Abstract

The conventional wisdom on immigration argues that leaders in liberal democracies are out of step with their constituencies on immigration. This argument—first made by Freeman (1995)—stems from the result that a majority of respondents to polling on immigration want to restrict immigration. In this paper, we first test whether the literature is correct that immigration policy is out of step with constituents’ views. Using a new dataset of immigration polls in the US and Canada over the last 30 years and data on immigration policies and voting behavior in the US Senate, we examine how well public opinion correlates with policy using a continuous-time latent variable approach to model the dynamics of public opinion and immigration policy. We find that the public has a good sense of immigration policy and that opinion reacts to changes in policy; that US senators are responsive to their constituents on policy; that policy responds to public opinion when it is salient and that the views of wealthier voters are not valued by senators more than the views of poorer voters.
1 Introduction

The conventional wisdom on immigration argues that leaders in liberal democracies are out of step with their constituencies on immigration. This argument—first made by Freeman (1995)—stems from the result that a majority of respondents to polling on immigration in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the US wanted to restrict immigration. Freeman argues that the limited information on immigration, the “boundaries of legitimate discussion of immigration policy,” and party consensus on immigration policy, “mean that governments typically enter office with no seriously binding commitments on immigration” (Freeman 1995, 885). Instead, policy makers are free to create a policy based on interest group lobbying, which leads them to privilege the better-organized pro-immigrant camp.

Yet, we have reason to believe that the public can affect, or at least constrain, policy maker’s actions on immigration. Clearly, public opinion led to the demise of Comprehensive Immigration Reform in 2007 when calls flooded into Congress against the bill. More recently, all the Republican Presidential primary candidates were constrained in their choices of immigration policy by Tea Party advocates on the Right, even though taking such a hard stance means losing the Hispanic vote. Similarly, when President Obama wanted to implement the Dream Act, he had to act unilaterally through an executive order rather than through the Congress due to the constraints that many Republican Members of Congress have been placed under. Nonetheless, if we examine recent polling data, a majority or at least a large plurality of Americans still prefer lower levels of immigration (Goldstein, Peters, and Rivers 2012). This suggests that immigration policy is still not responsive, or at least not responsive enough, to public opinion.

How can we reconcile the fact that Members of Congress, especially Republicans, seem to be constrained in their choices on how to act on immigration with the fact that the policy seemingly does not reflect public opinion? In this paper, instead of looking at current levels of support for immigration in the public and current levels of openness, we examine whether changes in public opinion affect changes in how Senators vote on immigration and changes in the immigration policy. In order to understand the dynamics, we use a new continuous-time latent variable approach. To preview the results we find that, first, the public does have a good sense of the overall immigration policy; when immigration policy opens, public support for immigration falls and when immigration becomes too restricted, support for immigration increases. This suggests that the public has an overall idea of the “proper” level of immigration policy and this level is not zero immigrants. Further, immigration becomes more salient when policy is more open. Second, we find that US senators are responsive in their voting on immigration policy and that they are responsive to all their constituents, not
just their wealthiest ones. Third, we find that public opinion can translate into changes on policy when immigration is highly salient. Thus, Freeman (1995) is correct that policy is sometimes does not affect policy, but this is because immigration is not a salient issue to the majority of Americans.

Next, we examine another case, Canada, to see if the effects we find are simply a product of the US political environment or whether policymakers elsewhere are similarly constrained by public opinion. We find some consistent and some conflicting effects. Policy changes still effect public opinion as they do in the US: a more open policy leads to more support for closure and a more closed policy leads to more support for openness. The effect of public opinion on policy is in the same direction as the US, but not statistically significant. Finally, we find the opposite effect of salience. When immigration policy is more salient in Canada it is more likely to be opened and when immigration is less salient it is more likely to be closed. However, as we discuss below, we have less confidence in these findings due to our measure of salience.

While this paper focuses on immigration policy, we believe that it has larger implications for the study of international political economy, international relations and the role of public opinion in policy making. There is a large literature in IPE on the determinants of support for trade, immigration and many other topics and the availability of relatively cheap survey technology combined with the trend of using survey experiments means that this literature is growing by the day. Yet, there is very little connection between this literature and that on policy. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by assessing when public opinion can effect policy.

The paper continues as follows. First, we discuss the relevant literature about the role of public opinion in immigration policy making and discuss the implications of the literature for our data. Second, we discuss the data we use and the pitfalls of using public opinion to measure sentiment on immigration. Next, we outline the new approach we use to testing the data. Fourth we present our results and finally, we conclude with implications for the broader public opinion in IPE literature.

2 Theoretical and empirical literature on public opinion and immigration

We, as political scientists, believe that within liberal democracies public opinion should affect policy. As policy makers are elected by their constituents, they should generally represent their constituencies’ views. Theoretically, the policy maker should choose an immigration
policy that gets him the most votes—i.e. he should choose the immigration policy of the median voter. However, there are several reasons to think that the policy maker may not represent the views of the median voter, including the level of heterogeneity in a district, the partisan leanings of a district, the role of information and wealth, and finally the issue of salience. If these theories hold true, the immigration policy chosen by the policymaker may not be tied to public opinion.

