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Ethnocultural or generalized? Nationalism and support for punitive immigration policy

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ABSTRACT
The revelation that the Trump administration separated immigrant children from their families at the U.S.–Mexico border and placed them in detention facilities sparked protests across the country in 2018. While the policy received swift backlash from the public and was widely derided as running counter to American values and the rule of law, a segment of the American public supports the policy. We argue that ethnocultural forms of nationalism—beliefs about religious, ethnic, and gendered criteria for "true Americanness"—help explain support for family separations. We test this argument using two surveys collected 2 years apart. In both data sets, we find substantial evidence that ethnocultural forms of nationalism are linked to support for family separation, while generalized nationalism is not.

Introduction

The Trump administration's 2018 "zero tolerance" policy formalized the practice of separating unauthorized migrant children—including those seeking to claim asylum legally—from their families at the border. The policy stood in stark contrast to past Republican immigration reforms, which routinely emphasized family unity and reunification (Maddux 2005). After fierce and immediate backlash, Trump officially ended the policy, but family separations continued at the border and thousands of children remain separated from their parents (Sieff and Taylor 2021). Although family separation was widely opposed in 2018 (Cox 2018), its public implementation and support from Republican elites suggest that there is a meaningful base of political support for this policy in the United States.

In some ways, the public's overall opposition to family separation comports with Americans' tendency to support more lenient treatment of immigrant children (Merolla, Ramakrishnan, and Haynes 2013). For example, whereas Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) legislation initially proposed immigration protections for veterans and parents, such measures were ultimately limited to youths. Similarly, Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) executive order qualified children for deferred deportation action but not their parents. In other

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ways, opposition to family separation conflicts with the public's animus toward unauthorized immigrants (McCabe, Matos, and Walker 2021) and appetite for punitive deportation procedures (Kanstroom 2007; Tichenor 2002). The public's paradoxical lenient and restrictive impulses make it difficult to explain support for family separation, since the policy targets parents and children—who most Americans view sympathetically —but it also targets unauthorized immigrants—a population stereotyped as criminal (Flores and Schachter 2018).

One explanation lies in the nationalistic discourse in recent immigration debates. Former President Trump campaigned on an "America First" anti-immigration platform in 2016 and made building a U.S.–Mexico border wall his priority (Costa, Sonmez, and Miroff 2019). During his time as president, Trump openly identified as a nationalist (Blake 2018) and routinely invoked nationalistic rhetoric to oppose unauthorized immigration (Stanley-Becker 2019). American nationalism, however, comes in various degrees and forms (Citrin, Wong, and Duff 2001; Parker 2010; Schildkraut 2014), and has evolved over time, such that Americans' national identity attachments have become more exclusionary since the September 11 attacks (McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2016). Explaining which type of American nationalism is associated with support for family separation contributes to identifying the vessel through which illiberal policies gain popularity in a liberal democracy.

We argue that a specific tradition of American nationalism—ethnocultural nationalism (Schildkraut 2014; Smith 1997)—explains support for family separation. We posit that people who believe a true American should be Christian, White, and "manly" are more likely to support family separation beyond the effects of generalized nationalism and other relevant political dispositions. Our argument expands the concept of ethnocultural nationalism to include gendered nationalism, an under-examined aspect of American identity (Deckman 2020; Deckman and Cassese 2021). Preferences of ethnocultural nationalists are more culturally and hierarchically defined than those of a general nationalist—i.e., one who believes that America is superior to other nations. Whereas existing research points to generalized nationalism as the great determinant of whether Americans are "bigots" (de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003), we claim that viewing America through a specific ethnocultural lens explains support for increasingly inhumane immigration policies.

We test our argument using original data from a 2018 single-city Election Exit Poll (N = 1363) and a 2020 post-election national survey (N = 1589). We find support for our argument. Ethnocultural nationalism is associated with increased support for family separation among White respondents and respondents of color. Our research sheds light on how this exclusionary identity can shape policy preferences.

The politics of nationalism

Recent scholarship unpacks the multi-dimensionality of American national identity—or a person's social identification with the American ingroup. Scholars offer two primary dimensions of national attachment: patriotism and generalized nationalism. This scholarship equates the divergence between patriotism and nationalism to a psychological one where patriotism is a form of in-group love and nationalism is akin to out-group hate (Blank and Schmidt 2003; Brewer 1999; Carter and Pérez 2016; de Figueiredo and

Elkins 2003; Schildkraut 2014). Other scholarship recasts generalized nationalism as blind patriotism (Parker 2010; Schatz, Staub, and Lavine 2003), uncritical patriotism (Huddy and Khatib 2007), and chauvinism (Citrin, Wong, and Duff 2001; Conover and Feldman 1987; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989). These studies understand nationalism as a collectively narcissistic form of attachment to one's nation, based on a general derogation "of alternatives to the [American] nation's institutions and principles" (de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003, 175).

