



Entitled or Excluded? Attitudes toward Access to Postsecondary Education for Undocumented Students

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This study examines the determinants of attitudes towards undocumented immigrant students' access to higher education, an area that has received little attention in the literature on immigration and public opinion. Theories of symbolic politics and labor market competition frame our research question. Using data from the 1994 General Social Survey, we find partial support for our predictions. Attitudes toward bilingual education, concerns about economic growth, and family income are significant predictors of public opinion regarding access to higher education for undocumented immigrants.

Keywords: Undocumented immigrants, higher education, public opinion, attitudes

In 2004 the Census Bureau reported that the foreign-born population had exceeded 32 million residents with approximately one third of those entering the country since 1990 (Larsen, 2004). Recent estimates find that there are 9.3 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S., comprising about 26 percent of the total foreign-born population. The majority of these immigrants originate from Mexico or other Latin American countries (Passel, 2004). While many immigrants do return to their home countries (Massey, 2005), a considerable amount will remain in the country, often raising children that are themselves undocumented. Indeed, a recent report found that approximately 1.5 million children in the U.S. are undocumented immigrants (Passel & Cohn, 2009). These children will have a significant impact on the social and economic future of the U.S. (Shields & Behrman, 2004), and their current and future presence demands greater consideration from policy-makers.

Undocumented status results in significant barriers of access to a variety of institutions and resources including healthcare, welfare benefits, food stamps, and other forms

of support (Capps, Henderson, & Reardon-Anderson, 2005; Levinson, 2002). While the undocumented do have access to public primary and secondary education, postsecondary education remains a largely inaccessible resource, primarily due to the prohibitive costs of college education, but also due to legal and social boundaries. A considerable body of literature documents public opinion toward immigration, yet there is a notable absence of research on attitudes toward access to higher education. Given the importance of public opinion for policy design and implementation, as well as the heightened social, political, and job-market value of a college degree, we find this a remarkable shortcoming in the literature. Thus, we intend to build on this literature by examining attitudes toward undocumented immigrant access to higher education. We frame our investigation using symbolic politics and labor market competition theories.

Literature Review

Immigrants and Education

An estimated 65,000 undocumented students graduate each year from U.S. secondary schools

(Drachman, 2006). The Supreme Court *Plyer v. Doe* decision in 1982 guaranteed children of undocumented immigrants' access to free public education for grades K-12. The Court stated that "denying undocumented children access to free public education 'imposes a lifetime of hardship on a discrete class of children not accountable for their disabling status, [and that] the stigma of illiteracy will mark them for the rest of their lives'" (Drachman, 2006, p. 92). While this decision allowed children access to primary and secondary public education, it did not ensure eligibility for financial benefits for postsecondary education. Providing access to public primary and secondary education to undocumented students in the U.S. may appear to reduce the lifestyle of hardship described by Drachman (2006), but it is a façade. Given the current economic, political, and social state of the country, it is postsecondary education that serves as the key to upward mobility. Providing access to it would allow relief from Drachman's "stigma of illiteracy" and the challenges of poverty experienced by many immigrant groups (2006).

Though roughly 15 percent of undocumented immigrants between the ages of 25 and 64 have earned a college degree, this figure is less than half that of legal immigrants and natives (Passel & Cohn, 2009). An estimated 7 to 13 thousand undocumented immigrants enroll in college after high school, however, the sites where their access is permitted are limited and the likelihood of these students completing their degree is slim (Passel, 2003). Generally speaking, financial and legislative barriers make it exceedingly difficult for these students to continue with postsecondary education. The barriers that make higher education difficult to access could mean even higher future costs in the labor force, healthcare services, and criminal offenses (Drachman, 2006). The cost is too great for both taxpayers and undocumented immigrants to not address their access to postsecondary education.

The DREAM (the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) Act has been introduced in the Senate every year since 2003. The act would make undocumented immigrant students eligible to pay in-state tuition funds for public higher education. Access to in-state tuition is crucial as undocumented students cannot qualify for federal aid. This act has not been implemented at the federal level; so many state legislatures are finding ways to temporarily ameliorate the problem. In 2001, Texas was the first state to pass legislation allowing undocumented high school students access to public universities and colleges by allowing students to pay in-state tuition rates. Nine other states followed suit: California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Utah, and Washington (Flores & Chapa, 2009).

However, many states with large immigrant populations still remain in opposition to immigrant access. Colorado, Massachusetts, Nevada, and New Jersey, states with some of the largest concentrations of Latino

immigrants, still remain without policies that support the presence of undocumented students in higher education. Even after recent dramatic increases in the immigrant population in the Southern region of the U.S., most southern states remain in direct opposition to the presence of undocumented students in secondary education, much less postsecondary. Mississippi, North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee have forbidden undocumented students from enrolling in public colleges and universities even if they can afford the tuition rates (Flores & Chapa, 2009). Furthermore, the lack of federal support means even for undocumented students in states that permit access to funding for postsecondary education, their degree may be useless in the American workforce because of their citizenship status (Flores & Chapa, 2009).