One hypothesis within American politics about representation is that greater heterogeneity within the district allows policy makers greater flexibility in their ability to choose policy. If there is great heterogeneity within the district on a given issue, the policy maker can essentially choose which “re-election constituency” to be responsive to. Given enough variety in the constituencies, this heterogeneity could free the policy maker from choosing the position of the median voter. There is some evidence that heterogeneity does, in fact, make legislators less responsive to the median voter (e.g. Bailey and Brady 1998, Ensley 2012, Gerber and Lewis 2004, Levendusky and Pope 2010). The role of heterogeneity may affect immigration politics due to the broad range of policies that affect immigration. For example, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) contained both weak employer sanctions and an amnesty for illegal immigrants. The weak employer sanctions would have appealed to employers and the amnesty would have appealed to immigrant groups while the bill in general could be opposed by almost half of the voters in Americans. The policy maker could essentially choose to be either for or against IRCA and still ensure reelection given that the electorate was split on the issue.

Another hypothesis on representation from American politics is that policy makers are tied to their partisan base. Policy makers depend on their base for support—in the primaries and in the general elections—and therefore, the policy maker has to be responsive to the base (e.g. Bishin 2000, Clinton 2006, Fenno 1978). If the policymaker deviates from the opinion of the median voter in his district, he should deviate towards the median voter of his party. Within immigration politics in the US, it is less clear how partisan deviation might affect representation given that the parties tend to have conflicting preferences over immigration within the party. For example, Republicans represent both pro-immigration business groups and anti-immigration nativists. Similarly, Democrats represent both pro-immigration immigrant groups and anti-immigrant labor unions.

In addition to choosing policy to appease their base, policy makers may respond more to wealthier citizens. Wealthier citizens are more knowledgeable about the issues; more likely to have well formed opinions about issues; in the US, more likely to vote; more likely to contribute resources to a campaign; and more likely to have direct contract with policy makers (Bartels 2008). We might expect that immigration policy should reflect the views of
wealthier citizens. We also know that wealthier, more educated citizens are more likely to support open immigration (e.g. Goldstein, Peters, and Rivers 2012, Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007, 2010). Therefore, if immigration is more open than the average citizen would like, it could be that it reflects the views of wealthier citizens.

Additionally, Freeman (1995) argues that voters are particularly ill-informed about immigration. This lack of information occurs for three reasons. First, there is scarcity of and ambiguity in the official data. Official data, especially on issues like illegal immigration, is generally poor (Freeman 1995, 883). Additionally, the effects of immigration tend to be lagged (Freeman 1995, 883). For example, most Europeans believed the guestworker programs of the 1950s and 1960s were temporary and this temporary nature of the flows likely colored their opinion on immigration. When it turned out that many guestworkers stayed, their opinions on immigration became much more negative. Moreover, Freeman argues that the boundaries of legitimate discussion on immigration are narrow—bounded by fears of charges of racism (1995, 884). Thus, it is difficult for the median voter to have a clear understanding of what policy is and difficult for her to express an anti-immigration opinion.

Finally, it may be the case that immigration is simply not a salient issue for most voters. As Money (1997) points out, immigrants are not evenly distributed across any country. The costs of immigrants tend, therefore, to be relatively concentrated geographically while the benefits of immigration to consumers is likely to be felt nationally. If the areas with many immigrants are not pivotal to an election, then their preference for immigration restrictions may not translate into policy even if they represent the majority of constituents in the country (Money 1997). Additionally, in a country like the US, it may be the case that malapportionment adversely affects citizens in areas with high concentrations of immigrants; states like California and Texas are greatly affected by immigration and have large populations, but still only have two senators. Thus, a majority of Americans could be against immigration but be unable to restrict policy because they do not have the votes in the US Senate.

If voters are unable to form coherent positions on immigration or immigration is simply not salient to them, policy makers should be free to make policy free from the views of the median voter. (Freeman 1995) argues that this freedom leads clientelistic politics on immigration. Politicians are then likely to favor the views of those who are most likely to organize on immigration. Given that immigration produces relatively concentrated benefits—to firms that use immigrant labor and to the immigrants themselves—but diffuse costs—in terms of the overall fiscal burden immigrants place on the country, their effect on the national labor market, and their effect on the national culture—immigration policy should be more open than the median voter desires.
Thus, while we generally believe that policy makers should represent the median voter by choosing policies that reflect their constituencies’ views, there are several reasons why policy may deviate from the views of the median voter. It is an open question, then, how public opinion should affect immigration policy. In this paper we examine four hypotheses deriving from the literature on representation and immigration policy. First, we examine the hypothesis that the public has a hard time forming an opinion on immigration due to the lack of information and the inability to discuss immigration (Freeman 1995). If Freeman (1995) is correct, then the actual immigration policy should not have much of an effect on public opinion on immigration. This leads to our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1a**: Immigration policy should not affect public opinion.

However, if voters can gauge the level of immigration from the media or from their interactions with immigrants in their communities, then opinion on immigration should be affected by public opinion. This leads to our next hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1b**: Immigration policy should affect public opinion.

Next we examine whether public opinion actually affects the way policy makers vote on immigration by examining data from the US Senate. From the median voter theorem, public opinion in the state should affect immigration policy.¹ From our other theories on representation and immigration, we think that the mean public opinion should not affect votes on immigration. This leads to our next two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 2a**: Public opinion in the district (state) should not affect how senators vote on immigration.

**Hypothesis 2b**: Public opinion in the district (state) should affect how senators vote on immigration.

Third, we examine whether public opinion actually affects policy. If policy makers respond to the median voter, then we would expect policy to follow the opinion of the median voter. However, as the discussion above shows, there are many reasons to believe that policy may deviate from public opinion, even if legislators represent their districts faithfully. This leads to our next two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 3a**: Public opinion should not affect immigration policy.

