whistle politics.” The notion that the Tories were trying to appeal to racial sentiment was reinforced by their hiring of Lynton Crosby, a strategist who had previously used immigration in Australian campaigns (Gould, 2007; Kavanagh and Butler, 2005).

Irrespective of the Conservatives’ intentions, immigration and asylum issues became central in the early part of the campaign (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005). This allows us to compare the same respondents living in the same neighborhoods before and after exposure to national rhetoric on issues of asylum and immigration. Contextual data are available at a variety of levels of aggregation, from Lower Level Super Output Areas with an average of 1,513 people to electoral wards with an average of 5,909 and Parliamentary constituencies with an average of 91,387 (Johnston and Harris, 2006). We can thus compare respondents at multiple levels of aggregation as well.

The dependent variable is a binary indicator of whether the respondent deemed immigration or asylum the most important issue facing the country. Using the panel weights, we observe that 12.9% of respondents said so before the election and 21.4% said so afterward. The independent variables include the respondent’s sex, age, educational level, and income as well

¹⁹Specifically, it reflects the number of articles in a sample of roughly 100 British newspapers available through Lexis-Nexis.

as indicator variables for unskilled workers, Conservative identifiers, and Labour identifiers.²⁰ At the neighborhood level—operationalized here as the Lower Level Super Output Area—the model includes the percent with high qualifications (well educated), the population density, the share born abroad, and the inflow of immigrants in the prior year. Here again, missing data are multiply imputed. We restrict the sample to white Britons living in England and Wales, which leaves us with 2,386 respondents.²¹

The results from separate models for the pre-election and post-election responses are shown in Figure 4. Consider the solid lines first. For the pre-election data, we fit a logistic regression predicting whether the respondent calls “immigration” or “asylum” Britain’s most important issue. For each independent variable, we then estimated the difference in the expected outcome as the independent variable shifts from its 10th percentile to its 90th, holding others constant. This change in probability is a first difference. The dot indicates the average first difference across 10,000 simulations, and the solid line represents its 95% confidence interval. We see, for example, that the first difference for the change in the percent immigrant is almost exactly zero, indicating that this variable has little predictive power in the pre-election data. The local percent immigrant in the pre-election period is positive but close to zero, indicating that we cannot make strong statements about its influence.

However, the post-election results tell a different story, as demonstrated by the open circles and dotted lines. After the election, we see that the percent immigrant in the neighborhood becomes a significant predictor of thinking that immigration is the most important problem. Shifting from a neighborhood at the 10th percentile (1.6% born abroad) to a neighborhood at the 90th percentile (14.3% born abroad), we see a 5.5 percentage point increase in the probability of naming immigration the most important issue on average. The confidence interval runs from 1.9 percentage points to 9.1 percentage points. Once the campaign had ended,

²⁰Respondents’ educational level was measured by sorting 18 qualifications/degrees into eight ordered categories. The results reported below are robust to including each of the categories as indicator variables as well.

²¹Contextual data for low levels of aggregation are not available for respondents living in Scotland.

