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When Partisans and Minorities Interact: Interpersonal Contact, Partisanship and Public Opinion Preferences on Immigration Policy

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Abstract

Objective. Many studies investigating contact theory have suggested that contact effects are not universal but rather conditional. In this article, we test one form of conditional contact effects. Our approach posits that contact with out-groups produces support for pro-minority public policies only when in-group members are not subject to contrary messages from co-partisans. *Methods.* We use data from an original survey to test this theory in the immigration policy domain. *Results.* We find strong confirmatory evidence that the emergence of contact effects on support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants is dependent on party identification. *Conclusion.* When information from the social environment and those from the party coincide, they reinforce each other producing more tolerant policy preferences. However, when the two are not congruent, individuals may use partisanship to help interpret contextual information, thus cancelling out the positive effects of intergroup contact on policy opinions.

Introduction

The American electorate is divided on how best to handle the issue of undocumented immigration and whether inclusion or restriction/deportation is the preferred course of government action. Research on immigration policy preferences has focused on two key drivers of attitude formation: inter-group interactions and partisanship/ideology. A substantial literature in political science, sociology, and social psychology has sought to understand how various types of personal and group-level interactions between people from different racial and ethnic groups influence the way members of the majority perceive of those in the minority and how those perceptions turn into political preferences. The contact hypothesis, originating with Allport (1954) and extensively tested by psychologists, suggests that direct (e.g., Pettigrew 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006) and mediated (Crisp et al. 2008; Schiappa et al. 2007; Wright et al. 1997) interactions with out-groups serve to reduce prejudice. A different tradition in political science seeks to tie public attitudes and preferences to partisan identities and ideologies (Zaller 1992, 1991; Iyengar 1991; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995; Nelson and Oxley 1999). In this view, partisanship acts as an information shortcut that guides people's policy choices and allows them to make political decisions at low cost (Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Here, we argue that preferences about immigration policy are influenced by the interaction of out-group contact and the partisan context. Specifically, we posit that contact with minorities reduces prejudice by providing stereotype-challenging information about out-groups (e.g. Allport 1954). However, the knowledge that comes from social interaction is not the only readily available information about how out-groups should be treated by public policy. In addition to outgroup affect, on matters of public policy, individuals also use their party preferences to understand which policies to support and which to oppose (e.g. Carsey and

Layman 2006). We expect that when the cues from the social environment and those from the partisan context coincide, they reinforce each other producing more tolerant policy preferences. However, when the two are not congruent, political party preferences may trump social interaction, thus cancelling out or even reversing the positive effects of intergroup contact on policy opinions. We test this hypothesis using an original survey which incorporates specific measures of interpersonal contact with Latinos, the group most frequently associated with immigration, and attitudes toward immigration policy. The analysis supports our theory: the connection between interpersonal contact and support for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants is contingent on partisan preferences.

Intergroup Contact: Process and Effects

In his seminal book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport (1954) proposed that interaction between members of various social groups can help reduce perceptions of social distance, weaken stereotypes and prejudice, and foster good will. Allport's "contact hypothesis" has been tested in hundreds of studies in the U.S. and across the world since the 1960s (for a review, see: Pettigrew and Tropp 2006)

Importantly for this study, the contact hypothesis has also been tested extensively on the connection between direct interactions between whites and Latinos and/or immigrants in the United States, and both group affect and policy preferences about immigration. Numerous studies have found that white-Latino friendships promote cross-group understanding and reduce the expression of anti-Latino sentiments among whites (Wright and Tropp 2005; Aberson et al. 2004; Page-Gould et al. 2008; Levin et al. 2003; O'Neil and Tienda 2010; Dixon 2006). They also reduce the principle-implementation gap, producing stronger support for racial policies (Dixon et al. 2007). Specifically on immigration issues, Ellison, et al. (2011) show that

friendship with Latinos is strongly correlated with more positive attitudes toward Latinos and a preference for less restrictive immigration policies (c.f., Stein et al. 2000).