¹Given our data we cannot actually test the opinion of the median voter, but instead must infer the position of the median voter from the mean voter.
Hypothesis 3b: Public opinion should affect immigration policy.

Fourth, it may be that policy only responds to public opinion when immigration is a highly salient issue. Voters do not have unlimited resources to devote to politics, let alone to every issue. Therefore, we expect that the salience of issues will vary. Further only when an issue is salient should public opinion translate into action as voters now care about an issue enough to take a costly action, such as call their Member of Congress. This leads to our next hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: Public opinion should affect immigration policy when it is more salient

Finally, we examine if policy makers are more responsive to one group over another. In this analysis we examine whether policy makers are more responsive to wealthier voters. This leads to our final hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Immigration policy is responsive to the views of rich voters.

3 Data

3.1 Public opinion data

The data on public opinion in the US were collected from the Roper Center. The database was searched using the terms “immigration” and “immigrants.” Only data from polls with nationally representative samples were included. This search produced several hundred questions on immigration, including general opinion on immigration, opinion on illegal immigration, opinion on the effects of immigrants on jobs, crime, and welfare spending, and opinion on enforcement, resulting in 768 questions from 1937–2010. However, we could not use all of these questions. Opinion on immigration greatly varies depending on the question wording used. Figure 1 shows this variation for the US for 1980–2010. The different dots represent different polling firms. As can be seen from the graph, the percent favoring a decrease in immigration or thinking that immigration is a bad thing for the US does not exhibit any clear trends. Ideally, we would have expected that the different question wording would have different means but have similarly trends overtime. Instead, there seems to be little correlation across polls.

Given the problems with using all the polls in the analysis that follows, we examine general opinion on immigration. General opinion was based on the following questions:

1. Do you think the number of immigrants allowed to enter the U.S. each year should be increased somewhat, decreased somewhat, or kept at about the present level?
2. Should immigration be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?

These two questions best capture the overall opinion on immigration in the US and therefore should capture Freeman’s (1995) argument that the public opinion on immigration does not affect immigration policy due to the clientelistic politics of immigration. This leaves us with 60 polls from 1964 to 2010. About a third of the polls (24) ask specifically about legal immigration using the same question wording but inserting “legal” before immigration. The use of the term “legal” in the question occurs after 1995 and is likely the result of increasing attention to illegal immigration. The questions with and without the use of the term “legal” are pooled together. The use of “legal” does not seem to have a great effect on the opinions reported and therefore pooling is appropriate. The first panel of Figure 2 shows how public opinion in the US has changed on immigration over the years using these question wordings.

The data on public opinion in Canada were collected from the Canadian Opinion Research Archive. In order to have consistent data, we used two questions from these polls

1. If it were your job to plan an immigration policy for Canada at this time, would you be inclined to increase immigration, decrease immigration, or keep the number of immigrants at about the current level?
2. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with each of the following statements? a) Overall there is too much immigration to Canada

These two questions were asked 36 times since the early 1980s. The second panel of Figure 2 shows the distribution of Canadian opinion over the last 30 years. The similarity in the level of support for immigration in the two countries is somewhat surprising, given the conventional wisdom that Canadians are more tolerant to immigrants than Americans. In the mid-1990s, both countries had relatively low levels of support (or high levels of opposition) to immigration. Since then, opposition to immigration has fallen greatly; although it has fallen further in Canada than in the US.

Additionally, we have 27 polls from 1995–2010 for which we were able to access the raw data. We can use these polls to examine Freeman’s (1995) hypothesis that immigration policy formation is clientelistic as well as additional hypotheses. To examine Freeman’s hypothesis in greater detail, we use the raw data get state level opinion on immigration and correlate this with voting behavior in the US Senate. We also examine whether policy correlates better with the opinion of wealthier respondents (Bartels 2008).²

Finally, we collected data on the salience of immigration as an issue in Canada and the US. In the US we collected data from the following question:

How important are each of the following issues to you personally...not at all important, slightly important, moderately important, very important or extremely important? How about...immigration?

²One poll does not adequately distinguish between the wealthy and the middle class. We use 27 polls therefore to test the argument for poor voters and 26 polls to test the argument for right voters.
Over our time period, this question was asked 44 times over our time period. In the case of Canada, we used the “most important problem” question to gage the salience of immigration, in which there were 40 polls with at least 1 respondent listing immigration as the most important problem over our time period. Figure 3 shows how salience has changed in the US and Canada. It is clear from the figure that the problem with using the “most important problem” question is that immigration—in Canada or the US—has rarely been raised as the most important problem. We believe that the question of how important immigrant is to a respondent is a better measure of salience, but this question was not asked on Canadian polls. There has been variation in the salience of immigration policy; although in Canada, this may be driven by a small number of people.

