

Naturalization under Targeted Political Threat: Evidence from Mexican and Chinese Immigrants in the U.S.

When political leaders single out an immigrant group, does the group seek membership in the polity or withdraw from it? We show the answer depends on what membership costs. Threat raises the protective value of citizenship but lowers the value of committing to a hostile polity, so the response turns on the price of naturalizing and the strength of outside options. Using administrative data and synthetic difference-in-differences, we find that Mexican-born naturalizations rose 24 percent after 2016, when anti-Mexican rhetoric peaked, while Chinese-born naturalizations fell 34 percent after 2020, when the rhetoric turned toward China. Mexicans may hold dual nationality; Chinese nationals must renounce theirs. In both groups higher education pulls the response downward, dampening the Mexican increase and deepening the Chinese decline, and adjacent untargeted groups do not move. Targeted threat does not merely change attitudes: it changes who joins the electorate.¹

¹ AI disclosure: The original draft of this manuscript was written entirely by the authors without the assistance of generative AI. Generative AI tools (Claude Fable and ChatGPT 5) were used only during the revision stage to improve grammar and language, identify typographical and formatting errors, reconstruct missing figures from author-provided data, help with citation matching, and provide editorial suggestions. All scientific content, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions were developed by the authors, who reviewed and approved all AI-assisted revisions and take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

1 Introduction

In June 2015, Donald Trump opened his presidential campaign by describing Mexican immigrants as criminals, and made a wall on the Mexican border the central symbol of his candidacy. Over the next four years, naturalizations among Mexican-born immigrants rose by 26 percent. Over those same years, naturalizations among Chinese-born immigrants also rose. Then, in 2020, the rhetoric of the same administration turned toward China and the pandemic, and Chinese naturalizations fell by a third. One instrument of hostility, deployed by one actor, moved two immigrant groups in opposite directions, and moved the same group in opposite directions at two different moments. This begs the question *How do groups respond when political leaders single them out as a threat?* Do they deepen their attachment to the polity, seeking protection and voice within it, or do they withdraw from a political community that appears to reject them (Hirschman, 1970)? The question matters wherever the targeting of minority groups is used as a political tool, and it is unusually stark for immigrants, who occupy an ambiguous position in the polity: they are subject to laws and political decisions, but many do not yet hold full membership or political rights. Their response to targeted threat is consequential beyond the group itself, because it helps determine who joins the demos, and thus to whom the political system must ultimately respond.

In this paper, we focus on naturalization, the act that formalizes membership in the polity. Naturalization is not only an administrative step in the immigrant integration process. It is the point at which immigrants acquire voice, the right to vote, and fuller protection as members of the polity. Previous work shows that naturalization can foster political integration, including formal political participation, political knowledge, and political efficacy (Hainmueller, Hangartner, & Pietrantuono, 2015). For immigrants who feel targeted, citizenship may become more valuable because it reduces some forms of legal and political vulnerability. At the same time, naturalization is costly. It requires time, information, fees, and bureaucratic effort. For some groups, it also requires giving up citizenship in the country of origin. This means that a hostile political environment may not always increase naturalization. For some immigrants, it may instead make incorporation into the host country less attractive.

We argue that competing expectations in the literature can be reconciled by looking more closely at the decision to naturalize. Targeted political threat changes the value of citizenship in two directions. On the one hand, it can increase the value of citizenship as protection; we call this the *protection effect*. On the other hand, it can reduce the value of committing to a polity that appears to reject the immigrant group; we call this the *exit-preservation effect*, because the immigrant who declines to naturalize preserves the option to exit. Which effect dominates should depend on the cost of naturalization and on the attractiveness of the immigrant's outside option. When naturalization is relatively low-cost and outside options are weak, political threat should increase naturalization. When naturalization is costly and outside options are strong, political threat may instead reduce or delay naturalization.

This argument builds on research that treats assimilation and incorporation as costly investments whose returns vary across groups and contexts. In the economics literature, discrimination can increase the returns to cultural assimilation when assimilation reduces the cost of being treated as an outsider (Abramitzky, Boustan, Eriksson, & Hao, 2020; Umblijs & Hermansen, 2025). Fouka (2019) shows that discrimination against Germans in the United States during World War I increased assimilation when the investment was relatively cheap, but discouraged it when the costs were higher. We apply a similar logic to naturalization, but with an important distinction: naturalization is not only cultural assimilation. It is legal and political incorporation. It changes formal status, access to rights, and the ability to vote. For this reason, the value of naturalization under threat depends not only on identity or cultural adaptation, but also on protection, legal security, and the value of preserving alternatives outside the host country.

We test this argument using two episodes of targeted political threat during the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump. Throughout, the treatment is not a single speech or an isolated channel: it is a bundled episode of politically salient group targeting, comprising elite rhetoric, the societal hostility it licensed, and the administrative threat that accompanied it, and we make no attempt to decompose these channels. The setting is useful because different immigrant groups were targeted at different moments. Trump's 2016 campaign and early presidency were marked

by highly visible anti-Mexican rhetoric, including claims about crime, border enforcement, deportation, and the wall with Mexico. Previous work suggests that Trump’s rhetoric politicized Mexican and Latino identities, though not necessarily in the same way across national-origin groups or immigrant generations (Garcia-Rios, Pedraza, & Wilcox-Archuleta, 2019; Gutierrez, Ocampo, Barreto, & Segura, 2019). Later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, political rhetoric increasingly targeted China and people of Chinese or Asian origin. Recent work shows that COVID-linked rhetoric and social exclusion were consequential for Asian American political attitudes and participation (Chan, Kim, & Leung, 2022; R. Lu & Sheng, 2020; Y. Lu, Kaushal, Huang, & Gaddis, 2021).

The main comparison in the paper is between Mexican-born and Chinese-born immigrants. For Mexican immigrants, we expect anti-Mexican rhetoric to increase the value of U.S. citizenship. Mexican nationals can generally keep Mexican nationality after naturalizing in the United States, which lowers the cost of naturalization. In addition, for many Mexican immigrants the outside option is relatively weak compared to remaining in the United States. We therefore expect naturalizations to increase after 2016. For Chinese immigrants, the prediction is different. Chinese nationals generally cannot retain Chinese citizenship after naturalizing elsewhere. This makes U.S. naturalization a more costly and less reversible decision. In addition, many Chinese immigrants, especially those with higher levels of education, may have stronger labor-market opportunities outside the United States. We therefore expect anti-China rhetoric after 2020 to reduce naturalization, especially among higher-skilled immigrants.

