

COMPLICATING THE ROLE OF WHITE RACIAL ATTITUDES AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT SENTIMENT IN THE 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract Some scholars argue that Donald Trump’s electoral college victory in 2016 was predicated on his ability to attract racially hostile white voters. Others argue that the increased relationship between whites’ racial attitudes and presidential vote choice in 2016 was because racial attitudes and partisanship had become even more aligned following the presidency of Barack Obama. Building on research that shows voters tend to update their policy positions to align with their preferred candidates, we propose a third mechanism that helps account for the strong relationship between whites’ racial attitudes and vote choice in 2016. We hypothesize that over the course of the presidential campaign, many whites shifted their survey responses on questions related to race and immigration to align with their support for Trump or Clinton. To test this argument, we use a unique panel dataset from surveys conducted by YouGov of more than 5,000 respondents interviewed at multiple points during the 2016 presidential election campaign. We find that the strong link between white attitudes toward Black Americans and Trump support observed in prior studies is likely due as much to white Trump supporters updating their survey responses to report opinions more consistent with Trump’s, as it is to Trump drawing support from more racially antagonistic white voters. Similar results emerge with respect to whites’ immigration opinions.

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These findings complicate our understanding of the 2016 election by offering direct evidence that Trump's campaign benefited from and catalyzed racial divisions. The results also hold implications for how we study election and campaign effects and the stability of race and immigration attitudes.

Donald Trump injected a level of racism into his 2016 presidential campaign that many thought impossible in contemporary US politics. He referred to Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists, he retweeted white supremacists and neo-Nazis, and he was slow to distance himself from white supremacists who endorsed his presidential bid (Lopez 2017a; Bump 2018; Leonhardt and Philbrick 2018). Did Trump benefit from this racism by attracting white voters opposed to immigration and with high levels of racial animosity?

While researchers have identified a number of factors that may have influenced voters in 2016, including economic conditions (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2017) and sexism (Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Valentino, Wayne, and Ocen 2018), a growing consensus argues that Trump indeed benefited from his racism and his positions on racially inflected issues (Bouie 2016; Enders and Smallpage 2016; Tesler and Sides 2016; Yglesias 2016; Tesler 2016b; Dionne, Ornstein, and Mann 2017; Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2017; Lopez 2017b; Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018; Jacobs 2018; Morgan and Lee 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Jardina 2019).¹ Whites with greater levels of racial prejudice, this prior work suggests, were supportive of Trump relative to other candidates during the Republican primaries, and they were far more likely to vote for Trump over Clinton in the general election, all else equal.

Most of the research on the relationship between white racial attitudes and Trump support is part of a tradition that assumes that racial attitudes are fairly stable predispositions that form early in life and then later become important for political reasoning (see Sears and Brown 2013 for a review). Implied in this line of research is that politicians or political campaigns do not change levels of prejudice, but they can prime these attitudes, or make them more or less salient and therefore more or less politically relevant (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001). Consistent with this assumption, most work examining the relationship between candidates' strategic use

1. Although we are sensitive to the fact that we cannot truly know Donald Trump's motivations or beliefs and are aware that he has referred to himself as "the least racist person that you've ever encountered" (Fisher 2016), we believe that his long and consistent pattern of racist acts and statements (Graham et al. 2019) unambiguously qualifies as racism.

of racially charged political rhetoric and whites' candidate evaluations, including research on Trump's appeal, has focused exclusively on the extent to which exposure to racist messages makes whites more likely to bring their racial attitudes to bear on their political preferences (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Tesler 2016a; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Sides 2018; Jardina 2020; Stephens-Dougan, 2020). Because racial attitudes are thought to be relatively fixed, prior work in this tradition typically assumes that an increase in the relationship between racial attitudes and vote choice reflects voters changing their vote choice to align with their racial predisposition and not vice versa.

Engelhardt (2019) identifies a second mechanism that helps account for the increased relationship between racial attitudes and vote choice in 2016 (Tesler 2016b). Specifically, Engelhardt (2021) offers evidence that between 2012 and 2016 whites' racial attitudes and partisanship became more strongly associated, as those whites with more racially antagonistic views sorted more uniformly to the Republican Party and those with more racially liberal views sorted more uniformly to the Democratic Party. Engelhardt's perspective parallels the above research in that racial attitudes are viewed as antecedent to vote choice, but it differs because the focus is on partisan sorting that happened largely prior to any election-specific factors of the 2016 presidential campaign.² One implication of this argument is that the relationship between white racial attitudes and vote choice would have been stronger in 2016 than in 2012 regardless of the presidential candidates because sorting by race and partisanship had increased so dramatically over the four years.

While both of these accounts are compelling and supported by evidence, we posit a third factor that helps further account for the strong link between whites' opinion on matters of race and vote choice in 2016. Our theoretical approach builds on the work of a small but growing number of scholars (Hopkins and Washington 2020; Engelhardt 2021) who have complicated the long-standing argument that attitudes on matters of race are largely fixed and persistent predispositions, rarely moved by political context or elite rhetoric (Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers 2009; Sears and Brown 2013; Tesler 2015). We argue that the strong association between Trump support and whites' views on racial issues identified in previous studies, most of which use cross-sectional survey data, was not merely a result of Trump attracting racist whites by way of his own racist rhetoric or a reflection of partisan racial sorting that had already occurred; it was also a result of white Trump supporters changing their views to be more in line with Trump's over the

2. Engelhardt (2021) shows that racial attitudes can influence partisanship and partisanship can influence racial attitudes, but the fact that partisanship is almost always viewed as a predictor of presidential vote choice reinforces the view that racial attitudes are antecedent to vote choice in this perspective.

course of his presidential campaign. In other words, Trump not only attracted whites with more conservative views on race; he also made his white supporters more likely to express more extreme views on issues related to immigration and on issues like the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and police killings of African Americans. What is more, the strong association between racial issue preferences and vote choice in 2016 was not merely driven by a conservative shift among white Trump supporters. We also find that many of those whites who supported Clinton began to express more liberal views on immigration as the campaign unfolded.

In making these claims, we argue that the expression of attitudes on racial issues are similar to attitudes on other political issues; they can be malleable, susceptible to change in response to elite messages, political context, the mass media, and other cues in the political environment (Zaller 1992; Lenz 2012). These shifts may be especially likely during elections, when voters are more likely to attend to politics, more likely to be exposed to political and policy information, and most apt to learn about the policy or issue preferences of their preferred candidate (Lenz 2009, 2012). Our article therefore contributes to a growing body of scholarship, which has documented notable changes in reported levels of white racial attitudes in recent years, including in the wake of the 2016 presidential election (Hopkins and Washington 2020). The evidence we provide also extends recent work, which suggests that some whites update their racial attitudes to align with their partisanship (Engelhardt 2021). We believe, however, that we are the first to argue that part of the increased relationship between racial attitudes and vote choice in 2016 stems from whites updating their racial attitudes *during* the campaign to align more closely with their preferred candidate.

We focus on two attitudes in particular: whites' opinion on racial issues that affect African Americans and whites' opinion on immigration issues. We focus specifically on whites' attitudes because a sizeable body of prior research has focused on the extent to which white racial hostility has become an especially important factor in candidate evaluations and presidential vote choice and because recent work has speculated that Trump was particularly adept at capitalizing on the racial animus of white voters (Bobo 2017; Smith and King 2020; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Jardina 2020). We suspect that the 2016 presidential campaign may have also influenced the racial attitudes and race policy views of racial and ethnic minority group members, but we believe investigating this possibility warrants careful, separate analysis that is beyond the scope of this article.

Much of the prior work on either the responsiveness of white racial attitudes to elite cues or on the link between these attitudes and Trump support has tended to focus on white racial resentment—a measure of white racism that specifically captures whites' attitudes toward Black Americans (Kinder and Sanders 1996). We agree that more conservative opinions on attitudes

toward Black Americans are likely strongly tied to Trump support (and more liberal positions to Clinton support), but we follow the lead of others who argue that attitudes toward immigration are also becoming an especially important force in American partisan and electoral politics (Hajnal and Rivera 2014; Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Sides 2018; Jardina 2019). Thus, we consider how whites' attitudes in both these domains might have influenced—and been influenced by—candidate support in 2016.