The long-term implications of limiting access to higher education are quite salient when one considers most undocumented students will continue to live in the United States. Carens argues that "to refuse to educate a child in the modern world is to condemn that child to a life of very limited possibilities" (2008, p. 170). In our current globalized society, higher education is crucial for social mobility. Globalization requires technologically based forms of education, new forms of knowledge and new standards for expertise, yet immigrant students may be limited to primary and secondary education which cannot always provide these specialized skills (Vasquez, 2007). Education is the key to entrance and mobility in a global society. The restriction of education will perpetuate exclusion and stratification of minority ethnic and immigrant groups (Solis, 2003). As Vasquez states, education provides a "safeguard for [the] human and civil rights" of immigrants whose socioeconomic status places them at a disadvantage (2007, p. 122). The more education one receives, the greater his or her worth in the social structure, giving him or her access to more resources and protection against exploitation and discrimination in the labor force (Vasquez, 2007). Socially inclusive policy will aid in immigrant assimilation into the larger culture through means of social mobility, possibly even reducing poverty through participation in the higher-paid segments of the labor market. Indeed, "all society benefits by providing [the immigrant] population with the education and supports they need today" that they may become productive and engaged for the future (Shields & Behrman, 2004, p. 4). We must consider immigrant education policy in the same manner we consider other socially inclusive policy, or the result may be a marginalized and uneducated population (Carens, 2008). The initial implementation of programs that promote child development and educational opportunity for immigrants may place a financial burden on society, but failure to create national policies that support the assimilation and success of the undocumented immigrant class will likely result in an even greater financial burden over time (Shields & Behrman, 2004).

Public Opinion

Considerable research has established that Americans tend to hold generally negative attitudes toward immigration (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1996; Jarret, 1999; Simon, 1985; Simon & Alexander, 1993; Stephan, Renfro, Esses, White, & Martin, 2005). Americans tend to express opposition to immigrant-specific social policy such as access to welfare services (Pantoja, 2006) and bilingual education (Garcia & Bass, 2007). Given the importance that public opinion can have in developing policy towards access to important institutions in society, it is notable that there is little research on public opinion regarding access to higher education for undocumented immigrants.

Though opposition to immigration is evident, when it comes to children of immigrants, many of whom are themselves undocumented, attitudes may be tempered. According to Carens (2008), children are a group of “special claims”. While many may feel that undocumented immigrants have broken the law by gaining entry into the U.S., they may also feel that the children should not be held responsible for their presence within the country. As a result, states are “even more morally constrained in dealing with irregular migrants who are children, than in dealing with irregular migrants who are adults” (Carens, 2008, pp.168-169). The public opinion shift when considering children and students is most likely a result of the American public favoring humanistic treatment (Lee & Ottatai, 2002).

Americans’ recognition of the importance of education also plays a role in the development of attitudes toward educating undocumented immigrants or the children of undocumented immigrants. Generally, some college has become the norm for Americans, as about eighty percent of all American students enroll in either public 4-year or 2-year colleges (Porter, 2002). On average, college graduates earn more than high school graduates, and a bachelor’s degree is now seen as essential for success (Riley, McGuire, Dessy, & Dorfman, 1999). Americans view higher education as having both public and private benefits. Individuals with higher education experience greater social and professional mobility, sustained cultural and family values, higher salaries and greater benefits, and improved working conditions and health. Also, the greater society experiences increases in the tax revenue, consumption rates, numbers of skilled workers, charitable giving, diversity, and decreases in government aid and crime (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). The value placed on higher education in America, combined with a unique sympathy for children, may temper attitudes toward immigrant access to higher education

Predicting Attitudes Toward Access to Higher Education: Theoretical Framework

A substantial body of research suggests that the perception of an economic and cultural threat posed by immigrants affects attitudes toward immigration generally (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1996; Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998; Fennelly & Federico, 2008), and

immigrant access to public services (Garcia & Bass, 2007; Wilson, 2001). While none of this research focuses on undocumented immigrant access to higher education, we feel that the traditional models used to predict these other attitudes might also be useful for understanding our specific interest. These models indicate that concerns about economic competition and cultural changes to America brought about by immigrants are strong predictors of opposition to their presence. To open up educational institutions to undocumented immigrants, at a cost similar to that of citizens, suggests another component of economic competition that immigrants may pose. In addition, the presence of undocumented students, who may struggle with English competency, implies changes to pedagogy that may threaten the “uniquely American” educational experience. On this basis, we test attitudes toward undocumented student access using models that have predicted different, but related, attitudes. Previous literature has employed the symbolic politics and labor market competition theories to explicate public attitudes toward immigrants and their access to public services. Thus, the following section discusses, within the symbolic politics framework, economic and cultural threat. We also discuss labor market competition theory as it shapes attitudes toward immigrants.

Symbolic Politics

Recent waves of immigration have brought insecurity about national cohesion and how one defines “American”. According to Citrin, Reingold, and Green (1990), through socialization we acquire cultural attitudes and definitions that can predict how we feel about those that differ from us. This reflects the basic principle of the symbolic politics argument: that cultural objects such as language, race, religion, and socioeconomic status are embedded in the social system and solidify the concept of a unique “American” identity by giving citizens a reference for their identity (Keogan, 2002). This identity, when paired with political symbols such as legislation that contributes to the benefits of immigrants, evokes negative political attitudes regarding those viewed as out-groups (Sears, Citrin, Cheleden, & van Laar, 1999).