We estimate these responses using administrative naturalization data by country of birth and state, combined with a synthetic difference-in-differences design. We find that Mexican-born naturalizations increased by about 24% after 2016 relative to non-targeted groups and relative to non-Mexican Latinos.² In contrast, Chinese-born naturalizations fell by about 34% after 2020.

²While *Latinx/Latine* is a more inclusive term, we use *Latino* to refer to all persons of Latin American origin or descent. We follow the approach of recent literature, as well as surveys and census questions. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/05/who-is-hispanic/>

These two results are not treated as separate facts, but as two sides of the same argument: political threat can push immigrants toward citizenship when citizenship is protective and relatively cheap, but away from citizenship when it is costly and when alternatives remain valuable. We flag the design’s main limitation at the outset: the Chinese decline coincides with China-specific pandemic-era travel and consular frictions that could mechanically depress completed naturalizations, so we read that estimate as consistent with the theory rather than as definitive on its own. The strength of the evidence lies instead in the joint pattern, which no single alternative shock readily reproduces: opposite-signed responses in Mexico and China timed to each group’s targeting, null responses in adjacent untargeted groups, robustness in logs and under placebo inference, event-study timing, and a within-group skill gradient of the predicted sign in both groups.

We also examine whether the pattern holds within groups. If outside options matter, then the response should differ by skill. Higher-skilled immigrants are likely to have stronger outside options and should therefore be less likely to naturalize in response to threat. Using ACS data, we find that the post-2016 increase among Mexicans is weaker among those with a bachelor’s degree or more, while the post-2020 decline among Chinese immigrants is stronger among those with a bachelor’s degree or more. This provides additional evidence that the aggregate difference between Mexico and China reflects the cost and outside-option mechanism, rather than only unobserved differences between the two groups.

Finally, we examine reported turnout among naturalized citizens using the CPS Voting and Registration Supplement. The turnout results are consistent with the timing of the naturalization results. However, these shifts are not unusual relative to changes among other immigrant groups in the same election cycles when assessed using randomization inference. We therefore treat the turnout results as suggestive evidence, and base the paper’s main claims on the naturalization results.

The paper contributes to research on discrimination, political behavior, and immigrant incorporation in three ways. First, it shows that targeted threat does not have a uniform effect on political incorporation. The same hostility can pull one group toward deeper membership and push another

away from the polity, depending on the terms of membership on offer. Second, it treats naturalization as a political behavior in its own right, the choice between voice and exit that precedes voting, rather than only as a background condition for turnout. Because naturalization determines who can vote, these responses feed back into the composition of the electorate, and thus into democratic responsiveness itself. Third, it shows that the effects of anti-immigrant rhetoric depend on which group boundaries become salient. Anti-Mexican rhetoric does not simply affect all Latinos in the same way, and anti-China rhetoric does not produce the same response among all Asian-origin groups. This is consistent with research showing that threat and mobilization depend on how identities are racialized, politicized, and linked to particular group boundaries (Barreto, Manzano, Ramírez, & Rim, 2009; Garcia-Rios et al., 2019; Gutierrez et al., 2019; Zepeda-Millán, 2014, 2017).

2 Discrimination, Group Threat, and Political Behavior of Immigrants

The study of group identity and behavior under discrimination has deep roots in social psychology and political behavior. Social identity and self-categorization theories argue that when social cleavages become salient, individuals categorize themselves into in-groups and out-groups, and threats to the group can trigger protective reactions from its members (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The rejection-identification model similarly suggests that discrimination can strengthen identification with the targeted group, as individuals respond to negative evaluations by increasing attachment to the group (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). In political settings, elite rhetoric can activate these identities by making particular groups visible as political targets. Politicians may supply narratives that define an out-group as threatening, making identity more salient and politically relevant (Glaeser, 2002).

This logic suggests that anti-immigrant rhetoric may increase political engagement among targeted immigrants. If an immigrant group is singled out by political elites, members of that group may become more aware of their shared vulnerability and more motivated to act politically. Previous work on Latinos, Muslims, and Asian Americans suggests that perceived discrimination and

group threat can increase political interest, group consciousness, and in some cases political participation (Barreto et al., 2009; Chan et al., 2022; Gutierrez et al., 2019; Pantoja, Ramirez, & Segura, 2001; Sanchez, 2006). Political discrimination may be especially relevant because it signals that the group is being targeted not only socially, but also by political actors and institutions (Oskooii, 2016).

However, the relationship between discrimination and political engagement is not always positive. Discrimination can also generate fear, anxiety, distrust, and withdrawal. Some immigrants may avoid political visibility when they perceive the environment to be hostile. Others may conclude that the host society is unlikely to accept them as full members, reducing their incentive to invest in incorporation. This is especially relevant for first-generation immigrants, who may retain ties to their country of origin and may have the option to return or move elsewhere. Studies of Muslim Americans after 9/11, for example, suggest that discrimination may increase group identity and political interest while still failing to translate into participation, especially when fear and lack of acceptance dominate (Ayers & Hofstetter, 2008; Takyar, 2019). More generally, work on emotions and participation shows that anger can mobilize, but fear and anxiety do not necessarily have the same effect (Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011).

The existing literature therefore leaves open an important question. When does discrimination increase political incorporation, and when does it discourage it? We argue that the answer depends in part on the kind of behavior being studied. Much of the literature focuses on political attitudes, voting, protest, or self-reported engagement. These are important outcomes, but for first-generation immigrants they often depend on an earlier decision: whether to naturalize. Naturalization is different from other forms of political participation because it changes legal status. It is also a costly and forward-looking investment. Immigrants must satisfy eligibility requirements, pay fees, complete paperwork, and pass language and civics tests. In some cases, they must also give up their original citizenship. Thus, naturalization is not simply a measure of identity or attachment. It is a decision about whether to deepen one's legal and political membership in the host country.

