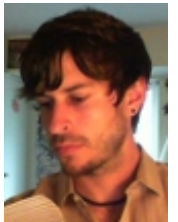


## Anti-Hispanic prejudice drives opposition to immigration in the U.S.

Last June, the U.S. Senate passed a comprehensive immigration bill that would give legal status to 11 million undocumented migrants, but this bill has remained stalled in the House of Representatives, reflecting the anti-immigration sentiments of many Americans. New research from [Todd K. Hartman](#), [Benjamin J. Newman](#), and [C. Scott Bell](#) investigates why so many are against immigration reform, and the role played by racial prejudice against Hispanics. Using surveys designed to detect anti-Hispanic prejudice, they find that white Americans react very differently to law-violating behaviors whether they are committed by Hispanic immigrants or not, suggesting a significant and persistent bias against them.

One key question that arises from current debates about immigration in the U.S. is whether anti-immigration policies are motivated by real policy concerns or simply prejudice toward specific immigrant groups. Supporters of restrictive immigration policies claim that ethnic prejudice plays absolutely no role in their preferences; instead, they argue that they have legitimate concerns about the economic and cultural consequences of unfettered immigration, as well as a desire to impose sanctions on undocumented workers who violated the law. On the other side of the debate, immigration advocates argue that these efforts are motivated by bigotry and represent a veiled attack on the larger Hispanic populace. Given this ongoing debate, we ask the question: What role does prejudice play (if any) in shaping the public's perceptions toward immigrants and immigration policy in the U.S.?



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'Modern racism' is an umbrella term for a set of theories addressing a 'new' form of racial prejudice toward African Americans in the U.S. that emerged following the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. The basic tenets of this theory are as follows: (1) white Americans recognize changes in societal norms that make it unacceptable to freely express 'old fashioned' forms of racial prejudice and open bigotry toward Blacks; and (2) as a result, a subtle, covert form of racism has emerged to supplant earlier, overt expressions of prejudice against African Americans. The key insight of the modern racism perspective is that prejudice became 'coded', whereby antipathy toward Blacks among elites and the masses was reconstituted as a defensibly race-neutral and 'principled' opposition to

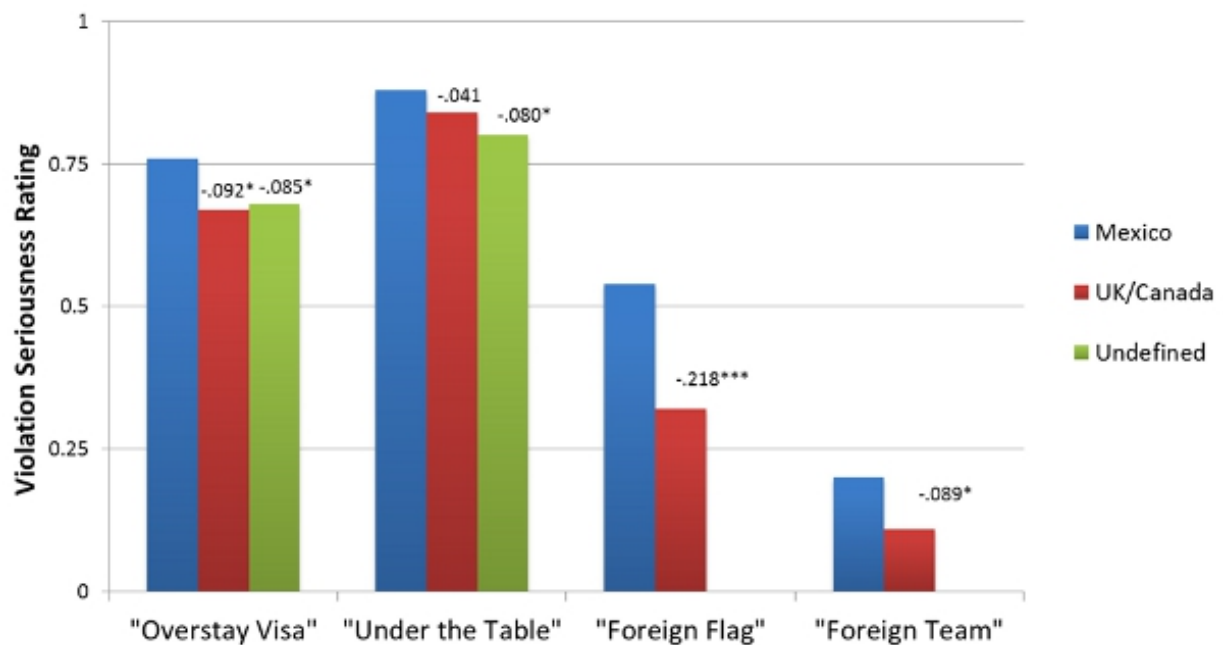
policies intended to advance the interests of black Americans. In adapting modern racism theory from white-to-black to white-to-Hispanic race relations, we predict that white Americans' antipathy toward Hispanic immigrants will be expressed in a similar covert manner, coded by language and reference to concerns that are not explicitly racial. Our primary hypothesis is that, for some Americans, opposition to immigration is rooted in anti-Hispanic prejudice, which is concealed as overt concern over law-violating behaviors, as well as economic and cultural threats posed by immigrants.