Other explorations of American nationalism consider how people move beyond a general sense of American superiority to engage in boundary drawing (Citrin, Green, and Sears 1990; Citrin, Wong, and Duff 2001; Schildkraut 2007, 2014). It is generally thought that Americans derive their definition of national identity from shared norms and beliefs known as the American Creed, positing that as long as someone works hard, treats others fairly, and follows the rule of law, they can become a member (Hartz 1955; Myrdal 1944; de Tocqueville 1835). This liberal tradition is often juxtaposed against ethnocultural traditions of defining citizenship in countries such as Germany and Denmark, where normative markers of citizenship are based on familial bloodlines and ethnocultural factors (Jaffe-Walter 2016). These ethnocultural traditions of national identity were long considered anti-democratic by scholars of American nationalism, due to their racially exclusionary nature. However, scholars increasingly argue that many Americans do in fact draw on ethnocultural traditions of national identity (Schildkraut 2007, 2014; Smith 1997; Theiss-Morse 2009; Wright 2011). Indeed, some Americans view Whiteness and Christianity as integral to American identity (McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2011; Shortle and Gaddie 2015; Whitehead and Perry 2020). White identity also consistently predicts exclusionary policy attitudes (Jardina 2019).

An underexamined component of ethnocultural nationalism in American behavioral research is gender (Thomson 2020). As Nagel (1998, 243) argues, nationalism can be understood as "masculinist projects, involving masculine institutions, masculine processes, and masculine activities." Nationalist attitudes and beliefs often rely on gender ideologies rooted in patriarchy that emphasize and prize gender difference (McClintock 1993). As such, men's leadership and dominance become a constitutive feature of nationalism. Recently, Van Berkel, Molina, and Mukherjee (2017) asked American men and women to list "true" Americans. Participants were far more likely to list men as exemplary and to consider masculinity a stronger indicator of Americanness than femininity. Furthermore, gendered claims to nationalism often emerge specifically in Western countries in response to immigration from countries considered racially or ethnically "other" (Farris 2017; Thomson 2020). This simultaneously racialized and gendered view of nationalism helps to explain some of the frames conservative elites have used to stoke fears of immigration. For example, Donald Trump repeatedly referred to the killing of Kathryn Steinle by an undocumented Mexican immigrant in San Francisco to rally opposition to sanctuary city policies, despite the evidence showing no link between sanctuary policies and crime rates (Gonzalez O'Brien, Collingwood, and El-Khatib 2019).

Nationalism is politically meaningful in the United States and social identification with the American ingroup shapes a variety of attitudes and behaviors (Huddy and Khatib 2007; Schildkraut 2011; Theiss-Morse 2009). Generalized nationalism's domineering spirit can lead to violent actions, discriminatory behaviors, and prejudice

against outsiders (de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003; Feshbach 1987; Parker 2010). Ethno-cultural nationalism predicts restrictive attitudes, such as opposition to immigration and anti-immigrant sentiment (Carly M. Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013; McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2011; Schildkraut 2011; Shortle and Gaddie 2015). And in the 2016 presidential election, gendered nationalist attitudes were strongly linked to the probability of voting for Donald Trump (Deckman and Cassese 2021). Which particular nationalism tradition an American draws upon to form policy attitudes likely depends on the political context surrounding the issue. Thus far, scholarship has not brought each of these dimensions of ethnocultural nationalism—religious, racial, and gendered—together with generalized nationalism to test their independent effects on policy attitudes.

Ethnocultural nationalism and family separation

It is reasonable to expect that nationalism would be linked to immigration policy attitudes: immigration law is essentially predicated on deciding who gets to be part of the ingroup (Motomura 2006). As nationalism is multi-dimensional, not all types of nationalism are likely to be relevant to any given policy. With immigration, we argue that Americans are more likely to draw on ethnocultural than generalized nationalism. Generalized nationalism is the belief that one's own nation is superior. Thus generalized nationalists might be torn over immigration. On the one hand, they are likely to view immigrants as inferior because they are from other, and in their view lesser, countries. On the other hand, an immigrant chooses to come to the United States and thus the generalized nationalist could view that choice as affirming their own belief that the United States is superior. Ethnocultural nationalists are unlikely to be conflicted, as their view of American identity is rooted in exclusion based on fixed characteristics like race/ethnicity and religion, and prescribes a narrow range of who deserves benefits and protections from government (Schildkraut 2007; Theiss-Morse 2009). These constitutive norms posit mostly impermeable boundaries around who counts as an American, such that individuals cannot simply adopt "American" characteristics—people are either born that way or not.