To test our predictions, we use a unique panel dataset conducted by the survey firm YouGov in which respondents were re-interviewed multiple times during the 2016 presidential campaign. Because vote intentions and attitudes toward African Americans and immigrants were asked of the same individuals at multiple points during the campaign, it is possible to test whether white respondents aligned their views on race and immigration to match their preferred candidate, updated their vote choice to match their issue preferences, or both (Lenz 2009, 2012).

We find, like other work, that attitudes toward race and immigration issues indeed mattered for whites' vote choice in 2016. But our panel design allows us to see important nuances in these associations that prior research has missed. While it is true that whites with already conservative opinions on race and immigration were more likely to support Trump early in the campaign (Engelhardt 2019), we find some evidence that voters shifted their vote intention to align with prior racial attitudes (e.g., Sides 2018). Furthermore, consistent with our argument, we also find that the relationship between the *change* in racial and immigration attitudes during the campaign and final vote choice is just as strong as the relationship between past racial and immigration attitudes and vote choice. Our findings therefore point to an overlooked consequence of politicians' racial appeals: these appeals can not only make racial attitudes more salient, as previous work suggests, but they may also make some whites more racially antagonistic—or at least more willing to express racially antagonistic views with respect to certain issues. Consistent with Hopkins and Washington (2020), we also find some evidence that whites who supported Clinton early in the presidential campaign expressed more liberal views as the campaign unfolded.

These findings offer important revisions to work on both racial attitudes and policy preference formation. First, consistent with Engelhardt (2021), they indicate that whites' expressed racial issue preferences are not as stable as previous work has claimed. Second, they suggest that issue preference learning may not necessarily be limited to complex public policies to which citizens typically only give limited attention (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lenz 2009, 2012). The same process can also occur with survey responses related to whites' opinions on issues regarding Black Americans and immigration, with important consequences for how we study elections. Our analysis of panel data provides evidence that each of the three mechanisms can

help account for the relationship between racial attitudes and vote choice in 2016. Cross-sectional analyses, by contrast, cannot identify these separate mechanisms, and thus risk attributing correlations to one particular explanation when many factors are actually at work. What is more, the results also hold implications for how we understand campaign effects. The findings support the conclusion that campaigns do matter (Vavreck 2009), but the evidence that voters shifted their positions to align with their preferred candidate also reinforces the importance of the “fundamentals,” like partisanship, in US presidential elections (Gelman and King 1993; Erikson and Wlezien 2012; Enns and Richman 2013).³

Why White Voters’ Views on Race and Immigration May Have Changed during the 2016 Campaign

Many scholars have documented a strong correlation in 2016 survey data between whites’ racial attitudes and presidential candidate support (e.g., Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Reny, Collingwood, and Valenzuela 2019), and they have noted that this association appears to be stronger than it was in previous elections (Tesler 2016b). This association, however, is not necessarily entirely driven by partisan and racial attitude sorting prior to the campaign (Engelhardt 2019) or the fact that some voters were attracted to Trump because of his racist and anti-immigrant comments—or, alternatively, to Clinton because of her more progressive views. We raise the possibility that some voters changed their views on these issues to align with their preferred candidates. We draw from work outside the domain of racial attitudes and racialized policy preferences to develop two mechanisms, which predict that some whites may have changed their expressed attitudes on racial issues and immigration to align with their chosen candidate’s positions.

A small number of studies have pushed back on the claim that views on matters of race are very slow to change and largely impervious to political context or top-down elite cues from the media or politicians (Goldman 2012; Goldman and Mutz 2014; Hopkins and Washington 2020; Engelhardt 2021).⁴ In keeping with this work, we suggest as a first mechanism that in the current political environment, attitudes on race and immigration may behave like other issue attitudes, responding to the opinion leadership of political elites, particularly those from prominent candidates of one’s preferred political party (Zaller 1992). We draw especially from work by Lenz (2009, 2012), who shows that when survey respondents’ policy preferences become

3. Of course, as noted above, as racial attitudes have increasingly aligned with partisanship, these attitudes have become central to electoral politics even when not part of the campaign.

4. This work is part of a long tradition of research on the influence of elite cues on issue preferences and political decision-making. See Gilens and Murakawa (2002) for a review.

more aligned with their vote intention during a campaign, it is typically because respondents learn and take on the positions of their preferred candidate, and *not* because they pick a candidate closer to their issues positions. While Lenz focuses on race-neutral policy positions (like whether to invest Social Security in the stock market or how much to spend on defense), we propose that the same effect may occur with racial policy preferences and anti-immigrant sentiments. That is, if respondents learn their favored candidate's views on racial issues, they may adjust their future survey responses to align their racialized issue preferences more closely with the candidate's.

It may seem surprising that this type of "learning" can occur with deeply held predispositions toward race and immigration. Prior work has suggested that learning is more likely to occur when issues are complex enough that voters, who often have limited time to devote to policy details, do not have strong or established prior views. However, while there is evidence of growing partisan divides and polarization on racial and immigration issues in recent years (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Engelhardt 2021), there nevertheless remains some partisan cross-cutting on these issues, creating opportunities for learning, perhaps especially when candidates are explicit and vocal about their issue positions. Trump, for example, was unique among recent Republican presidential candidates in the extent to which he was unequivocal and unambiguous in his positions. For one, he has a long history of directing racist behavior and rhetoric toward Black people, and his racist track record was well covered by the media over the course of his presidential bid.⁵ Furthermore, during his campaign, Trump was slow to distance himself from endorsements like those of former KKK leader David Duke, and he did not shy away from using explicitly racist rhetoric, a strategy contemporary national candidates have generally avoided so as not to appear to be violating norms of racial equality (Mendelberg 2001; Hutchings and Jardina 2009; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018). In addition, Trump's predecessors, like George W. Bush, John McCain, and Mitt Romney, were less extreme on issues of immigration, and they openly pursued Latino voters by presenting their websites and campaign ads in Spanish. Trump, in contrast, did neither, and declared, "This is a country where we speak English, not Spanish" (Goldmacher 2016).⁶ Compared to recent Republican candidates, then, Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric, in particular, may have provided new

5. For a list of Trump's racist remarks and behavior, see <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/15/opinion/leonhardt-trump-racist.html>.

6. When it comes to immigration policy, Mitt Romney recently declared, "I'm more of a hawk on immigration than Trump" (Lima 2018), but he was more ambiguous about his views on immigration policy during his 2012 presidential bid (Balz 2012), and even his calls for a "high-tech fence to enhance border security" (Wood 2012) resonate differently than Trump's 2016 immigration rhetoric. Romney also differentiated himself in one of his 2018 US Senate campaign ads, stating, "Utah Welcomes legal immigrants from around the world—Washington sends

and more salient information to both Democrats and Republicans about where the parties stood in 2016 on immigration.

Additionally, even when the underlying and deeply held attitudes or psychological predispositions that whites have on matters of race are fairly stable, specific policy positions on racial or immigration issues may be less crystalized than previous work has recognized. And when new issues arise, like the Black Lives Matter movement or the building of a border wall, voters' preferences may not be fully developed. As a result, the link between these preferences and more fundamental racial attitudes may be only weakly formed, and public opinion on these issues may be especially susceptible to learning effects over the course of a campaign.

Our first mechanism suggests that Trump's overtly racist behavior may have provided new information to some voters—especially about where the candidates stand on immigration. But this is unlikely to be the entire story. We suspect a second mechanism may also have been at work. After all, prior to the 2016 election, many voters were likely already aware that Republicans were more conservative on issues related to race than Democrats. The Republican and Democratic parties have taken different positions on race since the 1940s, when Republican voters and Republican politicians were less likely than Democrats to support policies that would promote racial equality (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Chen 2007; Chen, Mickey, and Van Houweling 2008; Schickler 2016). The relationship between racial attitudes and partisanship also increased significantly during the Civil Rights movement and then strengthened even more during the Obama presidency (King and Smith 2011; McAdam and Kloos 2014; Tesler 2016a; Bobo 2017).