Anti-immigrant rhetoric can affect this decision in two opposite ways. First, it can increase

the value of naturalization. When immigrants feel more vulnerable, citizenship may offer protection and security. It can reduce uncertainty about future rights, strengthen claims to belonging, and allow immigrants to vote against politicians or policies they perceive as threatening. In this sense, naturalization can become a defensive response to exclusion; this is the *protection effect*. This logic is close to work showing that hostile political climates can increase naturalization and voting among targeted immigrants, such as Latino immigrants in California after Proposition 187³ (Pantoja et al., 2001), or immigrant communities facing enforcement threat (White, 2016).

Second, anti-immigrant rhetoric can decrease the value of naturalization. If the host country becomes more hostile, some immigrants may be less willing to make a costly commitment to it. This should be especially likely when naturalization requires renouncing origin-country citizenship, or when immigrants have strong outside options in their origin country or elsewhere. For these immigrants, retaining flexibility may be more valuable than becoming a citizen of a country that appears to reject them; this is the *exit-preservation effect*. This possibility is consistent with work showing that discrimination does not always produce participation, and that political engagement depends on whether group identity is accompanied by efficacy, acceptance, and a viable channel for action (Oskooii, 2016; Schildkraut, 2005; Takyar, 2019).

It also presumes that the outside option is real rather than notional. Recent work on Latin American emigration establishes that mobility is both widespread and politically consequential for origin communities, shaping turnout and the electoral fortunes of incumbents (Acevedo, 2024, 2026). Where exit is a live prospect, declining to naturalize preserves an option with genuine value.

When naturalization is relatively low-cost and the outside option is weak, political threat should increase naturalization. When naturalization is costly and the outside option is strong, political threat may decrease naturalization. This argument implies that anti-immigrant rhetoric does not have a uniform effect. The same political environment can push some groups toward citizenship and others away from it.

³California's 1994 Proposition 187 was a ballot initiative to prohibit non-U.S. citizens from using public services such as health care services and public school education.

This also implies that the effect of rhetoric should depend on how clearly a group is targeted. Political rhetoric does not activate all immigrant identities equally. Some rhetoric targets specific national-origin groups, while other rhetoric invokes broader racial, ethnic, or religious categories. The response should be strongest when the group boundary is clear and when the targeted identity is salient to those affected. Work on the 2006 immigration protests shows that Latinos, and especially Mexican-origin and Spanish-speaking individuals, were more likely to mobilize when illegality was racialized and framed as a Mexican problem (Barreto et al., 2009; Zepeda-Millán, 2014, 2017). Work on Trump’s rhetoric similarly suggests that Mexican-origin identity was especially politicized, even though other Latinos could also perceive threat through immigrant-linked fate or pan-ethnic identity (Garcia-Rios et al., 2019; Gutierrez et al., 2019). For this reason, it is important to distinguish Mexicans from other Latinos, Chinese immigrants from broader Asian groups, and travel-ban countries from a broader Muslim or Middle Eastern category.

2.1 Observable Implications

The mechanism yields four observable implications, which structure the empirical work that follows.

First, groups that are explicitly targeted by anti-immigrant rhetoric should be more likely to change their naturalization behavior than groups that are not targeted or are only indirectly related to the targeted group. If the rhetoric activates national-origin identity, we should not necessarily expect the response to spill over to all members of a broader pan-ethnic group.

Second, when naturalization is a relatively low-cost way to obtain protection, targeted immigrants should increase naturalization. This is the case we expect for Mexican immigrants after 2016. Mexicans were directly and repeatedly targeted in Trump’s rhetoric, and Mexican nationals can generally retain Mexican citizenship after naturalizing in the United States. The expected response is therefore an increase in naturalization.

Third, when naturalization is costly and outside options are strong, targeted immigrants may reduce or delay naturalization. This is the case we expect for Chinese immigrants after 2020. Anti-

China and anti-Asian rhetoric became more salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, while U.S. naturalization requires Chinese nationals to give up Chinese citizenship. The expected response is therefore a decline in naturalization.

Fourth, if outside options are part of the mechanism, the response should vary within groups. Higher-skilled immigrants should be less likely to respond to threat by naturalizing because they have more valuable labor-market opportunities outside the United States. Among Mexicans, this means that the increase in naturalization should be concentrated among lower-skilled immigrants. Among Chinese immigrants, the decline should be stronger among higher-skilled immigrants.

We also expect turnout among already-naturalized citizens to move in a direction consistent with politicization, but we treat this expectation as secondary. Voting is affected by many election-specific factors, and all immigrant groups may be mobilized in high-salience presidential elections. For this reason, turnout is a less clean test of the theory than naturalization.

3 Background and Design Logic

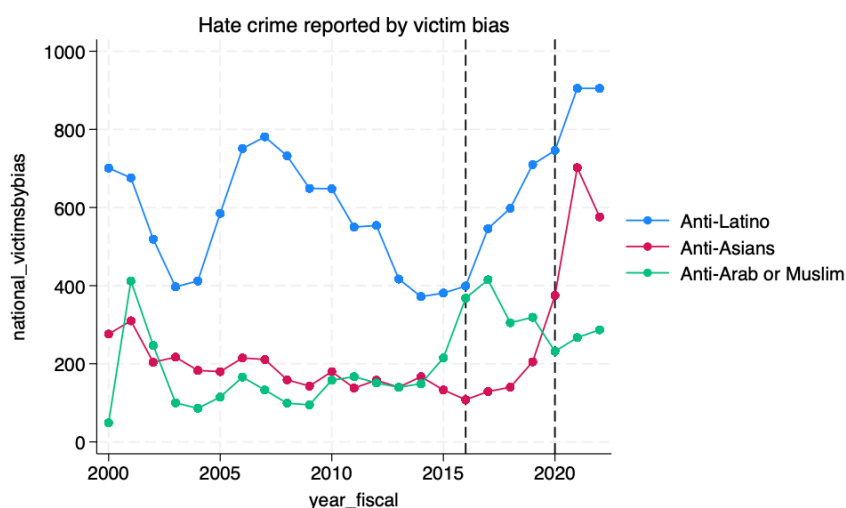
Throughout U.S. history, immigrant and racial minority groups have been negatively portrayed in the information environment and classified as out-groups. In the current immigration debate, this has been especially true for Latinos, Muslims, Asians, and other non-white immigrant groups (Abrajano & Hajnal, 2017; Kalkan, Layman, & Uslander, 2009; Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018; Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). While immigration has long been a divisive political issue, the 2016 presidential campaign marked a shift toward more explicit and targeted anti-immigrant rhetoric at the national level. Existing work suggests that Trump's campaign and election changed social norms around prejudice and increased the salience of anti-immigrant sentiment (Bursztyn, Egorov, & Fiorin, 2017; Crandall, Miller, & White, 2018; Newman, Shah, & Collingwood, 2018).

