"They’re Bringing Crime:” White Fear and Closing Borders

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**Overview**

This study examines the roots of xenophobia in the specific case of current political discourse regarding immigrants to the United States. Research focuses on:

- Exploring the roots of the increase in preemptive punitive action and threat-based rhetoric following the 2016 presidential election.
- Non-criminal immigration violator at-large arrests by ICE more than doubled, increasing from 5,496 in 2016 to 13,600 in 2017.
- Analyzing this increase through proximation theory from the research of Piotr Cap.
- A model of discourse that locates threats within proximity to both speaker and addressee.
- Used to create urgency and legitimize actions or policies in order to neutralize an antagonistic entity or justify preventative or protective measures in advance of the aforementioned threat.
- Applicable to diverse fields: preventative medicine, climate change, immigration, national security.
- Using the Chapman Survey of American Fears.

**Abstract**

Leading up to the 2016 election, popular rhetoric surrounding immigrants to the United States took a marked turn. This change can be partially explained using Piotr Cap’s proximation theory, a threat-based discursive model that relies on locating threatening events in proximity to the audience in order to justify preventative or protective measures. Quantitative public opinion data from the Chapman Survey of American Fears suggests that a disbelief in immigrants’ ability to assimilate is strongly correlated with a fear of immigrants committing crimes. White Americans who hold these beliefs typically tend to favor or strongly favor preemptive punitive action against noncitizen residents, including but not limited to increased policing, raiding homes and businesses, and deportation. The anticipation of elevated criminal activity within the immigrant population is used to motivate both individual and state-level action against immigrants, irrespective of real-world statistics regarding citizen and noncitizen crime rates. Further, a comparison of attitudes toward changing demographics in Europe and America places the American immigrant and refugee situation in a broader global context. Finally, current and historical case studies of nations more and less hostile towards refugees and immigrants attempt to identify the present-day actors that stand to benefit from framing the immigrant as latent criminal and citizen as defender of the nation.

**Hypotheses:**

H1: Americans who see immigrants as isolated from American culture are more likely to fear or strongly fear losing majority status.

H2: White Americans who fear losing majority status due to changing demographics are more likely to favor or strongly favor state use of force against immigrants.

H3: Americans who believe that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than US citizens are more likely to endorse punitive action against immigrants in advance of any hypothetical criminal activity.

**Data**

**H1: Isolation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Coefficient (B)</th>
<th>Std. Coefficient</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable: How afraid are you of the following event: Whites no longer being the majority in the US?</td>
<td>-0.217</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**H2: Changing Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
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<th>Std. Coefficient</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable: want to deport</td>
<td>0.349</td>
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<td>0.000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**H3: Fear of crime**

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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Coefficient (B)</th>
<th>Std. Coefficient</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable: want to deport</td>
<td>-0.217</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings**

H1: Isolation

- When immigrants are read as ‘other’ (by framing all immigrants or certain groups of immigrants as either unable or unwilling to assimilate), there is a significant amount of resistance to their presence and an associated fear of loss of majority status on the part of citizens. However, it is not as pronounced a predictor as fear of demographic shift itself or fear of crimes.

H2: Changing demographics

- Those who fear losing their majority status to changing demographics fall back on the distance or proximity between themselves and the immigrant-as-other; the distance, ideologically, between their concept of themselves as citizen-defender and immigrant as criminal, serves to increase their fear of the immigrant’s physical or temporal proximity to them. As a result, they defend themselves by going on the attack in the form of preemptive punitive state action.

H3: Fear of crime

- This hypothesis holds the most closely to Cap’s theory of proximationization, and is the most clearly present when critically examining the current rhetoric surrounding the issue of illegal immigration. Likewise, fear of immigrants committing crimes is the greatest predictor of the desire for punitive state action against immigrants, even when controlling for potential confounding variables such as age, race, and education level. Proximation makes use of the threat of violent crime in order to stoke nationalism and tighten border security, even when crime rates fail to match this narrative.

**Conclusions**

By positioning any given immigrant as a latent criminal, it is possible to reframe the issue of immigrants as a matter of public and individual safety. Further, by locating the threat of changing demographics within temporal proximity to the addressee, the addressee becomes more receptive to the idea that preemptive punitive action must be taken against a group that has already been established as a potential threat...

...resulting in the addressee being more strongly in favor of state use of force against groups that threaten majority status.