Economic Fairness, Racial Attitudes, and Immigration

(Abstract)

Previous research has emphasized the importance of cultural as opposed to economic considerations as determinants of immigration-related attitudes but has largely ignored perceptions of economic fairness. In this paper, we utilize a module of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) to model the effects of perceived economic fairness and racial resentment on attitudes toward immigration. We find that perceived economic fairness is largely a function of ideology and racial attitudes and that economic fairness and racial attitudes predict support for immigration though the effects are highly conditional. Individuals who believe the economy is unfair and who express strong racial resentment are least supportive of immigration.

Economic Fairness, Racial Attitudes, and Immigration

One of the enduring questions in the study of individual attitudes toward immigration involves the relative importance of economics and culture as determinants of anti-immigration (or nativist) sentiments. Labor market competition theories posit that opposition to immigration should be strongest among citizens whose jobs and livelihoods are at risk to newly arriving immigrant populations (Kessler 2001, Scheve and Slaughter 2001, Mayda 2006, O'Rourke and Sinnott 2006). Consistent with theoretical expectations, working class populations are, in fact, most strongly opposed to immigration and most supportive of political parties and candidates who espouse nativist campaign appeals (Betz 1993, Betz 1994, Lubbers and Scheepers 2001, Lubbers, et al. 2002, Oesch 2008, Lubbers and Coenders 2017, Manza and Crowley 2017, Davis, et al. 2019b).

Yet, if lower income and less educated working class citizens are generally less supportive of immigration; more educated and higher skilled citizens are more supportive regardless of skill level (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007, Hainmueller, et al. 2015). As an explanation of immigration-related attitudes, labor market competition only goes so far (Malhotra, et al. 2013). To the extent that economic calculations matter, it is generally socio-tropic, rather than pocketbook, concerns that resonate (Citrin, et al. 1997, Dancygier and Donnelly 2012). Preferences for restrictive immigration policies, for example, increase during recessions as economic hard times increase stereotypical thinking (Burns and Gimpel 2000).

Even socio-tropic evaluations, however, play a small role relative to perceived cultural threats to language, identity, and way of life (Citrin, et al. 2001, Ivarsflaten 2005, Sides and Citrin 2007, Rustenbach 2010, Schildkraut 2010, Card, et al. 2012, Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014, Inglehart and Norris 2016, White 2017, Davis, et al. 2019a). Experimental research has found that

merely hearing Spanish spoken in public places adversely affects support for immigration (Newman, et al. 2012, Hopkins 2014, Hopkins, et al. 2014, Newman, et al. 2014). And, support for immigration is stronger for immigrant groups perceived as more similar (European) than distinct (Latin American) from U.S. populations (Brader, et al. 2008). Within groups, assimilation and skin tone also matter, such that support is greater when immigrants are perceived as better assimilated into U.S. culture and when their racial characteristics are more similar to European Americans (Ostfeld 2017; but see Valentino, et al. 2017). More generally, opposition to immigration may reflect racial resentment or symbolic racism (Ayers, et al. 2009, Berg 2013, Hartman, et al. 2014, Abrajano and Hajnal 2015, Valentino, et al. 2017).

Despite the focus on economics and culture, previous research has not directly investigated the relationship between perceptions of economic fairness – a core feature of American political culture - and support (or opposition) to immigration. This is surprising for several reasons. First, one might suspect that individuals who perceive the economy as less fair would also express the greatest opposition to new immigrants. Previous research has shown that perceptions of fairness condition support for redistributive policies, such that individuals who believe hard work is determinant of economic success are less supportive of redistribute social welfare policies (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005, Bénabou and Tirole 2006, Alesina, et al. 2018). One might reasonably suspect the same process might play out individual attitudes toward immigration.¹

Second, in 2016, presidential candidate Donald Trump explicitly connected the "rigged economy" with illegal immigration (Gimpel 2017). Less informed citizens often rely on elite cues

