2 The Wall

Tear down this wall!

– President Ronald Reagan, 1987

BUILD THE WALL!

– President Donald Trump, 2017

The bulwark referred to by President Reagan in the first epigraph is the iconic Berlin Wall, whose fall was celebrated around the world. The German fortification had come to symbolize economic stagnation and the suppression of freedom, democracy, and human rights. For good reason, as the Cold War came to an end, border walls were seen as shameful embodiments of the totalitarian countries that built them to keep people fleeing poverty and repression from crossing. Thus, the idea of any nation constructing a massive and costly national boundary barrier seemed anachronistic (Jones, 2012: 5). In fact, many observers at the time believed we had entered a new and interdependent era of capitalist globalization that would lead to “the rollback of the state and the erosion of its borders,” including the walls that sometimes delineate them (Andreas, 2000b: 2; Ohmae 1999).

Although the international system has become more economically interconnected, contrary to expectations, the stigma associated with the erecting of walls has all but vanished, as “the current era of globalization has resulted in the most intensive and extensive period of bordering in the history of the world” (Jones & Johnson, 2016: 1). Importantly, and as the second epigraph illustrates, border walls are not solely an international phenomenon but are presently at the center of US politics. This raises a number of questions. How could a country whose leaders once advocated for the tearing down of walls elect a president who ran on a platform promising to build one? How can we explain the contemporary clamoring for an American border barrier, and what factors drive support for this proposal? Before exploring these vital questions, we examine what previous research tells us about what walls symbolize, why countries build them, and what they signify about the people who demand them. Additionally, we provide a brief review of some of the major policies – and their effectiveness – that over several decades have led to the construction of about 700-miles of fortifications along the 2,000-mile US–Mexico border.

2.1 Why Walls?

Prominent scholars agree that border bulwarks “have always spectacularized power” and aimed to evoke permanence, security, and impenetrability (Sorel, 2014: 136; Brown, 2017: 51). State border fortifications convey two messages: one of deterrence to the unsanctioned would-be crossers outside of them, and one of reassurance to the citizens living behind them (Nieto-Gomez, 2014: 193). Walls “reflect the nature of power relations and the ability of one group to determine” lines of separation (Newman, 2006: 147), often excluding “suspicious outsiders on ethnic, racial, and social grounds” (Golunov, 2014: 123). In the process, they attempt to preserve an imagined – often white – national homogeneity, distinguishing those who demographically belong from those who do not.

The people on “the other side” of walls are almost always seen as ungoverned and uncivilized, and are described in dehumanizing ways that make them seem unworthy of human rights or even of human life itself (Jones, 2012: 15: De Leon 2015). Hence, walls not only serve as markers of state sovereignty, they also symbolize the reaffirmation of identities. They are instruments of division and tools for the “othering” of foreignness (Newman & Paasi, 1998: 189; Vallet & David, 2014: 142). Viewed through this lens, the recent worldwide increase in xenophobia and populism has manifested itself in a racialized, nativist backlash embodied by the desire for border barriers (Longo, 2018: 2).

How can we best understand racist calls for walls in a globalized era that was supposed to be unifying and borderless? According to Longo (2018), since the September 11 attacks, immigration and terrorism “have dominated the global political imaginary” (2018: 1). Not surprisingly, then, the top reasons contemporary governments – including the United States – give to justify their construction of border bulwarks are their desires to stop undocumented migration (57 percent), terrorism (28 percent), and smuggling (24 percent) (Vallet, 2019: 158–159). Yet, as we will see, at least in the case of the United States, walls have not been effective in achieving their stated goals. So why erect them?

Rather than create a more unified and equitable world order, the post–Cold War era of global capitalism has exacerbated both domestic and international economic inequalities, often along racial lines (Harvey 2007; Jones 2012; Stiglitz 2018). These extreme financial disparities contribute to or directly create the supply of and demand for international migration, including clandestine migration (Sassen 1988; Sassen 2014). Tellingly, quantitative studies on border wall building have shown that the countries that construct them share one primary commonality: major differences in wealth between them and the neighbors they seek to block out (Hassner & Wittenberg 2015; Carter & Poast 2017). As Jones and Johnson (2016) put it, border barriers have essentially “become lines for the protection” of resources amassed by rich nations (9). According to Brown (2017), border walls help “organize deflection from crises of national cultural identity, from colonial domination in a postcolonial age, and from the discomfort of privilege obtained through superexploitation in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent global political economy” (145). As a result, the citizens of Western countries convince themselves that they are the true victims of globalization (133–134; Hochschild 2018), not the people of the global South who have disproportionately suffered from the effects of colonization and capitalist exploitation.

Although the carceral and defense industries have found the “business of bordering” (Fernades 2007; Andersson 2014) to be a lucrative one in which they spend millions on lobbying in return for billions in profits (see Section 3), the rise of global capitalism – or racial capitalism, to be more exact – has led to open borders for the members of mostly white Western nations, but border fortifications for the negatively racialized people of so-called Third World nations. Thus, national boundary walls serve the purpose of global wealth and resource hoarding, limiting the mobility of transnationally displaced labor, and in the process they help maintain vast socioeconomic divisions between wealthy and impoverished countries – “divisions that often correspond to conventional notions of race, in addition to ethnicity and nationality,” and which can be described as a system of “global apartheid” (Sharma 2007; Nevins, 2010: 205; Loyd, Mitchelson, & Burridge 2012).