Within this framework, the socialized identity of the majority group contributes to one’s perception of in-group and out-group distinctions and influences attitudes about those considered members of the out-group (Lee & Ottatai, 2002). Pantoja (2006) found the majority of Americans identify social values such as economic individualism, humanitarianism, and egalitarianism as playing a role in shaping American identity. Recently, the public has expressed toward immigrants and immigrant policy a “growing negativity...possibly caused by the perception that these newcomers threaten existing American cultural identity, beliefs, and values” (Garcia & Bass, 2007, pp. 64-65). Pantoja’s 2006 study shows the extent to which a growing minority group threatens core values and shapes the way citizens within the majority group respond to immigration policies such as border

enforcement, the number of immigrants admitted to the country, and the public resources to which they are granted access. Lee and Ottatai's 2002 study demonstrated that factors such as target ethnicity, perceived economic threat, and obedience to law significantly influenced participant's responses regarding humanistic treatment of immigrants. Importantly, however, the results of this study differed when respondents considered the children of illegal immigrants and their access to resources. Therefore, the perception of undocumented students as both a cultural and economic threat for the public will be key in our study.

Cultural threat. Immigrants, who bring with them different cultural beliefs and practices, are often seen as a threat to cultural definitions of "American." Fennelly and Federico (2008) and Wilson (2001) found respondents with more monocultural, or ethnocentric definitions of "American" more likely to hold exclusivist views toward immigrants. Americans often endorse the value of diversity, particularly within the realm of education, but continue to see immigrants, both documented and undocumented, as a threat to cherished values and traditions (Chandler & Tsai, 2001; Lamont & Morales da Silva, 2009). Generally speaking, citizens express concern over English language use and bilingualism, and, the possibility that public policy may favor immigrants over citizens. These issues are discussed in the following sections.

Research sites the use of the English language as a main factor in defining American identity (Chandler & Tsai, 2001). English is considered "a cohesive force solidifying United States citizenry," and many immigrants to the U.S. do not speak English, posing a threat to the established American language standard (Garcia & Bass, 2007). Citizen-driven movements have developed where the main objective is to make English the official language so as to clearly define what it means to be American (Citrin et al., 1990). Interestingly, Chandler and Tsai (2001) found all measurable factors linked to exclusivist attitudes to be related to English language use. Exclusivist attitudes regarding English language use, however, are not solely expressed toward adult immigrants, undocumented or documented. While studying immigrant students in North Carolina, Wainer's (2006) interviews with students, parents, and educators linked exclusivist attitudes of English-speaking Anglos and African Americans' with the widespread use and growth of Spanish speakers. However, within the realm of higher education, Americans generally promote the concept of diversity and see bilingualism as an asset (Lamont & Morales da Silva, 2009). Paradoxically, the undocumented population could provide to our public universities a wealth of diversity in education, yet they are generally restricted as a threat to our national identity and values (Lamont & Morales da Silva, 2009).

According to Wilson's (2001) group threat theory, dominant group attitudes toward minority groups are also influenced by fears that minority group members will be favored over their own group members. The ideal of the

"American dream" denotes economic wealth, occupational success, and opportunity for upward mobility, yet the continued growth of immigrants is often perceived as competition by majority group Americans who aspire to those ideals. Indeed, it is the majority group's *perception* of threat to their status within the social or political system that influences attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy (Wilson, 2001). Feelings of threat to one's status can be further exacerbated if majority groups, noting an increase in immigrant populations, overestimate minority group size (Alba, Rumbaut, & Marotz, 2005). The stronger the sense of group threat, the more likely the dominant group will express negative views toward policies that benefit minorities. Americans who believe immigrants threaten employment opportunities, economic growth, or national unity are more likely to oppose policy that benefits undocumented or documented immigrants (Wilson, 2001).

Economic Threat. In addition to a cultural threat posed by immigrants, economic concerns shape attitudes toward immigrants and related policy. Conditions of the national economy prove to hold great influence over citizens' perception of immigrants and their attitudes about their access to country entry, citizenship, and public services. Keogan (2002) found exclusivist attitudes develop when the public primarily perceives material conditions as unfavorable, and, contemporary immigrants as significantly different from the European-origin population. Anti-immigrant attitudes often come in response to political leaders placing blame on immigrant workers for rises in unemployment rates, economic downturns, and tax increases (Citrin, Green, Muste, & Wong, 1997). Exclusivist attitudes emerge with higher levels of anxiety about the national economy. For example, eight percent of Citrin et al.'s (1997) sample supported residency time restrictions of one year before immigrants could obtain access to social services.

Espenshade's (1995) evidence seems to counter this restrictionist attitude, finding that the negative fiscal impacts from undocumented immigrants are reported to actually decrease with increased time in the U.S. Among legal immigrants, only 5 percent receive welfare, which Lee and Ottatai deem not an "excessive demand" (2002, p. 620). While state and local governments burden about \$43 billion in annual taxes for undocumented immigrants, they are estimated to produce a \$23 to \$30 billion annual surplus in the federal budget (Espenshade, 1995). So, it is possible that the short-term costs are a small price to pay for long-term fiscal benefits and access to public services would only lessen their financial burden in order to quicken their financial contribution. If the United States continues to allow its immigrant population to remain uneducated, some argue, the lack of skilled workers in the labor force will result in a greater economic crisis (Collins & Reid, 2009).