Predicting Immigration as Most Important Problem

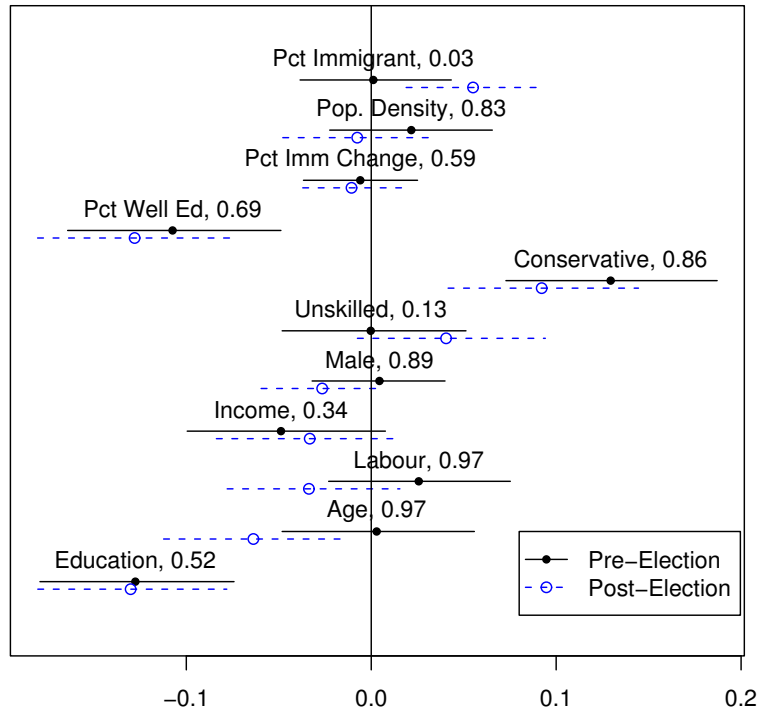


Figure 4: This figure shows the first differences given a shift in each independent variable, with the data separated into pre-election and post-election. The number to the right of each variable indicates the p-value for the hypothesis that the variable’s post-election impact is smaller than its pre-election impact. Living in a heavily immigrant neighborhood was a stronger predictor of concern about immigration after the 2005 British general election.

there is consistent evidence that those respondents in heavily immigrant neighborhoods were significantly more concerned about immigration. Moreover, that had not been the case just months before. Thus we cannot attribute the contextual effect to selection bias, or to any other alternative causal factor that acted prior to the campaign itself.

The true test of the hypothesis of a national-local interaction lies in the extent to which contextual effects change over the course of the election. Next to each variable name, Figure 4 also displays a p-value for the hypothesis that the variable’s impact after the election is smaller

than its pre-election impact. For most of the variables, there is scant evidence of a change over this period. But older voters and Labour voters become significantly less worried about immigration as a national issue after the election, and those in heavily immigrant neighborhoods become more worried. The p-value of 0.03 indicates that in only 3% of simulations is the contextual effect of living near many immigrants stronger before the election.

This technique does not pick up many spurious results, as many of the p-values indicate similar effects before and after the campaign. But the technique does confirm our expectation that people who initially identified with Labour would become less concerned about immigration relative to other respondents over the course of the campaign. This is no surprise: the Conservative emphasis on immigration was likely to shift attitudes among the non-identified or among Conservatives more than among Labour identifiers (Zaller, 1992). The technique of comparing impacts at two different points in time detects effects where we expect them and does not detect many effects where we would not.

Certainly, one might worry that this result stems from some idiosyncrasy of the data collection or model specification. However, the pattern of results holds very consistently when we include any one of twelve additional neighborhood-level measures, from the percent Muslim or the percent in the highest socioeconomic group to the percent in Social Housing. They also hold up when conditioning on the share of Labour's vote in the constituency in the 2001 election, a fact which rules out the alternative explanation that local differences are driven by aggregate partisanship. The only variable that obscures its influence is the percent Black, which correlates with the percent foreign born at 0.72.²² The result is also robust when we remove any of the measures of skills, since there are several such measures in the model. One might also worry that these findings are driven by London, the most diverse metropolis in the

²²Given recent research (e.g. (Bowyer, 2008*b,a*) demonstrating that Pakistanis and Bangladeshis produce threat most consistently, it is worth noting that in these data, both the percent South Asian and the percent Black are independent, positive predictors of indicating that immigration is Britain's most important problem. The coefficient for the percent black is significant (with a t statistic of 2.33) while the coefficient for the percent South Asian is not (t=1.46). The same groups do not always drive contextual effects, it seems.

United Kingdom. But even excluding the capital city, the results remain robust. They are also robust when using the larger census wards or Parliamentary constituencies as the geographic unit.