To test our coded prejudice hypothesis, we designed four survey-embedded experiments with a nationally representative sample of adult white Americans. In each experiment, we presented respondents with an immigrant who is engaging in a law- or culture-violating behavior, and then we measured participants' reactions to each potential transgression. The primary manipulation concerned whether the perpetrating immigrant was ethnically Hispanic or some other nationality. The power of this simple design is that it allows us to detect anti-Hispanic bias because the only difference between treatment conditions is the ethnicity of the offending immigrant. If public opinion is unaffected by ethnic prejudice, then it should make no difference whether the immigrant is Hispanic, European, or of some other origin. If, however, racism is at work, then white Americans should treat these transgressions very differently depending upon the immigrant's nationality.

We designed the 'Overstay Visa' experiment to test the coded prejudice hypothesis in arguably the most pervasive issue in the debate over immigration, namely undocumented, or 'illegal', immigration. Here, we measured participants' reactions to an immigrant who initially entered the country on a short-term visa but then remained longer than legally authorized. In our 'Under the Table' experiment, we informed respondents that an undocumented immigrant is working without legal approval, thus failing to pay income taxes for this employment. This particular transgression should serve as an important argument to justify opposition to immigration, as people commonly believe that undocumented immigrants use more services than they pay for in their share of taxes. In the 'Foreign Flag' experiment, we had our hypothetical immigrants display a Mexican or Canadian flag rather than the American flag. Our assumption is that displaying the flag of another country should be interpreted as a significant cultural violation (i.e., a lack of American patriotism). Finally, in our 'Foreign Team' experiment, we asked how respondents would feel if they saw someone rooting for a foreign (Mexican or Canadian) rather than American team during the Olympics. We assumed that supporting a foreign national team would serve as a salient symbolic transgression in the eyes of many American citizens.

The effects our experiments are depicted in Figure 1. The bars represent how serious respondents viewed the transgression from different immigrant groups on a scale from 0 to 1, where 1 indicates 'a very serious offense'. Two things are clear from this figure. First, respondents rate law-violating behaviors from the first two experiments more harshly than they do the cultural violations from the last two experiments. Second, and more importantly, white Americans view the *exact* same behaviors very differently when committed by Hispanic immigrants relative to others. Simply put, respondents reveal a significant and persistent bias against Hispanics in the U.S. We should also note that in looking at the results, it is clear that the 'hidden bias' toward Hispanics is the largest when it comes to immigrant behaviors that are deemed to violate cultural values, norms, and identities. In other words, the results from our experiments strongly suggest that expressing concern over immigrant assimilation to American culture likely serves as a more amenable and utilized 'coded' vehicle for prejudiced white Americans to express their anti-Hispanic sentiment.

### **Figure 1 – Perceived Seriousness of Each Violation by Nationality of Offending Immigrant**



**Notes:** Bars represent the mean levels of perceived seriousness of each offense, and entries above the bars reflect the mean difference between the Mexican group cue treatment and the non-Hispanic or control conditions (i.e., entries are unstandardized regression coefficients). \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  level. Significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests.

In addition to identifying a systematic bias against Hispanics in public reactions to transgressive immigrant behavior, we also examined how this ‘hidden’ bias toward Hispanics influences support for restrictive immigration policies. Later in the survey, we asked respondents about their views toward several different immigration policies. In each case, we discovered that receiving the Hispanic group cue indirectly increased support for restrictive immigration policies by heightening the perceived seriousness of each transgressive behavior. That is, respondents in the Hispanic group cue condition deemed the behaviors in our scenarios as more egregious violations than those in the non-Hispanic conditions, and these heightened violation perceptions directly increased support for restrictive immigration policies.

As we delve further into the 21st century, ethnic change and increasing diversity will undoubtedly serve as potent forces shaping the social and political scene in the U.S. Yearly influxes of immigrants from Latin America, along with high birth rates among Hispanic households, will continue to place Hispanics at the center of political debates and conflict over issues of immigration, multiculturalism, and other policy areas associated with racial and ethnic minorities, such as affirmative action and social welfare. Across four separate experiments, our analyses demonstrate that while the American public does care about immigrants’ transgressive behaviors, they also significantly distinguish between the immigrants who are engaging in these behaviors. One major implication of the findings from our studies is that it gives us evidence that the claim of race-neutrality and non-prejudice among opponents of immigration is a suspect one.

This article is based on the paper *‘Decoding Prejudice Toward Hispanics’* in *Political Behavior*.

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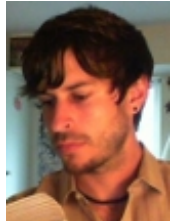
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