3.2 Data on immigration policy

In order to examine how public opinion affects policymakers and policy, we need a measure of immigration policy. We use the measure developed by Peters (2011). This measure captures the overall openness of the state to low-skill immigrants. We focus on low-skill immigrants because they are the vast majority of both potential and actual immigrants and because the native population opposes low-skill immigrants to a greater degree than high-skill immigrants (e.g. Goldstein, Peters, and Rivers 2012, Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007, 2010). Thus, Freeman (1995) model of clientelistic politics better applies to towards

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3We drop the surveys where no respondents list immigration as we are not sure whether or not immigration was listed as a choice opinion or was listed among “other” issues in these surveys.
low-skill workers because there is less opposition to high-skill workers.\footnote{Nonetheless, it could be that US policy makers are out of step with public opinion given that a majority of respondents favor high-skill immigration and yet, the US has a very limited high-skill immigration program.} The measure includes three broad categories of immigration policies with several sub-categories in each category to fully capture the different ways in which states can regulate migration: border regulations, who gets into the country; rights given to immigrants once they are in the country and enforcement.\footnote{Migrants choose their location on both economic and political variables (Leblang, Fitzgerald, and Teets 2009). Those states that offer immigrants more rights are more attractive (Leblang, Fitzgerald, and Teets 2009). Rights, therefore, can be used as a way to recruit immigrants. Similarly, citizenship policy can also be used as a way to attract immigrants (Leblang, Fitzgerald, and Teets 2009).} Not all categories are given equal weight in creating the final immigration policy measure; there is much greater weight placed on border regulations for workers and enforcement than refugee and asylum policy and migrant rights (see Peters (2011) for a more detailed discussion of the coding).

Figure 4 shows how immigration policy and public opinion has varied in the US and Canada in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Higher values mean more openness to immigration and lower values mean greater restrictions. We see that, again, contra to the conventional wisdom, the US restricts low-skill immigration to a great degree than Canada. Additionally, both states have increased their restrictions to low-skill immigration over the last 30 years.

3.3 Data on voting in the US Senate

Finally, we use senate roll call votes to gauge how the voting behavior of senators changes with variation in public opinion in the state calculated from the raw survey data. The voting
data from the US senate is from Peters (2012). The data consists of each roll call vote on immigration in Vote View (Poole 2009, Poole and Lewis 2009, Poole and McCarty 2009). To ensure that each vote was captured, Peters relied on Hutchinson to create an exhaustive list of all immigration bills that came before the Senate for a roll call vote from 1789 to 1965 (1981). After 1965, we relied on the Policy Agenda Project and Congressional Quarterly (Baumgartner and Jones 2009, Congressional Quarterly 2003, 2005, 2006a, b).

The substance of each vote—what the senators were actually voting on, whether amendment, procedural, cloture or final passage—in the Senate is coded as restrictive or expansive. Votes that sought to restrict immigration were given a score of 0 and votes that sought to open immigration were given a score of 1. The coding of some votes was quite easy—for example, the following vote on an amendment in 1912: “To amend S. 3175, by excluding persons of African descent from admittance to the US whether from Africa or the West Indies, except Puerto Rico.” Other votes were more difficult to code, such as a vote to amend the Displaced Persons Act in 1950 by “establishing a technical definition of ‘displaced persons.’” In fact, the technical definition of “displaced persons” debated was the more expansive definition of “displaced person” used by the United Nations, including persons not in camps, rather than the more restrictive definition of only those in displaced persons’ camps. For these more obtuse votes, Peters again relied on Hutchinson’s (1981) description of the votes as well as reading the text of the original debates in Congress.

Each vote by each senator was given a score of 0 or 1. A zero indicates that the senator voted in the restrictive direction—either by voting for a restrictive bill or voting against an expansive bill. A one indicates that the senator voted in the expansive direction—either by voting for an expansive bill or against a restrictive bill. In each year, the senator was given a score of the number of times he voted for expanding immigration divided by the total number of immigration votes in the year. This proportion of votes for open immigration serves as our measure of the senator’s voting behavior on immigration. Figure 5 shows how the voting behavior of the mean Senator from each region has changed over time and figure 6 shows how the voting behavior of the mean Senator from each party had changed over time.

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6Hutchinson examined the Congressional record from 1789-1965, recorded every bill that was introduced in the House and Senate including those which never made it out of committee and discussed the progress the bill made in each chamber.

7Procedural and cloture votes were included because they were often used to kill amendments or bills on the floor of the Senate.

8Abstaining (or simply not voting) and votes of “present” were excluded as it is unclear what they signal in this context.
Figure 5: Support by the mean senator from each region

Figure 6: Support by the mean senator from each party
4 Methods

4.1 Public opinion and policy

We do not observe public opinion on immigration or its importance, but only polls. These polls necessarily include sampling error as well as more systematic sources of error. Moreover, polls are not collected simultaneously, but over a period of time. In some cases in our data, this period is several months long.

We thus turn to a model that treats these observations as noisy measurements of a latent variable measured over an interval—specifically, the model developed in Tahk (2013). Mathematically, we assume that

\[
poll_i \sim \text{Normal}\left(\frac{1}{end_i - start_i} \int_{start_i}^{end_i} \text{opinion}(t) \, dt, \zeta_0 + \frac{\zeta_1}{4size_i}\right)
\]

\[
\text{observedpolicy}_j \sim \text{Normal}\left(\int_{start_j}^{end_j} \text{policy}(t) \, dt, \xi\right)
\]

where \(i\) indexes the poll, \(j\) indexes the year of a policy measurement, \(start_i\) and \(end_i\) are the start and end times for poll \(i\), \(poll_i\) indicates the fraction of respondents who favor decreasing the level of immigration, \(size_i\) indicates the sample size of poll \(i\), \(\text{opinion}(t)\) indicates the unobserved true level of public opinion at time \(t\), \(\text{observedpolicy}_j\) indicates the measured immigration openness during year \(j\), and \(\text{policy}(t)\) indicates the true level of immigration openness at time \(t\). Policy measurements are always taken over a year, so \(start_j\) and \(end_j\) always indicate the beginning and end of year \(j\). Three parameters also adjust the variance of the observations. \(\zeta_0\) and \(\zeta_1\) are parameters which adjust the variance beyond that implied by sampling error to account for systematic biases in a poll as well as the use of weighting. Finally, \(\xi\) is the variance of the policy measurements.

