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What is This?
Ethnic Change, Concern over Immigration, and Approval of State Government

Benjamin J. Newman1 and Joshua Johnson1

Abstract
The popularity and approval of a governor among their state citizenry is a central form of political capital that animates the informal power key to their legislative success and bolsters their prospects for reelection. Within the extant literature exploring the sources of approval of state executives, the lion’s share of the work focuses on the deleterious effects on approval of a poorly performing national and state economy. In the present article, we rely on the same logic underlying the economic-centered research—namely, that unhappy citizens blame governors and state governments for their discontent—but focus on the impact on approval of an entirely separate and relatively unexplored domain of life in a state: ethno-demographics. This article advances the hypothesis that citizen discontent over drastic ethnic change in their local environment is politicized as concern over immigration, which in turn serves as a concrete political issue through which personal discontent over increased ethnic diversity is translated into lower approval of state government. This hypothesis is tested within the context of the state of California using pooled statewide survey data. Our analyses demonstrate that growth in the Hispanic population within a respondent’s county of residence significantly increases concern over immigration within the state, and that concern over immigration significantly decreases approval of state government across the board, including the governor, the state legislature, and one’s local state representatives.

Keywords
state government, public opinion, ethnic change, immigration

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Citizens’ evaluation of the job performance of officials in state government is perhaps the most analyzed attitude in public opinion research focusing on state-level politics. Understanding the sources of approval of state government is important because it has been demonstrated, at least within the case of state executives, that approval ratings exert important influence over legislative and administrative policy making (Crew 1998; Dometrius 2002; Ferguson 2003) and success in obtaining reelection (Kenny and Rice 1983; King 2001). In reviewing the gubernatorial approval literature, King and Cohen (2005) observe that the majority of factors analyzed in the research that influence approval, such as national and state economic conditions, presidential approval, and unified party government, relate to an economic-political dimension of analysis. One shortcoming of this near exclusive focus on economic and political factors is that it neglects social and cultural areas of life in the state for which citizens may hold state government accountable.

Beyond changing economic conditions, one reality of social life in many states that may generate dissatisfaction among citizens with potential ramifications for approval of state government is ethnic change. Across the entire nation, steadily increasing immigration and the rapid growth and geographic diffusion of key immigrant minority groups, such as Hispanics, is significantly altering the ethnic landscape of most, if not all, states in the union. For example, in California alone, the immigrant population grew from about 6.45 million in 1990 to 9.85 million in 2006, representing an increase of nearly 3.4 million immigrants residing in the state. Other states experiencing high growth in their immigrant populations during this time period were Nevada, Arizona, and Texas in the Southwestern United States; New Jersey, New York, and Maryland on the Atlantic Coast; and North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and Florida in the Mid Atlantic and Southern regions of the United States. More significant than the numerical growth of immigrant populations across the states is the percentage growth of these populations. For example, the immigrant population increased by more than 100% in 30 of the 50 states between 1990 and 2006, and increased by more than 200% in states such as Tennessee, Kentucky, Nebraska, and Arkansas. Across most states in the union, Census data also reveal that the lion’s share of the growth in immigrant populations over the preceding decades was most concentrated in specific counties within states’ borders (Hopkins 2010), indicating significant local differences in citizens’ personal experience of the ethnic changes occurring across the nation and states.

The central question for the present research is, “What effect, if any, does ethnic change have on approval of state government?” More specifically, we ask whether ethnic change within citizens’ local area within a state holds the potential to influence their level of approval of state government. We believe it does, and offer an immigration backlash hypothesis, which contends that citizen dissatisfaction over drastic, immigration-driven, ethnic change in their local environment will serve to decrease approval of state government across the board. Specifically, we argue that dissatisfaction over increasing ethnic diversity will be translated into concern over immigration as a political issue in the state, and that the perception of immigration as a political
problem in one’s state will in turn decrease approval of the governor, the state legislature, and one’s local representatives. This hypothesis draws on and parallels the logic of theories of retrospective and economic voting in that we predict that higher levels of objective ethnic change will lead to greater perception that immigration has “gotten out of control,” and that citizens will view elected officials as responsible for this and will essentially punish them for their “poor job” in handling and preventing the problem. To test our hypothesis, we rely on census data and pooled statewide survey data obtained from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC). Our analyses demonstrate that citizens residing in counties with higher levels of growth in the Hispanic population are significantly more likely than those in lower growth counties to perceive immigration as an important problem in the state as a whole. Following this finding, we demonstrate that concern over immigration as a political problem significantly decreases approval of the governor, the state legislature, and one’s own local representatives in the state legislature. In essence, our analyses point to an indirect effect of ethnic change on approval of state government, where the effect of increasing diversity on approval is mediated by concern over immigration as a political issue in the state.