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¹ We find suggestive evidence for this relationship in Pew Center surveys. "Steadfast conservatives" are less likely to believe the economy is fair and more likely to be anti-immigration than "business conservatives." On the left, "hard pressed skeptics" are similarly more like believe the economy is unfair and to be opposed to immigration (Pew Research Center, June, 2014, "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology" http://www.pewresearch.org/wpcontent/uploads/sites/4/2014/06/6-26-14-Political-Typology-release1.pdf).

to make sense of complicated issues (Downs 1957, Zaller 1992), so it is possible that this connection found resonance with Trump's base supporters. Third, at least as gauged by standard measures of economic equality, the American economy has, arguably, become considerably less fair over time (Hacker and Pierson 2010b, a, Gilens 2012, Stiglitz 2012, Gilens and Page 2014, Bartels 2016). Rising economic inequality further affects policy representation, political participation, and policy outcomes in ways that benefit the affluent and disadvantage the poor and middle class (Gilens and Page 2014, Bartels 2016). As inequality increases, elected representatives are more responsive to wealthier interests (Gilens and Page 2014). Inequality adversely affects democratic participation and engagement of less affluent populations, thus further cementing the influence of wealthier groups and voters (Solt 2008) while adversely affecting perceptions of economic fairness or meritocracy (Newman, et al. 2015). And, "winner take all" politics are institutionalized such that the affluent are not only advantaged but their advantages are built in to the system (Hacker and Pierson 2010a).

Collectively, we might expect that individuals who perceive the economy as less fair would also be less supportive of immigration. Notably, however, this expectation runs against the grain of political ideology as liberals – more so than conservatives – are likely to perceive the economy as unfair. Moreover, based on labor competition theories, we might expect that individual who perceive the current economy as fair might be reluctant to allow new waves of immigrants into the country as these immigrants would compete for jobs and drive down wages. For individuals who already believe the economy is rigged this may be less of a concern. Rather than offer a fully articulated hypothesis, we instead phrase this as a research question:

R1: Are perceptions of economic fairness related to immigration-related attitudes?

Overall, perceptions of fairness should matter. Yet, they are unlikely to operate in isolation of cultural calculations, and especially racial considerations. Or, perhaps stated differently, we need to consider the related question of "fairness for whom?" Citizens who see the economy as unfair and who express racial resentment should be most opposed to immigration. As social norms have made explicit expressions of racism less socially acceptable, implicit racism has found its expression in "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" economic individualism (Tarman and Sears 2005, Tuch and Hughes 2011). In 2016, for example, Trump's racial appeals and rhetoric found resonance among voters who score high on measures of racial resentment and who believed the economy was "rigged" (Luttig, et al. 2017, Sides, et al. 2018). This leads to our first hypotheses:

H1: The effects of economic fairness should be conditional on racial attitudes.

Individuals who express racial resentment and who believe the economy is unfair should be most supportive of restrictive immigration policies.

Finally, perceptions of economic fairness should be related to racial resentment. As noted above, racist attitudes are often expressed through traditional values, especially through economic individualism. Perceptions that the distribution of wealth is fair, that individuals who work hard can get ahead, and that the economy is basically fair should be related to racial attitudes. This leads to our third hypothesis:

H2: Racial attitudes should predict perceived economic fairness, such that individuals who express more racist sentiments should also believe the economy is fairer.

² "Sociotropic" fairness has been shown to affect voting behavior (Mutz and Mondak 1997).

³ Admittedly this construct is difficult to disentangle from conservative political ideology (Feldman and Huddy 2005, Wilson and Davis 2011).