The history of American immigration policy reflects ethnocultural preoccupations with national identity. The United States has long relied on categories like race and religion for deciding who gets to come to the country and who can access citizenship. While local efforts at controlling who crosses borders existed well before immigration became federally regulated (Judd and Swanstrom 2012), the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was one of the first landmark national policies to exclude immigrants based on their race and religion. National quotas placed on early twentieth century immigration flows narrowly focused on southern European immigrants—predominantly Italian Catholics—and Russian Jews, and excluded other groups (Ngai 2004; Tichenor 2002). Non-white immigrants who managed to get to the United States then faced further legal barriers to inclusion, and racial restrictions on naturalized citizenship persisted well into the twentieth century (Haney López 2006). Furthermore, during the 1920s the U.S. automatically stripped citizenship from any American woman who married a man ineligible for citizenship on the basis of race (Haney López 2006), thereby inserting the state into reproductive decisions and linking gender, race, and the construction of the nation.

Ultimately, the state's immigration practices have served to create and maintain racial categories and meaning, while entrenching White supremacy and racial exclusion (Haney López 2006).

The racialization of immigration endures. Legal scholars have argued that current manifestations of immigration policy—including family separation—can best be understood as White nationalist projects (Srikantiah and Sinnar 2019). This racialization of immigration appears in public opinion data. The mass public often equates immigration with Latinos (Masuoka and Junn 2013; Shortle and Johnson 2017) and underestimates populations of immigrants—particularly unauthorized immigrants—from Asia, Europe, and Canada (Flores and Schachter 2019). It is, therefore, unsurprising that ethnocultural nationalism is linked to hostility toward outgroup members including immigrants (Citrin and Sides 2008; Schildkraut 2011; Wright 2011). As Flores and Schachter (2019, 38) argue "the racialization of illegality is undeniable."

A handful of studies demonstrate the potential power of the gendered component of American ethnocultural nationalism in the U.S. context (Deckman 2020; Deckman and Cassese 2021), but it is less well studied. However, European conservative gender movements—which have been linked to the American Christian Right—provide insight into how gendered American ethnocultural nationalism could be linked to immigration attitudes (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). These movements stem from the religious (Catholic) notion that liberal views of gender threaten society and espouse views of the traditional family that link masculinity to the nation (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). For example, rightwing populism in Hungary and Poland identifies the traditional family as a foundation of the nation, subjugating individual reproductive rights to its propagation (Kemper 2016; Grzebalska and Pető 2018). Not all families are made equal, however. Current Hungarian welfare policies seek to reshape the state's demographic landscape by financially encouraging reproduction by native-Hungarian women who are in heterosexual marriages and of at least lower-middle class (Fodor 2022). A tax credit that increases with the number of children per family is available to heterosexual families with sufficiently high incomes from the formal labor market. The income requirement ensures that Roma parents—who often cannot secure high incomes from formal employment—are ineligible (Fodor 2022). The pro-natalist policies so construct the nation by intertwining sexuality, race/ethnicity, and religion. Ideas that counter that aim, like gender equality and minority rights, are framed as cultural and moral threats to the nation (Grzebalska and Pető 2018).

The Central European cases demonstrate how ethnocultural nationalism is often simultaneously structured by race, gender, and religion. Each of these components of ethnocultural nationalism is relevant to family separation policy. Although many decried the policy as "un-American" in 2018, family separation is consistent with historical and ongoing practices enforced by the American state. The nation was built via chattel slavery, which routinely destroyed family bonds by separating husbands, wives, and children. More recently, the construction of so-called Indian Schools forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families with the goal of cultural genocide. As Joseph Pierce (2017, 58) writes, "In the 1960s, in some states in the United States, up to 35 percent of Native children were removed from their families and placed in white homes…Indian kids were never meant to become Indian adults. This is not isolated, but part and parcel of the ongoing intent to remove, displace, steal, and ultimately exterminate

Indigenous people by a settler state." Historian Margaret Margaret D. Jacobs (2009) argues that the removal of Native children in the American West and Aboriginal children in Australia were nation-building projects that specifically targeted children as a means of destroying Indigenous communities by severing kinship ties. She highlights how these processes of child removal were highly gendered, and cultural images of White womanhood "pathologized indigenous families and helped to justify indigenous child removal policies" (Margaret D. Jacobs 2009, xxxi). These settler states drew on ethnocultural notions of identity including race, religion, and gender, to implement policies of removing children from their families and communities to destroy Indigenous communities that threatened the goals of nation-building (Margaret D. Jacobs 2009). In an echo of the past, many children separated at the U.S.–Mexico border went on to be placed in religious foster care agencies in largely White communities (Burke and Mendoza 2018).