Partisanship and the Limits of the Contact Hypothesis

Despite being considered "one of psychology's most effective strategies for improving intergroup relations" (Dovidio, Gaertner, and Kawakami 2003, 5), contact alone is well understood to be insufficient for decreasing social animosity (Pettigrew 1998, 68; Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Allport (1954), in his original formulation of intergroup contact theory, included what he referred to as "institutional" support as a condition for contact to be effective. As Pettigrew (1998, 67) explains, "with explicit social sanction, intergroup contact is more readily accepted and has more positive effects. Authority support establishes norms of acceptance." Initial studies of intergroup contact from field research supported Allport's proposed institutional/social support condition (Landis et al. 1984; Morrison and Herlihy 1992; Parker 1968), as does more recent research (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Nesdale et al. 2005; Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2014). The important point of these studies is that contact in and of itself is insufficient to increase amity since it says little about what is accepted by others in the social network. When people perceive that their in-group has a negative view of the outgroup, they are less willing to integrate new positive information about outgroup members and update their attitudes toward the outgroup (Tezanos-Pinto et al. 2010). However, until very recently, political science had not investigated the issue of conditionality in contact effects on policy opinion formation.

Partisan Cues as Moderators of Contact Effects: The Partisanship-Context Interaction

In work focused on interpersonal contact and attitudes toward gay marriage, Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz (2014) developed a conditional theory of contact in policy opinion

formation. The theory rests on the premise that the tolerance-building effects of positive intergroup contact are conditional upon partisan identity. As they explain, the “hypothesis outlines that authority support (in the form of co-partisan support) must be present in order for intergroup contact to lead to increased acceptance of public policies benefiting minorities” (p. 575).

Among the most effective and widely used political decision-making heuristics is partisanship (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Zaller 1992; Carsey and Layman 2006). The vast majority of voters are affiliated to some degree with a political party and even those who present themselves as independent in surveys express views and positions that are consistent with the platforms of one party or the other (Klar and Krupnikov 2013). Political parties are the aggregators and processors of complex political and policy information which they breakdown and distill into simplified form. In this sense, parties enable the average citizen to understand policy issues and easily form an opinion (Carsey and Layman 2006; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). With the modern 24/7 news cycle and the emergence of the Internet, partisans have easy and direct access to trusted opinion leaders on most if not all issues, though direct access is not necessary for partisan effects to emerge (Mutz 2006).

Of course, not everyone is tuned in to Fox or MSNBC, nor are most partisans involved in party life. However, even without direct access to elite opinions, partisans have access to relevant information from co-partisans with whom they associate socially. Going back to Campbell et al. (1960), political scientists have stressed the role of families (Stoker and Jennings 2005), friends (Kotler-Berkowitz 2005) and trusted others in political behavior (Gimpel and Lay 2005; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995). Especially in the era of social media, elite-produced information spreads quickly across social networks and these networks have profound effects on

the behavior of individual members (Zhang et al. 2009; Bond et al. 2012). In addition, at this point, voters are well “sorted” into political parties that match their ideological positions.¹

Most voters exhibit a level of ambivalence about many political issues. Voters, if and when they have prior attitudes about issues, carry contradictory mental pictures of various political concerns (Converse 1964; Zaller 1992; Layman and Carsey 2002; Kuklinski and Hurley 1994). However, having a partisan identity can allow them to come down on one or the other side of an issue (Carsey and Layman 2006; Zaller 1992; Feldman and Zaller 1992). Partisanship can be the primary bit of data someone has about an out-group and therefore serve as a “perceptual screen” (Campbell et al. 1960, 133) that blocks new, potentially prejudice-reducing, information from being received or appropriately integrated.