Before explaining how the latter insights help us understand America’s current calls for walls, in the following section we present a short sketch of US border fortification legislation over the last several decades.

2.2 US Border Bulwark Policies

For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, only a few hole-filled fences sporadically dotted the nation’s southern boundary. While Richard Nixon was the first president to propose building a barrier along the entire US–Mexico border (Grandin 2019), it was President Carter who began materializing this plan by building sections of fencing along it (Dunn, 1996: 183). No additional fortifications were constructed under President Reagan; however, he was the first president to send National Guard troops to the border. Reagan framed illegal immigration as a national security issue, claiming that “tidal waves” of refugees, narcotics, and terrorists were infiltrating the United States from Mexico (Dunn, 1996: 42; Argueta, 2016: 13). In other words, while he was calling for the tearing down of concrete walls abroad, Reagan was also helping to create the rhetorical template that future presidents would use to build steel walls at home. When George H. W. Bush assumed the Oval Office in 1989, he continued to escalate the policing of the southern border. One of the most controversial aspects of these efforts was his 1991 construction of a seven-mile wall between San Diego and Tijuana, a move consistent with the 1990 Immigration Act that, among other provisions, called for the building of “structures to deter illegal entry” into the country (Nevins, 2010: 86). By the time Bush left office, about thirty miles of new or repaired fencing, most of it wall-like, marked the US–Mexico borderline (Dunn, 1996: 136).

Upon entering the White House, President Clinton followed his signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with what, up until then, was the largest degree of border militarization in US history, including more than doubling the miles of wall and various policing campaigns such as Operation Gatekeeper (Andreas 2000; Nevis 2010). Several key events of the early 1990s propelled this process: a terrorist bombed the World Trade Center, the “War on Drugs” was raging, and the national media highly sensationalized its coverage of undocumented Latino immigration (Andreas 2000; Santa Ana 2002). In this context, Clinton signed the Republican-sponsored Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in 1996. Among its many punitive provisions, IIRIRA was the first law to authorize the attorney general’s office to construct border fencing, giving it the power to waive a pair of environmental laws to do so (Haddal et al., 2009: 4–5). Activists quickly raised several ecological concerns and legal challenges, holding up some of the planned wall building in court (Herweck & Nicol, 2018: 13). Nonetheless, by the time Clinton’s tenure was over, one hundred miles of fortifications had been completed (Wong, 2017: 63), and the precedent of waiving laws to build walls was set.

Ironically, President George W. Bush built no border barriers immediately after the September 11 attacks. Less than two miles were constructed during his entire first term. Instead, from 2001 through 2003, Bush focused on starting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and on creating what eventually became the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which consumed and renamed the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and other agencies. This was a critical transformation because it signified that national security and border security were no longer discrete domains (Longo, 2018: 3). Reagan’s rhetorical framing of migrants, smugglers, and terrorists as security threats had become an institutional reality.

With the establishment of the DHS, “attention returned to the Mexican border as concerns about terrorist infiltration were overlaid with representations of Mexico as an ungoverned and uncivilized place” (Jones, 2012: 39, 41). During this period, Bush happily signed the 2005 REAL ID Act. Although the bill focused on creating federal standards for government identification cards, conservatives in Congress inserted an amendment that gave the DHS the unprecedented authority to waive “*all legal requirements*” to ensure expeditious construction of border fortifications (Haddal et al., 2009: 6; Herweck & Nicol, 2018: 17). Combined with these new legal powers, the following year’s bipartisan 2006 Secure Fence Act (SFA) provided the financial and institutional support needed for the explosion of wall building that occurred during Bush’s second term. According to Wong (2017), the SFA authorized the DHS to take “all actions” necessary to “control the border” and provided it with the resources to accomplish this goal (61). Between 2006 and 2007, the amount spent on border fencing and tactical infrastructure jumped astronomically, from $300 million to $1.5 billion, a 400 percent increase (62). SFA required “no less than 700 miles” of fencing along five segments of the US–Mexico border (Argueta, 2016: 14). Thus, the cumulative effects of Bush’s actions were that border fencing went from fewer than 150 miles when he entered office to over 600 miles of fortifications by the time he exited (Wong, 2017: 64).

During a 2008 presidential campaign visit to the border, then-senator Barack Obama expressed regret for supporting the SFA. Obama told local leaders that he was “now opposed to the idea of the wall” and that if he were elected, “something would be done” about it (Garrett, 2009: 129). Yet, in some respects, Bush’s unparalleled bulwark building continued after he left office, not because of what Obama did but because of what he permitted. During his first year as president, Obama allowed over 100 miles of border walls funded under his predecessor to go forward (Herweck & Nicol, 2018: 54). He also continued to increase funding for Border Patrol agents and other immigration enforcement measures like deportations. After Obama’s initial year in the White House, however, funding for fencing was cut dramatically, and wall construction stagnated during the remainder of his presidency (Argueta, 2016: 15).