However, even if most voters might have assumed that Clinton was more progressive on matters of race than Trump just by way of her partisan affiliation, Trump's ongoing racist and xenophobic comments may have influenced some white survey responses through a second, more bottom-up mechanism at the mass level, where respondents learned that expressing extreme responses to questions about racial issues on surveys might be more socially acceptable.⁷ It is therefore possible that some respondents harbored racially conservative policy preferences and anti-immigrant sentiments prior to 2016,

immigrants a message of exclusion" (Reston 2018). Also see Gonyea (2018) for "The GOP's Evolution on Immigration."

7. Although this mechanism still depends on Trump's racist rhetoric and behavior, we view this mechanism as more bottom-up because if this process occurred, individuals did not shift their responses to align with a political elite but rather began expressing responses that aligned more directly with their pre-existing attitudes. Examples of Trump's racism and xenophobia include Trump spending years perpetuating the false rumor that Barack Obama was not born in the United States but in Kenya (Jardina and Traugott 2019) and during the 2016 campaign referring to Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists. He also was slow to distance himself from the endorsement of David Duke, the former leader of the Ku Klux Klan (Rubin 2016; Lopez 2017a;

but because of a widespread norm of racial equality (Mendelberg 2001), they were reluctant to reveal these beliefs. It was not until Trump's campaign that they felt comfortable *expressing* these views in surveys. This process reflects a different type of learning, where white pro-Trump survey respondents may have come to believe from Trump's frequent and exceptionally extreme racial rhetoric that it was now socially acceptable to express racial bias in surveys (Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta 2018; Newman et al. 2020). If so, some of the relationship between racial bias and Trump support observed in 2016 would reflect Trump supporters who harbored racial animus selecting more extreme survey responses because they felt it was more socially appropriate to do so. This mechanism suggests an important addition to the standard view that white racial attitudes are highly stable (e.g., Sears and Brown 2013), as the mechanism allows for stable racial attitudes and helps account for when survey responses are more or less likely to align with underlying preferences.⁸

We also note that Trump's victory came in the wake of the presidency of Barack Obama, America's first African American president. Many scholars and political commentators have argued that Trump's victory was the result of a backlash to Obama among many whites who were dismayed at the nation's changing racial and ethnic demographics and at the economic and political success of racial and ethnic minorities (Sides 2018; Jardina 2019). Trump, with his promises to unravel many of Obama's policies, likely appealed to the many white Americans with racially conservative attitudes who wanted a white president who supported their views. But we argue that in addition to a racial backlash laying the groundwork for Trump, the political environment may also have set the stage for changes in whites' expressed attitudes on matters of race and immigration via the mechanisms outlined above.

Some whites who were uneasy about the racial and ethnic changes in the country that became more apparent during Obama's time in office may not have fully formulated a mental response or reaction. We posit that these whites were poised to adopt more conservative views in these domains when sent a signal about issue positions by a political elite they supported. Others may have held fully articulated views on race and immigration that they were previously uncomfortable sharing, but saw Trump as paving a path that made it acceptable for them to express views they had become increasingly eager to share. We think these shifts are especially likely to happen in the

Leonhardt and Philbrick 2018). For additional examples, see <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/15/opinion/leonhardt-trump-racist.html>.

8. It is also possible, perhaps even likely, that if social norms change enough that someone expresses a view they formally withheld, this process also pushes the underlying attitude in a more extreme direction.

increasingly polarized political environment, in which racial attitudes are becoming ever more correlated with partisanship as voters update their attitudes to align with their preferred political parties and their favored political candidates (Mason 2018; Jardina 2019; Engelhardt 2021).

Although this study cannot distinguish between these separate mechanisms—that is, learning candidates' positions (including learning from candidates how new issues align with racial predispositions) or selecting more extreme responses that no longer appear socially unacceptable—together they suggest that even though attitudes toward race and immigration may be deeply held and slow to change, there are reasons to expect that survey responses on these issues shifted during the campaign, such that voters were changing their positions to match those of their preferred candidate.

Traditionally, scholars examining the relationship between white racial attitudes and candidate evaluations have tended to focus on the opinions whites have about Black Americans (Piston 2010; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Tesler 2016a). But the nation's changing demographics, the significant influx of immigrants to the country in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and politicians' intense focus on the issue of immigration over the past decade mean that whites' orientations toward Black Americans are not the only racialized attitudes at play in American public opinion. As a growing body of work demonstrates, attitudes toward immigration have become an important lens through which white Americans arrive at their partisanship and their political preferences (Hajnal and Rivera 2014; Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). While attitudes toward other racial and ethnic groups certainly matter, we view our analysis as an initial step toward a more nuanced perspective, taking seriously the idea that in order to accurately assess the relationship between presidential candidate support and white racial attitudes, we must consider both how whites feel about issues related to Black Americans and issues related to immigration.

Analysis: White Racial Attitudes, Immigration Attitudes, and Support for Trump

Did some voters learn from Trump's racist and anti-immigrant statements and update their survey responses to questions about racial issues to align with their preferred presidential candidate? To answer this question, we employ panel data, which allows us to sidestep a shortcoming in work that relies on observational data drawn at a single point in time. Cross-sectional observational data cannot tell us whether a strong relationship observed between racial attitudes and candidate support is the result of the candidate attracting voters with particular racial attitudes, or if voters are changing their racial attitudes to align with their candidate. In either case, we would observe

a strong relationship between attitudes and preferences, but we would be unable to determine why. Furthermore, cross-sectional data cannot provide information about *when* these relationships emerged. Thus, in order to determine whether voter learning with respect to racial preferences occurred over the course of the campaign, we use a panel survey conducted by YouGov, which consistently performs extremely well on a variety of metrics (Rivers 2016).⁹ The survey contains data on over 5,000 panelists (and 3,976 white, non-Hispanic respondents) who originally completed an Economist/YouGov survey between May 8 and June 8, 2015, and were re-interviewed multiple times throughout the 2016 campaign about their vote intentions and their attitudes toward issues related to African Americans *and* immigration (as well as other topics, such as policy preferences and candidate views). YouGov invites panelists to participate based on education, race, gender, and age in proportion to the frequency of adult citizens in the most recent US Census American Community Survey. Data are weighted according to respondents' demographic characteristics and voter registration status. We limit our analysis to non-Hispanic white respondents and employ the survey weights YouGov provided in the analyses that follow.¹⁰

RACIALIZED ISSUES RELATED TO BLACK AMERICANS OVER THE COURSE OF THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

We turn first to considering the relationship between whites' opinions on racialized issues related to Black Americans. Our measure of racialized issues is composed of two survey questions, which were asked twice during the 2016 presidential campaign—the first time in the February wave, which followed the Iowa Caucus, and then again in the August wave, just over two months prior to the election. The first asks respondents whether they support or oppose the Black Lives Matter movement. The second asks respondents whether they think that police killings of African Americans are isolated incidents. These questions offer several advantages: they were asked at two points during the campaign, and they directly measure opinion on issues associated with Black Americans. Furthermore, as we show in [Supplementary Material section 1](#), these questions also appear to tap broader feelings of racial resentment. Our primary goal is to test our hypothesis that many Trump and Clinton supporters changed their opinion on these issues over the course of the campaign to align their views with their preferred candidate's position.

9. Details on YouGov survey methodology can be found at <https://today.yougov.com/about/panel-methodology/>. Also see Frankovic (2016).

10. Because YouGov maintains an opt-in panel that uses a proprietary turbo-sampling approach (<https://business.yougov.com/panel-data-tools>), a traditional survey response rate cannot be calculated. There were 5,244 respondents in wave 1 and 3,266 respondents in the post-election survey (wave 16), suggesting an overall attrition rate of approximately 38 percent.

Our research design, however, also allows us to evaluate the more common perspective, which is that Trump benefited from his racism primarily by attracting white voters who already had conservative views on racial issues. We begin by examining vote intentions during the campaign (across three survey waves) among those who consistently indicated that they strongly opposed BLM and thought police killings of African Americans were isolated incidents. If Trump's racist comments were merely serving to attract these types of voters, then we would expect to see two patterns. First, *after* Trump entered the race, we should find that the number of racially hostile white voters who expressed support for Trump is higher than the number who indicated support for a generic Republican candidate. If support among these voters is the same for Trump as it is for any Republican candidate, then there is not much evidence that Trump's racial messaging uniquely attracted these already racially conservative voters. Second, as the campaign progressed and Trump's racial appeals became more apparent by way of greater media attention, we should also expect to find an increase in support for Trump among whites with more conservative positions on race issues.