By demonstrating the importance of ethnic change and concern over immigration as sources of approval of state government, our research fills a conspicuous gap in the approval literature. Beyond this straightforward contribution, however, our research is further motivated by its potential for illuminating a key mechanism underlying the established link between ethno-demographics within a state, public concern over immigration, and state policy outcomes within and beyond the realm of immigration. For example, changes within the foreign born, and particularly Hispanic, populations within a state have been linked to state adoption of Official English Language laws (Citrin, Reingold, Walters, et al. 1990) and staunch E-Verify laws (Newman, Johnston, Strickland, and Citrin 2012). Beyond immigration policy outcomes, concern over immigration among state citizens has been found to enhance public support for limiting the size of state government and decreasing taxes and the amount of government services (McGhee and Neiman 2010). This finding is reinforced by research demonstrating that higher levels of social diversity and larger immigrant populations within a state are associated with lower levels of state Medicaid expenditures (Hero and Tolbert 1996) less generous levels of social welfare spending (Hero and Preuhs 2007), and more severe sentencing policies (Hero 2003). These mostly state-level analyses leave open for ecological inference the micromechanisms underlying their findings. The results presented from our analyses could suggest that public approval of state government may serve as a key mechanism through which ethnic change and diversity ultimately exert their influence over elite behavior and state-level legislative outcomes. To be sure, one distinct implication of our findings is that restrictive immigration and social welfare policies emerging at the state level may reflect an attempt by elected officials in state government to manage their political fortunes by counteracting through policy response the deleterious effects of unchecked ethnic change on their approval ratings.
Explaining Approval of State Government

The political science literature has long been focused on explaining approval of government from the federal level down to the state level. The justifications for the study of approval of state government, at least in the form of gubernatorial approval, closely track those for the study presidential approval. At the national level, the approval of an executive is theorized to serve as a basis for their persuasiveness and power (Neustadt 1960), as a factor shaping their electoral fortunes (Durr, Gilmour, and Wohlbrecht 1997; Highton 2008; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1982), and as a key source of success in accomplishing their policy goals (Canes-Wrone and De Marchi 2002). Paralleling this, research analyzing the political consequentiality of public approval for state executives has demonstrated that voters are more likely to vote for popular governors in their bids for reelection than unpopular ones (Kenney and Rice 1983; King 2001) and that popular governors are more likely to achieve their legislative goals (Beyle 1999). In reviewing the literature on approval of state government, three features of this body of work stand out: (1) the heavy theoretical and empirical focus on economic and political factors in explaining approval, (2) the preponderance of aggregate-level analyses, and (3) the near exclusive focus on state executives.

Paralleling the literature on presidential approval, the research on approval of state government overwhelmingly focuses on the relationship between the health of the economy and public approval of office holders (King and Cohen 2005). Informing this focus on the economy are theories of economic (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000) and retrospective voting (Fiorina 1978), which argue that the electoral fortunes of office holders and parties in government are directly linked to fluctuations in the health of the national economy. According to these theories, the link between economic conditions and approval is rooted in citizens’ theorized tendency to evaluate the job performance of office holders based on determinations of the performance of the economy. At the national level, scholars have demonstrated that presidents are rewarded for good economic times and penalized for economic downturns (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Mueller 1973; Norpoth 1996). Much like the president in the national political arena, governors are the most visible office holders in the state governmental arena (Squire and Fastnow 1994) and are theorized to be similar to the president in being held accountable by state citizens for a poorly performing economy. A corpus of studies demonstrates that gubernatorial elections and approval are influenced by national and state economic conditions (e.g., unemployment and inflation) and perceptions (Carsey and Wright 1998; Chubb 1988; Hansen 1999; Howell and Vanderleeuw 1990; King and Cohen 2005; Niemi, Stanley, and Vogel 1995; Peltzman 1987; Svoboda 1995).

Outside of the economy, the gubernatorial approval literature has given strong attention to political, institutional, and personal factors, such as shared partisanship with the president (Crew and Weiher 1996), unified party control of state government (Barth and Ferguson 2002), and individual governors’ power orientation and leadership style (Barth and Ferguson 2002; Kelleher and Wolak 2007). The heavy focus on
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economic conditions and political factors has resulted in a field of research dominated by what King and Cohen (2005) term the *economic-political dimension* of approval. The dominance of this dimension has come at the expense of the exploration of important noneconomic or institutional factors that, while perhaps not as salient as a floundering economy, may nonetheless loom large in the minds of state citizens and enter in their calculations of the performance of state government. What has been particularly overlooked in the approval literature is how ethnic and cultural factors, such as ethnic change and immigration, may exert politically relevant effects on citizens’ experience of, and level of satisfaction with, life in their state. At present, the closest approximation is the established finding that population diversity within a state influences aggregate opinion (King and Cohen 2005). This finding, however, is relatively undertheorized in the approval literature, as it is primarily attributed to pluralistic conflict and the complexities of governing a diverse populace, and not theorized as representing a political backlash against the diversity itself by state citizens. At the bottom line, theories of economic and retrospective voting essentially rest on the logic that citizens blame politicians for negative occurrences, such as economic downturns. This logic could very well extend to salient changes in other important areas of life within a state, such as change in one’s local ethnic and sociocultural environment. At present, the relevance of these types of factors on approval of state government is essentially unknown.

Beyond the dominance of the economic-political dimension, a second noticeable characteristic of the state government approval literature is the preponderance of aggregate-level analyses. Indeed, there are only a handful of microlevel studies within the state politics research that use survey data to assess the determinants of individual approval of state government, leaving this an underdeveloped area of research in the state government approval literature. The reliance on aggregate analyses is aided by the greater availability of aggregate data with the release of the U.S. Officials Job Approval Rating (JAR; see Beyle, Niemi, and Sigelmanet 2002), which provides information on aggregate gubernatorial approval across states and time. While using aggregate data analysis is useful, drawing conclusions about the sources of individual approval of state government from aggregate analyses leaves us at risk of committing the ecological fallacy. For example, King and Cohen (2005) find that population diversity within a state negatively affects aggregate gubernatorial approval. As noted above, while the logic offered for this finding emphasizes the inability of officials to satisfy wider sets of competing constituent interests, an alternative account for this finding could be dissatisfaction among state citizens, particularly whites, generated by diversity itself. At present, however, little to no research has been conducted to explore the dynamics of racial and ethnic diversity, and approval at the microlevel.