Data and Methods

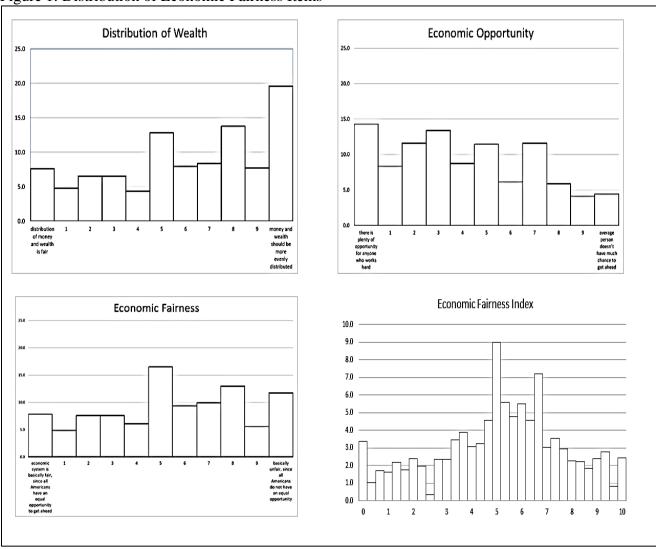
To test these hypotheses, we rely on data from a module of the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Because some of the measures were only asked in the second wave of data collection, we limit our analysis to 815 respondents who participated in both waves of the study.

Economic Inequality: Our measures of economic equality capture individual attitudes toward wealth distribution, economic opportunity, and economic fairness. Each of our measures ask respondent to select between competing statements and to rate their level of agreement on an 11-point scale. We describe each of these indicators below:

- Wealth Distribution is measured asking respondents to select between the "distribution of money and wealth is fair" and "money and wealth should be more evenly distributed" (M=6.0; SE=0.14).
- *Economic Opportunity* is measured asking respondents to select between the "average person doesn't have much chance to get ahead" versus "there is plenty of opportunity for anyone who works hard." This item was reverse coded to match the direction of the items including the overall economic inequality scale (M=4.1; SE=0.13).
- *Economic Fairness* is measured by gauging respondent assessments of whether the "economic system is basically fair, since all Americans have an equal opportunity to get ahead" versus "basically unfair, since all Americans do not have an equal opportunity" (M=5.4; SE=0.13).

These individual items are combined into an overall index gauging perceptions of economic inequality. The index is based on average of these items and runs from 0-11. (α =.74). We display the individual items and the full scale in Figure 1 below.





Immigration: We measure immigration attitudes using items in the 2016 CCES core questionnaire. Specifically, respondents were asked what should be done about immigration and were given the following set of items to select. Individuals could select multiple items and

responses were recoded so that 1 indicated anti-immigration sentiments. These individual responses were then summed to create a single index ranging from 0 to 4 (M=1.97; SE=.06; α =.69).

Table 1: Immigration Attitudes

Item	Selected	Not Selected
Grant legal status to all illegal immigrants who have held jobs and paid taxes for at least 3 years, and not been convicted of any felony crimes	52.4	<u>47.6</u>
Increase the number of border patrols on the U.SMexican border	<u>48.7</u>	51.3
Grant legal status to people who were brought to the US illegally as children, but who have graduated from a U.S. high school	42.9	<u>57.1</u>
Identify and deport illegal immigrants	<u>43.5</u>	56.5

^{*}Bolded and underlined items indicate anti-immigration sentiments.

Racial Attitudes: Racial attitudes are gauged with a set of four items included in the 2016 CCES core questionnaire. These items were designed to gauge institutional racism, racial fear, and empathy and have been validated in previous research (Desante and Smith 2017). The four items included in our scale of racial attitudes are provide in Table 2 (M= 2.2; SD= .03; α = .57). The last two items are reverse coded so that larger values indicate more racist sentiments.