The Case of Immigration: Testing a conditional contact effect

While, of course, there is much diversity of opinion in the Republican Party, in general, party positions toward out-groups differ markedly. In the domain of immigration policy, Republican elites have generally favored more restrictive and punitive immigration policies, resisted efforts to regularize the status of undocumented immigrants, sought to expand border enforcement measures and remove judicial discretion in deportation decisions (Ramakrishnan and Gulasekaram 2014). Republican candidates have also produced ads that portray immigrants in highly negative terms. For example, Republicans in Congress passed the restrictive “Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005”, which sought to criminalize unauthorized entry and focus resources on border control. Conversely, Democrats have proposed comprehensive immigration reforms that include the legalization of most

¹ It is important to note that some partisans switched parties to a party more closely aligned with their ideological views, while others seemed to have just absorbed the policy positions of the party with which they already identified (Levendusky 2009).

undocumented individuals with a realistic path to citizenship and opportunities for undocumented youth to reach that goal with greater ease. In 2012, President Barack Obama even issued an executive order, known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program or DACA, to prevent deportations of undocumented youth who came to the United States before age 16 and fulfilled certain other criteria. In late 2014, the Obama Administration extended the immigration executive order to apply to the undocumented parents of legal immigrant and U.S.-born children and to undocumented individuals over the age of 30 who were brought to the U.S. as children but not the parents of DACA recipients. These policy differences reflect normative differences between the parties related to the treatment of out-groups.

Given that Allport conditioned contact effects on cues from authority and, as noted earlier, party identification theory has intimated the importance of the social context, we suggest that the study of public opinion on immigration policy is ripe for applying an integrated theory that takes into account the interaction of the social and the political environment. We therefore draw on the contact-cue interaction approach (Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2014) to argue that political party positions determine the dominant social norms for their co-partisans. Political discourse in the media, on the internet, at work and at the dinner table provides the narrative that allows partisans to navigate and interpret relations with social out-groups and weigh related policy options. *We contend that a proper understanding of the effects of intergroup contact on policy preferences must explicitly contain a theory of party identification.* Thus on immigration policy, where in recent years the political parties have consistently taken sharply different positions, we expect Democrats and Republicans to respond to intergroup contact in different ways.

Specifically, those individuals who identify with a political party that expresses support for pro-immigrant policies (in this case, the Democratic Party) are more likely to generalize the positive contact experience and apply it to policies that benefit immigrants. In this case, Democrats are more likely to support inclusive immigration policies when they have close Latino contacts. Conversely, those who receive partisan cues that are opposed to pro-immigrant policies (in this case, Republicans) are more likely to treat positive contact experiences as an exception and oppose pro-immigrant policies. To summarize, the context-cue interaction approach suggests that *contact with out-groups only produces support for public policies that favor out-groups when the partisan context does not explicitly reject the policy*. Thus positive contact effects emerge only when a political party is either silent about an issue related to an out-group or explicitly supportive of the out-group.

Data and Methods

The contact-cue interaction approach specifies the conditional relationship between contact and partisanship. As a result of contact with an out-group, an individual may experience increased support for pro-minority policies as the contact hypothesis would suggest, or they may be unaffected by contact depending on their party preferences.

We test our conditional hypothesis using an original survey conducted by the UMass Lowell Center for Public Opinion. This survey was administered online by YouGov in May of 2013 and includes 1,000 respondents from a national sample, 923 of whom answered a question about giving children who were brought to the country illegally a path to citizenship if they attend college or serve in the military.² In this survey, we are able to measure interpersonal

² Our original survey was collected online by YouGov and subsequently matched to characteristics from the American Community Survey to achieve a representative sample. This

contact. All respondents were asked “Do you personally know anyone who is Latino/Hispanic?” If they said yes, they were then asked “Thinking about the Latino person you know best, how would you describe your relationship with this person? A member of your family? A close friend? A coworker? Or an acquaintance?”³ The vast majority (684 non-Latino respondents—75%) reported knowing someone who is Latino. Of those, 14 percent said the person was a family member, 27 percent said a close friend, 20 percent said a coworker, and 38 percent said an acquaintance.

The data also allow us to control for relevant confounding variables including gender, education, marital status, age, and religious fundamentalism. In addition, we include variables for four indicators of a person’s partisanship and ideological placement. These include a 7-point party identification question ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican, and a 5 point ideology scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. We also include a variable measuring if the respondent thinks *Fox News* is “fair” or “biased” on the assumption that conservatives and Republicans are more likely to approve of this information source. The online appendix includes question wording for each of the variables we include in the model. The analysis presented below does not include Latino respondents. By excluding Latino respondents from the analysis we do not risk conflating contact and in-group identity.

method, which is a non-probability sampling approach, has been shown to be as good as or better than standard RDD designs (Vavreck and Rivers 2008; Ansolabehere and Rivers 2013).