Such notions of identity have shaped other policies affecting children in the United States. In the early development of the American welfare state, Black, Latino, and Native children were routinely denied welfare benefits to which they were legally entitled, or given substantially less money than White children (Katznelson 2005; Mettler 1998). As welfare programs—whose purpose was to aid families with children—became increasingly associated with Black families through the latter half of the twentieth century, the nature of programs themselves changed, becoming more restrictive and punitive (Gilens 1999; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). This harsh treatment of children of color is even more visible in the carceral state, where Black and Latino children are "hypercriminalized" and have faced disproportionate criminal justice contact throughout American history, including separation from their families via incarceration (Abrams, Mizel, and Barnert 2021; Mallett 2018; Rios 2007). Given this legacy of harmful policies levied against children of color, political support for a policy that removes children from their families is not wholly surprising. Although children are usually seen as sympathetic policy targets (Cook and Barrett 1992), their ethnic and racial identity plays an important role in shaping public support for policies targeted at them (Braun and Chang 2015).

As the face of America is slowly changing, some White Americans fear the loss of a White majority (Jardina 2019; Parker 2021). Given the racialization of immigration, ethnocultural nationalists are likely to perceive migrant children as a demographic threat. Poland and Hungary certainly use demographic concerns to justify policies that reward native women's reproductive work; some supporters of these policies claim to guard the nation from "moral and 'biological' decay" (Grzebalska and Pető 2018, 167). Media figures on the American right have harnessed this sentiment as well; Laura Ingraham, for example, lamented that "[m]assive demographic changes have been foisted upon the American people" with the result that "in some parts of the country, it [seems] like the America that we know and love doesn't exist anymore" (Baker 2018). This discourse casts non-White migrant children in particular as representatives of an ominous future and a direct threat to the survival of American identity. For the ethnocultural nationalist then, family separation provides a policy response to these fears.

Our central hypothesis is that family separation policy is likely to be associated with Americans' ethnocultural beliefs that "true" Americans must be White, Christian, and manly, above and beyond the explanatory power of generalized nationalism. Effects of ethnocultural nationalism could differ by race. Scholars show that many political attitudes are differently linked to political opinion and behavior across racial groups in

the United States (Anoll 2022; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Pérez and Hetherington 2014; Segura and Valenzuela 2010). Moreover, conceptions of American national identity vary across racial/ethnic categories (Pérez, Deichert, and Engelhardt 2019). We anticipate that nationalism's relationship to separation support will be stronger for those who are most susceptible to receding into their ethnocultural national identities in light of threats to their cultural dominance: White people (Bobo and Massagli 2001; Jost and Banaji 1994; Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Dominant groups tend to use stereotypes to inform their attitudes and behaviors to support their continued dominance in any hierarchy (Fiske 2011; Masuoka and Junn 2013). Therefore, we anticipate White respondents will most strongly link their ethnocultural definitions of national identity to support for the policy of family separation.

Data and methods

We use two data sets to test our expectations. The first is a November 2018 Election Day exit poll (N = 1363) conducted at 12 precincts in Oklahoma City (Bracic, Israel-Trummel, and Shortle 2018). Exit polls allow researchers to examine a sample of verified voters and have been successfully used to explain voter attitudes and behavior (Benjamin 2017; Benjamin and Miller 2019; Bracic, Israel-Trummel, and Shortle 2017; Bracic et al. 2020). Our exit poll sample reflects precinct demography on race, income, and party registration (see Appendix Tables A1 and A2). To comply with state election law and to decrease social desirability bias (Bishop and Fisher 1995), the surveys were self-administered.

Our second data set is an online survey (N = 1589) fielded by Lucid Theorem the day after the 2020 election when the outcome of the presidential election was still uncertain. Online surveys are useful because they allow researchers to access a diverse national sample of Americans and have been shown to provide high quality samples (Coppock and McClellan 2019).

These two data sets are not directly comparable as they differ in both the time period of the collection and the sample population. The exit poll includes verified voters in a single city, while the national survey is a diverse sample of American adults. However, by testing these relationships at different times and with different but overlapping groups, we gain a more robust understanding of the relationships between ethnocultural nationalism and punitive immigration attitudes.