Finally, we assume that the unobserved levels of public opinion, salience, and policy follow a multivariate Ornstein-Uhlenbeck process, which is essentially a continuous-time analog of a vector-autoregressive process. Formally,

\[
\partial \text{opinion} (t) = \alpha_{0.1} + \alpha_{1.1} \text{opinion} (t) + \alpha_{3.1} \text{policy} (t) + \sigma_1 \partial U (t) + \rho \partial V (t)
\]

\[
\partial \text{salience} (t) = \alpha_{0.2} + \alpha_{2.2} \text{salience} (t) + \alpha_{3.3} \text{policy} (t) + \sigma_1 \partial V (t)
\]

\[
\partial \text{policy} (t) = \alpha_{0.3} + \alpha_{1.3} \text{opinion} (t) + \alpha_{2.3} \text{salience} (t) + \alpha_{2.2} \text{policy} (t) + \sigma_3 \partial W (t)
\]

where \(\text{opinion}(t)\) and \(\text{policy}(t)\) are the instantaneous levels of public opinion and policy, respectively, at time \(t\); \(U (t), V (t),\) and \(W (t)\) are independent Weiner processes, which provide a continuous-time analog to normally distributed errors; and \(\partial x (t)\) indicates the
instantaneous rate of change of $x$ at time $t$.

Although not apparent mathematically, this model includes the vector-autoregressive model (with similar restrictions) as a special case in which no sampling error or other measurement error occurs and observations are simultaneous and regularly spaced. It is, thus, a generalization of the vector-autoregressive model which allows us to account for these limitations. For more details, see Tahk (2013).

More intuitively, this model allows public opinion and policy to affect each other as well as themselves. A high level of public opinion favoring a decline in immigration could push policy away from immigration openness at a rate determined by $\alpha_{1,3}$. It may also tend to return to a long-run equilibrium level at a rate, determined by $\alpha_{1,1}$. Likewise, a high level of immigration openness might cause public opinion to favor decreasing the level of immigration at a rate determined by $\alpha_{3,1}$ (or, more accurately, $-\alpha_{3,1}$) and policy might return to a long-run equilibrium at a rate determined by $\alpha_{3,3}$. Of course, these effects might occur in the opposite direction or not at all.

It is also worth noting that a series can be mean-reverting in combination with the other series without being mean-reverting on its own. For example, policy might not be self-correcting in reverting to a mean (if, for example, $\alpha_{3,3} = 0$), but might be in combination with public opinion if public opinion served to pull policy away from extremes.

Because public opinion on immigration policy and the salience of immigration policy are both measures of public opinion, we do not allow these two series to directly affect one another. Instead, we allow movements in these two series to be correlated, which occurs so long as $\rho \neq 0$. This correlation is estimated as part of the model. Thus, we can capture co-movements in the series without one series causing the change in the other. Indirect effects—in which one might affect immigration policy which in turn affects the other—are also still possible.

### 4.2 State-level public opinion and Senate voting

To study the relationship between public opinion and legislative behavior on an individual level, we modify the model to separate polling data out by state. We then look at the voting behavior of each senator over time in comparison with the views of the senator’s constituents.

Mathematically, our model assumes that

$$\text{poll}_{k,m} \sim \text{Normal} \left( \text{opinion}_{k,\text{year}(m)}; \zeta_0 + \frac{\zeta_1}{4\text{size}_{k,m}} \right)$$

$$\text{pro}_{i,j} \sim \text{Bernoulli} \left( \Phi \left( \alpha_{0,j} + \alpha_{1,j} \left( \text{senator}_{i} - \beta_{\text{opinion}_{\text{state}(i),\text{year}(j)}} \right) \right) \right)$$
where $\Phi$ indicates the cumulative distribution function of the normal distribution, $k$ indexes the state, $m$ indexes the poll, $i$ indexes the senator, $j$ indexes the bill, $opinion_{k,t}$ indicates the unobserved level of public opinion in state $k$ during year $t$, $poll_{k,m}$ indicates the fraction of respondents in state $k$ who favor decreasing the level of immigration measured in poll $m$, $year (m)$ indicates the year of poll or bill $m$, $size_{k,m}$ indicates the sample size of poll $m$ in state $k$, $pro_{i,j}$ indicates whether senator $i$’s vote on bill $j$ favored more open immigration policy, $senator_{i}$ indicates the ideal point of senator $i$, and $state (i)$ indicates the home state of senator $i$. The parameters, $\alpha_{0,t}$ and $\alpha_{1,t}$ determine the relationship between the probability of taking a pro-immigration position and the senator’s ideal point and public opinion in his home state for year $t$—in essence, describing the immigration legislation agenda during year $t$. Finally $\beta$ represents the degree to which changes in home-state public opinion affects a senator’s vote.