Labor Market Competition

New immigrants, particularly those of undocumented status working in the U.S., may be viewed

as competition in the labor market and a financial burden on the state. Historically, immigrants have been viewed as the source of increased unemployment and poverty levels, lowered national wages, and limited provision of social services (Espenshade, 1995). Currently, immigrants make up about 20 percent of the low wage labor force (Shields & Behrman, 2004). The labor market competition theory suggests that persons with lower socioeconomic status are less likely to support immigration because it generates greater competition within their own bracket of the labor market (Bonacich, 1972; Garcia & Bass, 2007).

Generally, one's labor market position is determined by economic status or wage bracket and level of education. Immigrants, generally of low education levels, provide an economic advantage for employers, supplying a lower overall cost of labor. Their citizenship and lower socioeconomic status mean immigrants have less political power, and are therefore more vulnerable to labor market abuse through underpay, exclusion of benefits, and lack of advocates (Bonacich, 1972). Undocumented workers are also typically paid almost 30 percent less than legal immigrants from their same native countries, despite their high rates of labor force participation (Espenshade, 1995). Thus, while undocumented immigrants supply a ready-made low-wage labor force, they have little to no recourse to challenge their subordinate status.

Natives who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to express anti-immigrant attitudes as they may view immigration as having a negative personal impact (Citrin et al., 1997). American employers turn to undocumented immigrants for labor because undesirable tasks in many blue-collar jobs can be completed for considerably less than the national wage, therefore increasing employer profits. By increasing the size of the minority immigrant population, the majority, mostly Anglo white-collar workers, are secured in their higher status (Espenshade, 1995). Bass and Garcia (2007) found that Non-Whites were indeed most likely to view immigrants as competition for employment in low-wage jobs.

According to Lee and Ottatai (2002), direct competition for jobs in the lower wage brackets rarely occurs. Nonetheless, immigrants are still perceived to hinder employment opportunities, which results in exclusivist attitudes towards their access to resources that may potentially make them even more competitive in the labor market (Citrin et al., 1997). The possibility of experiencing later competition in the job market due to increased human capital among immigrant students may pose a threat to Americans of low socioeconomic status and education. Citrin et al. (1990) argue that those with higher levels of education, higher wages, and upper middle-class status are more likely to hold inclusivist attitudes because their own status is not threatened by immigrants in low-wage, blue-collar jobs. Those in blue-collar jobs are more likely to view immigrants in a negative light, as immigrants pose a direct threat to their own job security (Citrin et al.,

1997). Citizens with higher education are more likely to hold white-collar jobs, and a "college education gives one a regularly protected labor-market situation and instills confidence in one's future prospects" (Citrin et al., 1997, p. 865). Clearly, education level and socioeconomic status is strongly linked to how one perceives immigrants and, thus, their access to public services.

Background Characteristics and Demographics

Other factors that have been found to influence attitudes toward immigration and related policy include political party and ideology, gender, race, region of the country, and type of community in which one resides.

Research has shown that political ideology can be an important predictor of attitudes and that, generally speaking, those holding more liberal perspectives tend to be more supportive of immigration and its corresponding policies. For example, whites who identify as politically liberal are more likely to favor inclusive immigration policies (Hood & Morris, 1997). Chandler and Tsai (2001) found conservative political ideology to be the strongest factor in opposition toward immigration. Likewise, those who hold a conservative ideology tend to believe too many immigrants are residing in the U.S. (Fennelly & Federico, 2008). Overall, political ideology, rather than political party identification, has been found to shape one's economic beliefs and views, including attitudes toward immigration.

Research on the effect of other demographic characteristics has been inconsistent. While some have found gender to be an important determinant of attitudes, with males expressing the most opposition (Chandler & Tsai, 2001), other research has found no such effect (Espenshade & Hempstead, 1996; Wilson, 2001). Findings on the effect of race are likewise contradictory. While Burns and Gimpel (2000) found Blacks and Latinos more likely to desire decreased immigration, Fennelly and Federico (2008) found Latinos to be less supportive of restrictions. On the question of English-only policies, Garcia and Bass (2007) showed that non-Whites exhibited more support for bilingual language programs in schools.

Recent trends in settlement patterns suggest that residents in different regions of the country may hold different perspectives on immigration policy. The decade during the 1990's saw substantial growth in the Latino population characterized by immigrant settlement in non-border states (Kandel & Cromartie, 2004; Passel, 2004; Kochar, Suro, & Tafoya, 2005). Indeed, some of the highest growth rates in the country can be found in southern states such as North Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia and Alabama (Kochar et al., 2005). The fact that these states may be unaccustomed to Latino and other immigrant populations, combined with the fact that no southern states have adopted in-state tuition policies for undocumented students (Flores & Chapa, 2009), suggests that southern residents will be more likely than others to oppose higher education policy.