In the 2018 exit poll, our dependent variable asked respondents whether they favor or oppose the policy that saw at least 2,700 children separated from their parents at the border between October 1, 2017, and May 31, 2018. The answer options were on a five-point scale, ranging from "strongly favor" to "strongly oppose" (see online appendix for all question wordings). We crafted this question at a time when available information significantly underestimated the extent of family separation; the estimate was accurate to the best of our knowledge at the time, but is in hindsight too low.[1] In the 2020 survey, our dependent variable was updated to reflect new data regarding the number of children separated from their families—at that time, an estimated 5400 children since 2017.

We have three measures of ethnocultural nationalism. These questions ask respondents how important they think being Christian is in making someone an American (*Christian nationalism*); how important they think being White is in making someone

an American (*White nationalism*); and whether they agree that "the nation has gotten too soft and feminine" (*Gendered nationalism*; 2020 survey only).[2] These are standard measures of ethnocultural nationalism (Deckman 2020; Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013; Schildkraut 2007, 2014, 2011; Theiss-Morse 2009). We capture *Generalized nationalism* by asking respondents whether they agree that "generally speaking, America is better than most other countries."[3]

We use OLS regression to test the associations between nationalism attitudes and support for family separation. Political attitude formation can function differently for White Americans and Americans of color (Anoll 2022; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Pérez and Hetherington 2014; Segura and Valenzuela 2010). Therefore, we first fit the regression model on non-Hispanic White identifiers and then fit the same model on those who identify with one or more minoritized racial/ethnic groups (Black, Latino, Asian, or Native).[4] We pool respondents of color together for both practical and theoretical reasons. We have fewer respondents of color in both surveys, and thus pooling provides sufficient variation. More importantly, while political conflicts between minority racial/ethnic groups can occur (e.g., McClain and Karnig 1990) and pan-ethnoracial labels can mask differences in discrete ethnic groups' experiences (Beltrán 2010), people of color (POC) form a politically meaningful group in the United States (Pérez 2021). A sense of POC identity does not replace racial or ethnic identity and there is variation in POC identity attachment, but Pérez (2021) argues that Americans of color understand themselves as part of a POC group. He shows that POC identity exhibits positive distinctiveness, is a highly accessible attachment, and is most salient on issues perceived as relating to racial or ethnic discrimination (Pérez 2021). Therefore, we should expect that POC identity is particularly relevant in the context of punitive immigration attitudes.[5]

This produces samples of 831 White voters and 490 voters of color in the 2018 exit poll and 1103 White respondents and 465 respondents of color in the 2020 survey. Both surveys captured a host of relevant covariates, which we include in our models: born again identity, partisanship, education, income, gender, age, and Latino identification (for the POC subsample).

Results

The average level of support for family separation is low among the exit poll voters in 2018, with only 13% of voters overall supporting family separation.[6] This varies by racial group, however, with White voters expressing more support for the policy (17% approval for White voters and 7% approval among voters of color). There is also relatively little agreement with the ethnocultural nationalism measures in this data set. Approximately 15% of White voters and 30% of voters of color believe that being a Christian is an important part of being an American, and many fewer endorse the idea that part of being a true American is being White (3% of White voters, 5% of voters of color). Agreement with generalized nationalism, however, is quite high. Nearly 70% of Whites and just over 60% of voters of color believe that the United States is better than most other countries.

While we cannot directly compare the two samples, we find higher levels of support for family separation and more ethnocultural nationalism in the 2020 national sample.

One-third of these respondents say they approve of separating immigrant parents and children, and there is no differentiation between White respondents and respondents of color: 35% of each subgroup supports family separation policy. Majorities of both White and non-White respondents say that being a Christian is an important part of being a true American (55% of White respondents and 59% of respondents of color). Significant proportions of both groups say that being White is an important part of American identity (44% of Whites, 38% of non-Whites) and also think the U.S. is getting too feminine (41% of Whites, 35% of non-Whites). Generalized nationalism is also high in this sample: 64% of White respondents and 45% of respondents of color say that the U.S. is better than most countries.

Table 1 presents the results of OLS regression models.[7] In the 2018 sample, different forms of nationalism seem to matter to White voters and voters of color when it comes to family separation policy. Among White voters, Christian nationalism and generalized nationalism are both significantly associated with support for separations, while among voters of color, only White nationalism is significant. Turning to the 2020 data, we find strong support for the link between ethnocultural nationalism and family separation policy across both groups. Among White respondents, Christian, White, and gendered nationalism are all significantly associated with attitudes toward family separation. Among POC respondents, both White and gendered nationalism are positive and significant, while Christian nationalism fails to achieve statistical significance. Generalized nationalism is not significantly associated with support for family separation policy in either model and the coefficients are close to zero.