Because separating public opinion by state greatly increases the number of parameters, we simplify the model of public opinion to allow only changes from one year to the next, with a common level of correlation in changes between states. Thus,

$$opinion_{k,t} = opinion_{k,t-1} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{k,t}$$

$$\delta_t \sim iid \ N(0, \rho)$$

$$\varepsilon_{k,t} \sim iid \ N(0, \tau)$$

where $\delta_t$ represents a national change in public opinion between years $t - 1$ and $t$, $\varepsilon_{k,t}$ represents a state-specific shock to state $k$ during this time period, and $\rho$ and $\tau$ are parameters giving the variances of the national and state-specific shocks. This creates a correlation of $\frac{\rho}{\rho + \tau}$ between the changes to different states.

Intuitively, our model allows public opinion to move separately within each state, but also allows for common movement in public opinion across the nation. We then assume each senator’s voting pattern is a combination of the senator’s time-invariance preferences and public opinion in his home state. Note that we do not assume the source for the senator’s preferences—they might include party, personal ideology, and characteristics of his home state—but they are not allowed to vary over time, unlike public opinion. If public opinion does not impact voting behavior, then we would expect $\beta = 0$, leaving each senator’s voting behavior to be described only by his own time-invariant preferences combined with the properties legislative agenda on which the senator must vote in a given year.
4.3 State-level public opinion and Senate voting by income

Finally, to study Bartels’s (2008) theory that legislators are more responsive to high-income constituents, we modify this model to distinguish between public opinion among these two types of constituents. Thus,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{poll}_{high,k,m} & \sim \text{Normal}\left(\text{opinion}_{high,k,year(m)}, \zeta_0 + \frac{\zeta_1}{4\text{size}_{k,m}}\right) \\
\text{poll}_{low,k,m} & \sim \text{Normal}\left(\text{opinion}_{low,k,year(m)}, \zeta_0 + \frac{\zeta_1}{4\text{size}_{k,m}}\right) \\
\text{pro}_{i,j} & \sim \text{Bernoulli}\left(\Phi\left(\alpha_0,j + \alpha_{1,j} \left(\text{senator}_i - \frac{\beta_{low}\text{opinion}_{low,\text{state}(i),year(j)} - \beta_{high}\text{opinion}_{low,\text{state}(i),year(j)}}{\beta_{high}}\right)\right)\right),
\end{align*}
\]

where \(\beta\) and \(\text{opinion}\) are now additionally indexed by income group. This leaves us with the same model as before, but separates between public opinion among high-income and low-income respondents. Thus, if the preferences of high-income constituents were given more weight, we would expect \(\beta_{high} > \beta_{low}\).

4.4 Estimation

Estimation and inference regarding the first model of the relationship between public opinion and policy was performed in a maximum likelihood framework using the software developed in Tahk (2013). Finally, estimation of this model was performed in a Bayesian framework using flat priors.\(^9\) Despite these different approaches, the maximum likelihood results can be taken to approximate the posterior under a Bayesian approach using flat prior and Bayesian results using a flat prior can be taken to approximate likelihood-based inference.

5 Results

5.1 Public opinion and immigration policy in the US

We now turn to our results; we begin by examining how immigration policy and public opinion affect each other in the US. Figure 7 shows the fitted public opinion in the upper frame, the fitted immigration policy in the middle frame and fitted salience in the lower frame.

\(^9\)The posterior distribution was approximated using Gibbs sampling performed with the software package JAGS. A total of 50,000 iterations were run with a burn-in of 12,500 iterations and thinning interval of 10 iterations.
From the fitted public opinion data, we see that the peak in anti-immigrant sentiment in the US occurred in the mid 1980s, followed by a spike right after September 11th. Similarly, we see that immigration policy was most open in this period in the early 1980s and has gradually become more restrictive since then. In contrast, it appears that immigration as a policy issue has become more salient in recent years. Additionally, it appears that there is a relationship between public opinion, salience and immigration policy. Public opinion has become more supportive (less opposition) toward immigration as immigration has become more restrictive. Immigration has become a more salient issue at the same time immigration policy has become more restrictive.

Table 1 shows the relationship between public opinion, salience and immigration policy. First we see that opinion and salience are mean reverting. Given that we generally expect that public opinion and salience on immigration tends to a certain distribution over time (i.e. it is stationary), this result is not surprising. If public opinion or salience were not mean reverting, then it could tend to be infinite or non-existent. Immigration policy, however, is not mean reverting. Instead, immigration policy could become infinitely open, i.e. the government recruits workers, or completely closed, i.e. the government expels the foreign born. This is not surprising. We know from the trade literature that the current policy tends to empower those groups, which benefit from the policy (Rogowski 1989). Immigration openness, thus, could empower those groups who benefit from openness, giving them additional resources to push the policy open. Similarly, restrictiveness empowers groups that benefit from restrictions, which then could seek further restrictions.

Table 1: Estimated relationship between public opinion, immigration policy, and immigration salience in US

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mean reversion speed of opinion</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean reversion speed of policy</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean reversion speed of salience</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect of opinion on policy</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect of salience on policy</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.06†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect of policy on opinion</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect of policy on salience</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.07†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, we examine the relationship between policy and opinion (hypotheses 1a, 1b, 3a, and 3b). We find that policy indeed has an effect on opinion (support for hypothesis 1b but not 1a). As policy becomes more open, opinion towards immigration becomes more negative. As policy becomes more restrictive, opinion towards immigration becomes more positive. This suggests that the average citizen is more aware of immigration policy than Freeman
Figure 7: Fitted public opinion, salience and immigration policy in the US
(1995) gives her credit for. It may be that media reports on immigration or the affects of immigration within the community provide the average citizen with enough information to form an informed opinion on immigration.