Figure 1 reports Republican candidate vote share in May 2015 (before Trump had entered the race), and Trump's vote share in February 2016 and August 2016. Often, vote intentions are reported as the percent supporting a particular candidate out of the two-party vote (i.e., among those who indicated an intention for either the Republican or Democratic candidate). However, most changes in vote intention during a campaign are likely to occur among the uncommitted. Thus, the percentages in figure 1 include those who indicated they were undecided, voting for another candidate, or not voting, ensuring we capture all potential shifts in vote intentions among our respondents. Figure 1 includes the May 2015 wave because this survey precedes Trump's official entrance into the campaign on June 16, 2015. The May vote intention question does not mention any candidates. Instead, it asks, "If an election for president was going to be held now, would you vote for the Democratic Party candidate or the Republican Party candidate?" Because Trump had not entered the race when this question was asked, it offers a baseline of support for the Republican candidate independent of any support based on Trump's racist comments.

The other two surveys (February 2016 and August 2016) were selected because the BLM and police shooting questions were asked during these waves, which allows us to measure Trump support and racial views at the same time. By analyzing respondents who participated in multiple survey waves, we also help ensure that any panel attrition does not influence the over-time patterns.¹¹ Between May 2015 and August 2016, Trump

11. If a respondent missed a particular survey wave, they were allowed to participate in subsequent waves, so the total number of respondents is roughly consistent throughout the period of

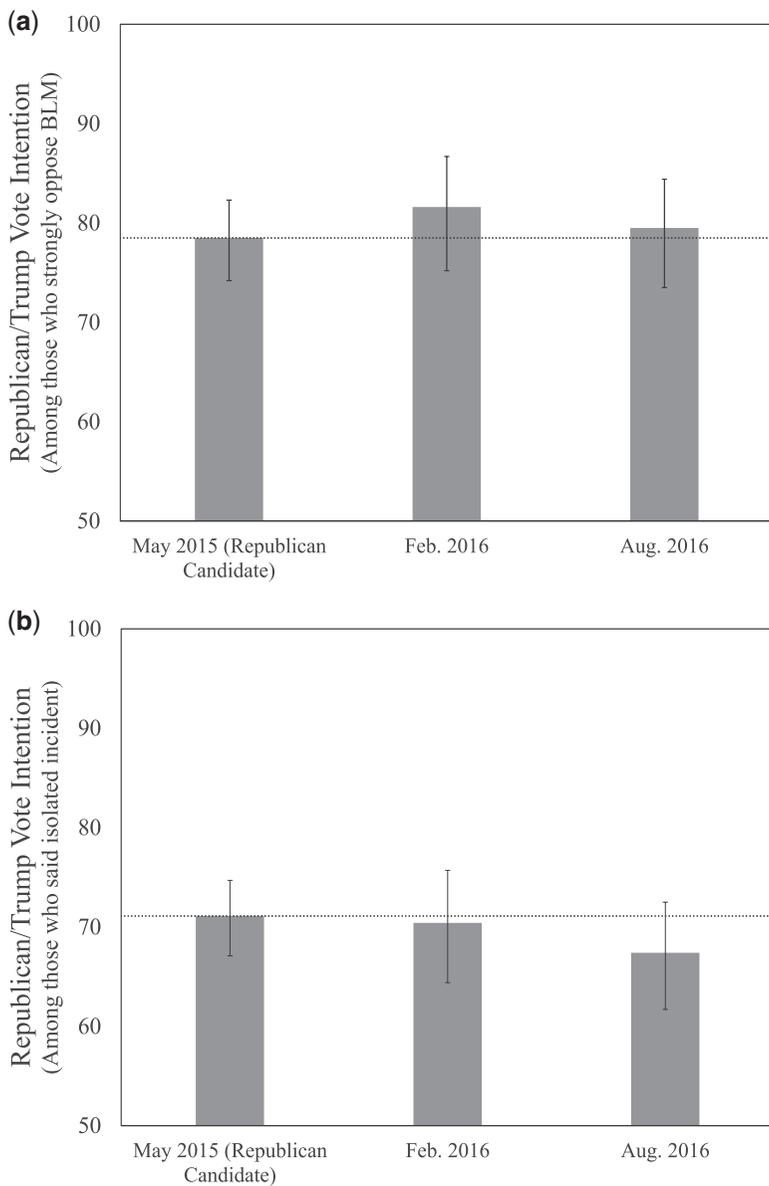


Figure 1. The percent of white respondents indicating a Republican vote intention (May 2015) and Trump vote intention (Feb. and Aug. 2016) during the campaign among those who strongly opposed Black Lives Matter (Panel a) and those who thought recent police killings of African Americans were isolated incidents (Panel b).

repeatedly attacked Black Lives Matter, calling the group a “threat” and (erroneously) accusing the group of “essentially calling death to the police” (Campbell 2015; Diamond 2016; Heer 2016). Nevertheless, during this period, we see no evidence that support for Trump increased (compared to support for a Republican candidate in May 2015) among those whites harboring the most racially conservative policy views. The differences in Trump support in February and August are small and not statistically different than general Republican support in May 2015 among those strongly opposing Black Lives Matter (Panel a) and those who view police killings of African Americans as isolated incidents (Panel b). In short, at least during the first year of Trump’s campaign, those whites we might suspect to be most likely to increase their support for Trump due to his racist comments show no evidence of doing so. Instead, the results suggest that those whites who expressed the most racial animus in May 2015 were *already* predisposed to support any Republican candidate. This initial result is consistent with Engelhardt’s (2019) argument that racialized partisan sorting occurred prior to the 2016 campaign (also see Chen 2007 and Carmines and Stimson 1989 on the much earlier alignment of racial attitudes and partisanship).

Next, we consider whether some white Americans were actually changing their policy preferences to align with their preferred candidate as they learned about Trump’s or Clinton’s issue positions. Figure 2 offers a preliminary assessment of the learning hypothesis. Panels a and c on the left side of the figure plot the percent of white Trump supporters (those indicating a Trump vote intention at both points in the survey) who strongly oppose BLM and think police killings of African Americans are isolated incidents at two points in the campaign: January 2016 and August 2016. The two right panels of the figure (panels b and d) plot the percent of whites subscribing to each policy position among those indicating a Clinton vote intention in both surveys. If we are right that issue learning is occurring, then we should see a significant conservative shift in opinion on these issues among white Trump supporters, and a liberal shift among Clinton voters, between January and August.

Not surprisingly, in figure 2 we see that those whites who consistently supported Trump were much more opposed to BLM and much more likely to view police killings of African Americans as isolated incidents than those who consistently supported Clinton. The y-axis for Trump supporters ranges

analysis. Lending further evidence that panel attrition does not affect our conclusions, Supplementary Material section 8 reports subsequent results incorporating a Heckman selection model that models panel attrition. The model suggests attrition is random with respect to demographic variables (including partisanship and political ideology). The full survey included 17 waves. The various analyses throughout this paper include data from waves 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 11, 13, and 16 (the first post-election wave). We selected these waves to analyze because they included the necessary survey questions and allowed for the most comprehensive analysis of campaign dynamics.