An additional concern is that these results are confounded by local campaigns, and by variations in information environments across England and Wales. Certainly, the conceptualization of a single information environment across England and Wales is an over-simplification. The 2005 campaign in particular was targeted, with the parties competing very differently across the constituencies (Heerde, 2007). But even when we condition on the log of total campaign spending by constituency (Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2008), which should measure the intensity of local campaigning, we find the same results as reported above.

If local contexts are in fact politicized by national events, we should also expect people who paid close attention to the campaign to be especially susceptible to environmental influence. Respondents were asked if they had seen “any of the Party Election Broadcasts that were shown on television during the election campaign.” 68% of respondents in our sample said yes. Among those respondents, the contextual effect of shifting from a neighborhood that is at the 10th percentile foreign born to one at the 90th percentile is 7.7 percentage points, with a 95% confidence interval from 3.5 to 11.9 percentage points. Because only one in five respondents in the survey indicated that immigration was the nation’s most important problem, this 7.7 percentage point increase represents a change of 34% over the baseline probability. Among those who did not watch a broadcast, the contextual effect is a statistically insignificant - 1.0 percentage point. No such interaction existed before the campaign. Not only did the campaign induce a contextual effect, it did so in the subset of people who were paying close attention. This finding is counter-intuitive, since media effects and local contextual effects are often thought of as substitutes. But it provides yet more evidence that national politics can shape local contextual effects.

3 Discussion and Conclusion

Contextual effects are not static. Even the same respondents living in the same neighborhoods will respond differently to their neighbors depending on the broader national context. And this is not a finding that is specific to the U.S.: it shows up in the U.K. as well. Having identified the same processes at work in two different countries, we can be more confident that they are not idiosyncratic, or artifacts of multivariate analysis. Across countries and across time, we observe that contextual effects are influenced by the national political environment. This provides an alternate explanation for the past conflicting findings on inter-group threat. Perhaps the conflicting findings reflect a conflicted reality, as threatened responses come and go with national attention to immigration.

One might also invert these conclusions, and use them to gain leverage in debates about the role that elites play in shaping public opinion (e.g. Page and Shapiro, 1992; Zaller, 1992; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). This study suggests that salient elite rhetoric on an issue might be more effective when it resonates with experiences in people’s day-to-day lives (Kinder, 1998; Mutz, 1994). The influence of frames could be contingent not only on their persuasiveness and timing (Chong and Druckman, 2007*a,b*) but on their resonance—that is, their ability to highlight factors observed in people’s own experience.

Still, this study itself leaves several questions to future work. Here, for simplicity’s sake, the information environment is typically characterized as a single national stream of information, received with equal intensity by all respondents. Scholars can nuance that understanding in two ways. We can develop more accurate characterizations of the information environment, characterizations that acknowledge variation by media source and location. Where people get news shapes what news they get. And we can link that variation to the characteristics that make people more or less susceptible to the interactive effects highlighted in this paper. The interaction with campaign attention described above is a small step in this direction.

Both characteristics of the respondent and characteristics of the community might shape the dissemination of contextual information.

Future work should also explore why specific aspects of the local context do or do not become politicized. This paper and past research on the U.S. emphasize the role of *changes* in local contexts, demonstrating that sudden inflows of immigrants can generate aversive responses. In those cases, residence in heavily immigrant communities did not correlate with anti-immigrant views. The studies here demonstrate that at least in the U.K., it is not changes but *levels* of ethnic diversity alone that generate concern about immigration. One might try to explain those differences with reference to residential mobility or differences in the role of local government in providing resources. Given that government-provided housing is far more prevalent in the U.K., it is plausible that traditional threat-style responses to large immigrant populations are more common there as well. In Britain, larger immigrant populations could be thought to indicate a shift in local political power and the allocation of local resources. In the U.S., with its high rates of home ownership, changes might be especially destabilizing. Changes might induce uncertainty about the future of the neighborhood (Gould, 2000) and an impetus to quickly sell one's home before prices decline (Sugrue, 1996). But as this paper has demonstrated, to produce a sizable contextual effect, the broader information environment must be conducive as well.

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