We find, however, that opinion does not have a statistically significant effect on immigration policy (evidence supporting hypothesis 3a). The sign of the coefficient is in the logical direction—decreased support for immigration leads to a less open policy and increased support for immigration leads to a more open policy. However, the coefficient is not statistically significant at conventional levels.

While policy is not responsive to public opinion in general, it is responsive to salience (hypothesis 4). As expected, when immigration is highly salient, immigration policy become more restrictive. A majority or at least a large plurality of the population opposes open immigration. Therefore, when immigration is highly salient, we would expect that if there was a change in policy, that it would be a negative change in policy and this is what we find. Thus, while public opinion on immigration does not always affect policy, it does have a greater effect when immigration is a more salient issue.

5.2 Public opinion and voting in the US Senate

Next we examine the effect of public opinion on voting in the US senate. Table 2 shows the results of the analysis of public opinion of all respondents in the senators’ districts. The estimate is in the hypothesized direction and highly statistically significant. When the respondents in the district are more favorable to immigration, the senator is more likely to vote for opening immigration. In contrast, when the respondents in the district are less favorable to immigration, the senator is more likely to vote for restricting immigration. Therefore, it appears that the opinions of respondents in each state affect the way that senators from that state vote on immigration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Posterior SD</th>
<th>Posterior prob. &lt;0</th>
<th>Lower Bound</th>
<th>Upper Bound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>all respondents</td>
<td>6.300</td>
<td>1.739</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>3.192</td>
<td>10.191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3 Public opinion by income and voting in the US Senate

Next, we examine whether the pattern we see above in the voting behavior of US senators is driven by the views of one set of respondents, namely wealthy voters. Table 3 shows the effects of the opinions of respondents, based on their income level, on the voting behavior of
senators in the year of the poll. The estimate on the effect of the high-income voters (those making greater than $50,000 per year) on is not statistically significant, while the effect of low-income respondents (less than $30,000 per year) is statistically significant. It appears that when low-income respondents want more open immigration policy, the senator is more likely to vote for openness and when these respondents want more restrictive immigration policy, the senator is more likely to vote for restrictions. Nonetheless we cannot distinguish between the effect of low-income and high-income voters; the difference between the two coefficients is not statistically significant. This may be due to the small amount of data that we currently have. Thus, we do not believe we can fully reject Bartels’s (2008) argument that policy is driven by wealthy voters at this time.

Table 3: The effect of public opinion on Senate voting by income

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Posterior SD</th>
<th>Posterior prob. &lt;0</th>
<th>Lower Bound</th>
<th>Upper Bound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high income respondents</td>
<td>1.417</td>
<td>1.841</td>
<td>0.195</td>
<td>-2.364</td>
<td>4.738</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low income respondents</td>
<td>3.669</td>
<td>1.997</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>-0.384</td>
<td>7.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difference</td>
<td>-2.252</td>
<td>3.363</td>
<td>0.736</td>
<td>-8.982</td>
<td>4.088</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4 Public Opinion and Immigration Policy in Canada

Finally, we examine data from Canada to see if what we have learned about the US can be generalized to other countries. Figure 8 shows the fitted public opinion in the upper frame, the fitted immigration policy in the middle frame and fitted salience in the lower frame. Again there appears to be a correlation between public opinion and immigration policy. Public opinion is becoming more favorable (lower opposition) to immigration as immigration policy becomes more restrictive. Finally, there is some variation in salience over time; immigration was a more salient issue in the mid 1990s.

Table 4 shows the relationship between public opinion, salience and immigration policy in Canada. Similar to the US, we find that opinion and salience are mean reverting while policy is not. We also find that Canadians’ opinion on immigration are also affected by immigration policy in the same way. If immigration policy becomes too open, Canadians oppose immigration more and if immigration policy becomes too restrictive, Canadians favor immigration more. Again, there is no statistically significant effect of opinion on policy, but the results are in the hypothesized direction. Finally, the effect of salience is opposite that of the US. In Canada, greater salience leads to more open immigration policy. There could be two reasons for this effect. First, our measure of salience is very crude and can be easily
Figure 8: Fitted public opinion, salience and immigration policy in the US
influenced by a small number of respondents. These respondents could have very different preferences on immigration than the rest of the population. For example, it may be that immigration tends to become very salient only to foreign-born citizens, who tend to be for open immigration. As such, we might expect that salience is measuring the influence of this group. Second, Canada has a very different political system than the US, giving more weight to smaller parties and, again, this too may give more influence to the foreign-born and ethnic lobbies.

Table 4: Estimated relationship between public opinion, immigration policy, and immigration salience in Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mean reversion speed of opinion</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean reversion speed of policy</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mean reversion speed of salience</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect of opinion on policy</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect of salience on policy</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect of policy on opinion</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effect of policy on salience</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.5 Discussion of results

We find that the public responds to changes in immigration policy in both the US and Canada and that public opinion affects voting in the US Senate. Yet, we find a weaker relationship between public opinion and immigration policy in both the US and Canada, but this relationship is stronger when immigration policy is more salient. Thus, it appears that opinion affect immigration policy but only when it is more salient.

