Voters are much more likely to support immigrant-family separation if they watch Fox News or read Breitbart

In June, following a massive public outcry, President Donald Trump suspended his administration's policy of forcibly separating immigrant families who had crossed the US-Mexico border. Despite the backlash, a majority of Republicans supported Trump's family-separation policy. In new research based on a recent survey, **Kevin Cope** *and* **Charles Crabtree** *take an in-depth look at what drives people's positions on family separation. They find that, more than many other factors, reading Breitbart and watching Fox News were significant predictors of support for members of both the Republican and the Democratic parties.*

In late June, President Donald Trump officially suspended his administration's policy of forcibly separating immigrant children from their families as they crossed the US-Mexico border. But even after a court ruling ordered prompt reunification, hundreds of families remain separated, with many parents having already been deported.

Though the policy has received bipartisan blowback, almost one-third of voters — mainly Republicans and/or Trump voters — support it. Who exactly are these voters, and what explains their views?

Results from a survey we fielded in early July of 2,900 US citizens and permanent residents may help to answer that question. Overall, we found that 32 percent of voters said they "strongly" or "moderately" support the policy of "[separating] migrant children from their parents who arrive at the border," while 68 percent said they "strongly" or "moderately" oppose it. Predictably — and consistent with other recent polling on the issue — we found a significant partisan divide, with 59 percent of Republicans, 24 percent of independents, and 13 percent of Democrats expressing support for the policy.

The different voter traits associated with support for the policy are illustrated in Figure 1 below. Unsurprisingly, we find that, all things being equal, voting for Trump is strongly associated with supporting the policy. In the past few months, Trump has claimed that he's always opposed family separation, but that he'd continue the policy because legal precedent and Democrats in Congress had tied his hands. But DHS Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen has denied the policy even exists, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions has said it's justified on biblical grounds. So it's hardly surprising that supporting the policy is so closely tied with Trump voting.

Figure 1 – Correlates of child separation policy support
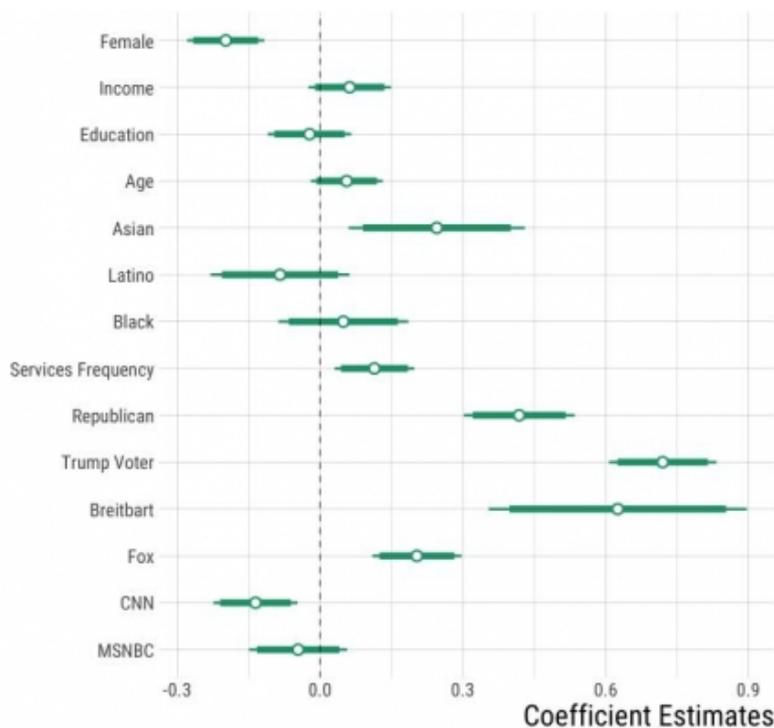
Note: Data from a survey of 2,418 voters (June 28-July 5, 2018). "Services frequency" denotes how regularly a respondent attends religious services. "Breitbart," "Fox [News]," "CNN," and "MSNBC" indicate that the respondent considers that outlet a primary source of news.

But behind these numbers lies a more interesting story: We find that voters' media consumption can matter just as much or more than party identification. Voters who consider Fox News or Breitbart a primary news source are significantly more likely to support the policy — even controlling for traits such as party identification, presidential vote choice, religious intensity, ethnicity, education, income, and gender. Conversely, otherwise similar voters for whom CNN is a primary news source are somewhat less likely to support the policy.

