Why taking an anti-immigration policy position is a poor long-term electoral strategy.

*With Donald Trump's stated desire to build a wall on the Mexican border and to prevent Muslims from entering the US, immigration is at the forefront of the 2016 presidential election. In new research which uses Texas and California's 1994 gubernatorial election as case studies, **Austin Doctor** and **Jamie Monogan** examine the long-term effects of parties' immigration platforms on their electoral chances. They find that while parties which push extreme immigration policy positions may do well electorally in the short run, over the long-term they may lose support to the other party.*

The general election stage of the 2016 presidential campaign season has begun, and each American political party has strategically manufactured its policy platform in a competition to win the largest share of the American electorate. Nested among other issues, immigration claims quite a bit of real estate in the pages of each party's platform statement. Unsurprisingly, Democratic and Republican positions on the issue of immigration take starkly different tones. The Democrats have a highly inclusive position, while the Republican Party strongly emphasizes the security and economic threats posed by current and potential non-natives. This contrast is even starker given Republican nominee Donald Trump's stance that a wall should be constructed along the US-Mexico border. Each party clearly has its sights set on the next presidential term, but what are the potential long-term effects of such platforms—especially anti-immigration campaigns—on voting behavior?

At the sub-national level, anti-immigration policies have shown the ability to instigate lasting shifts in partisan coalitions. Our recent work comparing the 1994 gubernatorial elections in Texas and California reveals that the adoption of anti-immigrant policies can have long-term effects on party identification. That year's campaigns in those two states demonstrate a clear divide that emerged within the Republican Party about the best electoral strategy regarding America's growing Hispanic population. In Texas, Republican George W. Bush challenged incumbent governor Ann Richards with a campaign of racial equality and pro-Hispanic policies—he even spoke a little Spanish from the stump. His electoral strategy aimed to bring unaffiliated Hispanic voters into the state Republican fold. This campaign appears to have paid off; Bush increased his share of the Hispanic vote from 28 percent in 1994 to 46 percent in his successful 1998 re-election bid.

In California, incumbent Republican governor Pete Wilson built his re-election campaign around the "Save Our State" ballot initiative (Proposition 187), a policy to stop undocumented immigrants from receiving state benefits. Wilson's first term as governor was defined by spikes of unemployment and a steep local recession. Unemployment rates in California nearly doubled between 1990 and 1994. To boost his tenuous prospects for re-election, Wilson found an ideal scapegoat in the millions of undocumented immigrants. Election results indicate that this campaign approach mobilized enough support to win by a margin of over 14 percentage points.

How did Pete Wilson's 1994 campaign strategy affect his party's future fortunes in California? Figure 1 describes the lasting intervention effect of Proposition 187 on partisanship among California voters. The horizontal axis specifies the number of annual quarters since that election began affecting voters, and the vertical axis designates the Democratic Party's net pickup in partisan identification after the 1994 election. To be clear, the effects shown in this graph are effects of the election above and beyond the effects of economic fluctuations, presidential approval, and microtrends in the data (all of which are accounted for in the analysis). The solid black line represents change in total California partisanship, the blue dashed line represents change in Hispanic partisanship in California, and the red dotted line represents change in white partisanship in California.

Figure 1 – Effects of Proposition 187 on Democratic partisanship among California voters
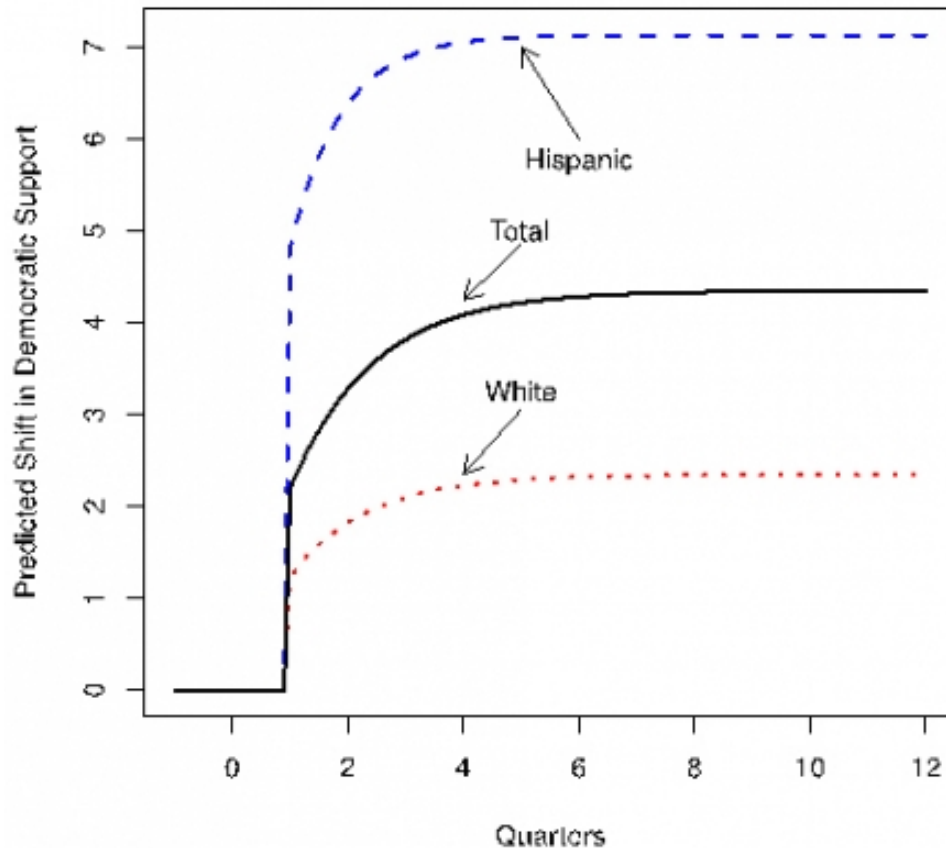
The figure demonstrates that, over the three years following the passing of Proposition 187, California Democrats significantly increased their share of partisan identifiers relative to Republicans among the state electorate, especially among Hispanic voters. This effect was almost entirely established within a year of Wilson's re-election to office. The long-term 4.3 percentage point increase in support for the California Democrats was led by a long-run 7.1 percentage point increase in Hispanic identification with the Democratic Party. Such an effect has the potential to swing election outcomes. In short, the Hispanic exodus to the Democratic Party produced a lasting effect on partisanship in the state.

Strong anti-immigrant rhetoric today could reproduce this kind of effect nationwide in the future, as the lasting, long-term effect in California was led by Hispanic voters. In fact, immigration is expected to drive population growth in the United States over the coming decades. Accordingly, when selecting immigration policy positions, political party leadership should be especially wary of overvaluing immediate gains without considering the potential long-term consequences of anti-immigration campaigns. While Trump's support for a border wall may help him garner white votes in 2016, this position may lose Hispanic votes for the GOP in years to come.

This article is based on the paper, 'Immigration Politics and Partisan Realignment California, Texas, and the 1994 Election' in State Politics & Policy Quarterly.

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