Trump's campaign announcement in 2015 made Mexico and Mexican immigrants central to his political message. His campaign repeatedly linked Mexican immigration to crime, border insecurity, and illegal entry, and the proposed wall with Mexico became one of the central symbols of the campaign (Trump, 2015). After taking office, the administration signed executive orders

related to border security, interior enforcement, and restrictions on travel from several majority-Muslim countries. These policies and messages increased the salience of immigration enforcement and may have increased the perceived value of citizenship for some non-citizen immigrants.

The targeting changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, political rhetoric increasingly associated the pandemic with China. This was accompanied by a rise in anti-Asian hostility and made Chinese and Asian-origin identities more politically salient (Chan et al., 2022; R. Lu & Sheng, 2020; Y. Lu et al., 2021). The shifting narrative of discrimination is mirrored in the significant increases in hate crimes directed first towards Latinos and later towards Asians (Figure 1). This shift provides a second moment of targeted threat, but one that differs from the anti-Mexican episode in important ways. For Chinese immigrants, the cost of naturalization is higher because China does not generally permit dual citizenship. The outside option may also be stronger, especially for higher-skilled immigrants.

Figure 1 – Total Hate Crimes Reported by Victim Bias



Notes: Data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program. Reporting is voluntary for non-federal agencies; Online Appendix Section A discusses the limitations of these data. The series is used to establish the timing and direction of societal hostility, not as an outcome.

These two episodes provide the main design logic of the paper. We compare the naturalization behavior of Mexican-born immigrants after 2016 and Chinese-born immigrants after 2020 to that of non-targeted immigrant groups. We also examine non-Mexican Latin Americans, broader

Asian-origin groups, and nationals of countries affected by the travel ban. These groups allow us to test whether the response follows the specific group boundaries implied by the rhetoric, or whether it spills over more broadly.

Specifically, we study the behavior of five groups of foreign-born immigrants: 1) Mexicans, 2) Latin Americans (excluding Mexicans), 3) those born in one of the 6 majority-Muslim countries affected by Trump’s travel ban, 4) a selected group of Asian countries,⁴ and 5) Chinese. We analyze Mexicans and other Latin Americans separately, since Trump most explicitly targeted Mexicans and Mexico, and other Latin Americans may or may not feel threatened by his remarks and actions. After we establish that there was no effect on other Latin Americans, we use this group as an additional control group for Mexicans.

4 Data and Empirical Strategy

4.1 Data

We use naturalization data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security compiled by the Office of Immigration Statistics on the number of persons naturalized by country of origin and state of residence for those 18 years and older who became naturalized in a given fiscal year.⁵ Fiscal year of naturalization may be a lag of the year of application for naturalization because of processing times, which may vary from year to year. At the level of observation carried out here we only observe the number of naturalization petitions that were approved successfully. That is, the observed naturalization numbers may be an equilibrium outcome that involves both more petitions and potential increases in denial rates and backlogs. If this is the case, then the numbers

⁴We follow Chan, Nguy, and Masuoka (2024) to select these countries: China (PRC), the Philippines, Vietnam, Japan, India and Korea (the Korean peninsula countries). Overall, they represent more than 80% of the naturalizations from Asian origin.

⁵Fiscal years run from October 1st of the previous year to September 30th of the current year. Naturalizations data from <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/naturalizations> for years 2004–2023.

observed might be attenuated, and the estimates will be a lower bound; this is not a problem as long as processing shocks affect naturalizations from control and treatment groups similarly. Online Appendix Section A gives full details on sample construction, and Online Appendix Section B reports summary statistics and the composition of the newly naturalized.

The mechanism test uses American Community Survey data to examine whether the naturalization response differs by education within Mexico and China. Education is used as a proxy for outside options, since immigrants with a bachelor's degree or more are likely to have stronger opportunities in alternative labor markets. We also use Current Population Survey Voting and Registration Supplement data (Flood, King, Rodgers, Ruggles, & Warren, 2020) to examine reported turnout among naturalized citizens. These results are interpreted with caution. They are useful for assessing whether targeted groups already inside the electorate became more politically active, but they are not the main basis for the paper's causal claims. Hate crime data come from the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting program and are used descriptively only; Online Appendix Section A documents their substantial limitations.

4.2 Empirical Strategy

Before turning to the estimators, we are explicit about what the treatment is. Throughout the analysis, the treatment is the politically salient *targeting* of a group: the bundle of explicit political rhetoric, the societal hostility it licensed (visible in the rise of hate crimes documented above), and the enforcement actions that accompanied it; we refer to this bundle as *targeted political threat*. These components moved together by construction, as the rhetoric was the vehicle through which social and administrative hostility was activated, and we make no attempt to decompose their separate contributions. Our estimates should accordingly be read as the effect of a salience episode in which a group is singled out, not as the effect of any single channel such as hate crimes or enforcement alone.