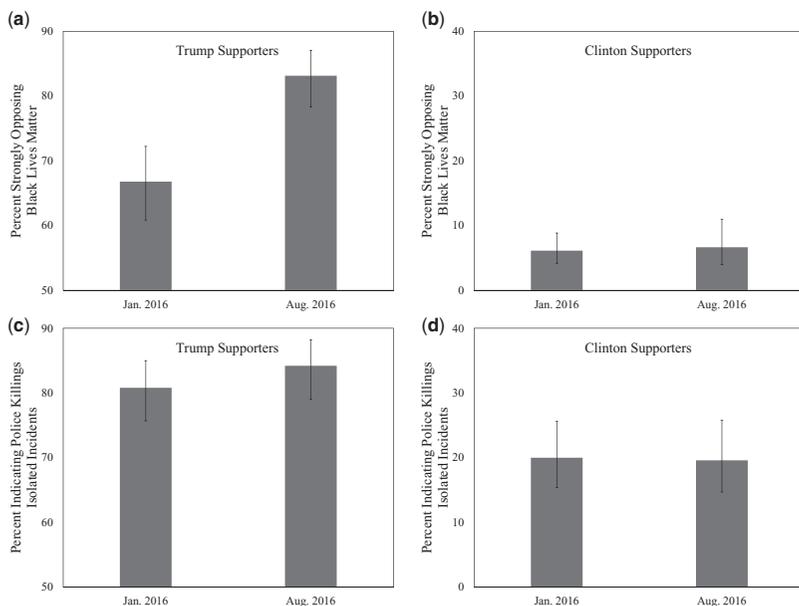


Figure 2. The percent of white respondents indicating they strongly oppose Black Lives Matter or they think police killings of African Americans are isolated incidents during the campaign among those who indicated a vote intention for Trump in both Feb. and Aug. 2016 or for Clinton in both Feb. and Aug. 2016. We use the February survey for vote intentions because vote intentions were not asked in the January wave (when the BLM and police killing questions were asked).

- Panel a) Oppose BLM, Trump Supporters
- Panel b) Oppose BLM, Clinton Supporters
- Panel c) Police Killings Isolated, Trump Supporters
- Panel d) Police Killings Isolated, Clinton Supporters

from 50 to 90 percent, and the y-axis for Clinton supporters ranges from 0 to 40 percent, so the differences are even more substantial than they appear. The results presented in Panel a in the top left are consistent with our expectations: among Trump supporters, opposition to Black Lives Matter increased by about 16 percentage points from January to August. Together, figures 1 and 2a suggest that those whites opposed to BLM did not become more supportive of Trump as he continually attacked the movement. Instead, those whites who *already* supported Trump became more opposed to BLM. The percent of white Trump supporters indicating they thought police killings of African Americans were isolated incidents increased slightly during this period, but the difference is not statistically significant. Thus, our

preliminary analysis only finds evidence of shifting racial attitudes related to Black Lives Matter among Trump supporters. There is no evidence that Clinton supporters adjusted their views of BLM or police shootings during this period.

Table 1 offers another, more nuanced, look at these relationships. The dependent variables in the first two columns are attitudes toward Black Lives Matter (column 1) and beliefs about whether police killings of African Americans are isolated incidents (column 2). These columns present the relationship between whites' attitudes on these issues in February and past attitudes on these issues, past vote intentions, past partisanship, and past political ideology.¹² Past issue positions are those measured in the January wave of the study. All other past variables were measured in the February wave of the survey. In addition, we suspect that if vote intentions among citizens change during a campaign, they are more likely to change among those who are undecided or not planning to vote. Thus, our measure of past vote intentions includes white respondents who indicated these particular responses. Each variable in the model is recoded to range from 0 to 1.

The evidence in support of the learning hypothesis from this perspective is even stronger than what we presented above. In columns 1 and 2, when controlling for past issue positions, partisanship, and political ideology, we see evidence that many whites shifted their racial policy attitudes to align with their past vote intentions. Those whites who expressed a Trump vote intention just after the Iowa Caucus were more likely to strongly oppose BLM and to view police killings of African Americans as isolated incidents six months later.

In columns 3 and 4, we consider the more conventional hypothesis, which is that past issue positions predict later presidential vote intentions. If Trump was primarily drawing support from more racially conservative white voters, we should find that whites' past issue positions were strongly predictive of their vote intention reported later in the campaign, in August 2016. However, consistent with the patterns in figure 1, we do not find evidence that this is the case. Although the coefficients on our measure of lagged issue positions are positive (0.76 and 0.20), they are imprecisely estimated, and the confidence intervals overlap zero. In other words, we cannot conclude that a relationship exists between whites' past views on Black Lives Matter or police killings of African Americans and their August vote intentions. Of course, this is just a six-month snapshot of the campaign. Past racial attitudes most certainly influence lagged vote intentions in the model. And our subsequent analyses will consider changes right before the election. But

12. In tables 1 and 2, "not sure" responses to partisanship and ideology are recoded as independent and moderate, respectively. Tables A-3 and A-4 in the Supplementary Material show that the results are nearly identical when all partisanship and ideology responses—including not sure—are coded as separate dichotomous variables.

Table 1. Ordered logit models of white racial policy attitudes and vote intentions: respondents appear to change their issue positions to match their previous vote intention (columns 1 & 2), not change their vote to match their previous issue positions (columns 3 & 4)

	(1) DV: Issue position BLM	(2) DV: Issue position Police killings	(3) DV: Trump vote intention	(4)
Previous Trump vote intention	1.08 (0.26) <i>0.00</i>	0.93 (0.30) <i>0.00</i>	4.57 (0.54) <i>0.00</i>	4.63 (0.53) <i>0.00</i>
Previous other vote intention	0.29 (0.30) <i>0.33</i>	0.07 (0.31) <i>0.82</i>	1.16 (0.67) <i>0.09</i>	1.18 (0.68) <i>0.08</i>
Previous no vote intention	-0.02 (0.30) <i>0.94</i>	0.01 (0.41) <i>0.99</i>	2.23 (0.69) <i>0.00</i>	2.45 (0.67) <i>0.00</i>
Previous BLM opposition	5.75 (0.45) <i>0.00</i>		0.76 (0.83) <i>0.36</i>	
Previous police killing isolated		2.78 (0.30) <i>0.00</i>		0.20 (0.31) <i>0.53</i>
Previous partisanship	0.84 (0.40) <i>0.04</i>	0.56 (0.44) <i>0.20</i>	3.19 (1.23) <i>0.01</i>	3.30 (1.22) <i>0.01</i>
Previous ideology	1.24 (0.45) <i>0.01</i>	1.78 (0.49) <i>0.00</i>	3.91 (0.96) <i>0.00</i>	3.99 (0.96) <i>0.00</i>
<i>N</i>	1,485	1,488	1,144	1,143

NOTE.—Coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and *p*-values in italics. All models estimated with survey weights. Data from Jan. and Aug. 2016, white, non-Hispanic respondents only. All variables re-scaled to range from 0 to 1. Clinton is the baseline vote intention category.

these results indicate that despite months of attacking BLM, even after the Republican National Convention, the evidence that Trump benefited from his racism during the campaign by drawing in already racially conservative voters is tepid. Instead, we find strong support for our argument that Trump was shifting the preferences of some white supporters, either by actually helping transform the racial policy preferences of his initial and steadfast supporters, helping supporters learn how these issues align with racial predispositions, or showing them that what is socially acceptable had changed.

IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES DURING THE CAMPAIGN

We argued above that whites' racialized issue positions with respect to Black Americans were likely no longer the only racialized opinions that routinely underlie presidential candidate preferences. In today's political environment, immigration opinion also has a significant impact on political preferences. Trump made immigration a central issue of his campaign from its very beginnings, taking strong anti-immigration positions (Jardina 2019). It would not, therefore, be unreasonable to presume that whites with especially hostile immigration positions would be drawn to Trump. At the same time, our learning hypothesis predicts that Trump may also have influenced many of his supporters' positions on immigration, leading them to take more conservative positions over the course of the presidential campaign.

To test our expectations, we turn again to the YouGov panel study and analyze two questions about immigration attitudes that were asked more than once across the panel period: "Which comes closest to your view about "illegal" immigrants who are living in the U.S.?" (The three response options were "They should be allowed to stay in the U.S. and apply for citizenship," "They should be allowed to stay in the U.S., but not become citizens," and "They should be required to leave the U.S.") and "Do you favor or oppose building a wall across the entire U.S. border with Mexico?" ("Yes" or "No"). [Supplementary Material Section 2](#) shows that these questions relate closely to other questions that capture anti-immigrant sentiment.