A final feature of the research on approval of state government is the near exclusive focus on state executives. Although the governor is seen as being the most important and visible official in the state (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Squire and Fastnow 1994), there are other institutions and actors that influence the day-to-day life of voters that have not been covered as well by the literature. One of the few studies that look at
offices other than the governor finds interesting differences in how voters respond to, and what they are looking for in, governors and state legislators (Kelleher and Wolak 2007). Examining approval toward a wider array of state governmental entities, as well as exploring more of the differences in public attitudes toward these entities, would be a valuable step in the development of the state government approval literature. Of particular interest for the present study is whether the retrospective processes used by citizens in evaluating the governor are used when evaluating other officials, such as the legislature as a whole, or one’s own local representative. Retrospective voting theories, particularly the theory of blind retrospection (Achen and Bartels 2004), would suggest that disgruntled citizens may lash out against government in general, perhaps making little distinction between executives, aggregate entities, or lone legislators.

In sum, important contributions to the research on public approval of state government could be made by moving beyond its emphasis on the relationship between economic conditions and approval, its use of aggregate data analyses to assess this relationship, and its focus on governors. In this article, we offer such contribution; in the following sections, we lay out a theory of approval that emphasizes the impact of ethnic change on approval of state government, test this theory on individual-level survey data analyzing the effect of citizens’ ethnic context on their level of approval of state government, and examine our theory with regard to approval of the governor, the state legislature, and citizens’ local representatives in the state legislature.

**Ethnic Change, Immigration, and Approval**

In devising a theory of approval of state government that centers on citizen dissatisfaction over ethnic change, we must first contend with the corpus of opinion research on the effects of citizens’ ethnic context on their opinions. In reviewing this literature, we extract two key guiding principles for the development of our theory and hypotheses. First, growth in immigrant minority populations, rather than their contemporaneous size, is strongly suggested to be the theoretically and empirically relevant characteristic of these populations responsible for capturing public attention, arousing feelings of threat, and thus influencing political preferences. Second, the effects of citizens’ local ethnic context on their political attitudes, such as approval of state government, should be mediated by politically relevant intervening concerns, such as the perception that immigration has gotten out of control and/or represents a major problem facing one’s state government.

The predominant hypothesis tested within the opinion research on ethnic context is the power threat hypothesis (Blalock 1967; Key 1949), which contends that hostility toward immigrants will be highest among citizens residing in immigrant-heavy local areas (Hopkins 2010). Interestingly, the results for the power threat hypothesis are notoriously mixed, with limited evidence in support of the hypothesis (Campbell, Wong, and Citrin 2006; Tolbert and Grummel 2003), some evidence demonstrating a reduction in anti-immigrant sentiment in response to residing near larger immigrant.
populations (Fetzer 2000; Hood and Morris 1997), and the bulk of the research finding that the size of local immigrant populations exerts no significant effect on citizens’ immigration policy preferences (Cain, Citrin, and Wong 2000; Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Citrin Reingold, Walters, et al. 1990; Dixon and Rosenbaum 2004; Taylor 1998). One predominant explanation offered for these inconsistent results is the countervailing predictions of intergroup threat and contact theory (Allport 1954), with the latter suggesting that residing near large minority group populations should lead to increased contact, which under certain conditions, may reduce threat. To be sure, one major operational shortcoming of group-size-based measures of ethnic context is that they do not differentiate the types of diffuse and impersonal contact theorized to generate threat, and the types of intimate and positive contact theorized to attenuate threat.

In response to the inconclusive nature of the findings for the power threat hypothesis and the countervailing predicts of intergroup contact theory with respect to the effects of minority group size on majority group opinion, scholarship has begun to move beyond power threat. This movement centers on the shift from a theoretical and empirical focus on the size of immigrant groups and toward the focus on over-time ethnic change as the key factor operating within citizens’ ethnic context responsible for driving threat. For example, Hopkins (2010) argues that while the contemporary size of local immigrant populations may evade citizens’ attention, drastic changes in the size of these groups over time are more likely to capture attention and arouse an initial sense of threat. Supporting this assertion, existing research demonstrates that growing immigrant populations is associated with ethnocentric voting behavior (Alexseev 2006), state adoption of ethno-nativist and restrictive immigration policies (Citrin, Reingold, Walters, et al. 1990; Newman, Johnston, Strickland, and Citrin 2012), and the perception that immigrants pose economic and cultural threats (Newman 2012). Taken together, this work provides a firm basis for the first prediction of our immigration backlash hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1:** Citizens residing in areas within a state experiencing high levels of immigration-driven ethnic change will be more threatened by immigration and thus should be more concerned about immigration as a political issue facing the state.