Table 2: Racial Attitudes

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am angry that racism exists.	58.9	21.0	15.2	2.3	2.6
White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.	27.3	27.2	16.6	12.5	16.6
I often find myself fearful of people of other races.	2.7	12.8	23.8	25.5	35.2
Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations.	5.4	14.1	15.9	29.5	35.1

Economic Considerations: We also include a number of indicators economic well-being, including family income, perceptions of the change in household income over the past year, and whether anyone in the household had lost a job. In addition, we include measures of a retrospective and prospective economic evaluations. Coding details for these variables are provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Variable Descriptions

Variable	Description
Family Income	Measured on a 12 point scale where 1 indicates less than
	\$10,000 and 12 indicates \$150,000 (M=5.8; SE=.14)
Retrospective Household Income	Over the past FOUR YEARS, has your household's
	annual income increased a lot (5), increased somewhat
	(4), stayed about the same (3), decreased somewhat (2),
	decreased a lot (1)? (M=3.1; SE=.05)
Prospective Economic Evaluations	OVER THE NEXT YEAR, do you think the nation's
	economy will get much better (5), get somewhat better
	(4), stay about the same (3), get somewhat worse (2), get
	much worse (1)? (M=2.9; SE=.05)
Retrospective Economic	OVER THE PAST YEAR the nation's economy has
Evaluations	gotten much better (5), gotten better (4), stayed about the
	same (3), gotten worse (2), gotten much worse (1)?
	(M=2.8; SE=.05)
Lost Job	Over the past FOUR YEARS, have you lost a job? (13.9)
	percent of respondents reporting having lost a job in the
	previous four years).

In addition to these variables, we include controls for gender, age, race, and education. Gender is coded one for female respondents, 0 otherwise. Age is measured as age in years. Race is coded 1 for White/Caucasian respondents, 0 otherwise. And, education is measured on a 3-point scale where 1 indicates high school or less, 2 indicate some college, and 3 indicates a college degree.

Results

We begin by examining the predictors of economic fairness. Specifically, we model economic fairness as a function of demographics (gender, age, race, education), economic wellbeing (family income, change in income over the past four years, and whether the respondent had lost job), retrospective and prospective economic evaluations, political ideology, and racial attitudes. The results graphically in Figure 2 below. The full results are provided in the appendix. For the purposes of comparison, all of the variables have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

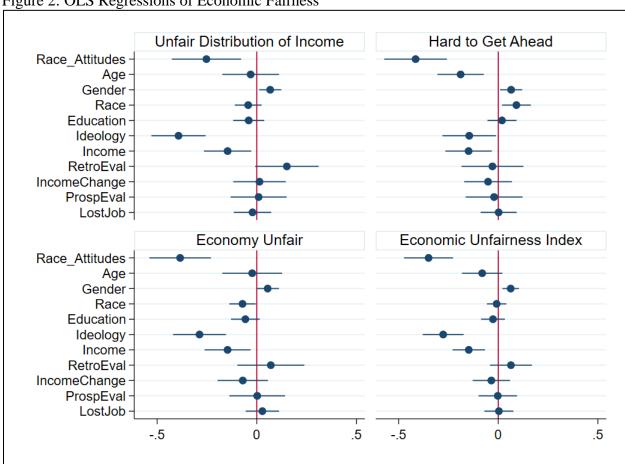


Figure 2: OLS Regressions of Economic Fairness

As the results presented in Figure 2 reveal, perceptions of economic fairness are mostly rooted in ideology and racial attitudes rather than in one's economic well-being. First, racial attitudes exert a consistent effect on perceptions of economic fairness with respondents expressing the most racial resentment also indicating that they believe the economy is relatively fair. Second, self-identified conservatives are more likely to perceive the economy as fair than self-identified liberals. Personal economic well-being also matters, though differences reflect family income rather than short-term considerations such as change in income over the last four years or having recently lost a jobs. We see no consistent effects for prospective or retrospective evaluations of the national economy. Finally, gender was the only demographic factor to consistently influence perceived economic fairness with women consistently evaluating the economy as less fair than men.

What difference do perceptions of fairness and racial resentment have on immigration related sentiments? In Figure 3, we present the results of ordinal regressions on economic fairness, racial attitudes, and a set of controls capturing demographic and economic differences. We are particularly interested in the interaction of between economic fairness and racial attitudes as individuals who perceive the economy as unfair and who express racial resentment should be least supportive of liberal immigration policies. The full set of results is available in the appendix.