To illustrate, suppose we chose two superficially similar Trump voters — middle-aged, middle-class white male Republicans with some college education, who both regularly attend church services. They differ only in whether or not one of their primary news sources is Fox News or Breitbart. Of these two Trump voters, the one who consumes one or both of the conservative media is much more likely to support the family-separation policy. Specifically, watching Fox News regularly is associated with an increase in support for the policy of about 1/6 of a standard deviation, while the Breitbart readership relationship is even stronger, accounting for about half of a standard-deviation increase in support for the policy.

What accounts for these effects? There are two plausible explanations. First, there may be some trait associated with both conservative-media consumption and support for migrant-family separation that our survey missed. If there is such a confounding factor, however, we haven't yet been able to identify it; we control for several traits typically associated with attitudes toward immigrants, such as voting for Trump, income, education, church attendance, age, and gender.
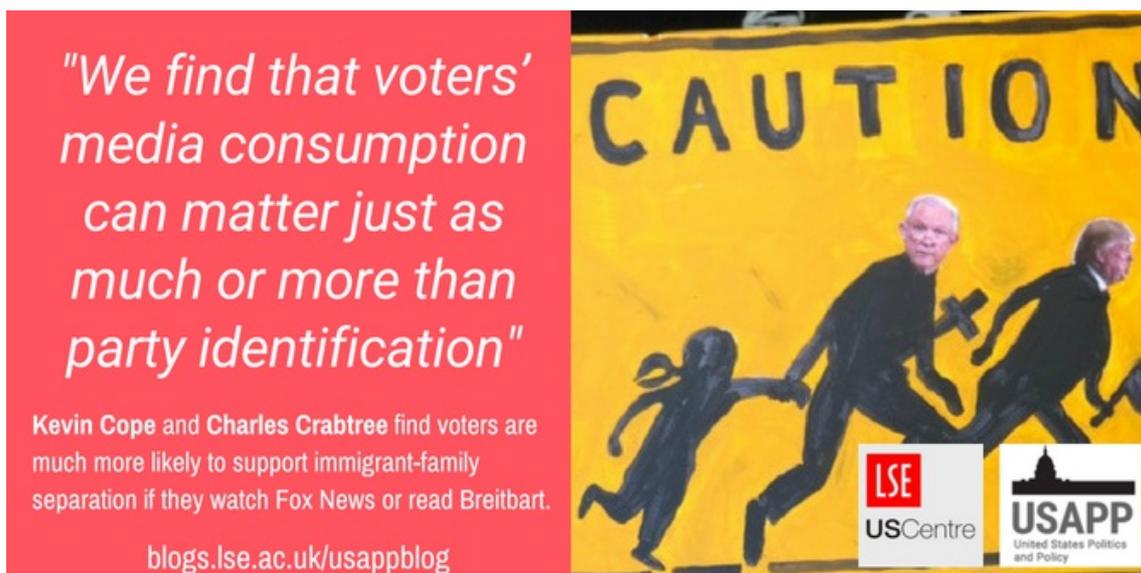
"[2018/06/30 Families Belong Together Rally (Richmond, CA)](#)" by [Daniel Arauz](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

The other possible explanation for our finding is that consuming different media actually influences voters' attitudes. And in fact, circumstantial evidence exists for this effect. In late June, Vox [reported](#) that Fox News had spent roughly half as much time as CNN and MSNBC over the preceding weeks discussing the family separation issue. And a large fraction of the coverage that Fox News did provide was dedicated to *defending* the policy.

For instance, on her show "The Ingraham Angle," Laura Ingraham called the centers housing separated children "essentially summer camps." On the Fox News program "The Next Revolution with Steve Hilton," Ann Coulter referred to the separated migrant children as "these child actors weeping and crying on all the other networks 24/7 right now," and said, "These kids are being coached, they're given scripts to read by liberals." On his program "Tucker Carlson Tonight," Carlson implied that the policy was little different from the plight of American children separated from parents in prison. And Sean Hannity argued, "In fact, the Obama administration … they're the ones who actually started the policy of detaining minors younger than 18 for months."

By contrast, CNN opinion commentators have been far more critical of the policy, and its news segments have highlighted more of the policy's toll on migrants. It seems plausible that the different narratives from these two networks have shaped their most devoted viewers' attitudes — whatever their prior political views — in opposite ways.

There's a wealth of political science [literature](#) on the correlates of support for immigrants and immigration generally, with competing explanations rooted in economic anxiety and sociocultural factors. But there is very little research on the role of media in support for particular immigration policies. Our findings suggest that, especially in this era of increasingly polarized media, these factors could sometimes be comparably influential.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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