We use Synthetic Differences-in-Differences (SDID) to estimate the impact of targeted political threat during the Trump years on our outcomes of interest. We use this estimator for the natural-

izations analysis because the major treated groups (Mexicans, Asians and Latin Americans) are significantly larger than any of the other groups: the average control cell records 41 naturalizations per year against Mexico's 1,837. Compared to traditional DID, SDID is at least as good in terms of consistency and statistical normality (Arkhangelsky, Athey, Hirshberg, Imbens, & Wager, 2021). For reference, the following equation describes a traditional DID:

$$Y_{ijk} = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 Post_j * T_{ij} + \gamma_{1i} + \delta_{1j} + \lambda_{1k} + \epsilon_{1ij}$$

Y_{ijk} is the variable of interest, be it naturalizations or voter turnout, from birth country i in year j in state k . T_{ij} is a treatment indicator, equal to one for those affected countries or country groups (separately estimated for each group) interacted with $Post_j$, a dummy for the post-2016 period. γ_{1i} is a dummy for country of birth or group of treated countries of birth, and δ_{1j} is a post indicator for years 2016 onward (or a full set of year dummies in richer specifications). Furthermore, a region-specific dummy λ_{1k} (where k is state) is added. For each potentially treated group, a separate regression is estimated omitting the other potentially treated groups.

The Synthetic Differences-in-Differences estimator takes the comparison further: it re-weights control units to ensure a parallel trend with the treated pre-treatment trend. By doing so, it allows the parallel trend assumption to be relaxed, as the algorithm implicitly assigns the best match in pre-treatment trends using a mix of the control units. Online Appendix Section C reports both estimators side by side: for the paper's central quantities, Mexico and China, they are statistically indistinguishable, and they diverge only where the treated group's pre-trend departs most from the unweighted control average, which is the scenario SDID's re-weighting is designed to address.

5 Naturalization Results

Figure 2 and Table 1 show the results of the coefficient on the SDID Average Treatment Effect (ATT). We have organized the results to account for the different treatment periods. We consider the first three rows to be the most significant, as they pool the effects of the bundled episode of

targeted political threat during the Trump presidency.

First, there is a consistent positive effect on the naturalization of those immigrants born in Mexico relative to those of other non-targeted countries. The effect is positive and statistically significant for the 2016–2022 and 2016–2019 periods, but not for 2020–2022. Compared to their baseline (pre-treatment) levels, the Mexico group is significantly higher than the others, with an increase of almost a quarter of the naturalizations (1,837 in 2010–2015, increasing by 439 in 2016–2022, the ATT). Interestingly, for other Latin Americans there is no effect in the grouped post period, consistent with a group boundary defined by national origin rather than by pan-ethnicity. This null is what licenses using them as an additional control group for Mexicans, which we do in Online Appendix Section C with unchanged results.

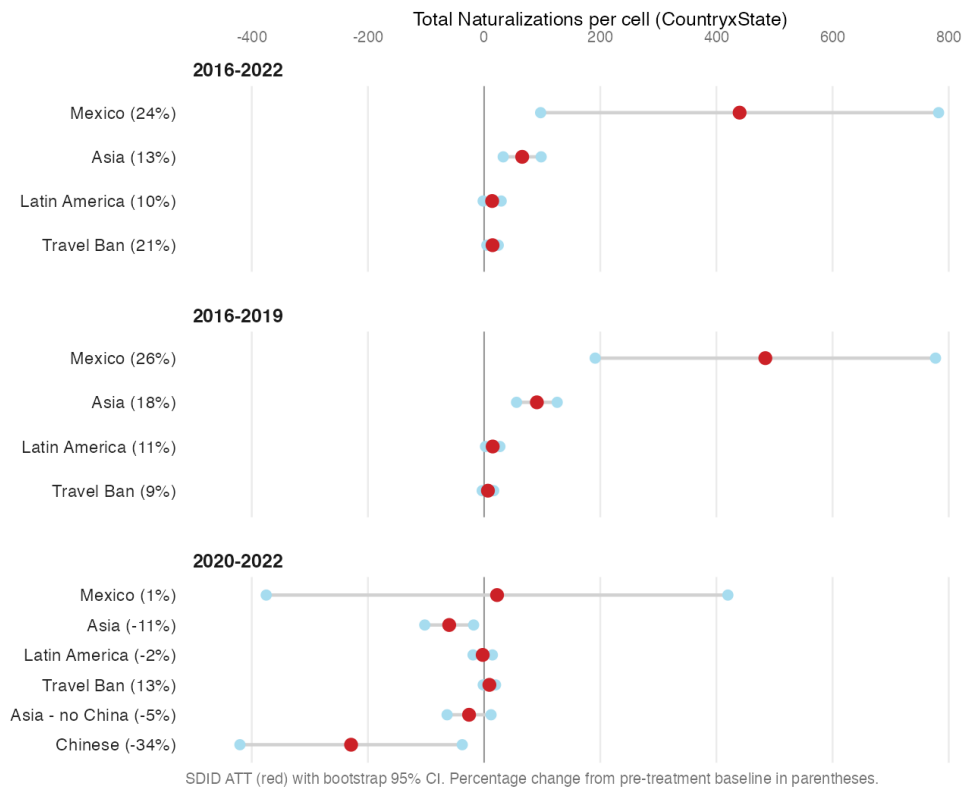
Naturalizations also increase for the Asian group during the whole period, even if the subgrouped periods differ. This is mainly driven by the unprecedented decrease of naturalizations of Chinese citizens in 2021 relative to 2019.⁶ In fact, we note a –34% decrease in Chinese naturalization during 2020–2022 when compared to the previous years (using the weighted pre-2020 mean as the baseline; the level ATT is independently corroborated by the –33% log estimate reported in Online Appendix Table C2). During 2016–2019, however, while the rhetoric targeted other groups, Chinese naturalizations *rose* by 0.169 log points, or 18%. Over the full period the two phases offset to a null. The reversal is dated to the moment the rhetoric turned, not to the beginning of the administration.

We flag immediately the main caveat attached to this estimate: the same window saw China-specific pandemic-era frictions (the February 2020 suspension of entry from China and consular disruptions) that could mechanically reduce *completed* naturalizations. We therefore read the Chinese decline as consistent with the theory rather than as definitive on its own, and we place the identifying weight on the joint pattern of responses across groups, periods, and specifications. As

⁶This has been noted by other sources as well; see <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-read/2022/12/01/after-declining-early-in-the-covid-19-outbreak-immigrant-naturalizations-in-the-u-s-are-rising-again/>.

the other targeted groups, Travel Ban countries also experienced an increase in their naturalization levels, although the first period is largely statistically insignificant.