We begin by examining the conventional hypothesis that Trump support increased over the course of the campaign among whites with consistently anti-immigrant policy preferences. We present our first results in [figure 3](#), which displays Trump vote intentions among those who consistently favored building a border wall and those who consistently indicated that "illegal" immigrants should be required to leave the country. In contrast to the results above, it appears that those whites who consistently favored a border wall did indeed gravitate toward Trump over the course of the election. Support for Trump among these white respondents increased by about 14 percentage points from May 2015 to October 2016, and the increase is statistically significant. We do not see a corresponding shift in support for Trump among those whites who consistently indicated that "illegal" immigrants should be required to leave, as the slight increase in Trump support in June 2016 is not statistically significant. The timing of when these questions were asked, however, may account for the different results between [figures 3a and b](#).

[Figure 4](#) considers the learning hypothesis. As above, we see some evidence of learning, but this time it is not among Trump supporters but rather Clinton supporters (Panel b), who *decreased* their support for building a border wall along the course of the campaign. The magnitude of the decline in anti-immigration opinion is about 12 percentage points from February to

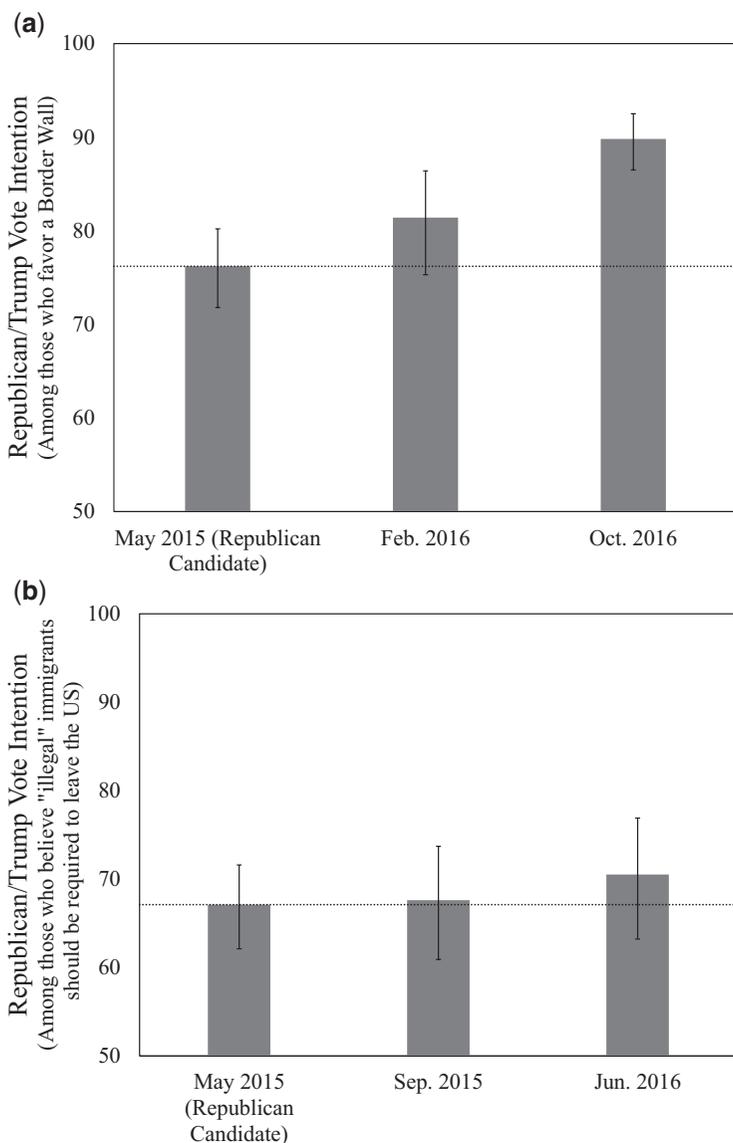


Figure 3. The percent of white respondents indicating a Republican vote intention (May 2015) and Trump vote intention (Sep. and Jun.) during the campaign among those who favored building a border wall in both Feb. 2016 and Oct. 2016 (Panel a) and those who thought “illegal” immigrants should be required to leave the United States in both Sep. 2015 and Jun. 2016 (Panel b).

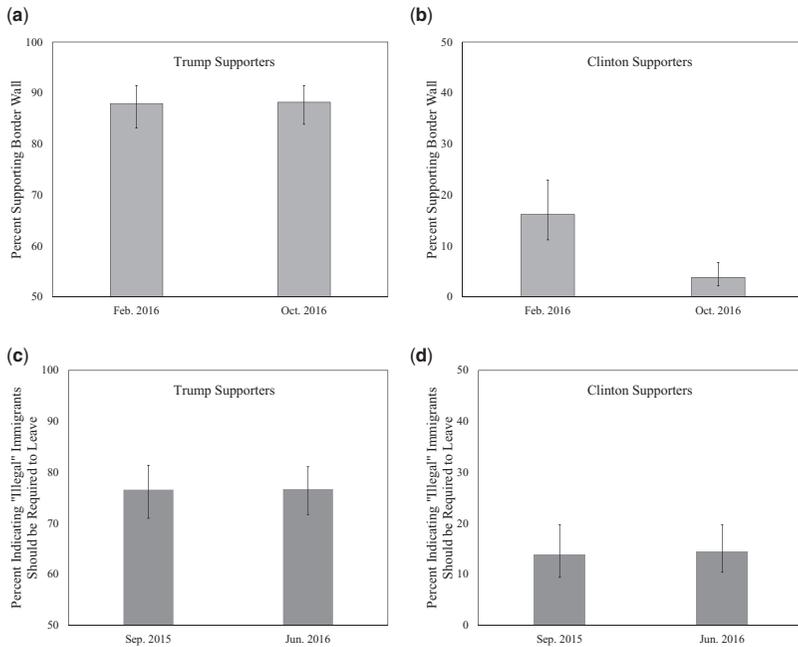


Figure 4. The percent of white respondents indicating they favor building a border wall in both Feb. and Oct. 2016 or they think “illegal” immigrants should be required to leave in Sep. 2015 and Jun. 2016 among those who indicated a vote intention for Trump or for Clinton at both time points. Vote intentions are from August 2015 wave for the first “immigrant should leave” response because vote intentions were not asked in the September wave.

Panel a) Favor Border Wall, Trump Supporters

Panel b) Favor Border Wall, Clinton Supporters

Panel c) Immigrants Should Leave, Trump Supporters

Panel d) Immigrants Should Leave, Clinton Supporters

October 2016. Of course, it is possible that these shifts reflect longer-term patterns that happen to coincide with the election. Yet, given that Clinton supporters shifted their views on a border wall, which was a key focus during many of Trump’s campaign events, we think it is plausible that the change in survey response reflects the 2016 campaign environment. Trump supporters, by contrast (Panels a and c), consistently expressed anti-immigrant preferences, becoming no more or less hostile to immigrants over the period. As with figure 2, the overall differences between Trump and Clinton supporters are greater than they appear given the different ranges on the y-axis (50-100 and 0-50).

As above, we also conducted a statistical analysis to re-examine the relationship between immigration opinion and vote intention controlling for partisanship and political ideology. The results of this analysis, presented in [table 2](#), largely reinforce the patterns in the figures above, showing learning related to border wall attitudes (column 1) and vote shifting effects related to both immigration questions (columns 3 and 4). With all the controls included in the models, we do find that those who previously supported Trump became more likely to support building a border wall, and those who previously supported a border wall or requiring immigrants to leave became more likely to support Trump. Although we find that those whites who indicated that immigrants should leave became more likely to vote for Trump, we do not find evidence that those who intended to vote for Trump become more supportive of the view that immigrants should leave.

Consistent with [figure 4b](#), [Supplementary Material section 5](#) presents a similar statistical model, which shows that past support for Clinton predicts decreased support for a border wall. These results suggest that previous cross-sectional evidence showing a stronger relationship in 2016 than in previous elections between anti-immigrant attitudes and vote choice does not just reflect Trump supporters' opposition to immigration; it also reflects the fact that Clinton supporters expressed more positive views toward immigration.

ESTIMATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WHITES' RACIAL AND IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES AND FINAL VOTE

The previous analysis covers a large and important part of the 2016 presidential campaign. But the period of analysis did not include *final* votes from November because we needed to restrict the analysis to surveys that included the same questions from two time points, and the November post-election wave did not include the race and immigration attitude questions. We can, however, use the post-election wave of the survey to evaluate the extent to which *prior* issue positions were associated with actual vote choice in November. The vote choices revealed in the post-election wave captured the overall final vote share the candidates received with a high degree of accuracy (within just 0.2 percent of the actual vote share). We thus feel confident that this final wave offers a valid indication of final vote choice among our respondents.¹³

Our aim here is to compare the effects of whites' racial and immigration issue preferences on final vote choice at two points in time: early in the campaign and near the end of the election. Many public opinion scholars, relying

13. Specifically, 48.4 percent of respondents indicate a Clinton vote in the final wave (the actual share was 48.2 percent) and 45.9 percent indicated a Trump vote (the actual share was 46.1 percent).

Table 2. Ordered logit models of white immigration attitudes: respondents appear to change their issue positions to match their previous vote intention (columns 1), and change their vote to match their previous issue positions (columns 3 & 4)

	(1) DV: Issue position Border wall	(2) DV: Issue position Immigrants leave	(3) DV: Trump vote intention	(4)
Previous Trump vote intention	1.78 (0.38) <i>0.00</i>	0.27 (0.31) <i>0.39</i>	3.73 (0.54) <i>0.00</i>	3.72 (0.49) <i>0.00</i>
Previous other vote intention	0.01 (0.46) <i>0.99</i>	-0.80 (0.42) <i>0.06</i>	1.34 (0.71) <i>0.06</i>	2.65 (0.69) <i>0.00</i>
Previous no vote intention	0.03 (0.45) <i>0.94</i>	0.55 (0.41) <i>0.18</i>	1.38 (0.66) <i>0.04</i>	2.06 (0.81) <i>0.01</i>
Previous support border wall	3.58 (0.37) <i>0.00</i>		2.06 (0.52) <i>0.00</i>	
Previous immigrants should leave		4.76 (0.35) <i>0.00</i>		2.07 (0.55) <i>0.00</i>
Previous partisanship	0.37 (0.54) <i>0.49</i>	-0.24 (0.49) <i>0.62</i>	2.31 (0.72) <i>0.00</i>	2.71 (0.70) <i>0.00</i>
Previous ideology	2.57 (0.64) <i>0.00</i>	2.15 (0.76) <i>0.01</i>	4.48 (1.01) <i>0.00</i>	4.37 (1.15) <i>0.00</i>
<i>N</i>	1,505	1,139	1,259	892

NOTE.—Coefficients with standard errors in parentheses and *p*-values in italics. All models estimated with survey weights. Data from Feb. and Oct. 2016 (Border Wall) and Sept. 2015 and June 2016 (Immigration), white, non-Hispanic respondents only. All variables re-scaled to range from 0 to 1. Clinton is the baseline vote intention category.

on cross-sectional survey data, will likely estimate the relationship between racial attitudes and candidate support near the end of the election from survey data in which questions about race and vote choice are asked on either the same survey or very close together in time. The 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES), for example, asked the standard four-item measure of racial resentment, questions about immigration, and opinions about Black Lives Matter on the post-election wave of the survey—the same wave of the study in which respondents were asked about their vote choice. But if we are

right and issue position learning is happening over the course of the campaign, then scholars estimating the effect of racial attitudes on vote choice late in the campaign—using data like the ANES—might unintentionally overstate the extent to which pre-existing racial attitudes drew support or opposition for a particular candidate. In other words, our hypothesis predicts that the relationship between whites' racial and immigration issue preferences on vote choice will reflect the influence of white survey respondents' prior attitudes on vote choice *as well as* their survey responses that shift during the campaign to align with their preferred candidates. Analyses using only a single cross-section also cannot differentiate between campaign effects and shifts that occurred prior to the start of the campaign (Engelhardt 2019).

To evaluate the various hypotheses, we estimate the relationship between whites' racial and immigration policy attitudes measured early in the campaign, and respondents' *change* in these attitudes during the campaign, on final vote choice in November.¹⁴ This approach allows us to estimate the relationship between whites' prior racial attitudes and vote choice independent of the potential influence of racial and immigrant attitudes that shifted during the campaign. In previous analyses, to get a better sense of relative influence of past attitudes and past vote intentions, we used separate equations to analyze each of the racial attitude and immigration attitude questions. For this analysis, which is designed to evaluate the overall influence of past attitudes on final vote intention, we analyze these questions in the model together. Because each of the two racial attitude questions and the two immigration attitude questions are highly correlated with each other (see [Supplementary Material sections 1 and 2](#)), we combine the items into two indices: white opposition to Black support and opposition to immigrant support. We also control for a host of other factors usually related to presidential vote choice, including partisanship, political ideology, education, income, employment status, age, and gender. [Figure 5](#) reports the predicted change in the probability (and 95 percent confidence interval) of voting for Trump if each variable shifted from its minimum to maximum value, while holding all other variables at their mean (full results are reported in [Supplementary Material section 7](#)). We are most interested in comparing the shift in predicted probabilities across variables. Several results stand out.

Looking at the top of the figure, the relationship between opposition to Black support and final vote choice is statistically significant. This relationship did not emerge in [table 1](#) when we analyzed vote intentions earlier in the campaign, suggesting that the relationship between racial attitudes and

14. Variables from early in the campaign, including demographic variables, come from the January and February waves of the survey. Change in racial attitudes is measured between January and August. Change in immigration attitudes is measured between February and September/October.

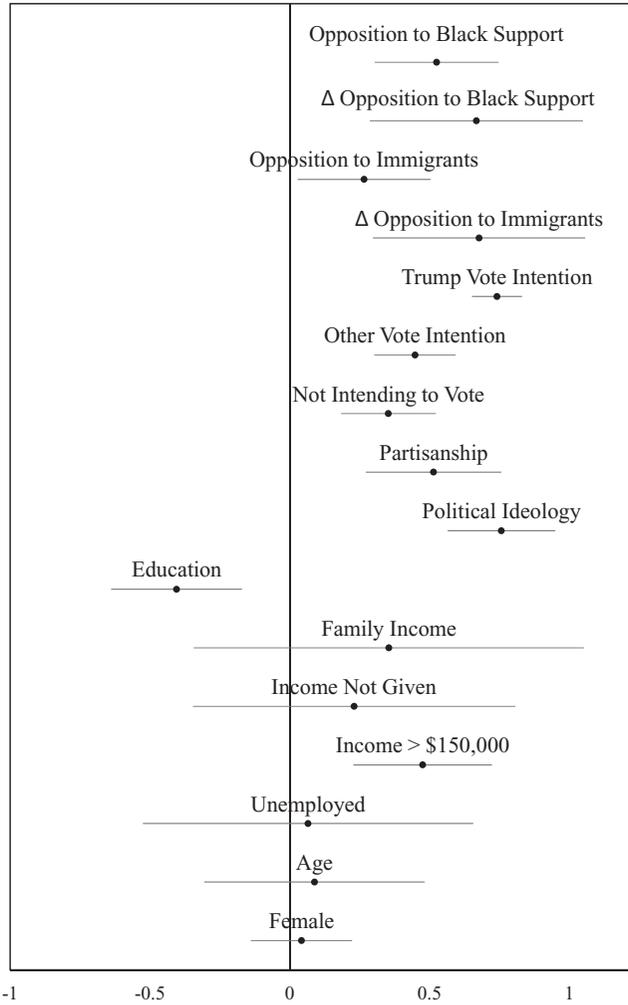


Figure 5. The estimated relationship between racial and immigration attitudes, change in racial and immigration attitudes, and the probability of voting for Trump versus Clinton among Whites, conditioning on political and demographic variables. Estimates reflect the expected change in the probability of a Trump vote and associated 95 percent confidence intervals, shifting each variable from its minimum to maximum value, holding all other variables at their mean. Full regression results are reported in [Supplementary Material section 7](#).

vote choice became more pronounced much closer to the election (consistent with this interpretation, [Supplementary Material section 6](#) shows that the previous results in [table 1](#) persist, even when analyzed with the racial index variable). The significant relationship between opposition to immigrants and vote choice parallels the findings in [table 2](#). Consistent with expectations, we also observe significant relationships between changes in opposition to Black support and opposition to immigrants and final vote choice. And the magnitude of these relationships is substantial, on par with the factors that are typically the most powerful predictors of presidential vote, including previously expressing an intention to vote for the candidate, partisanship, and political ideology.