Immigrants have historically settled in urban metropolitan areas where greater receptivity and opportunities for affordable housing and jobs could be found. De Jong and Tran (2001) reported metropolitan Atlanta, Baltimore, Detroit, Miami, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. to be most receptive of immigrants. Their findings are true for many metropolitan areas, but it is important to note that attitudes in urban areas are not necessarily consistent. Keogan (2002) found stark differences in public perceptions of immigrants in the cities of Los Angeles and New York. Due to the geographic distribution of immigrants and the resulting residential segregation, immigrants in Los Angeles were most commonly perceived as a cultural threat, while immigrants in New York were perceived as victims of culture. Americans living in metropolitan areas near the U.S.-Mexico border expressed equally exclusivist sentiments as those in non-metropolitan, agricultural areas with little to no immigrant populations (De Jong & Tran, 2001).

Nonetheless, those in more rural areas have likely experienced less contact with immigrants and have been shown to be more prone to hold exclusivist views, often believing that immigrants decrease the quality of life in their community (Fennelly & Frederico, 2008). However, the demand for skills acquired through higher education has increased in rural areas such as the Great Plains states. So, rural areas in states such as Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, and Missouri would benefit greatly from educating their immigrant workforce (Collins & Reid, 2009).

Hypotheses

Based on the previously cited research, we develop a set of hypotheses. Within the symbolic politics framework, we expect the following:

H1: Those who oppose bilingual education will be more likely to oppose undocumented student access to higher education compared to those who do not oppose bilingual education.

H2: Those who feel that immigrants demand too many rights will be more likely to oppose undocumented student access to higher education than those who do not feel this way.

H3: Those who are concerned that immigrants are being favored over one's family will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than those who do not feel this way.

H4: Those who feel that immigrants inhibit economic growth will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than those who feel immigrants bring economic growth.

H5: Those who feel immigrants lead to higher unemployment will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than those who do not feel this way.

Concerning labor market competition, we expect the following:

H6: Those with higher family income will be more likely to support undocumented immigrant access to higher education than those with lower family income.

H7: Those with a higher earned degree will be more in support of undocumented immigrant access to higher education than those with lower levels of education.

H8: Those with higher occupational prestige will be in support of undocumented immigrant access to higher education than those with lower prestige.

Despite some contradictions in the literature, we also make predictions in regard to our control variables:

H9: Males will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than females.

H10: Whites will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than non-Whites.

H11: Southerners will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than non-Southerners.

H12: Those in rural areas will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than those in suburban or urban areas.

H13: Republicans will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than Independents and Democrats.

H14: The politically conservative will be more likely to oppose undocumented immigrant access to higher education than moderates or liberals.

Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses we analyze data from the 1994 General Social Survey (GSS) conducted biennially by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago (Davis & Smith, 2000). The GSS uses probability sampling techniques to select respondents from English-speaking non-institutionalized adults. There is a core set of questions asked of all respondents, and certain years contain particular topical modules asked of a subset of the sample. We use the year 1994 data set because it is the only year that includes the specific variables of interest that allow us to test general attitudes toward immigration for their effect on attitudes toward immigrant children's access to higher education. The survey for 1994 sampled 2,992 respondents. After selecting only those who responded to the survey question about undocumented student access to higher education, our final sample includes 1,024 respondents.

Our analysis involves both univariate and multivariate statistics. First we describe our sample, including our dependent variable of interest, reporting means or percentages as appropriate. Second, in order to test those factors that determine attitudes toward undocumented student access to higher education, we employ logistic regression. Logistic regression is used when the outcome variable is dichotomous, or binary. This type

of analysis predicts the odds of an event occurring. Our dependent variable is coded dichotomously, thus, logistic regression predicts the odds of supporting undocumented student access to higher education.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable is based on the GSS question, “should illegal immigrants have access to public universities at the same cost as other students?” Respondents replied “yes” or “no”, so we dichotomized this variable to reflect those who feel immigrants should have access, with those in opposition as the reference group (1 = yes, 0 = no).

Independent Variables: Symbolic Politics

We measure two types of threat that may affect attitudes toward higher education access: cultural and economic. We employ three measures of cultural threat. The first variable (BILINGUAL2) assesses attitudes toward bilingual education. This question asks whether respondents favor or oppose bilingual education, and the response categories are on a Likert scale which ranges from “strongly favor”, “somewhat favor”, “somewhat oppose” and “strongly oppose”. We combine response categories such that 1 = those who strongly or somewhat favor and 0 = those who oppose or strongly oppose. The second variable (IMPRTS) asks if immigrants are demanding too many rights, with the Likert responses “strongly agree”, “agree”, combined into one category, and, “neither agree nor disagree”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree” serve as the reference category. Our final measure (IMMFAVR) which asks about the chances illegal immigrants will be favored over one’s family, is also dichotomized such that 1 = “very likely” or “somewhat likely”, and 0 = “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely”.

Next, we use two measures of economic threat posed by immigrants. ECONGROW asks if it is “very likely”, “somewhat likely”, “not so likely”, or “not at all likely” that immigrants will lead to economic growth. Finally, UNEMPL asks if immigrants will fuel unemployment, with Likert response categories “very likely”, “somewhat likely”, “not so likely”, “not at all likely”. Both variables were recoded such that 1 = very or somewhat likely and 0 = not so or not at all likely.