Figure 2 – Average Treatment Effect (in levels) from the Synthetic DID Using Different Treatment Periods



Notes: Results from the SDID using the Arkhangelsky et al. (2021) methodology. Each range represents a different treatment period, while all previous years are taken as controls. Percentage changes from baseline are in parentheses. Control countries are all countries that are not part of the 4 presented groups. 95% intervals are calculated using bootstrapping from the `sdid` command in Stata.

Table 1 – Synthetic DID: Average Treatment Effect on Naturalizations, by Group and Period

Group	Period	ATT	SE	95% CI	N	% Δ baseline
Mexico	2016-2022	439.9**	(174.8)	[97.3, 782.5]	73593	23.9%
Asia	2016-2022	65.5***	(16.7)	[32.9, 98.2]	76908	13.0%
Latin America	2016-2022	13.8*	(7.9)	[-1.7, 29.3]	91494	10.4%
Travel Ban	2016-2022	14.5***	(5.0)	[4.7, 24.4]	76908	20.5%
Mexico	2016-2019	484.2***	(149.5)	[191.2, 777.2]	56610	26.4%
Asia	2016-2019	90.8***	(17.9)	[55.8, 125.8]	59160	17.9%
Latin America	2016-2019	14.8**	(6.3)	[2.4, 27.2]	70380	11.1%
Travel Ban	2016-2019	6.6	(5.0)	[-3.3, 16.4]	59160	9.3%
Mexico	2020-2022	22.3	(202.8)	[-375.1, 419.7]	73593	1.1%
Asia	2020-2022	-60.1***	(21.5)	[-102.2, -18.1]	76908	-11.5%
Latin America	2020-2022	-2.4	(8.5)	[-19.1, 14.2]	91494	-1.8%
Travel Ban	2020-2022	9.1*	(5.4)	[-1.5, 19.7]	76908	13.2%
Asia - no China	2020-2022	-25.9	(19.3)	[-63.8, 11.9]	76245	-5.2%
China	2020-2022	-229.0**	(97.7)	[-420.4, -37.6]	73593	-33.8%

Notes: ATT in levels (naturalizations per country-of-birth $\times$ state cell), from the `sdid` command (Arkhangelsky et al., 2021), bootstrap standard errors in parentheses, 95% CI in brackets. Control group is all countries not part of the four treated groups. % Δ baseline is the ATT as a share of the treated group's pre-period mean. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

5.1 A Tale of Two Nationalities: China and Mexico

Why do naturalizations of Chinese-born individuals decrease so sharply (34%), while naturalizations of Mexican-born individuals increase by 24%? We argue that the two countervailing effects of the theory pull with different strength in the two groups. First, Chinese-born individuals generally have higher education and occupations than other groups, giving them a premium that is valued in both host and home countries; this strengthens the exit-preservation effect. Secondly, Chinese citizens must renounce their Chinese nationality to become US citizens, complicating future plans of returning to China and raising the cost of incorporation. For Mexicans, by contrast, dual nationality keeps the cost of incorporation low and weaker outside options leave protection as the dominant consideration.

In terms of utility maximization, both naturalization and discrimination are costly, but the cost of the latter rises in an environment with highly aggressive anti-immigrant rhetoric. Additionally, these costs depend on specific group and individual factors. Targeted individuals evaluate whether naturalization is worth it to decrease the potential costs of discrimination. We can assume that anti-immigrant rhetoric increases uncertainty, which decreases the expected net present value of not naturalizing. For Mexicans, the cost of naturalization is lower than for Chinese, as Mexican

nationals can keep their Mexican nationality. Moreover, the outside option is less valued for Mexicans, who are less skilled and might struggle in a labor market that is less advanced than that of the United States. This asymmetry in the value of exit is consistent with evidence that emigration from Latin America responds to, and is sustained by, comparatively weak domestic economic and political conditions (Acevedo, 2024). This is not the case for Chinese nationals who return to China, where highly skilled individuals are in high demand.

Descriptive evidence from the DHS naturalization profiles is consistent with this account. Chinese-born naturalized citizens become increasingly low-skilled over the post-treatment years, with an increase of 6.8 percentage points; the case is the opposite for Mexicans, with a decrease of almost 4 percentage points, and with no effect for the Travel Ban group (Online Appendix Table B3). As the highly skilled Chinese withdraw from naturalization, those who continue to naturalize are drawn from lower in the skill distribution, which is what the outside-option mechanism implies.

5.2 Who Naturalizes? A Within-Group Test of the Outside-Option Mechanism

The contrast between Mexico and China is consistent with our mechanism, but on its own it compares only two groups, and a skeptic could attribute the opposite responses to any of the many ways the two countries differ. If the outside option is truly what drives the divergence, the same margin should operate *within* each group: individuals who could leave and do well elsewhere should be less inclined to naturalize in response to hostility. We proxy the outside option with educational attainment (a bachelor’s degree or more, the characteristic most directly tied to the value of return migration) and test a prediction we fix before estimation: the naturalization response to own-group rhetoric should be *decreasing in skill* in both groups. Because the baseline responses have opposite signs, this single comparative static implies that high-skill status should *dampen* the Mexican increase and *deepen* the Chinese decline.

We use the American Community Survey (2010–2024, excluding the unavailable 2020 wave) and define the naturalization rate as the naturalized share of the eligible foreign-born, that is, non-citizens and naturalized citizens with at least five years of US residence. For each group we esti-

mate a linear probability model of naturalization on an indicator for holding a bachelor's degree interacted with a post-treatment indicator (post-2016 for Mexico, post-2020 for China), controlling for age, sex, marital status, years in the United States, and state and year fixed effects. We then estimate a triple-difference against the pooled control countries, which nets out any economy-wide change in the relationship between skill and naturalization. Table 2 reports the results.

The skill gradient of the response is negative in both groups, as predicted. Within Mexico, holding a degree reduces the post-2016 naturalization response by 2.2 percentage points (column 1); within China, it reduces the post-2020 response by 3.7 points (column 2). Both effects survive the triple-difference against control countries, at -1.3 points for Mexico (column 3) and -2.3 points for China (column 4), confirming that the gradient is specific to the targeted groups and not a common skill-by-time trend. Unlike the pooled voting results, these estimates do not rest on a single treated cluster: identification comes from variation across many states (within group) and across the full pool of control countries (triple-difference).