To connect this first prediction of our immigration backlash hypothesis to one pertaining to approval of state government, we draw on theories of economic (Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000) and retrospective voting (Fiorina 1978), as well as the state referendum thesis (King and Cohen 2005). The common logic underlying these theories is that citizens who are unhappy with some aspect of public life may hold elected officials, especially executives, accountable for their dissatisfaction. These theories essentially presume that some troubling and thus salient aspect of public life is used by citizens as a judgmental heuristic (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982) for evaluating how well those in government are doing their job. There is even some evidence
that citizens engage in “blind retrospection,” where they lash out against government regardless of incumbent office holders’ actual influence or culpability in the source of their dissatisfaction (Achen and Bartels 2004; Wolfers 2002). Analogous to these theories, we contend that drastic ethnic change, similar to economic downturns, should capture the attention of citizens and generate threat and dissatisfaction. This threat and dissatisfaction may in turn, in a fashion similar to a poorly performing state economy, be used as a judgmental heuristic for citizens to judge the performance of elected officials. This leads to the second prediction of our immigration backlash hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2:** Concern over immigration should serve as a basis for citizen evaluation of the performance of officials in state government, with citizens more concerned about immigration being more disapproving of the job performance of state government, including the governor, the legislature, and one’s own local representatives.

Thus far, the first prediction of the immigration backlash hypothesis draws a link between citizens’ ethnic context and their opinions on immigration, and the second prediction draws a link between citizens’ opinions on immigration and their approval of state government. What is left is to integrate these predictions into an overarching framework stipulating the complete nature of the causal relationships between ethnic context, concern over immigration, and approval of state government. One primary feature of the contextual research is that leading theories, such as the power threat hypothesis, stipulate that the effect of citizens’ ethnic context on their political attitudes and policy preferences should be mediated by intervening cognitions, such as the perception that specific minority groups pose a threat. For example, the principal mechanism linking minority group size to white racial hostility in theories of realistic group conflict and power threat is the perception of threat associated with the group in question (Key 1949; Quillian 1995). According to these perspectives, for the competitive group processes presumed by minority group size to activate hostility among whites toward minorities, these competitive relations have to be perceived and translated into the belief that these groups pose a threat.

Carrying this logic over to the case of ethnic change and approval of state government, it is likely that personal dissatisfaction or feelings of threat over residing in a local context undergoing substantial ethnic change may not have any ramifications for attitudes toward state leaders unless translated by citizens into a political grievance. In other words, citizens have to connect contextual experiences to politics and state government. Moving from personal dissatisfaction over ethnic change in one’s community to concern over immigration as a political problem facing one’s entire state requires doing what Brody and Sniderman (1977) describe as shifting the locus of concern regarding one’s personal problems from the self to society. “Socially located” personal problems, according to Brody and Sniderman, involve looking outward,
rather than inward, in assessing the causes of one’s problem. Determining that one’s personal problems are socially based, and thus a social problem, essentially politicizes the problem and increases the likelihood of attributing responsibility for the problem to those in charge of the larger society, such as political elites at the state level. Following this logic, there is strong reason to expect a mediated causal process, whereby a personally experienced contextual process—in this case, drastic ethnic change in one’s local area—is translated into a social or political issue (i.e., concern over immigration as a problem facing one’s state) and is subsequently used as a basis for evaluating the performance of state office holders. This leads to the third and final prediction of the immigration backlash hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3:** Concern over immigration as a political issue will serve as the mediator through which drastic ethnic change is translated into decreased approval of state government.

In sum, the immigration backlash hypothesis has three predictive components. The first is that citizens’ local ethnic context will influence their opinion on immigration. The second is that opinion on immigration—namely, concern over immigration within one’s state—will exert an impact on approval of state government. The third is that ethnic change will have an indirect effect on approval through its effect on opinion on immigration. In total, our backlash hypothesis argues that personal feelings of dissatisfaction or threat in response to local ethnic change is relevant for elites in state government because citizens who do not like what is going on in their ethnic context will hold state government accountable for it by blaming them for “out of control” immigration and ethnic change.

**Data and Method**

To test the immigration backlash hypothesis, we focus on the state of California and draw on statewide survey data collected by the PPIC. The PPIC conducts several statewide surveys a year of the adult population throughout the entire state and asks a variety of questions tapping the economic, social, and political views of the state’s residents. PPIC surveys are representative samples of the adult population of the state, each contain approximately 2,000 survey respondents, and they are conducted by telephone using random digit dialing. For the purposes of the present analysis, we pooled together nine PPIC surveys conducted between 2006 and 2010, which resulted in a total sample of 18,022 respondents. Each of these surveys was selected for use because they asked questions about approval of the governor, state legislature, and local representatives, as well as questions about immigration. Given that we are primarily interested in observing a potential backlash against immigration and state government among citizens residing in local contexts undergoing drastic ethnic change, we restrict our analysis to the approximately 10,480 white respondents in these nine surveys.

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The first part of the immigration backlash hypothesis predicts that residing in a local context undergoing drastic ethnic change will result in increased concern over immigration. To test this first prediction, we obtained data from the U.S. Census Bureau about the percentage Hispanic within each respondent’s county of residence. Using the 1990 Decennial Census and the 2006 American Community Survey, we obtained estimates of the percentage Hispanic in each California County in 1990 and 2006. There are 58 counties in California, and our pooled data contain respondents from 55 of the 58 counties (no respondents from Alpine, Amador, or Inyo Counties). We chose to focus on changes in the Hispanic population as our operationalization of ethnic change for the principle reason that Hispanics, both in California and the nation as a whole, are the largest, fastest growing, and arguably most salient immigrant minority group. The primary independent variable in our analysis is *Hispanic growth*, which is the difference in the percentage Hispanic in a respondent’s county of residence from 1990 to 2006.