Independent Variables: Labor Market Competition

We measure labor market competition using income, education, and occupational prestige. Family income (HINCOME) is a categorical measure that we have dichotomized to reflect those who earn \$25,000 or more¹,

¹ The General Social Survey income measure has 12 response categories, beginning with “less than \$1000 per year” to the final category of “\$25,000 or more”. Since this measure is truncated at the \$25,000 income category, we dichotomize thusly. In addition, we feel the amount of \$25,000 represents a point of demarcation between those who might be considered low income and those with moderate to high incomes based on U.S. Census data that

and all those earning less as reference category. We measure education (DEGREE) by respondents’ highest degree earned, a categorical response variable. Finally, we use the GSS variable “PRESTG80” to measure the prestige of the respondent’s occupation. This measure is based on a rating system created using Census occupational and industrial classifications in combination with the NORC/GSS prestige scores². This results in a continuous variable with lower scores indicating lower occupational prestige and higher scores indicating higher prestige.

Control Variables

The final group of variables include demographic measures and measures of political orientation. Gender (MALE) is coded such that 1 = male and 0 = female. Race is dummy coded into the category WHITE, with black and “other” race serving as our reference category. The GSS assigns respondents to one of nine U.S. regions of residence based on their state of residence. We combine three of these regions, the South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central, to create one variable representing SOUTH. All other regions serve as reference category. We also include a measure of community size, derived from the GSS variable “SRC Beltcode” which assigns codes based on the place of interview. Our RURAL variable is based on those counties having no towns of 10,000 or more³. We dummy code for SUBURB based on the suburbs of the 112 largest Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSA).

Finally, we include measures of political party identification and political views. REPUB represents those who identify as republican, with democrat and independent serving as reference categories. For political views, respondents are asked to identify themselves on a 7-point scale ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Those who identify as “extremely conservative”, “conservative”, or “slightly conservative” are combined to form the category CONSERV. Our reference category includes those who identify as moderate or liberal.

Findings

Table 1 presents the descriptives for the study sample. The mean is presented for interval measure variables, and percents are presented for categorical variables. Generally speaking, the public is opposed to undocumented immigrants having access to public universities at the same cost as other students with just 31 percent in support of this type of policy. Regarding our cultural threat measures, respondents are generally in support of bilingual education (58%), yet a majority agrees that immigrants demand too many rights (58%). About 32 percent feel that immigrants will be favored over their own family. On the question of economic threat, about 31

identifies median family income for 1994 at roughly \$35,000 (Weinberg, 1996).

² See General Social Survey documentation, Appendix G.

³ See General Social Survey documentation, Appendix D.

Table 1
Sample Statistics

| Measure | Percent or Mean | n |
|---|-----------------|------|
| Access to public universities | 31% | 1024 |
| <i>Symbolic Politics: Cultural Threat</i> | | 1024 |
| Support Bilingual education | 58% | 1024 |
| Immigrants demand too many rights | 58% | 1024 |
| Immigrants favored over one's family | 31% | 1024 |
| <i>Symbolic Politics: Economic Threat</i> | | 1024 |
| Immigrants lead to economic growth | 33% | 1024 |
| Immigrants fuel unemployment | 90% | 1024 |
| <i>Labor Market Competition</i> | | 1024 |
| Family income \$25,000 or more | 63% | 1024 |
| Degree earned | 1.57 | 1024 |
| Occupational prestige score | 43.51 | 1024 |
| <i>Control Variables</i> | | 1024 |
| Male | 48% | 1024 |
| White | 84% | 1024 |
| South | 34% | 1024 |
| Rural | 9% | 1024 |
| Suburban | 27% | 1024 |
| Republican | 29% | 1024 |
| Conservative | 37% | 1024 |

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Table 2

Logistic Regression, Determinants of Attitudes toward Access to Higher Education for Undocumented Immigrants (n = 1,024)

| Measure | β (S.E.) | df | p-value | eβ | 95% C.I. Lower | 95% C.I. Upper |
|---|--|-----------|----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Symbolic Politics: Cultural Threat</i> | | | | | | |
| Support Bilingual education | .550 (.161) | 1 | .001 | 1.733** | 1.263 | 2.377 |
| Immigrants demand too many rights | -.013 (.153) | 1 | .932 | .987 | .731 | 1.333 |
| Immigrants favored over one's family | -.079 (.159) | 1 | .621 | .924 | .676 | 1.263 |
| <i>Symbolic Politics: Economic Threat</i> | | | | | | |
| Immigrants lead to economic growth | .513 (.149) | 1 | .001 | 1.670** | 1.247 | 2.236 |
| Immigrants fuel unemployment | -.285 (.228) | 1 | .211 | .752 | .481 | 1.176 |
| <i>Labor Market Competition</i> | | | | | | |
| Family income \$25,000 or more | -.303 (.228) | 1 | .045 | .737* | .546 | .993 |
| Degree earned | .122 (.075) | 1 | .101 | 1.130 | .977 | 1.308 |
| Occupational prestige score | -.007 (.006) | 1 | .269 | .993 | .981 | 1.005 |
| <i>Control Variables</i> | | | | | | |
| Male | -.233 (.141) | 1 | .099 | .792 | .600 | 1.045 |
| White | .013 (.197) | 1 | .945 | 1.014 | .689 | 1.491 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|---|------|-------|------|-------|
| South | -.061 (.150) | 1 | .685 | .941 | .701 | 1.263 |
| Rural | .226 (.249) | 1 | .364 | 1.254 | .769 | 2.044 |
| Suburban | -.296 (.165) | 1 | .074 | .744 | .538 | 1.029 |
| Republican | -.330 (.172) | 1 | .055 | .719 | .513 | 1.007 |
| Conservative | -.194 (.156) | 1 | .215 | .824 | .607 | 1.119 |
| Constant | -.456 (.431) | 1 | .290 | .634 | | |
| Notes: | | | | | | |
| Pseudo R ² = .079 | | | | | | |
| (***)p<.001 **p<.01 *p<.05) | | | | | | |
| χ ² =70.4 | | | | | | |