Figure 3 shows where each response is located. Among Mexicans (left panel), the naturalization rate of the less educated accelerates visibly after 2016, closing part of its gap with the more educated, whose trajectory is essentially unchanged. Among the Chinese (right panel), the pattern is mirrored: the naturalization rate of the more educated falls sharply and steadily after 2020, while that of the less educated holds roughly constant. The response thus sits at opposite ends of the skill distribution in the two groups: among the low-outside-option Mexicans who have the most to gain from the protection of citizenship, and among the high-outside-option Chinese who have the most attractive alternative to it. This is the same heterogeneity logic that Fouka (2019) uses to identify the cost of the assimilation investment, extended here to the outside-option margin that allows the response to change sign.

Three caveats temper the interpretation. First, because the ACS records current citizenship but not the date of naturalization, this is a comparison of stocks rather than flows; the decline among high-skill Chinese could in part reflect out-migration of high-skill non-citizens rather than a decision not to naturalize, a possibility cross-sectional data cannot fully exclude. Second, the

Chinese sample is an order of magnitude smaller than the Mexican one, so we rely on the post-2020 break and the regression estimate rather than on year-to-year movements. Third, conditioning on five years of residence and controlling for tenure mitigates but does not eliminate compositional shifts in arrivals. With these qualifications, the within-group evidence corroborates the mechanism: the outside option governs not only why Mexico and China diverge in the aggregate, but who within each group drives the response.

Table 2 – Who Naturalizes? The Skill Gradient of the Naturalization Response

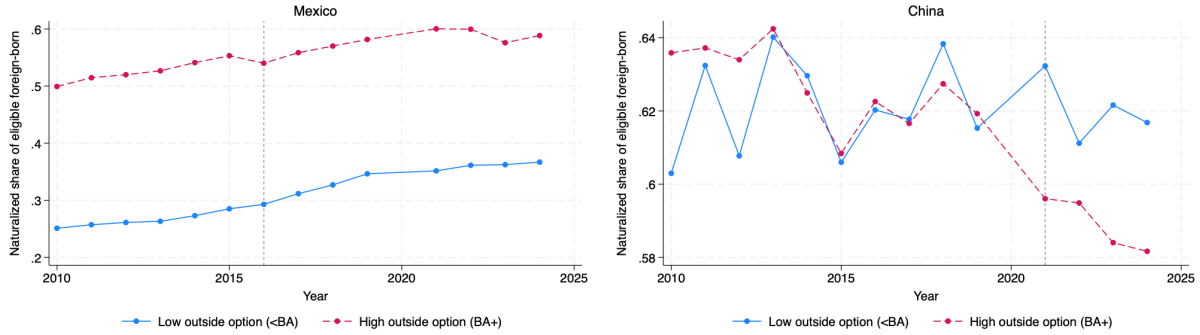
	(1) Mexico (within)	(2) China (within)	(3) Mexico (DDD)	(4) China (DDD)
High outside option (BA+)	0.260*** (0.00755)	0.0106 (0.0276)	0.0338** (0.0144)	0.0338*** (0.0123)
BA+ × post-2016	-0.0219** (0.00908)		-0.00838 (0.00785)	
BA+ × post-2020		-0.0370*** (0.0136)		-0.0131* (0.00769)
BA+ × post × Mexico			-0.0133* (0.00794)	
BA+ × post × China				-0.0226*** (0.00759)
Observations	1011162	201751	2210123	1400712

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Notes: Linear probability models of naturalization among the eligible foreign-born (non-citizens and naturalized citizens with 5+ years of US residence), ACS 2010–2024 (2020 wave unavailable). “High outside option” equals one for a bachelor’s degree or more. Columns (1)–(2) are within-group difference-in-differences (skill × post), with the post period beginning in 2016 for Mexico and 2020 for China; columns (3)–(4) are triple-differences against the pooled control countries. Controls: age, age squared, sex, marital status, years in the US, and state and year fixed effects. Standard errors clustered on state in columns (1)–(2) and on country of birth in columns (3)–(4). Person-weighted. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 3 – Naturalized Share of the Eligible Foreign-Born by Education: Mexico (left) and China (right)



Notes: Naturalized share of the eligible foreign-born (5+ years' residence) by year and education, person-weighted. Solid line: less than a bachelor's degree (low outside option); dashed line: bachelor's degree or more (high outside option). The vertical dashed line marks the onset of each group's targeting (2016 for Mexico, 2020 for China; the 2020 ACS is unavailable). Source: ACS annual.

5.3 Event Analysis

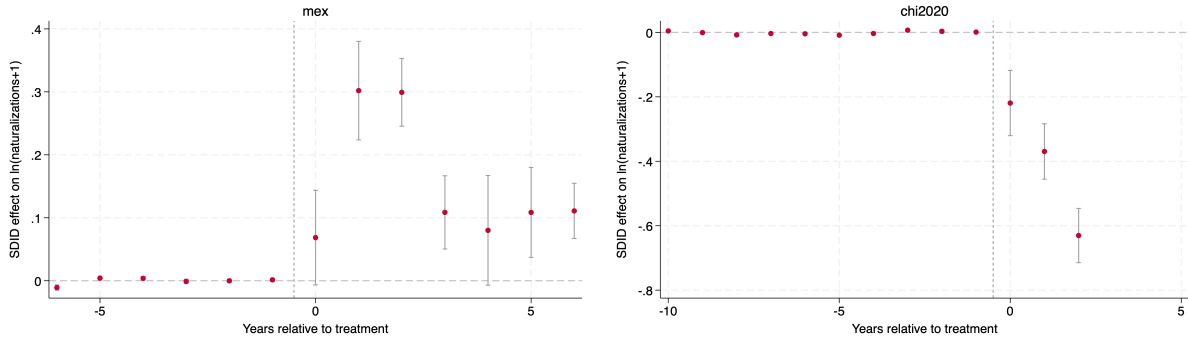
We complement the pooled estimates with an event study that traces the effect year by year and, more importantly, supplies a formal test of the parallel-trends assumption through the pre-treatment leads. We estimate the event study on $\ln(\text{naturalizations} + 1)$ using the synthetic difference-in-differences estimator of Arkhangelsky et al. (2021) in its event-study form, with the full set of leads and lags (treatment normalized to the year before adoption) and 100 bootstrap replications.⁷ This specification is the relevant one for the pre-trends question: an earlier event study estimated by two-way fixed effects had displayed apparent pre-treatment leads for Mexico, but the synthetic-control re-weighting that underlies SDID is designed precisely to match pre-treatment trajectories.