The Hispanic population varies drastically across the state, ranging from 4.9% of the population in Trinity County to roughly 76% of the population in Imperial County. In terms of growth, the average percentage point change in the county Hispanic population in our pooled data is 10.18, with a standard deviation of 4.39. The growth in the Hispanic population from 1990 to 2006 is only moderately correlated with its size in 1990 within a county ($r = .41$). The highest percentage point growth occurred in San Bernardino County, whose Hispanic population grew from about 26.6% in 1990 to about 46.7% in 2006, yielding a change of nearly 20.1 percentage points. However, San Francisco County experienced a near zero percentage growth in the Hispanic population, with the Hispanic population comprising 13.9% of the population in 1990 and about 14% in 2006.

To measure concern over immigration, we rely on an open-ended PPIC survey item included in eight of the nine surveys selected for use in the analysis. This item asks respondents, “First, thinking about the state as a whole, what do you think is the most important issue facing people in California today?” The PPIC organizes respondents’ open-ended responses into nearly 32 categories, ranging from “abortion” and “crime, gangs, and drugs” to “unemployment” and “housing costs.” Of principle concern for us are individuals who report “immigration” or “illegal immigration” as the most important issue in the state. Within our data, about 1,334 or 14.4% of white respondents reported immigration or illegal immigration as the most important issue in the state. From this question, we created a dichotomous item labeled *importance*, which is coded “1” for those reporting immigration or illegal immigration as the most important issue and “0” otherwise. Thus, our principle measure of the translation of personal dissatisfaction over ethnic change in one’s local community into a political issue concern is the perceived importance of immigration as an issue facing the state. For the purposes of the present analysis, respondents who perceive immigration as the most important issue facing the state are believed to have a high degree of concern over immigration.
Moving on to the key dependent variables, we rely on three standard worded items tapping job approval of the governor, the state legislature, and local representatives. Approval of the governor was assessed in each of the nine utilized surveys with an item asking, “Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way that Arnold Schwarzenegger is handling his job as governor of California?” The first approval-dependent variable, labeled governor, is dichotomous and coded “1” for those approving of the governor’s job (about 58.2%) and “0” for those disapproving. Following this item in each of the nine surveys, respondents were asked, “Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the way that the California legislature is handling its job?” The second dependent variable in the analysis, labeled legislature, is dichotomous and coded “1” for those approving of the job of the state legislature (about 29.5%) and “0” for those disapproving of performance of the legislature. Our last approval item pertains to respondents’ approval of their own local representative in the state senate and assembly; respondents were asked, “Overall, do you approve or disapprove of the job that the state legislators representing your assembly and state senate districts are doing at this time?” This item appeared in six of the nine surveys used in the present analysis, and from this item we created a dichotomous variable, labeled representatives, which is coded “1” for those approving of their local senators (about 46%) and assemblymen or women, and “0” for those disapproving of them.

For all analyses, we included a number of theoretically relevant control variables. First, we control for effects of two key county-level factors: partisanship and economic conditions (Campbell, Wong, and Citrin 2006; Ha 2010; Hopkins 2010). We include in all analyses the percentage of registered voters in a respondent’s county that are registered Republican and the average unemployment rate between 2006 and 2008 in each respondent’s county of residence. The former variable is intended to account for the effects on both immigration opinion and approval of the political leanings of those surrounding oneself, and the latter variable is intended to account for the effects of average variation in the level of economic hardship experienced in one’s local environment. Given the theoretical importance of economic concerns to both opinion on immigration and approval of the political leanings of those surrounding oneself, all analyses include a measure of respondents’ subjective evaluations of the future state of the economy. Respondents were asked, “Turning to economic conditions in California, do you think that during the next 12 months we will have good times financially or bad times?” From this item, we created a three-category-ordered item labeled economic perceptions, which is coded “1” for those “good times,” “2” for those reporting that they “didn’t know,” and “3” for those reporting “bad times.”

All analyses included a basic set of demographic controls, including education, annual household income, employment status (1 = unemployed), age, gender (1 = male), citizenship status (1 = born in the United States), and home ownership (1 = homeowner). In addition, all analyses included controls for partisan identification (standard 7-point scale, 7 = strong Republican) and ideological self-identification (5-point scale, 5 = very conservative). Last, we include a series of survey dummy variables...
to control for survey effects and the element of time in our analyses. The inclusion of these survey dummies provide a means for accounting not only for time per se but also for larger national events occurring during the time period under analysis. For example, the federal Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007 likely increased the perceived importance of immigration for many citizens from 2006 to 2007, while the onset of the financial crisis in 2008 and the presidential election likely drew attention away from immigration and toward the economy and other campaign issues, such as health care and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, controlling for the element of time via the inclusion of survey dummies allows us to model a potential “decay” for approval of state government as a function of both time in office and additional time-bound events, such as the economic collapse in 2008. For ease of interpretation, all independent variables, except age, were recoded to range from 0 to 1.

The immigration backlash hypothesis predicts that ethnic change will influence concern over immigration, that concern over immigration will affect approval of state government, and that the effect of ethnic change on approval of state government will be mediated by concern over immigration. To test these hypothesized effects, we estimated a single structural equation model (SEM) that simultaneously regressed (1) the perceived importance of immigration on Hispanic growth and controls; (2) approval of the governor on the importance of immigration, Hispanic growth, and controls; (3) approval of the legislature on the importance of immigration, Hispanic growth, and controls; and (4) approval of one’s local representative on the importance of immigration, Hispanic growth, and controls. Due to the categorical nature of our concern over immigration and approval variables, we used probit link functions for these models and estimated the parameters using mean- and variance-adjusted weighted least squares in the software package Mplus® (Muthén and Muthén 2007).