2.3 Do Walls Work?

In terms of effectiveness, the border was more militarized and had more fortifications on 9/11 than at any previous point in US history, yet the attacks still occurred. All the hijackers entered the country with visas through formal ports of entry and eventually flew airplanes into buildings – none of which would have been prevented by a border wall. Perhaps this is why, despite the burst of walls that emerged around the world after September 11 (Vallet, 2019: 156–157), studies have found that “there is no statistical relationship between actual levels of terrorism and the propensity of states to construct walls” (Hassner & Wittenberg, 2015: 174). Research also shows, moreover, that “despite widespread alarms raised,” there is no evidence of terrorists entering the United States from – or of even the presence of terrorists in – Mexico (Leiken & Brookes, 2006: 503). In fact, since 9/11, domestic terrorists – the vast majority of whom are not immigrants but white, right-wing, US-born citizens – have killed more Americans than international terrorists have (Byman 2019).

With regard to drug smuggling, not only have over 220 underground tunnels from the Mexican to the US side of the border been discovered since the 1990s, but the massive increase in the volume of cross-border traffic caused by NAFTA has given cartels the ability to hide more of their narcotics shipments inside the increasing number of commercial and private vehicles entering the country (Nevins, 2010: 162). As a result, according to the US Drug Enforcement Administration, today the majority of illicit drugs continue to enter through official ports of entry (DEA 2018), not via the remote parts of the southwestern deserts where Trump wants to build his wall.

Although walls have not stopped the trafficking of narcotics, they do seem to have put more money in the coffers of drug cartels. The increased difficulty of entering the United States due to walling and militarization means that unauthorized migrants must now pay professional smugglers to help them cross the border. Not surprisingly, drug cartels control the most hidden routes and, as a result, have discovered a cash cow in the human smuggling business. As a former Border Patrol chief put it, “The more difficult the crossing, the better the business for the smugglers” (Andreas, 2000: 95–96). Tellingly, in the decade after NAFTA, which INS officials knew would *increase* undocumented migration (Nevins, 2010: 168), and since major border fortification began, the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States skyrocketed from 5.7 million in 1995 to 11.1 million in 2005 (Pew Research Center 2019). Statistical studies show that from the early 1990s to the present, the escalation in border fencing has failed to reduce clandestine migration (Wong, 2017: 168). In short, in terms of their stated goals, walls have failed to decrease or prevent terrorism, drugs, and undocumented immigration. Symbolically, however, their usefulness in contemporary racial politics is undeniable.

2.4 Trump’s Walling

As of December 2019, after over three years in office, Trump had not managed to get a single mile of new border wall built (da Silva 2019). And while the president has repaired some parts of existing border bulwarks and claimed these updates are “impenetrable,” Border Patrol officials admit that smugglers have already used a ladder to successfully climb over and an inexpensive saw to cut through the renovated parts of the wall (Miroff 2019). Nonetheless, the fact that the border wall is one of the cornerstone issues of Trump’s political agenda and reelection bid suggests that whether or not he fulfills his promise to build over 400 miles of wall by the end of 2020 (Kumar 2020) is less significant than the wall’s rhetorical usefulness in mobilizing his base and the symbolic meanings his pledge conveys.

Despite their material ineffectiveness, border fortifications can reassure panicked citizens that their government is working to protect them from always lurking, racialized foreign threats. In this fashion, Trump has discursively criminalized Latino immigrants, claiming they are “bad *hombres*” and “rapists” who bring “drugs” and “crime.” The president has also dehumanized migrants by, describing them as "infesting" (Zimmer 2019) the country – a term usually reserved for pests and diseases – and disparagingly stating, "These aren't people. These are animals" (Korte & Gomez 2018). Because dehumanization and criminalization can be used to justify physical violence against demonized groups, it should not have surprised anyone when in 2019 a white man who had tweeted "#BuildTheWall" fatally shot twenty people (almost all of whom were Latino) in El Paso, Texas. Echoing Trump's language, he defended his mass murder as a "response to the Hispanic invasion" (Hasan 2019).

The usefulness of walls as instruments of division that aim to reaffirm certain – in this case, white – identities and preserve imagined (or desired) national homogeneity is also on full display in the rhetoric of the president himself. For example, he claimed it was "a shame" that immigration had "changed the fabric of Europe," and "not in a positive way," but in a manner that was leading to Europeans' "losing" their culture to migrants of color from the global South (Nguyen 2018). Trump doubled down on his white nationalism when he complained that the United States had too many immigrants from "shithole countries" (i.e., the regions of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa) while expressing his desire for more migration from Scandinavian nations (Kendi 2019). As our survey results show, the notion that migrants pose a cultural threat to the United States is key to understanding the support of some whites for the president's punitive immigration policies.

In sum, President Trump has used his calls for a border wall to foster racial fears and resentment, fanning the flames of white nationalism and demonizing migrants – especially Latino ones – by fueling bigoted conspiracy theories about the supposed cultural, political, and demographic dangers posed by them. In the process, he has attempted to reaffirm a need to preserve the United States as a white nation, demanded more white migration, and propagated false notions of white victimhood.

In the remainder of this section, we explore the degree to which these themes influence public support for Trump's proposal to build a mammoth wall along our southern border.

2.5 Public Opinion and Border Walls

Since the early 1990s, a number of studies have assessed public support for building a border wall. In 1993, Gallup found that 71 percent of respondents expressed opposition. By 1995, the percentage in opposition had decreased to 65 percent, and in 2006 was 56 percent. Since then, the level of opposition to a border wall has hovered in most Gallup polls between 56 and 60 percent (Norman 2019). Gravelle (2018: 108) found similar trends, showing opposition to the wall gradually increasing to 61 percent in 2016. For three decades, then, about half to a strong majority of the country has opposed building a wall. Given the salience of immigration and the frequency with which President Trump focuses on the imperative to build a wall, it is critical to assess the current state of public support. In this section, we seek to assess the factors driving contemporary support for and opposition to the wall, as well as public perceptions of its potential effectiveness.