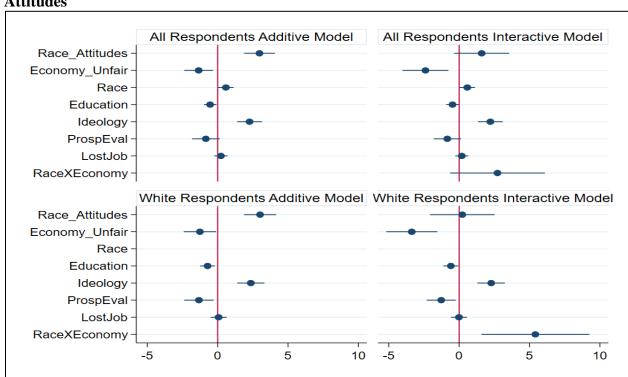


Figure 3: Ordinal Regressions of Immigration Attitudes on Economic Fairness and Racial Attitudes

In the additive models presented in Figure 3, racial attitudes are strongly and clearly associated with anti-immigration sentiments. Respondents who express the greatest racial resentment also prefer restrictive immigration policies. Perhaps surprisingly, perceiving the economy as unfair leads respondents to be more—rather than less—supportive of liberal immigration policies. The interactive models, however, reveal that the effects of perceived fairness are largely contingent on racial attitudes. Perceiving the economy as unfair and expressing strong racial resentment makes respondents significantly more anti-immigrant. We illustrate this effect in Figure 4.

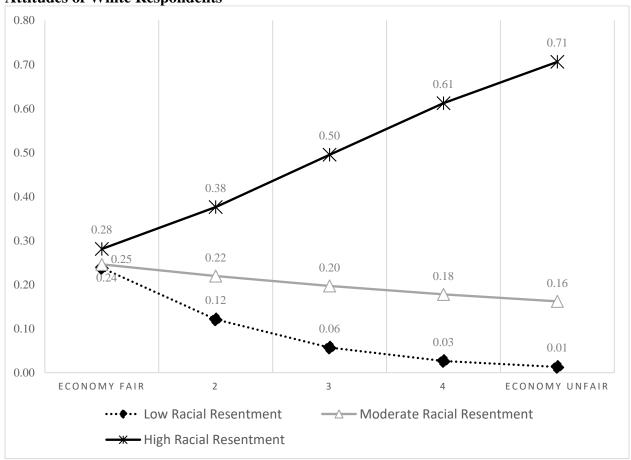


Figure 4: Interactive Effect of Economic Fairness and Racial Attitudes on Immigration Attitudes of White Respondents

*Figure 4 shows the probability that an individual would score a 4 on out immigration index indicating they are least supportive of immigration. Probability were produced using Clarify (Tomz, et al. 2003)

As Figure 4 reveals, if one believes the economy is fair, racial resentment has little effect on attitudes toward immigration. However, for respondents who believe the economic is unfair **and** who express strong racial resentment, the effects are profound. We should note as well that throughout our models we control for ideology. Conservatives consistently express greater opposition to immigration, so this does not appear to be a substitute for political ideology.

Conclusions

Previous research has consistently found that attitudes toward immigration are largely a function of cultural, rather than economic, considerations. Yet, beliefs about economic fairness are intractably linked to culture, especially beliefs rooted in economic individualism and Horatio Algier "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" mythologies. These beliefs are also connected to racial attitudes as individuals who believe the economy is essentially fair can discount the importance of institutional racism in determining individual (or group) success. Perceptions of economic fairness then are central to questions of support (or opposition) for immigration.

Perceptions of fairness, however, do not act alone. Indeed, they are highly conditional on racial attitudes such that opposition to immigration is strongest among individuals who express racial resentment and who believe the economy is unfair.