percent feel that immigration will lead to economic growth and ninety percent feel it will fuel unemployment. Labor market competition measures show that almost sixty-three percent earn at least \$25,000 per year and more than half, roughly 56 percent, have completed high school (1.57). The average occupational prestige score is 43.51, with the scale ranging from 17.0 to 86.0.

Regarding our control variables, about 48 percent of the sample are male, 84 percent are white, and 34 percent live in the southern region of the U.S. Nearly nine percent reside in rural areas and 27 percent in suburban areas, with the remaining 64 percent in urban communities. Approximately 29 percent claim a republican political affiliation, and, ideologically, almost 37 percent are conservative.

Due to the binary nature of our dependent variable, a logistic regression was performed, using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), entering all independent and control variables simultaneously. Table 2 presents the results of the logistic regression, predicting support for higher education access for undocumented students. Only one of our cultural threat measures shows

significance: attitudes toward bilingual education. The odds of supporting access to higher education for undocumented immigrants are increased by a factor of 1.7 among those who support bilingual education compared with those who do not. Those who favor bilingual education are significantly more likely to support undocumented student access to higher education, than those who oppose bilingual education. Concerns about immigrants demanding too many rights and being favored over one’s family are not significantly related to attitudes toward higher education.

We find partial support for our predictions regarding economic threat. The odds of supporting access to higher education increase by a factor of nearly 1.7 among those who feel immigration brings economic growth when compared with those do not feel this way. Thus, those who feel immigration benefits the economy are significantly more likely to allow undocumented students access to higher education. There is no relationship between feelings about unemployment and attitudes toward educational access.

Our next set of variables measure labor market competition, and show that the odds of supporting

educational access are decreased by a factor of .74 among those with higher family income compared with those who have lower family income. So, those with higher family incomes are less supportive of undocumented student access to higher education than those with lower levels of income. Level of education and occupational prestige, however, have no impact on our dependent variable.

Finally, we included a set of control variables measuring gender, race, southern region, rural and suburban residence, republican political party, and conservative political ideology. None of our controls show a significant relationship to attitudes toward higher education access.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our goal for this research was to examine the determinants of attitudes toward access to higher education for undocumented immigrants, a question that, to our knowledge, remains unaddressed in the literature on public opinion and immigration. Overall, we found partial support for each of our predictions. *Cultural* threat is an important sentiment as the relationship between feelings about bilingual education and higher education access demonstrates. Those who are in support of bilingual education in school also support undocumented immigrant access to higher education. Within the symbolic politics framework, language can be seen as an important aspect of American identity. It is possible that those who support instruction in both English and the native language of students feel that this will lead to educational promotion and ultimate success in the labor force. To have mastered the English language and then experience upward mobility in the U.S. can be seen as an embodiment of the “American Dream”, and an important symbol of a shared identity and common goals among natives and non-natives alike. However, it is also possible that those who support educational instruction in English and Spanish are simply more tolerant toward undocumented immigrants (Garcia & Bass, 2007) and this warmer sentiment thus predicts greater support for undocumented student access to higher education.

Concerns about immigrants pushing for too many rights and being favored over one’s family, our other measures of threat, show no salience in the matter of attitudes toward access to higher education. Although this is not what we predicted, others have found no relationship between group threat measures and attitudes toward immigration and immigration related issues (O’Neal & Tienda, 2009). It could be that respondents’ anxiety about rights and favoritism shown to immigrants does not extend to the children of immigrants. The cultural symbol of the immigrant that does not assimilate, takes native jobs, and threatens the culture of the U.S. may not include the image of children or students. Indeed, the “American Dream” explicitly endorses education as the route to opportunity and upward mobility, including the notion that children can advance beyond their parents’ circumstances. These sentiments may exempt children and students from hostility and opposition sometimes reserved for adult immigrants.

However, as stated, these two measures were not significant; thus, interpretation of this non-finding is purely speculative. Future research should consider investigating possible differences in attitudes toward undocumented immigrants and undocumented immigrant children. This could add further nuance to the group threat framework.