³ Given the wording of the question, these categories are not mutually exclusive. We cannot test if the person has many Latino contacts across varying categories or if they have only one.

However, this question wording is the standard in the literature and does attempt to capture the “proximity” of the contact the respondent knows best.

Models and Analysis

Our outcome variable for this survey consists of four choices, ranging from strong opposition (0) to strong support (3) for a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. Since the outcome variable consists of four categories, we employ an ordered logit model. In this model we interact party identification with four personal-level contact measures. The comparison group is those who have no Latino/Hispanic contacts.

[Table 1 about here]

Our findings support our hypothesis. People who have Latino family members, friends and acquaintances are all more supportive of a path to citizenship. Interestingly, the “Latino co-workers” variable has no effect on support for a path to citizenship. For each of the three contact variables that are significant, the effect varies depending on an individual’s partisan identification. It is not straightforward to interpret the substance of these effects because we have a nonlinear model and four interaction terms. Thus, we present an illustrative figure of the substance of the effects in Figure 1. Because we have 7 different groups for which we present predicted values, presenting the confidence intervals around the predicted values would make the graph unreadable. We include in Table 2 the predicted values and confidence intervals for interested readers which demonstrate the statistical significance of the substantive effects pictured.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 demonstrates the effect of different types of contact with Latinos on the predicted probability of supporting a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. Effects are modeled by splitting out voters who

identified with different degrees of strength in their partisan attachments. Consistent with our hypothesis, Figure 1 shows that effect of contact on attitudes about a path to citizenship for undocumented children is strongest among the most partisan Democrats. Strong Democrats with no Latino friends have a predicted probability of .19 of strongly supporting the policy while Strong Democrats with Latino acquaintances have a predicted probability of .43. Strong Democrats with Latino family have a predicted probability of .41 while those with Latino friends have a predicted probability .37 of strongly supporting a path to citizenship. Interestingly, it is those with Latino acquaintances that are the most supportive among both strong and weak Democrats, although the differences between acquaintance, friend and family are not statistically significant. Although the effect of Latino contact decreases for Democrats as partisan strength wanes, there is a positive impact of contact for strong and weak Democrats. The positive effect disappears, though, for all independents (including leaners) and Republicans.⁴

Reliability Checks

Following Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz (2014), we also examined whether or not there were significant differences in the generalization of the contact effect by political knowledge. This is important as we are arguing that partisanship prevents the acquisition of contact effects for Republicans. If this is true, this should be an effect more likely observed among more

⁴ It is important to note that Democrats were no more likely than Republicans to report knowing a Latino person: 24% of strong Democrats and 26% of strong Republicans said they did not know any Latino/Hispanic individuals. The forms of contact are also the same for the different partisan groups. Republicans, Democrats and Independents were all equally likely to say they had a Latino contact that was each of the categories.

knowledgeable respondents who are more aware of what the party line is on an issue at any given moment. We find support for this assertion. We accomplish this by splitting the sample into 2 categories – high knowledge and low knowledge – using a 5-point knowledge scale built on a question about partisan control of the House and Senate, and 3 open-ended questions which ask respondents if they know the jobs of John Boehner, David Cameron and John Roberts. Approximately 50% of respondents answered three or more questions correctly, while 50% answered fewer than three questions correctly, making for an easy choice in where to split the sample. The results, which are simply the model from Table 1, run by splitting political knowledge, are presented in Table 3. The results here conform to our theoretic expectations and are consistent with the results from Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz (2014). The partisan-contact interactions are only significant among the sub-group with higher levels of political knowledge; the coefficients are in the right direction, but there is considerably more noise in the estimates for the low knowledge group. All of this supports the contact-cue interaction theory’s assertion that partisan differences in the generalization of the contact effect are driven by partisan cues. As a secondary check on our results, we also ran our analysis using the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). Unfortunately, this dataset does not have a specific question about Latino contact. Instead we employed a variable measuring the percent of the population that is Hispanic in the zip code the respondent lives in. The zip code was chosen because it was the smallest geographic identifier available. The results are substantively equivalent to those produced with our superior measure of contact effects in our original dataset. This analysis is available in Table 4 and the corresponding Figure and confidence intervals are available in the online Appendix.⁵