The available data limit our ability to specify the exact causal link at work here but it seems likely that individuals who believe the economy is unfair and who are low on racial resentment, attribute the unfairness to other systemic factors. In this sense, they fit well with social democrats, such as Bernie Sanders, who see the economy as rigged but who blame elites and institutions. Individuals who believe the economy is rigged but also engage in racialized thinking, however, blame others, especially immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities.

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Appendix: Full Model Results

Table A1: OLS Regressions of Economic Fairness

	Distribution of Income	Chance to Get Ahead	Economy Unfair	Economic Fairness Index
Racial Attitudes	-0.25	-0.41	-0.38	-0.35
	(0.09)**	(0.08)**	(0.08)**	(0.06)**
Age (Years)	-0.03	-0.19	-0.02	-0.08
	(0.07)	(0.06)**	(0.08)	(0.05)
Gender (Female)	0.07	0.06	0.05	0.06
	(0.03)*	(0.03)*	(0.03)	(0.02)**
Race (White)	-0.04	0.09	-0.07	-0.01
	(0.03)	(0.04)*	(0.03)*	(0.02)
Education	-0.04	0.02	-0.06	-0.03
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Ideology (Conservative)	-0.39	-0.15	-0.29	-0.28
	(0.07)**	(0.07)*	(0.07)**	(0.05)**
Income	-0.15	-0.15	-0.15	-0.15
	(0.06)*	(0.06)*	(0.06)*	(0.04)**
Retrospective	0.15	-0.03	0.07	0.06
Evaluations				
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.05)
Household Income Change	0.01	-0.05	-0.07	-0.03
_	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)
Prospective Evaluations	0.01	-0.02	0.00	-0.00
•	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Lost Job in Past 4 Years	-0.02	0.00	0.03	0.00
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Constant	0.92	0.72	0.95	0.86
	(0.09)**	(0.08)**	(0.08)**	(0.06)**
R^2	0.30	0.20	0.28	0.36
N	727	730	729	730

^{*} *p*<0.05; ** *p*<0.01

Table A2: Ordinal Regressions of Immigration Attitudes on Economic Fairness and Racial Attitudes

	All	All	White	White
	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents	Respondents
	- Additive	- Interactive	- Additive	- Additive
Racial Attitudes	2.97	1.60	3.01	0.23
	(0.56)**	(1.00)	(0.58)**	(1.17)
Economic Unfairness	-1.35	-2.39	-1.26	-3.37
	(0.52)**	(0.83)**	(0.59)*	(0.92)**
Age	1.19	1.22	0.40	0.45
_	(0.53)*	(0.52)*	(0.57)	(0.57)
Gender	0.10	0.09	0.07	0.08
	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.21)
Race	0.59	0.58		
	(0.28)*	(0.28)*		
Education	-0.53	-0.47	-0.72	-0.59
	(0.23)*	(0.23)*	(0.26)**	(0.27)*
Ideology	2.27	2.22	2.36	2.28
	(0.45)**	(0.45)**	(0.49)**	(0.50)**
Income	-0.16	-0.18	0.29	0.27
	(0.43)	(0.42)	(0.40)	(0.39)
Retrospective Evaluations	-0.38	-0.37	-1.04	-1.10
-	(0.54)	(0.54)	(0.60)	(0.59)
Income Change	0.69	0.64	0.55	0.48
G	(0.47)	(0.47)	(0.51)	(0.51)
Prospective Evaluations	-0.84	-0.84	-1.33	-1.27
-	(0.50)	(0.49)	(0.53)*	(0.52)*
Lost Job	0.23	0.19	0.07	-0.01
	(0.24)	(0.24)	(0.29)	(0.29)
Racial Attitudes X	, ,	2.72	, ,	5.42
Economic Unfairness		(1.72)		(1.95)**
N	730	730	551	551

^{*} p<0.05; ** p<0.01