To understand the relationships between independent variables and an outcome variable, it can be helpful to visualize the size of each relationship. Figure 1 plots the expected change in support for family separation moving from the lowest to highest score on each independent variable. In the 2018 data, unsurprisingly, partisanship has the largest magnitude relationship with support for family separation. Among White voters, the strongest Republicans are 2.20 points more supportive of family separation than the strongest

Table 1. Nationalism attitudes and support for family separation.

	2018 Exit poll		2020 National survey	
	White voters	Voters of color	White Rs	Rs of color
(Intercept)	−0.04 (0.16)	0.01 (0.19)	0.33 (0.16)*	0.87 (0.24)*
Christian nationalism	0.17 (0.05)*	0.01 (0.04)	0.09 (0.04)*	0.13 (0.07)
White nationalism	0.10 (0.08)	0.19 (0.08)*	0.20 (0.04)*	0.31 (0.07)*
Gendered nationalism			0.24 (0.03)*	0.24 (0.06)*
Generalized nationalism	0.08 (0.04)*	0.05 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.06)
Born again	0.12 (0.09)	0.16 (0.10)	0.32 (0.10)*	0.18 (0.15)
Partisan identity	0.37 (0.02)*	0.16 (0.03)*	0.17 (0.02)*	0.05 (0.03)
Education	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.04 (0.05)	0.05 (0.02)*	0.03 (0.04)
Income	−0.02 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	−0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)
Woman	−0.26 (0.07)*	−0.23 (0.09)*	−0.27 (0.08)*	−0.39 (0.14)*
Age	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)	−0.08 (0.02)*	−0.14 (0.04)*
Latino		0.02 (0.11)		0.09 (0.15)
R^2	0.52	0.20	0.37	0.25
Adj. R^2	0.51	0.18	0.36	0.23
Num. obs.	696	365	1060	398

Note: OLS Models. Standard errors in parentheses. For the interested reader, Appendix Table A12 provides regression models pooling all respondents. Those results again show significant and positive associations between ethnocultural nationalism and family separation attitudes in both samples. *$p < 0.05$.
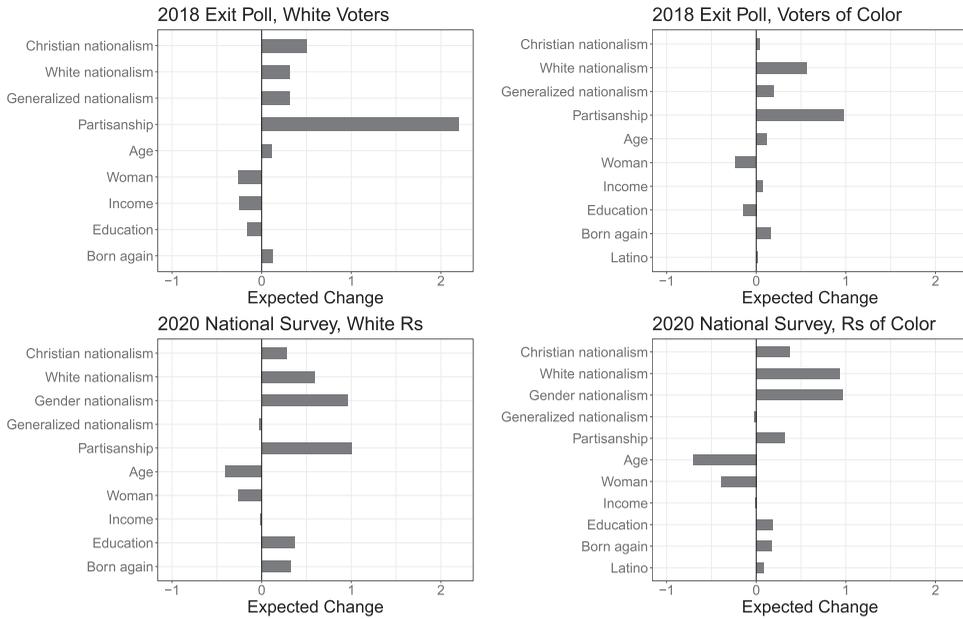
Figure 1. Expected effects of independent variables on family separation support.

Democrats. Among voters of color, the strongest Republicans are expected to score 0.98 points higher on the support scale compared to the strongest Democrats. Beyond partisanship, the plots show that in 2018 ethnocultural nationalism attitudes are substantial predictors of family separation attitudes. Among White voters, Christian nationalism has the second largest effect on separation attitudes (0.50 points) next to partisanship, while for voters of color White nationalism exerts the second largest effect (0.57 points). By comparison, the expected increase along the full scale of generalized nationalism is 0.31 points among Whites and is insignificant among voters of color.