⁵ The CCES data consist of individual units nested within higher order contextual levels with an

Finally, we also considered whether the effects of party identification, ideology and our measure of opinions of Fox News were appropriately modeled as linear variables or better approximated as a series of dummy variables.⁶ We consider each of these in turn by re-estimating the models with dummy variable replacements and then comparing both the Akaike information criteria (AIC) and the Bayesian information criteria (BIC). Both measures consider the trade-off between fit and parsimony; smaller values for AIC and BIC indicate better fitting models (see Burnham and Anderson 2004). Table 5 summarizes the findings from these considered alternatives. In each case, the model presented in Table 1 is preferred to alternative specifications using both AIC and BIC. Therefore, alternative treatments of partisanship, ideology, and views on Fox News as dummy variables lead to poorer model fit.

Conclusion

inherently interactive hypothesis between first- and second-order variables. The data, therefore, call for a multilevel model. Since our outcome variable is dichotomous, we employ a hierarchical generalized linear mixed model with a logit-link function which is coded 1 for respondents who said they would vote for a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and 0 for those who responded that they would vote against a path to citizenship. We present two sets of models. In Table 4, we present general contextual effects, where level 2 variables are modeled on our dependent variable linearly as a shift in the constant term of the level 1 model. This model allows us to test for context effects generally. In Model 2, we present our model with the inclusion of the interaction term which allows us to assess if intergroup contact affects people's policy preferences differently depending on their partisan identification.

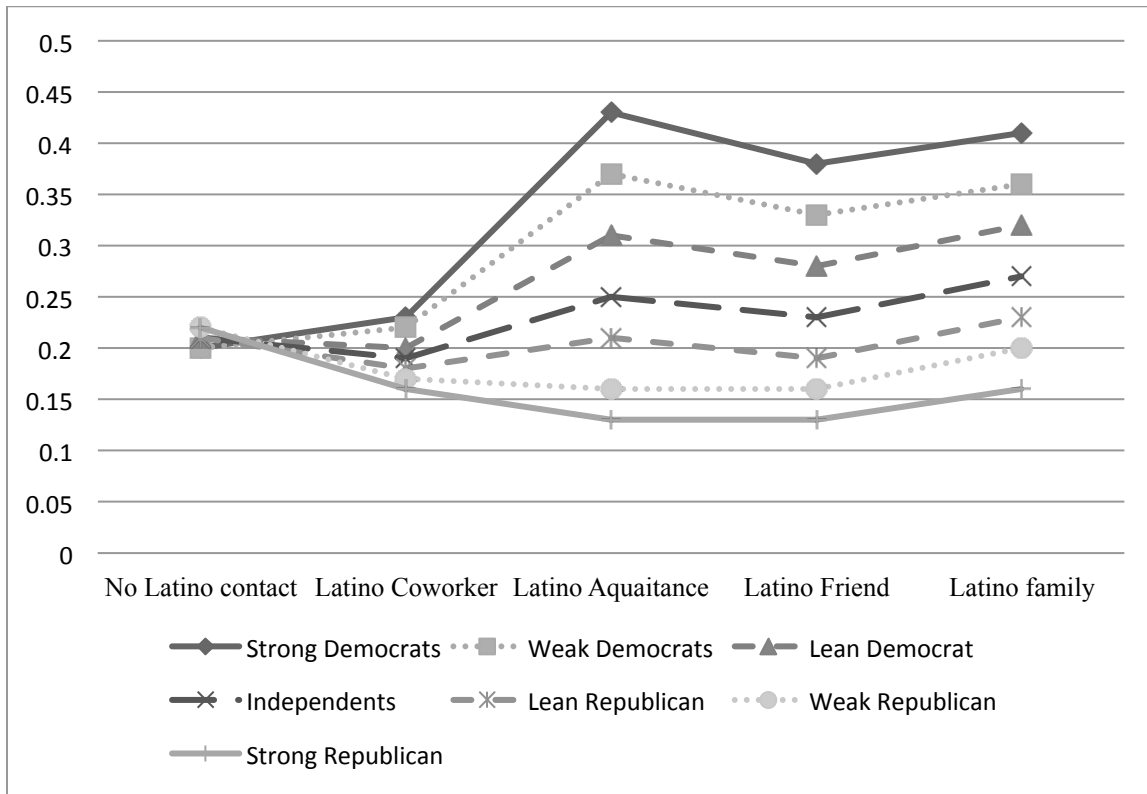
⁶ An anonymous reviewer raised this very important question.