Of course, we do not know the exact cause of the change in whites' racial and immigration attitudes, but given Trump's focus on these issues during the campaign and the evidence in [tables 1](#) and [2](#) that prior Trump support among whites predicts more conservative views on Black Lives Matter, the police killing of African Americans, and a border wall, while controlling for past views on these same issues, the evidence suggests that the campaign accounts for much of this change. Thus, the strong relationship between change in attitudes during the campaign and final vote choice offers further support for our argument that presidential candidates are not always drawing support, early in their campaigns, from white voters who already share their racialized issue preferences. In the case of Trump support in 2016, we find across our analysis that Trump was not merely attracting whites who already possessed more racially antagonistic views. He was also helping shape whites' views on these matters, a phenomenon that likely contributed significantly to the strong relationship in cross-sectional survey data that scholars have observed between white preferences on matters of race and immigration and a preference for Trump.

The results with respect to the control variables in the model also speak to other literature on the 2016 campaign. The estimated relationships for income and employment status are not statistically different from zero, consistent with research finding that personal economic circumstances were not significantly related to vote choice in 2016 ([Mutz 2018](#); [Jardina 2019](#)).¹⁵ Consistent with other work, we also observe that those who previously indicated a candidate preference of "other" or that they would not vote were significantly more likely to end up voting for Trump. Some research argues that these individuals were late deciders ([Kennedy et al. 2018](#)), perhaps influenced by late-breaking campaign information, while others find that media

15. The one exception is the 28 respondents who indicated that their family earned more than \$150,000 the previous year but did not specify how much more. These individuals were more likely to vote for Trump. See [Morgan \(2018\)](#) for an additional take on economic interests and the 2016 presidential vote.

effects during the final weeks of the campaign had little to no effect on the outcome (Wlezien and Soroka 2018) and that those who appeared to “break late” for Trump were identifiable earlier in the campaign (Enns and Schuldt 2016; Enns, Lagodny, and Schuldt 2017).

Conclusions and Implications

Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “It is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not true—his ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power” (Coates 2017). Yet, in 2016 Trump received 62,984,828 votes and won the electoral college. Many political scientists and journalists have concluded that a large portion of these votes were *because* of Trump’s racism. We demonstrate here, however, that the relationship between race and Trump support is much more complicated, and perhaps more troubling, than previous work has illustrated. We find some evidence, consistent with prior work, that whites with policy preferences more hostile to Black Americans and to immigrants were more likely to vote for Trump than whites who did not hold these attitudes. But perhaps most importantly, we find evidence that Trump also helped transform some white supporters’ policy preferences in these domains. Trump was, we argue, both a symptom and a cause of these notable relationships; he both attracted voters with conservative views on matters of race and immigration, and he also transformed some of his supporters’ views on these issues.

These results suggest that Lenz’s (2009, 2012) work on policy learning during campaigns may have an even broader scope than previously thought. We are limited in our ability to determine whether Trump’s own overt racism simply made some whites feel like it was more socially acceptable to express more conservative views on issues related to BLM and immigration, or if real attitude change occurred. But we think it is indeed likely that some voters were sincerely updating their policy preferences to align with those of their preferred candidates, especially since we also found that many Clinton supporters actually became more liberal in their immigration attitudes over the course of the election—a result we would not expect if shifting social desirability bias was the only mechanism.¹⁶ We recognize that our analysis was limited to racial policy preferences, rather than to more abstract measures of racial attitudes like racial resentment (although we note in the [Supplementary Material](#) the very strong correlation between the issues in our analysis and

16. Another possibility is that some of these shifts reflect what Bullock et al. (2015) refer to as “partisan cheerleading,” where some partisans select survey responses that they know to be false but they believe make their party look better. Although Bullock et al. focused on factual beliefs instead of attitudes, evaluating whether some of the changes we observe in racial attitudes and immigration attitudes reflect sincere shifts as opposed to a type of “cheerleading” is an important potential extension for future research.

the standard measure of racial resentment). Much of the prior work on racial resentment demonstrates that it is a fairly stable predisposition, resistant to change. Had we therefore been able to conduct our analysis with a measure like racial resentment, it is possible we may have observed more attitude consistency.¹⁷ At the same time, however, recent work has called into question the actual stability of some racial attitudes, suggesting that many white Americans are actively updating their racial beliefs to more closely align with their partisan identities (Engelhardt 2021). Our findings are consistent with this research; we suggest that whites may be updating their racial attitudes and racial issue preferences to align not just with their partisan preferences, but also with their candidate preferences over the course of a political campaign.

Our analysis was also limited in that it focused on issue position learning among whites on racialized issues. We focused on whites because of the longstanding and growing acknowledgment that white racial hostility is significantly tied to whites' political preferences and because of the particular attention among scholars and other political observers to white racism and Trump support in 2016.¹⁸ But we acknowledge it is quite likely that racial and ethnic minorities also update their issue positions or attitudes on matters of race over the course of a presidential campaign. We suspect that in many cases, these shifts on racial issues among people of color, if they occur, do not necessarily look the same as they do for whites or have the same consequences. For instance, given Black Americans' stable commitment to supporting Democratic candidates (White and Laird 2020), we may not find that learning significantly influences the relationship between issue positions and candidate support among Black Americans over the course of a campaign. We argue, therefore, that future work should dedicate serious and significant consideration to whether and how learning on these issues matters for people of color in presidential contests.

Our results provide some important considerations for work that examines issue preference and candidate support, often with the presumption that issue positions are causally prior to the decision to endorse one political candidate over the other. Here we show that prior issue positions in two racialized areas were indeed associated with white support for either Trump or Clinton, but we also find that political candidates can have a powerful effect on issue preferences over the course of a national campaign. Our findings, therefore, not only point to the need to reconsider the stability of racial attitudes,

17. Questions measuring racial resentment were, unfortunately, not available at multiple points on the YouGov panel study.

18. We also focus on whites' racial attitudes because, as the dominant group in US society, whites' racial attitudes often have greater and more detrimental consequences, especially for people of color, than do the racial attitudes of racial and ethnic minorities.

particularly in this polarized and racially charged political environment. They also suggest a need to employ panel data more often, when possible, to study the relationships between issue preferences, attitudes, and candidate evaluations.

Our results also paint a potentially more pessimistic picture than much literature on race and the 2016 election. Rather than driving whites away with his racially charged rhetoric, or at least limiting his appeal to those whites who were already antagonistic to Black Americans and immigrants, we find that Trump may have pushed many whites to become more hostile toward these groups—an outcome that does not bode well for the future of race relations in the United States, particularly if future political candidates attempt to adopt racialized strategies similar to Trump's. Even if they lose, our results show that when politicians race-bait white voters during political campaigns, they may not merely be making pre-existing racial hostilities more salient, they may also be contributing to greater levels of racial animus among their core supporters.

If there is room for optimism, it is that we find that even in the midst of a vitriolic campaign, some white voters moved in a more racially liberal direction. Specifically, we found that many Clinton supporters became more opposed to building a border wall, a policy associated with Trump's anti-immigrant statements made throughout his campaign. We cannot know for sure whether this shift was a backlash to Trump's racism (Hopkins and Washington 2020), if Clinton supporters were learning Clinton's more liberal positions on immigration and updating accordingly, or whether this was part of a more long-term trend toward more public support for immigration. Nevertheless, there appear to be some countervailing effects to Trump's racial appeals. Indeed, when looking at aggregate data, the overall shift in racial attitudes since Trump entered office appears to be in a liberal direction (Hopkins and Washington 2020). One important avenue for future work, therefore, will be to understand the extent to which white voters of various political predispositions are willing to learn and adopt less racially hostile issue positions.

Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/enns>.

Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab040>.

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