Research focusing on how proximity to the border influences attitudes on immigration is fairly limited. Even fewer articles directly examine public support for a wall. Prior work has demonstrated that proximity to the US–Mexico border can substantially shape attitudes toward immigration policies, and this effect is largely polarized by political party. Proximity leads Democrats to be more supportive of initiatives protecting immigrants and to oppose restrictive policies, while it increases Republicans' willingness to support restrictive immigration policies and to oppose policies seeking to expand immigrant rights (Branton et al. 2007; Dunway et al. 2010; Gravelle 2016). But these studies do not focus on support for a border wall.

On the question of how proximity to the border influences opinions about the wall, the findings are mixed. Gravelle (2018) suggests that as distance from the border increases, both Democrats and Republicans, as well as liberals and conservatives, are less likely to support a wall. Cortina (2019), by contrast, asserts that people living in close proximity to the border learn and are socialized about the realities involved, and are consequently less likely to support constructing a border wall than those living farther away, who express opinions from a decontextualized point of view.

What is often missing from opinion studies on immigration is how racial attitudes, anti-immigrant sentiment, and perceptions of threat shape attitudes toward specific immigration policies such as the border wall. The role of these factors is particularly relevant given the highly racialized nature of the debate on the border wall, as well as the way in which it has become a symbol of anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiment. We therefore center the role of racial attitudes, anti-immigrant sentiments, and threat alongside partisanship in our analyses.

2.6 Methodological Approach

To examine contemporary attitudes toward Trump's proposal to build a wall, we designed survey items for the 2019 ITES specifically focused on support for the wall and perceptions of its effectiveness across several dimensions. For each component of public attitudes toward the wall examined, we first discuss the survey questions posed, then the overall levels of support for and opposition to those questions, before turning to statistical models to examine variation in the factors influencing opinions.

In all of our statistical models, we include a host of background control variables, including age, gender, income, and education. Age is measured as a categorical variable with six categories. Gender is coded where a value of 1 indicates the respondent is male and 0 female. Income is coded on a seven-point scale, as is education. To control for media consumption and the dominance of immigration coverage on Fox News (Radtke 2017), we also included a measure of whether people regularly watch Fox News. While income and education are variables frequently treated as controls, in the immigration attitudes literature they can be critical factors for explaining variation. Prior work demonstrates, for example, that higher education can lead to more progressive attitudes on immigration (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2010). Additionally, if individuals are motivated by economic concerns, some scholarship has shown that lower-income individuals are less supportive of pro-immigration policies (Hanson et al., 2009). The inclusion of these measures allows us to test whether the findings from these studies hold up when studying attitudes toward the border wall and other immigration policies.

Our primary explanatory variables in this Element are racial attitudes and partisanship, as well as cultural and demographic threat. Prior research has analyzed whether demographics drive anti-immigrant attitudes (Hopkins 2010; Newman 2013; Abrajano & Hajnal 2015), though often with mixed results. We theorize that what primarily drives any potential relationship between demographics and anti-immigrant attitudes is not actual demographics, but rather anxiety around demographic change. Our demographic threat measure asks, “The Census Bureau estimates that by 2045 racial minorities will compose the majority of the United States population. How concerned are you about this demographic change?” Because prior work has theorized that much of the backlash on immigration is rooted in the perceived threat of Latinos (US and foreign-born) (Chavez 2008; Abrajano & Hajnal 2015), we also include a Latino-specific measure of cultural threat. This question asks, “How concerned are you that immigration from Latin America is changing American culture?” Answer choices for both questions were “Not at All Concerned,” “Slightly Concerned,” “Somewhat Concerned,” “Very Concerned,” and “Extremely Concerned.” The analytical advantage of these two measures of demographic and cultural threat is that they directly tap into perceptions of threat rather than making inferences from contextual factors.[7]

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[7] See Appendix B for more discussion.

The primary variable used in opinion studies to examine racial attitudes is racial resentment. The racial resentment scale is created using four items that ask respondents to agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) Blacks should work their way up without any special favors; (2) Generations of slavery and discrimination make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class; (3) Blacks have gotten less than they deserve; and (4) Blacks must try harder to get ahead. Answer choices range from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". The items are recoded to be in the same direction and placed on a scale from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating higher levels of resentment. While this scale was constructed to measure racial attitudes toward African-Americans (Kinder & Sanders 1996; Tuch & Hughes 2011), no similar scale was created or designed to measure racial resentment toward Latinos until 2020 (Ramirez and Peterson 2020). Scholars have utilized the racial resentment measure and found that high levels of racial resentment are associated with more restrictive and negative immigration viewpoints (Hajnal and Rivera 2014; Tesler 2016). In the absence of a Latino- or immigrant-specific measure at the time of our survey in 2019, we employed this standard measure of racial resentment in our analysis.