In the US case, there are myriad reasons for the finding that opinion affects senate voting but does not always affect the final policy outcome. First, we do not find that it is the case that immigration policy is driven solely by wealthier constituents. Second, this disconnect between opinion and policy may be due to the particular institutions of the US. Following Money (1997), overall opinion in the US may not affect policy due to the geographic concentration of immigration and the importance of swing constituencies. The President and the leadership of the House and Senate may ignore the opinions of the public in non-swing states with few consequences. Therefore, it could be the case that immigration policy reflects the views of the constituents in swing states and not the general public. Additionally, this result could be driven by malapportionment in the US Senate. The views of those who live in small rural states disproportionately affect immigration policy. Rural voters, because of
the need for immigrant labor for farms, may hold very different views on immigration than urban voters. Therefore, public opinion on immigration may not affect immigration policy because only a subset of voters—in swing states or in rural states—affects immigration policy due to US institutions.

Third, overall public opinion may not affect immigration policy; however, it could be the case that partisan public opinion affects immigration policy. Given the need of politicians to gain support from their base (Bishin 2000; Clinton 2006; Fenno 1978), it is possible that immigration policy follows the opinions of the partisans whose representatives are in Congress. In the 1980s and early 1990s, immigration policy may have better reflected the views of Democratic respondents as the Democrats held control of Congress; in contrast, in the 1990s through late 2000s, immigration may have better reflect the views of Republican respondents.

Moreover, disconnect in opinion and policy may reflect the ability of policy makers to use heterogeneity in opinion to their advantage. The public is relatively split in their views on immigration. Most of the time, support for decreasing immigration ranges from 40% to 60%. There is, thus, a large plurality of the public who supports the status quo or increasing immigration. The policy maker, therefore, can use the heterogeneity in the public to craft a bill that, while it does not reflect overall views on immigration in the US, can gain enough support to get him reelected.

Immigration policy may also reflect the role of the President more than the role of Congress because the president has the power to veto the bill. This role that the President plays could have several consequences for immigration policy, which may move it away from public opinion. First, Presidents tend to care more about the foreign policy considerations of immigration policy than the people or Congress (Salehyan and Rosenblum 2008). Prior to September 11th, foreign policy concerns tended to make the President more open to immigration—especially to refugees—than Congress. The President used the issue of refugees and immigration to show that the US was “better” than the USSR during the Cold War. After the Cold War, refugee policy was still used in response to US military actions (Salehyan and Rosenblum 2008). Second, the President is thought to have the “national interest” in mind. In the trade literature, the national interest is thought to be for openness given that trade openness will grow the economy and help consumers. The national interest, at least economically, is the same in immigration. As the Stolper-Samuelson model shows, opening immigration also leads to increased economic growth and will help consumers. Thus, it could be that the President pushes for a more open policy in the “national interest.” Moreover, Presidents worry about swing states to a great degree. Recently, many swing states have had large populations of Hispanic voters. Hispanic voters tend to be for open immigra-
tion. Thus, in order to stay in office, Presidents have sought to court this voting bloc and supported open immigration for that reason.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to examine the relationship between public policy and public opinion on immigration in order to reexamine the argument that immigration politics are clientelistic. We find some confirmatory and some contradictory evidence. First, we find that the public, in fact, seems to respond to the level of immigration openness when forming their opinion on immigration. This result contradicts Freeman’s (1995) argument that the public has a hard time forming their opinion on immigration due to the lack of official data on immigration. It seems that the public can in fact infer the level of immigration policy from the media or from the effects of the policy in their community. Unsurprisingly, when immigration policy is more open, the public desires a lower level of immigration and when immigration policy is more restrictive, the public desires a higher level of immigration. The public seems to have a particular level of immigration in mind and when policy deviates from this level; public opinion shifts in a way to show that the public would like policy to move back to the public’s preferred level.

Second, we find that public opinion affects US Senators. When the senator’s constituents prefer less immigration, she is more likely to vote for restriction; when the senator’s constituents prefer more immigration, he is more likely to vote for openness. Third, we find, however, that there is a weak link between public opinion on immigration and immigration policy but that this link is stronger when immigration is more salient. When immigration is a more salient issue, the immigration policy becomes more restrictive. Further, we find that senators’ support for immigration does not seem to be driven by the views of the wealthy alone; contradicting Bartels’s (2008) work, we find that the views of the rich and the poor affect senators’ voting behavior.

We then examined whether these findings hold outside the US by examining Canada. We found some consistent findings. Again, the public’s opinions on immigration were not divorced from policy; instead the Canadian public, too, seems to have in its mind a “correct” level of immigration policy and changes its opinion when policy moves outside of this range. There is, again, a weak link between opinion and immigration policy. However, we find conflicting evidence on salience and immigration policy. In Canada, great salience leads to a more open immigration policy. This result may be due to the way we measure salience in Canada. By using the “most important problem” question, our measure may be overly influenced by a few respondents. It may also be driven by the different political system in
Canada.

This paper, thus, provides some contradictory and some confirmatory evidence for the immigration literature. Policy makers are not completely out of step with their constituents on immigration; when immigration is an important issue, immigration policy is affected by public opinion. When immigration is not a salient issue, policy makers are less constrained in their immigration policy making. But this does not apply to all levels of policy making. We find that Senators, who have a smaller constituency than the national interest, are more constrained by public opinion than overall policy.

Finally, in this paper we began to tackle the link between public opinion and public policy. Survey research has become a more popular tool as the costs of this research have decreased, especially in International Political Economy. Yet, this research is often divorced from the research on public policy. This paper takes a first step in bringing these literatures back together.
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