In the 2020 data, nationalism attitudes seem to matter as much or more than partisanship. Among White respondents, the expected change in separation preferences along the full length of the partisanship scale is 1.00 point, while the magnitudes of the effects for the measures of ethnocultural nationalism are 0.96 points for gendered nationalism, 0.59 points for white nationalism, and 0.28 points for Christian nationalism. This means the expected effects of gendered and White nationalism are larger than the effects of age, gender, born again identity, education, income, or generalized nationalism for White respondents. Among respondents of color, ethnocultural nationalism attitudes actually dwarf the effect of partisanship. The expected changes in support are 0.96 points for gendered nationalism, 0.93 points for White nationalism, and 0.38 points for Christian nationalism, compared to 0.32 points for partisanship. Among respondents of color, gendered and White nationalism exert larger effects than any other variable in the model, and Christian nationalism outperforms generalized nationalism, partisanship, Latino identification, born again identity, education, and income.

A careful reader might worry that the effect of ethnocultural nationalism is so large in the 2020 data because it functions as a proxy for partisanship, as the Republican Party embraced more punitive immigration actions and the Democratic Party voiced

opposition to family separation specifically. We test for this possibility in the Appendix (Table A13) by estimating separate models on White Democrats, White Republicans, Democrats of color, and Republicans of color in the 2020 sample. Despite much smaller sample sizes, particularly in the Republicans of color model, the results are durable. Across each subset, ethnocultural nationalism is consistently associated with support for family separation.[8]

We find strong support for our hypothesis that ethnocultural nationalism is associated with support for family separation policy. Across the two different sampling populations and in two different years, ethnocultural forms of nationalism are consistently related to separation attitudes, while generalized nationalism only reaches statistical significance for White voters in 2018. We are struck by the higher levels of support for family separation, more enthusiastic endorsement of ethnocultural nationalism, and much larger coefficients in the 2020 data compared to the 2018 data. We must be cautious when comparing the two samples as differences could result from multiple factors: changes over the intervening 2 years, geographic differences comparing an urban sample to a national sample, and differences between a sample of voters and a national sample. While we cannot definitively say which of these factors might drive the differences we observe, we can probe whether geography or voter status are likely culprits.

First, we examine whether there are significant mean differences in family separation attitudes and ethnocultural nationalism by urban or likely voter status. We merge our 2020 survey data with Census data on the number of rural and urban respondents in each U.S. zip code (Manson et al. 2021), and code urban respondents as those who live in a zip code with zero rural respondents. We measure likely voter status as those respondents who indicated that they voted in both 2016 and 2020. While self-reported voter turnout has known social desirability issues, this provides a subset of likely, but not validated, voters. Based on the 2018 sample, one might expect less support for family separation and ethnocultural nationalism among urban respondents and likely voters, but when significant differences emerge in Welch two sample *t*-tests, they show the opposite (Appendix Table A9).

The means comparisons suggest that geography and voter status are not likely the cause of higher support for family separation and ethnocultural nationalism in 2020. We push this further by replicating our models on the subsets of urban respondents (Table A10) and likely voters (Table A11). The findings from 2020 replicate, and the Christian nationalism coefficient actually strengthens in the subset of likely voters of color to achieve statistical significance. While this analysis cannot definitively determine the cause of the stronger relationships between nationalism and separation attitudes in the 2020 data relative to the 2018 data, these additional tests suggest they more likely stem from the change in time period than geography or voter status.

While we anticipated that the relationship between ethnocultural nationalism and support for separation policy would be stronger among Whites due to the tendency for dominant groups to more heavily rely on stereotypes in the formation of political attitudes (Fiske 2011; Masuoka and Junn 2013), we actually find that these relationships hold for both Whites and respondents of color. In a series of models in the Appendix (Tables A7–A8), we disaggregate the POC subgroup to test whether the choice to pool all respondents of color could be driving this unexpected result. While the sample sizes shrink substantially, we still find support for the relationship between ethnocultural nationalism

and support for family separation across racial/ethnic subgroups, especially in 2020.[9] This finding suggests that ethnocultural nationalism attitudes may have broader appeal than would be assumed from the research on social dominance or racial prejudice, which has generally found less activation of stereotypes among people of color (Masuoka and Junn 2013; Segura and Valenzuela 2010). We are unable to probe the possibility that ethnocultural measures have different meaning for non-White groups. For example, how do respondents of color interpret a question that asks if they agree that a true American is White and does an affirmative answer indicate that they believe American identity does not include them? While we can't answer this question here, our results do show that ethnocultural nationalism functions similarly as an explanatory factor across race. For Whites and respondents of color, those who endorse more exclusive views of national identity are more supportive of a harsh immigration policy. Indeed, our findings contribute to a growing recognition of the linkage between hierarchical national attachments and restrictive immigration attitudes across race (Carter and Pérez 2016; McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle 2011, 2022).