Another type of racial attitude that can influence policy opinions concerns perceptions of discrimination (Valentino & Brader 2011). We asked respondents to rate how much discrimination a racial or ethnic group faces on a scale from ranging from "none at all" to "a great deal." The most obvious group to inquire about, given the focus of this study, is immigrants. The racialization of immigration often results in stereotyping all Latinos as immigrants and all immigrants as Latino (Chavez 2008; Masuoka & Junn 2013; Zepeda-Millan 2014). Thus, we asked respondents how much discrimination they think Latinos and immigrants face. We think both of these survey questions are measures of progressive racial attitudes because respondents who answer "a lot" or "a great deal" recognize the substantial levels of discrimination faced by Latinos and immigrants today.

Recent work on racial attitudes also reveals that some segments of the white population increasingly worry about and believe whites experience discrimination (Jardina 2019). Consequently, to assess the degree to which they feel marginalized, we also ask respondents how much discrimination they felt whites face. We found it theoretically interesting and important to measure this phenomenon given that a disproportionate amount of power and wealth in the United States is held by white elites (King & Smith 2005; Masuoka & Junn 2013). Strength of white identity has also been recently shown to strongly influence racial attitudes (Jardina 2019). Accordingly, we ask respondents how important being white is to their identity. Finally, to assess whether respondents acknowledge the advantages bestowed on white people because of their skin color, we ask respondents if they agree or disagree with the following statement: "White people in the US have certain advantages because of the color of their skin." This is a measure of "white privilege," because those who agree with this statement are actively acknowledging the racial advantages of whites relative to other groups (Lopez-Bunyasi 2015).

To measure the impact of partisanship, we constructed a binary variable for Republican, where 1 represents a Republican and 0 represents a non-Republican. Additionally, in alternate models, we test the role of ideology using a seven-point scale, where lower values represent more liberal ideological scores and higher values are more conservative. In graphical and textual depictions of the survey results throughout the Element, we also show differences between Republicans, independents, and Democrats, as well as liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

The outcomes we are trying to explain in this section – levels of support for the wall and perceptions of the wall's effectiveness – have four answer choices ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" or "Strongly Oppose" to "Strongly Support." We normalized the dependent variables to range between 0 and 1, and we use ordinary least squares (OLS) to estimate our statistical models. Explanatory variables have also been normalized for ease of interpretation of the results.[8]

2.7 Theoretical Expectations

We expect that party, ideology, cultural and demographic threat, and racial attitudes will drive support for the wall. Given the salient role of political party and ideology in examining immigration attitudes (Haynes et al. 2016; Wong 2017; Wallace & Wallace 2020), we expect Republicans and conservatives will be substantially more likely than Democrats and liberals to support building a wall. We expect there to be a strong relationship between party and wall support for several reasons. Most obviously, the policy is one of President Trump's signature issues. Second, the wall is widely supported by conservative and Republican political elites (Levine & Arkin 2019). Finally, the policy is a restrictionist immigration policy that is focused on enforcement, an increasingly dominant component in the Republican Party platform (Wallace 2014a; Wong 2017). Taken together, these considerations provide strong support for the theoretical expectation that wall support will be driven by party.

Because of the durable role of racial attitudes and threat in influencing public opinion on racialized policies (Kuklinski et al. 1997; Gilens 1999; Krysan

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[8] Coding details of these variables are in Appendix A. The results do not significantly differ when estimating the models using ordered logit.

2000), including immigration (Peréz 2015; Casellas & Wallace 2019), and the symbolic purpose of the wall as an Othering device, we also expect these factors to be critical in explaining support for the wall. We expect that individuals with the highest levels of racial resentment will be considerably more likely to support the wall. Similarly, we expect people who express strong levels of cultural threat to be more likely to support the wall because they feel that immigrants from Latin America pose a threat to the United States (Chavez 2008). For these individuals, the wall may serve as both a symbol and as an example of good public policy. Similarly, those who are most worried about demographic changes in the population will be much more likely to support the wall for reasons similar to those driving people who are culturally threatened. When people feel threatened by demographic changes and perceive potential negative cultural changes from immigration, we theorize that they may be experiencing an existential crisis not only in their own identity, but also in their sense of national identity. In this way, they may perceive immigration and changing demographics as disrupting their place in society and what they understand American culture to be, triggering support for the border wall out of this sense of threat.

Turning to factors that reduce wall support, we expect that people with progressive racial attitudes, such as those who believe Latinos and immigrants face high levels of discrimination, will express greater opposition to the wall. Similarly, we expect those who acknowledge white privilege will also be more likely to oppose the wall. We expect these factors to moderate support for the wall because we believe these people will be more likely to identify the symbolism of the wall as Othering and excluding immigrants, Latinos, and nonwhites. Likewise, we believe individuals who recognize the levels of discrimination that Latinos and immigrants face are likely to be more capable of calculating the potential harmful consequences of building a wall in terms of which groups it will target and who will experience its negative effects.