The literature in social psychology and political science has provided ample support for the idea that positive inter-group contact can produce tolerance. However, this paradigm has not fully heeded Allport's (1954) vision and thus has not specified the outer boundaries of the theory and the conditions under which the beneficial effects of social contact may not be realized (Dovidio et al. 2003). This is especially problematic when we know that a number of other information sources in addition to inter-group contact are influential in shaping people's attitudes toward out-groups. Individuals are part of a complex information environment: under different conditions, information derived from inter-group contact may be more or less credible, influential or legitimate. In turn, the likelihood that an individual will generalize the positive knowledge from inter-personal contact with members of an out-group to public policy issues is conditional upon other influences that enable the individual to interpret and attach meaning to these interactions.

Among the most powerful constraints on attitude formation are those created by party identification. Partisanship can interact with the information that people receive from their social context and in some instances they may cancel out or overshadow the positive effects of social contact. As our study shows, partisan identification plays an important role in how the signals from the social context will be received and interpreted, and what impact they will have on a person's attitudes relating to out-groups. When Democrats are exposed to out-groups, the positive effect of contact can be amplified as it interacts with the inclusive attitudes emitted by the party. This in turn makes them more open to inclusive policy proposals such as the path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Conversely, the positive effect of contact may be reduced or cancelled out for Republicans because the party rejects inclusive policy.

The context-cue interaction approach that we outline in this article is a step in integrating the complexity of the information environment to the study of group interactions and social prejudice. We claim that understanding the production and mitigation of prejudice requires scholars to move away from mono-causal explanations to theories that can elucidate how different information cues operate concurrently, how they interact with each other and how the changing strength in intensity of these cues can lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors over time and across space.

Figure 1. Predicted Values for Strongly Supporting a Path to Citizenship for Partisans with Different Types of Contact



Note: Predicted values generated using SPOST for STATA (Long and Freese 2003).

Predictions are the probability of supporting a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children and are computed setting all other variables in the model at their mean levels. Standard errors for the predicted values are included in online Appendix Table 2

Table 1. Interpersonal Contact, Party Identification and Support for a Path to Citizenship, 2013 YouGov Survey

Independent Variables	Model 1		
	Coeff.	SE	P-value
Party ID X Latino Family Member	-.24	.11	.04
Party ID X Latino Friend	-.25	.10	.01
Party ID X Latino Coworker	-.10	.11	.35
Party ID X Latino Acquaintance	-.30	.10	.00
Party Identification	.02	.08	.79
Latino Family Member	1.0	.43	.02
Latino Friend	.89	.34	.01
Latino Coworker	.16	.40	.68
Latino Acquaintance	1.14	.37	.00
Fox News Fairness	.41	.07	.00
Ideology	-.55	.11	.00
Born Again	-.05	.16	.76
Education	.07	.05	.17
Female	.31	.15	.04
Married	.22	.16	.15
Black	-.25	.37	.49
White	-.06	.27	.81
Cut 1	-.874	.487	
Cut 2	-.136	.485	
Cut 3	1.846	.480	
N	785		
Prob>Chi2	.00		

Notes: Data are from an original YouGov survey, commissioned by the authors and fielded in May of 2013. Coefficients are estimated with an ordered logit model. Models include only non-Latino respondents.