Results

The results from our analyses are presented in Table 1, which displays the effects of Hispanic growth on approval as mediated by the perceived importance of immigration. The first results column reveals that whites residing in counties experiencing high levels of growth in the Hispanic population are significantly more likely than those residing in low growth counties to perceive immigration as a problem facing the state. Holding all other variables at their mean, moving from a county with the minimum (San Francisco County) to a county with the maximum (San Bernardino) growth in the Hispanic population results in a change from .05 to .17 in the predicted probability of perceiving immigration as the most important issue facing the state. This finding provides initial evidence in support of the first leg of the immigration backlash hypothesis by demonstrating that experiencing drastic ethnic change in one’s local community is politicized by citizens into enhanced problematization and concern over immigration.

Of the controls in the importance equation, we see that whites residing in counties experiencing higher average unemployment are less likely to view immigration as the
most important problem facing the state. In addition, the results for the controls reveal that individuals with higher incomes, older adults, native-born citizens, those who identify more with the Republican Party, and those who are more ideologically conservative are more likely to perceive immigration as the most important issue facing the state. Turning to the survey dummies, we find the results telling a sensible story. The results reveal that, compared with the sample taken in December of 2006, the perceived importance of immigration significantly increased into 2007 and then began to steadily decrease starting in 2008. This time trend likely tracks with the increased national salience of immigration in 2007 due to the introduction of the Secure Borders, |

Table 1. Hispanic Growth, Importance of Immigration, and Approval of State Government

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<th>Concern over immigration</th>
<th>Approval of state government</th>
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<td>Importance</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2007 Survey dummy</td>
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</tr>
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<td>-.796**** (.069)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic growth</td>
<td>-.056*** (.020)</td>
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| Notes: Mean- and variance-adjusted weighted least squares estimates (WLSMV) using delta parameterization and 1,000 iterations in Mplus (v.5.21). For all models, because Mplus treats categorical dependent variables as latent variables, the coefficient estimates represent the standard deviation unit change in the latent variable underlying the dichotomous response dependent variable associated with a unit change in the independent variable. The coefficient for the indirect effect of Hispanic growth represents the estimated effect of Hispanic growth on each policy-dependent variable as mediated by its effect on the importance of immigration. Reported p values are based on two-tailed hypothesis tests. *p < .10. **p < .05. ***p < .01. ****p < .001.
Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Reform Act in the Spring of 2007, and the decline of the salience of immigration on the national agenda as the economy collapsed in 2008 and the presidential election involving female and African American candidates drew nearer.

Moving on, the second through fourth columns of Table 1 present the effects of Hispanic growth and importance on approval of each state governmental entity. The results for the SEM analyzing approval of the governor reveal that residing in high Hispanic growth counties and perceiving immigration as the most important issue each directly and significantly decrease approval of the governor. In contrast, Hispanic growth had no significant effects on approval of the state legislature or one’s local representatives, whereas concern over immigration in the form of its perceived importance significantly decreased approval for the state legislature and one’s local representatives. In line with the immigration backlash hypothesis, these findings suggest that beyond economic and institutional factors, concern over sociocultural issues, such as immigration, serves as a significant source of approval of the performance of state government. One means for obtaining an approximate upper bound on the magnitude of the effect of a unit change in importance (i.e., a movement from 0 to 1) on the predicted probability of approval of each state governmental is to multiply each coefficient by 1.6 (Gelman 2006; Train 2003) and then divide by 4 (Gelman and Hill 2007).

Applying this procedure, we find that moving from concern over other issues to concern over immigration as the most important issue facing the state results in at most a .025 decrease in approval of the governor, a .08 decrease in approval of the state legislature, and .035 decrease in approval of one’s own representatives state government.

Turning to the indirect effects of Hispanic growth on approval, the bottom row of Table 1 reveals that in each instance, residing in a county experiencing high growth in the Hispanic population indirectly decreased approval of state government by augmenting the perception that immigration is the most important issue facing the state. This finding provides evidence for the final leg of the immigration backlash hypothesis by demonstrating that ethnic change indirectly erodes approval of state government by leading to the heightened concern over immigration. The mediated effects of Hispanic growth on approval are further depicted in each panel of Figure 1; within each “tripod,” the coefficients listed along the arrows are direct effects, whereas the italicized and bold coefficients listed in the center of the tripod are indirect effects. As can be seen, while Hispanic growth indirectly decreases approval of each governmental entity, in two out of three cases Hispanic growth only affects approval through concern over immigration. It is worth noting that the strongest “backlash” is against the state legislature. Although our hypothesis is agnostic toward this finding, it can be speculated that this is the case because the American public in general tends to be more negative toward legislatures (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), which are impersonal entities ultimately responsible for generating legislation.