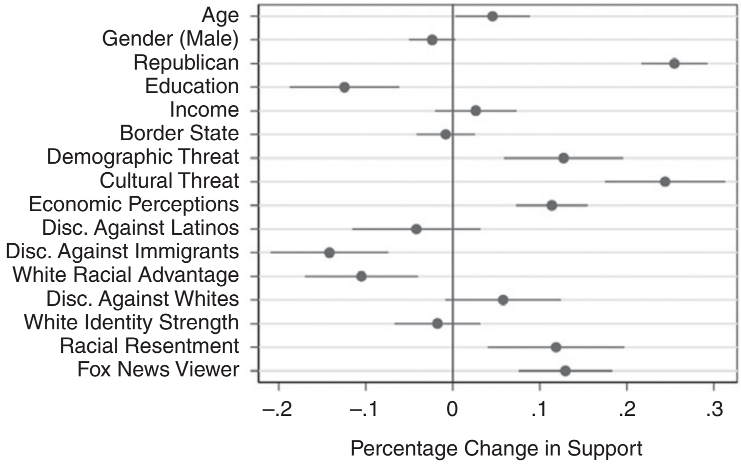
2.8 Public Support for the Wall

To measure support for a border wall, we asked respondents, “Do you support or oppose the construction of a border wall along the entire US–Mexico border?” Answer choices included: “Strongly Support,” “Somewhat Support,” “Somewhat Oppose,” and “Strongly Oppose.” Overall, we find an overwhelming majority of people oppose the wall. The data reveals that only 18 percent of those surveyed strongly support the wall, compared to 53 percent who strongly oppose its construction. If we combine both levels of opposition (strongly and somewhat oppose), 67 percent of people surveyed oppose the wall. This aggregate total is similar to contemporary public polls, such as Gallup.

A very different picture of attitudes emerges if we examine partisan and ideological differences. Support among Republicans is markedly higher than that of non-Republicans: nearly 50 percent of Republicans strongly support the wall, and another 31 percent somewhat support it, for a total of nearly 81 percent support. Among non-Republican respondents (independents and Democrats), 71 percent strongly oppose the wall, and another 16 percent somewhat oppose the wall. Thus, nearly 88 percent of non-Republicans express opposition to the wall, which is close in total percentage to the percentage of Republicans who support it. It is also worth noting that the degree of strong opposition expressed by non-Republicans is considerably stronger than the degree of strong support among Republicans, as indicated by a much greater percentage of non-Republicans expressing strong opposition.

Comparing Republicans directly to Democrats and independents, the difference in levels of support is also substantial. While 81 percent of Republicans support the wall, only 7 percent of Democrats and 40 percent of independents express support for it. Although ideology and partisanship are related, they do not measure precisely the same thing. Comparing support across ideologies, we observe similar levels of polarization, with 80 percent of conservatives expressing support for the wall compared to only 6 percent of liberals and 41 percent of moderates. In sum, Republican partisanship and conservative ideology are key factors explaining support for the border wall. These results are important, because they indicate that opinion on the wall is significantly divided by party and ideology and is indicative of high levels of polarization. Unfortunately, this gap in public attitudes creates conditions in which it is difficult to imagine people from both sides of the aisle coming together in agreement or any sort of compromise.

Our statistical results examine how different factors influence wall support and the degree of their influence (see Figure 1). Confirming our theoretical expectations on partisanship, threat, and racial attitudes, we find that several crucial factors drive support for the wall. The role of partisanship is undeniable and is associated with a 25 percentage-point increase in support of the wall. Feeling culturally threatened by Latin American immigrants has a similar relationship, driving a 24 percentage-point increase. Likewise, those who feel demographically threatened are also more likely to support the wall, with a nearly 13 percentage-point increase in support. Support also increases among those who are most racially resentful (12 percentage-point increase). Not surprisingly, people who watch Fox News are more likely to support the wall (13 percentage-point change). Lastly, people who hold the most negative perceptions of the economy are also more likely to support the wall.



Note: Coefficient plot (OLS) indicating percentage point change in support for the relevant outcome. Lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Figure 1 Support for the wall

A few factors are shown to significantly reduce wall support. Consistent with prior work showing a moderating impact of higher education on support for restrictive immigration policies, we find that education results in a 12 percentage-point decrease in wall support. Progressive racial attitudes, such as whether people acknowledge white privilege (10 percentage-point decrease) or recognize the high levels of discrimination that immigrants face (14 percentage-point decrease), also reduce wall support. These results are consistent with our theoretical expectations.[9]

2.9 Public Perceptions of Wall Effectiveness

As noted earlier in this section, states have historically justified the need to build walls as an attempt to stop drugs (Vallet 2016), terrorism (Brown 2017; Longo 2018), and clandestine migrants (Hasner & Wittenberg 2015; Longo 2018). Broadly grouped, these can all be described as attempts to stop illicit flows (Andreas 2000a); countries often root their arguments in this security perspective. Other scholars have suggested that states build walls primarily for economic security (Hasner & Wittenberg 2015; Carter & Poast 2017). The narrative of an uncontrolled mass of immigrants entering the United States through the US–Mexico border has dominated public debates and media depictions of immigration (Chavez 2001). Chavez notes that this metaphor manifests in various ways, including depicting immigrants as a massive overpowering “flood” or large groups of immigrants ready to cross the border in a line that extends to infinity (2001). He contends this imagery is very powerful in shaping public discourse.

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[9] Perceptions of the discrimination Latinos face does not result in a statistically significant relationship in any of our statistical models. Given the level of racialization Latinos face around immigration (Chavez 2008; Masuoka & Junn 2013; Zepeda-Millan 2014), this is surprising. It may be, however, that the public sees these policies as most directly impacting immigrants, whether Latino or non-Latino.