The symbolic politics framework was partially supported when examining *economic* threat. While feelings about the role of immigration and unemployment were not an important determinant of attitudes toward higher education access, beliefs about economic growth were. Others have determined that economic conditions are an important influence on attitudes toward immigration policy generally (Burns & Gimpel, 2000; Citrin et al., 1997), yet no studies that we are aware of have examined these factors for their influence on immigrant educational access. Clearly, concerns about the general economy are important in shaping attitudes toward undocumented immigrant access to higher education. We suspect that those who perceive that immigration brings economic growth may perceive benefits regarding their own status and competitiveness in the economic realm. The converse of this finding is that those who feel that immigration will not bring growth may perceive a constrained job market, and if undocumented immigrants are allowed to access higher education, an important form of human capital, at the same cost as citizens, they may usurp job opportunities from “deserving” natives. Thus, undocumented immigrants with higher levels of education represent a real material threat to natives.

Our third set of measures tested the labor market competition theory and we found partial support for this hypothesis. Interestingly, the findings on income are in the opposite direction than expected. While findings from other research show that those who are economically disadvantaged are more opposed to immigration because of perceived job competition (Citrin et al., 1990), we find that those with higher levels of family income are more likely to oppose access to higher education for undocumented immigrants. In our view, however, this is further confirmation for the labor market competition thesis and a clear platform for future research. Those who have higher levels of income are more likely to be able to finance their children’s higher education and may perceive future competition from undocumented immigrants who also attain a college degree. Thus, they may be “protecting” the future economic advantage of their progeny by opposing a more egalitarian educational policy. Regarding other measures of labor market competition, others have found educational level to be an important determinant of attitudes toward immigration (Citrin et al., 1990), but we did not find this to be the case. In our analysis it appears that income level is more salient in determining a sense of competition with undocumented immigrants. In addition, occupational prestige is not related to attitudes toward educational access. It may be that the wording of the question that our dependent

variable is based on, with its emphasis on “cost” of higher education, causes income to be a more tangible and concrete factor in the consideration of this particular policy.

It is notable that none of our control variables were significant, given the research outlined earlier that suggests gender, race, community type, political affiliation and political views to be important predictors of attitudes toward immigration. However, we are predicting a very specific aspect of immigration policy and it appears that other factors are more explanatory here. Nonetheless, it should be noted that three of our control measures very closely approached significance, thus, future studies using other data or methods should consider investigating these potential relationships. First, gender showed near significance with a p-value of .099. This finding would be in line with other research showing males to express more opposition than females to immigration policy (Chandler & Tsai, 2001; Garcia & Bass, 2007). Another interesting possibility is the connection between community type and attitudes. Suburban residence approaches significance with a p-value of .074. Recent research (Benjamin, 2009) suggests that some suburbs, and particularly exurbs, have become a haven for many whites who experience fear and discomfort from the encroaching diversity that immigrants represent. Future research should use more specific measures of community to gauge the attitudes of those in highly race-segregated areas, on issues of immigration policy. Finally, Republican Party affiliation had a p-value of .055. While other research has shown that political ideology is more salient on immigration issues, it is possible that party identification matters on the question of educational access.

A shortcoming in our research is the year of data used: 1994. Although the survey data were gathered near the middle of a decade that experienced significant increases in undocumented immigration, it may be that these effects were not felt until many years later. Unfortunately, the GSS has yet to produce more current data generated from similar variables regarding immigration. More recent survey data could allow for a more current examination of attitudes regarding educational access. In addition, the ongoing economic crisis and rising costs of college would surely affect general attitudes regarding immigration, and particularly attitudes about equalizing the costs of higher education between citizens and non-citizens. Despite this shortcoming, we feel this study contributes significantly to the extant literature that has, thus far, been deficient in examining attitudes toward educational policy for undocumented immigrants. Our study underscores the relevance of the symbolic politics and labor market frameworks for understanding various forms of resistance to the “other”. Though we did not find total support for our hypotheses, it is clear that real and perceived threat shapes sentiment toward this very specific immigrant-centered policy. If data are available, future research should examine immigration policy attitudes

during the current recession. The economic threat framework may produce more telling results in this context. More recent data might reflect more awareness and even exposure to immigrant populations, thus group threat may be more apparent in future analyses. In recent months, the debate about immigration has become even more contentious with the passage of SB 1070 in Arizona. Other states are considering similar measures. We would expect that more recent analyses of attitudes would mirror our findings. The poor economy combined with hostile rhetoric suggests perceived cultural threat could be particularly predictive of opposition to undocumented student access to higher education.

We hope that our study can begin a dialogue about this important policy issue and spur additional research that considers attitudes toward, and outcomes of, restricting access to higher education for this vulnerable population. While the influx of undocumented immigrants may be partly due to flaws in our immigration system, it does not nullify their long-standing presence in our country and the need for policy change. The U.S. will face greater economic and social problems if it ignores the presence and needs of such a large group. Our research supports the notion that social and economic attitudes drive political change and indicates the attitudes regarding undocumented immigrants and education must be amended in order to address the needs of a growing immigrant population. In addition, developing educational policy to facilitate inclusion and successful assimilation of immigrants may have the added benefit of challenging exclusivist attitudes among natives. Thus, education is the key to reducing unwarranted native fear and prejudice, facilitating the integration of immigrants, and creating opportunities for upward mobility among undocumented young people in our country.

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