Of the controls in the approval models in Table 1, we find that pessimistic prospective economic evaluations significantly and strongly decrease approval of state government
This individual-level finding is consistent with findings at the aggregate level highlighting the importance of economic conditions for approval. Interestingly, while higher levels of education appear to decrease approval of statewide government entities, such as the governor and the legislature, they increase approval of one’s local representatives in state government. Our results reveal that while moving from strong Democrat to strong Republican is associated with a significant increase in approval of the governor, it is associated with a decrease in approval of the state.
legislature and one’s local representatives. The results in the case of the governor and legislature are expected given a Republican governor and Democratic legislature during our entire period of analysis. The result for approval of one’s local representatives, given strong Democratic control of the legislature, may be due to the fact that Republican respondents in our surveys are more likely on average to find themselves represented by a Democrat than the other way around. In the end, we believe the key point is that the effects of Concern over Immigration are significant holding constant individual partisanship. Last, the results for the survey dummies, across the three approval models, can be interpreted as indicating a common trend characterized by a “honeymoon” bump in approval for elected officials following the 2006 General Statewide Election followed by the decline of approval likely driven by time in office and the collapse of the economy in 2008.

In sum, the evidence presented provides initial evidence, at least within the context of the state of California, that salient aspects of citizens’ day-to-day experiences, such as changes in the ethnic composition of their surrounding community, can have important implications for political elites at the state level. This effect is accounted for by our immigration backlash hypothesis, which, paralleling theories of retrospective voting, argues that citizens who are dissatisfied over what is going on around them direct this toward elected officials and blame them for these undesirable occurrences. In addition to exerting consistent effects across different state governmental entities, it is important to note that we observe these effects despite differences in the partisanship across these entities; our analyses reveal that ethnic change and resulting concern over immigration erode support for a Republican governor, a largely Democratic legislature, and a mixture of Republican and Democratic state representatives.

Conclusion

With the rapid growth and geographic diffusion of the Hispanic population, increasing ethnic diversity is a reality for most states. One important consequence of this for state politics is that the degree of ethnic change, and its geographic distribution within a state, is politically relevant for state office holders via its influence on one of the most important resources at their disposal—their popular approval. This article demonstrates that citizens negatively react to ethnic change, and this reaction becomes politically relevant as it is translated from a threatening personal experience into the problematization of immigration within the state as a whole. This broad political concern over immigration, in turn, is shown to serve as the vehicle through which dissatisfaction over ethnic change erodes approval of state government, including the governor, legislature, and one’s own local representatives.

Our findings make several contributions to the state politics literature. First, we contribute to our understanding of the sources of gubernatorial approval by moving beyond the standard set of economic and political factors explored in the bulk of the research by demonstrating that objective ethno-demographic processes and sociocultural issues exert important effects on approval. In doing so, we connect two bodies of research—the opinion literature on immigration and the state-level approval
literature—that previously had little to no overlap, and demonstrate the relevance of ethnic change and immigration for approval of state government. Second, this article adds balance to a body of literature largely dominated by aggregate studies by employing microlevel analysis of the sources of individual approval. Last, the overwhelming majority of the approval research at the state level assesses gubernatorial approval; in this article, we go beyond this conventional focus on the governor, and analyze the effects of ethnic context and corresponding issue concerns on a wider set of state political actors and institutions.

The findings from our analyses have a variety of implications for state politics and government. First, they suggest that alongside the formidable task of managing the health of state economies, state office holders’ efforts to maintain their popularity and approval, which are important sources of their ability to accomplish their policy goals and achieve reelection, may cause them to have to contend with an additional goliath—managing patterns of immigration and ethnic change within their state. Indeed, extant theories of white backlash (Matsubayashi and Rocha 2011) argue that states with large minority populations will also be characterized by negative racial attitudes among nonminority citizens and thus be more likely to enact antiminority policies. The findings from our analysis suggest that the passage of restrictive immigration policies and the incorporation of tough positions on immigration into political platforms may reflect an attempt by office holders to counteract the deleterious effects of unchecked immigration and ethnic change, or at least the public’s perception of this, on their level of popularity and approval. For example, ex-governor of California Pete Wilson fervently supported anti-immigrant ballot initiative, Proposition 187, whose passage in 1994 co-occurred with his reelection. Indeed, many political commentators at the time credited his support of the proposition as vital for his reelection, as he was initially trailing his challenger in the polls during the campaign (Decker and Weintraub 1994). As a more recent example, Jan Brewer, current governor of Arizona, won election for her first full term in late 2010 after backing the controversial anti-immigrant Arizona bill SB 1070 in early 2010. Although these examples do not constitute evidence that advocating anti-immigrant legislation caused their reelection, each case is a prominent example of an executive of a high immigration state publicly endorsing anti-immigrant legislation and subsequently achieving their electoral goals.