In his first presidential address from the Oval Office in 2019, Trump repeatedly spoke of immigrant flows as a crisis and doubled down on drawing connections between immigrants and crime, drugs, and gangs. He said, “the Southern border is a pipeline for vast quantities of illegal drugs,” and that it is necessary to “stop the criminal gangs, drug smugglers, and human traffickers” (Taylor 2019). Later that year, when facing a lack of Congressional funding for the wall, Trump resorted to declaring a national emergency in order to allow him to reallocate funds from other sources, such as the military. He defended his declaration by emphasizing an “unprecedented surge in the number of alien families arriving at the southern border,” and made the case for wall funding by arguing that “securing our border is vital to ensuring the safety of the American people” (Trump 2019). It is clear that Trump’s public rhetoric is an attempt to boost public support for the wall and justify its construction; in doing so, he has frequently relied on all three of the standard rationales for wall building – drugs, terrorism, and undocumented immigrants.

Separate from whether any of these claims are true or accurate, of which there is dubious evidence, we are interested in whether the public thinks a border wall is likely to impact any of these factors. We know little about public perceptions of the wall’s projected effectiveness, especially in light of skepticism about its efficiency among experts (Frazee & Barajas 2019). If people do not think walls are effective for the reasons governments and leaders say we need them, then why do they continue to support their construction? We suggest that Trump’s border wall acts as an important cultural symbol against immigrants and immigration. In this sense, we contribute to a long line of literature suggesting that border walls are used as an Othering device and tool for division (Newman & Passi 1998; Dear 2013; Vallet & David 2014).

We directly test these justifications for the border wall by asking respondents three questions about its potential effectiveness. All questions had the same answer choices of “Strongly Agree,” “Somewhat Agree,” “Somewhat Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.” First, we asked, “Do you agree or disagree that the construction of a border wall along the US–Mexico border will stop illegal immigration?"[10] Second, we used a similar question wording but asked whether respondents thought the wall would "stop terrorists from entering the country." Finally, respondents were asked whether the border wall would "stop illegal drugs from entering the country."

When examining general beliefs on the wall's effectiveness, it is clear that there is deep skepticism. Across all three dimensions, a minority of respondents indicate they agree that the border wall will be effective. Only 28 percent indicate they believe the wall will be effective in stopping undocumented immigrants; just 23 percent believe it will stop the flow of illegal drugs; and only 20 percent believe it will be effective against terrorism. It does not appear, then, that the public is swayed by Trump's justifications for the wall.

The results are deeply divided by partisan affiliation, with Republicans showing stronger belief in the wall's effectiveness, though they still express considerable doubt across all three dimensions. Among Republicans, 68 percent expressed some level of agreement that the wall would stop undocumented immigrants, which means nearly a third do not agree that the wall will be effective for this purpose. Perceptions of effectiveness are even lower for drugs (56 percent) and terrorism (49 percent), with half of Republicans indicating they do not believe it will be effective for these purposes. If we compare Republican perceptions of effectiveness to Republican support for the wall as a policy, there is a substantial disjuncture. Over 80 percent of Republicans expressed approval for building a wall, with 50 percent expressing strong approval. By contrast, only 20 percent of Republicans strongly agreed the wall would be effective in stopping undocumented immigration, 13 percent strongly agreed it would stop drugs, and 10 percent strongly agreed it would stop terrorism. We argue, then, that support for the wall among Republicans, despite their limited belief in its effectiveness, is rooted in the symbolic power of the wall to serve as an exclusionary device.

Our statistical models examining the factors driving perceptions of wall effectiveness reveal the same patterns as our models explaining wall support (see Figures 2a–c). The most consistent factors influencing attitudes toward wall effectiveness across all three dimensions are whether the respondent is Republican, feels culturally or demographically threatened, is worried about the economy, and is a Fox News viewer. The substantive impact of these factors is not consistent across all three dimensions, however. The largest substantive effects are observed when we analyze attitudes toward whether the wall will stop undocumented immigration. Here, we find that cultural threat (22 percentage-point change), demographic threat (12 percentage-point change), partisanship (17 percentage-point change), and whether someone is a Fox News viewer

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[10] On question wording, see Section 1.7, "Note on Terminology."

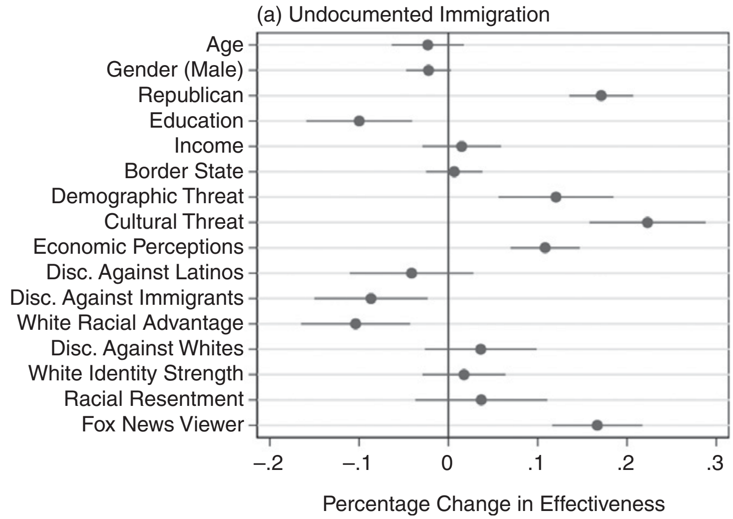


Figure 2a Beliefs in the effectiveness of the wall to stop undocumented immigration