Discussion

The practice of separating children from their parents at the U.S.–Mexico border has shaken many Americans' sense of their government's morality. Some, however, support the policy. We argue that this policy fits within a long history of forcible removal of mostly non-White children from their families and communities, and that by understanding the roots of this contemporary policy we can trace the attitudes associated with support for family separation. Here, we try to gain insight into what might motivate support for family separations and find that ethnocultural nationalism—beliefs that "true" Americans are White, Christian, and manly—is associated with approval of separating immigrant children from their families at the border. We find support for these attitudinal linkages in two data sets. We also find that these relationships hold both for White respondents and for respondents of color.

Our findings offer several key contributions. First, we demonstrate the profound power of ethnocultural nationalism attitudes in the U.S. at the present moment. Ethnocultural nationalism is linked to policy attitudes in both our data sets, and strikingly, *nears the effect size of partisanship* in 2020. Second, by including all three dimensions of ethnocultural nationalism—religious, racial, and gendered—along with generalized nationalism in our models we can adjudicate between their effects and show that support for this harsh immigration policy is linked to the ethnocultural—and particularly the gendered—variant and not the generalized one. Third, our work speaks to punitive immigration practices within the United States and beyond. Although the legacy of immigration in the United States is in some sense unique, European countries have also engaged in violent practices such as forced adoptions and coercive assimilation against marginalized racial/ethnic communities and immigrants (Barany 2002; Matache 2014; Strasser and Tibet 2020). Further, some European states have placed reproduction by heterosexual, married, ethnic-majority women at the center of nation building projects—all to protect the nation from the incursive "Other" (Fodor 2022; Schenk 2021). Thus the linkage between ethnocultural nationalism and punitive immigration practices that we uncover in the U.S. context may exist in Europe as well.

Our data are of course not without limitations. We are not able to directly compare our 2018 and 2020 data as the sampling frames differ, and we are unable to demonstrate causality. This might be particularly important: if ethnocultural nationalism is stoked further by political elites, will it promote more draconian policies? If political elites work to limit expressions of ethnocultural nationalism, will policy attitudes soften? Our data suggest this might be likely, but we cannot answer definitively here. Ultimately, our findings reveal the power of ethnocultural nationalism in the American public's political attitudes. We encourage other researchers to take note of these beliefs and consider how they may shape political behavior more broadly.

Notes

1. Thousands of children may have been taken from their parents in 2017 *before* accounting began, as separations had been happening for months prior to the DOJ's announcement of zero tolerance (Jordan 2019). While the total number of children separated from their parents remains unknown, it is certain that the initial number of 2700 is an underestimate (Jordan 2019).
2. Christian and White nationalism are captured on four-point scales from "very unimportant" to "very important." Gendered nationalism is measured on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."
3. Generalized nationalism is measured on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."
4. We measure race/ethnicity as "mark one or more." Given that multiracial Whites tend to exhibit political behavior more in line with their non-White group (Davenport 2016), we pool them with respondents of color. Respondents who identify as some other race or did not respond are dropped.
5. To test the robustness of our results, models disaggregated by race/ethnicity are in Appendix Tables A7–A8.
6. See Appendix Tables A3 and A4 for all summary statistics.
7. Appendix Table A5 shows that the nationalism measures are not highly correlated in either sample and thus not subject to multicollinearity concerns.
8. We provide additional robustness tests in Appendix Table A6 using the 2018 survey, which included other variables that might intervene in the relationship we find. Our results are robust to the inclusion of anti-Latino attitudes, as captured by Garcia-Rios and Ocampo's (2018) Latino Ethno-Racial Resentment Scale, parental status, church attendance, and biblical literalism.
9. In the 2018 data, the significant effect of White nationalism is driven by Latino respondents. Black respondents are the largest subgroup and ethnocultural nationalism doesn't explain their family separation attitudes. In 2020, significant effects of ethnocultural nationalism appear across each subgroup. Christian nationalism is statistically significant among Black and Native respondents; White nationalism is statistically significant among Black, Latino, and Asian respondents; gendered nationalism is statistically significant among all four subgroups.

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