One limitation of our study is that the evidence in support for our immigration backlash hypothesis, and thus our conclusions, are at present restricted to the state of California. An obvious direction for future research would be to test the relationships specified in our theory in additional states; such research could not only serve to replicate the findings from this study but also unlock potentially substantively interesting variation in the dynamics of ethnic change, opinion on immigration, and approval of state government across the different U.S. states. For example, we would expect that the results found in the present study may not only be undermined in states like Arizona or Alabama where the state government has been actively passing anti-immigrant legislation but also possibly be reversed, such that the concern over immigration
generated among citizens residing in high immigrant growth environs within these states would be associated with heightened support for conspicuously anti-immigrant state leaders. While California did have a Republican governor during the period under observation in our study, the state has taken less drastic action toward restricting illegal immigration than other states, and this is likely rooted in the fact that immigrant minorities constitute a large enough proportion of the population in many districts across the state to be able to impose some electoral constraints on politicians. Indeed, a very interesting direction for future research in this area would be to analyze heterogeneity in the relationship between ethnic change, concern over immigration, and approval across states as a function of state-level characteristics, such as the anti-immigrant efforts of the governor or prominent state legislators.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
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Notes
1. We would like to thank Survey Director Mark Baldassare and the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) for allowing us to use their data. The PPIC bears no responsibility for conclusions reached based on our analysis of the data.
3. Our decision to analyze opinion among whites only is in-line with prior opinion research on immigration (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay, 2008; Campbell, Wong, and Citrin, 2006; Citrin, Reingold, and Green, 1990; Hood and Morris, 1997; Rocha and Espino, 2009; Stein, Post, and Rinden, 2000; Tolbert and Grummel, 2003).
4. For full justification for using the Hispanic population to test theory pertaining to immigrants, see Supplemental Appendix A.
5. Leading studies on ethnic change in political science and sociology measure change over time spans roughly comparable in length to the one we selected (see Alexseev 2006; Citrin, Reingold, Walters, et al. 1990; Hopkins 2010; Green et al. 1998). While our theory pertains to more long-term ethnic change and alternations in citizens’ surrounding sociocultural landscape, one concern with this operationalization of ethnic change is that it measures cumulative change and is insensitive to fluctuations in year-to-year ethnic changes. We reran all of our analyses using alternative Hispanic growth variables measured from 1990 to 2000 and again for 2000 to 2006, and the results remain fundamentally unchanged.
6. Based on 2006 American Community Survey estimates.
7. The September 2006 statewide survey did not include the “Most Important Issue” item.
8. The results from our analysis (i.e., the effect of Hispanic growth) hold when analyzing concern over “immigration” and “illegal immigration” as separate dichotomous variables, suggesting that these are fundamentally the same concept in the minds of PPIC survey respondents, and thus supporting our decision to combine these responses into a single category for our importance variable. To view the results for these separate concern models, see Supplemental Appendix B.

9. The State Representative Approval question was not asked in the December 2006, June 2007, or August 2008 statewide surveys.

10. Information about the percentage Republican in each California County was obtained from the California Secretary of State Office, http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/sov/2006_general/reg.pdf. Data on the unemployment rate in each County in 2006, 2007, and 2008 were obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

11. For each model, the oldest survey is excluded as the baseline category.

12. Given the consecutive order of the Approval questions in the PPIC surveys and thus the likely correlation of the error terms in these equations, our structural equation model (SEM) allowed for correlated errors across the Approval equations. While the error terms were significantly correlated, the results do not significantly differ across this model and one that does not allow the error terms to be correlated.

13. Common methods for assessing mediated effects (e.g., Stata’s sgmediation command) treat dependent and mediating variables as continuous variables, which provide misleading estimates when such variables are categorical in nature. To address this issue, we used SEMs, which allow for the specification of categorical variables (e.g., see Iacobucci, 2008) and provide more accurate statistical tests for mediation.

14. An issue requiring discussion is our decision to not use a multilevel modeling approach to analyzing the data. First, while SEMs can incorporate the modeling of hierarchical data, estimating a multilevel mediation model is very computationally complex. The added complexity of estimation and interpretation would be worth using for the presentation of our results if there was statistical evidence that these more complicated models are justified. In rerunning each of the three constituent regression equations from our SEMs using random-intercept logistic regression analysis, we found that the sign and significance of all of our results—especially our key independent and mediating variable—remain completely unchanged. Furthermore, the amount of total error being accounted for by the modeling of county-level variation, as indicated by the size of $\rho$, is extremely small across the three models ($\rho < .008$), suggesting a negligible difference between a multilevel approach to estimating model parameters and a “completely pooled,” basic logistic regression approach. The results from these random intercept (RI) models are presented in the Supplemental Appendix B.

15. To control for the possibility that these results are being driven by counties with outlying values of Hispanic growth, we estimated a random-intercept logistic regression model of the importance of immigration and restricted the analysis to respondents residing in counties within the 5th to 95th percentile values of Hispanic growth. The results from this analysis are presented in Supplemental Appendix B. The results indicate that even after removing several outlying counties, the effect of Hispanic growth on the importance of immigration remains significant.

16. We multiply our coefficients by 1.6 to convert our probit coefficients into logit coefficients as discussed by Train (2003). We then divide the obtained logit coefficient by 4 as the
logistic curve is maximized at its midpoint, and taking the derivative of the logistic curve at its midpoint yields β/4. This gives us the upper bound or maxima in the difference in Pr(Y = 1) corresponding to a 1-unit change in X. The “divide by four rule” is thoroughly discussed by Gelman and Hill (2007).

17. While not directly interpretable in terms of magnitude, these coefficients share a common underlying scaling in standard deviation units, and thus can be compared to one another.

18. One distinct possibility suggested by extant research is that citizens who are more politically informed and/or sophisticated will be more likely to translate their grievances or concerns into political preferences and behavior. While traditional measures of political information are not available across our PPIC surveys, we were able to explore this possibility by rerunning our approval models including an interaction term between concern and education. Across the three approval models, the interaction terms were each negative—suggesting that the decrease in approval associated with high concern tends to deepen as levels of education increase—however, none of the interaction terms attained statistical significance, and the inclusion of the interaction terms did not alter our core results.

References


Bios

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