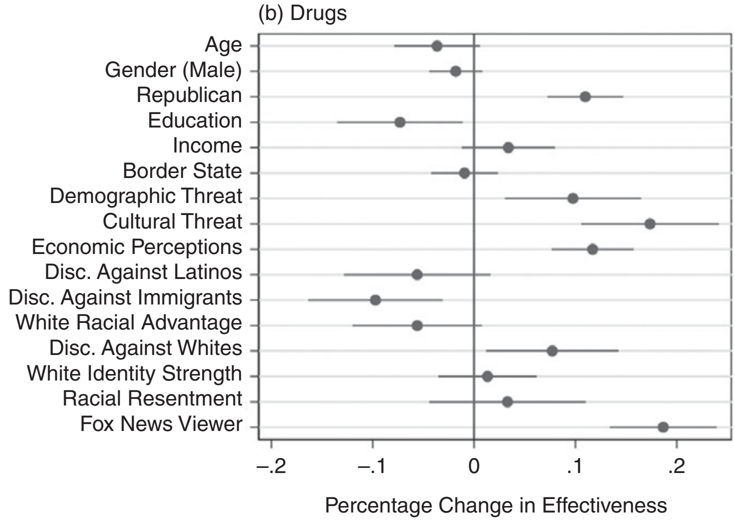
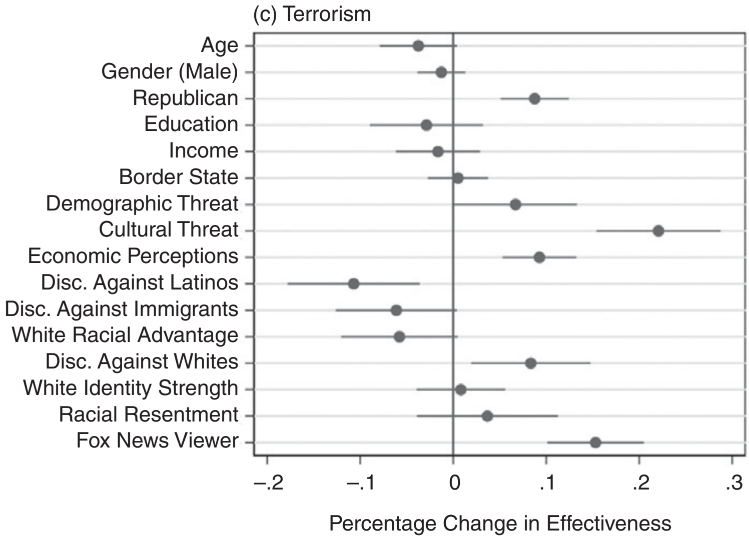


Figure 2b Beliefs in the effectiveness of the wall to stop drugs

(16 percentage-point change) all substantially increase whether a person will agree the wall will be effective. Even more moderate associations for factors like economic perceptions (10 percentage-point change) remain sizeable.

On drugs and terrorism, the impact of various factors is not quite as strong on perceptions of effectiveness. Cultural threat remains a key factor for both,



Note to Figures 2a–c: Coefficient plots (OLS) indicating percentage point change in beliefs about effectiveness for relevant outcome. Lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Figure 2c Beliefs in the effectiveness of the wall to stop terrorism

associated with a 17 percentage-point increase on the drug question and a 22 percentage-point change on the terrorism question. Likewise, being a Fox News viewer has a substantial impact, with an 18 percentage-point increase on perceptions of drug effectiveness and a 15 percentage-point change on terrorism effectiveness. Party plays less of a role, with more modest 9 and 11 percentage-point increases, respectively. Both demographic threat and economic perceptions also play a much weaker role in explaining attitudes toward drug and terrorism effectiveness, with both associated with around a 10 percentage-point change. Overall, results across the three effectiveness models underscore partisan differences and the key impact of both cultural and demographic threat, economic perceptions, and conservative news media on the public’s beliefs.

2.10 Conclusion

According to Jones (2017), US border fortification policies are implemented to appease the country’s white citizenry (viii). While the elected officials who push for these laws do tend to be white, our findings show that a relatively small proportion of white respondents strongly support a border wall or believe it would be effective. While opinions on the wall are deeply polarized along party and ideological lines, with fervent support from Republicans and conservatives, other factors that influence support include perceptions of the economy and consumption of the right-wing views broadcasted on Fox News. However, as our results also show, racial attitudes greatly influence wall support. In line with the spirit of Jones's argument, our findings demonstrate that whites who fear the cultural impact of Latino immigrants, who harbor racially resentful sentiments, and who feel demographically threatened by people of color becoming the majority of the US population are significantly more likely to support Trump's plan to build a wall on the US–Mexico border. These xenophobic mindsets are also associated with believing a border fortification will achieve the president's promised results.

Racial attitudes thus matter when it comes to opinions about a wall along the US–Mexico divide. Drawing on prior scholarship, we have argued that border bulwarks not only serve as markers of state sovereignty, they also attempt to symbolically preserve an imagined or desired national racial homogeneity, are instruments of division, and are tools for the Othering of foreignness. Our empirical results corroborate these contentions, demonstrating that while the majority of whites do not support a border fortification or think it would work, the most racist ones do. Thus, our findings suggest that Trump's wall is less about sound policy or a reflection of the public's desires than it is about appealing to the most racially bigoted segments of the country.

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