Figure 4 reports the results, and they settle the question. For both groups the pre-treatment leads lie essentially on zero: the Mexican leads fall between -0.011 and $+0.004$ log points and the Chinese leads between -0.009 and $+0.007$, two orders of magnitude below the post-treatment effects. The apparent pre-trends in the earlier TWFE specification therefore reflected an inade-

⁷Implemented with the `sdid_event` command (Ciccia, 2024). Mexico is treated from 2016 and China from 2020; each group is estimated against the pool of never-targeted control countries.

quately matched control group rather than a genuine pre-existing divergence. The post-treatment paths follow the rhetoric calendar in both cases. Mexican naturalizations rise sharply after 2016, peaking near $+0.30$ log points in 2017–2018 before settling around $+0.11$; Chinese naturalizations fall monotonically after 2020, reaching -0.22 , -0.37 , and -0.63 log points in the three post-treatment years. For completeness we note that, because the bootstrap standard errors on the leads are very small, two or three individual leads are statistically distinguishable from zero at conventional levels; their magnitudes (at most one log point) are negligible relative to the treatment effects and do not represent an economically meaningful pre-trend.

Figure 4 – SDID Event Study on Log Naturalizations: Mexico (2016 adoption, left) and China (2020 adoption, right)



Notes: Each panel plots SDID effects on $\ln(\text{naturalizations} + 1)$ by event time, with treatment normalized to the year before adoption (vertical dashed line). Whiskers are 95% bootstrap confidence intervals (100 replications). Source: Own calculations.

5.4 Voting Turnout

We next examine reported voting turnout, estimated with a linear probability model of having voted among naturalized citizens in the CPS. Turnout is the voice of those already inside the electorate; the central margin of our theory is membership itself, so turnout is a secondary outcome here, and we present these results as *descriptive*. Reported turnout of naturalized Mexicans is about 4.3 percentage points higher in the 2016 and 2020 elections relative to other nationalities, and Chinese-born turnout reverses across the two elections, lower in 2016 when the rhetoric targeted other groups and higher in 2020 when it turned against them. As the randomization-inference

exercise reported in Online Appendix Section D shows, however, these pooled turnout shifts cannot be distinguished from the turnout changes that untargeted immigrant groups experienced in the same election cycles; with a single treated birth country per regression, the cluster-robust significance levels overstate the evidence. A single theory-implied test of the Chinese within-group reversal, which was not preregistered and which we report as exploratory, is of the predicted sign but does not reach conventional significance. We conduct no further tests and rest the paper's identified claims on the naturalization results.

6 What These Tests Do and Do Not Establish

Online Appendix Section C reports the full robustness suite: a comparison of the two estimators, a log specification with placebo-based inference, naturalization rates constructed from an ACS eligibility proxy, alternative control groups, and registration as an alternative participation margin. The central quantities are stable throughout. We use this section to be explicit about what those exercises do and do not deliver.

The placebo exercises validate the statistical inference, not the identification. They establish that effects of the estimated magnitude essentially never arise when the treatment label is assigned to untargeted countries: the results are not noise, and they are not artifacts of the estimation machinery. They also indicate that shocks common to all immigrant groups, such as fee changes, processing backlogs, and election cycles, are absorbed by the control pool. What no test on these data can rule out is a confounder specific to the treated group that arrives at the same moment as the treatment: something other than political rhetoric that affected Mexicans, specifically, in 2016, or Chinese immigrants, specifically, in 2020.

The identification argument therefore rests on the joint pattern of responses across groups and time, and this pattern imposes demanding requirements on any alternative explanation. A confounding story must produce an increase among Mexicans in 2016–2019 that fades thereafter; an increase among Chinese immigrants in the same years, which rules out any broad anti-immigrant administrative tightening, since such tightening would have depressed rather than raised Chinese

naturalizations; a sharp Chinese reversal precisely in 2020; and null responses among other Latin Americans and travel-ban nationals throughout. A single alternative shock would need to switch signs across groups exactly on the calendar of the political rhetoric. We are not aware of a candidate that does so.

The most important remaining vulnerability concerns the Chinese decline in 2020–2022. Our interpretation is demand-side: facing hostile rhetoric, Chinese immigrants, who must renounce their citizenship of origin to naturalize and who hold comparatively strong outside options, chose not to naturalize. The same period, however, saw China-specific supply frictions, including the February 2020 suspension of entry from China and consular disruptions, which could mechanically reduce *completed* naturalizations among Chinese applicants. Pandemic-era processing shocks common to all applicants are absorbed by the control groups, but frictions specific to Chinese applicants are not. A direct test would use N-400 *applications* by country of birth, which measure demand and are unaffected by downstream processing; to our knowledge such data are not published at the required disaggregation, and we flag this as a limitation. Two considerations nonetheless constrain how much of the Chinese estimate a supply-side account can absorb. Consular and travel frictions operate on entry and on documents issued abroad, whereas naturalization is completed by applicants already resident in the United States. And a purely mechanical processing story predicts no relationship with education, yet the decline is concentrated among the highly educated, which is what the outside-option mechanism predicts and what a bureaucratic bottleneck does not.

7 Discussion

Political engagement at the electorate level is an important step in the integration process of immigrants, and whose pre-requisite in most countries is naturalization. Naturalization has been shown to develop political integration by increasing formal political participation, political knowledge, and political efficacy (Hainmueller et al., 2015). Furthermore, naturalization grants foreign-born individuals nearly all the benefits, rights, and responsibilities as native-born citizens, includ-

ing the right to vote and full protection from deportation. In the case where immigrants may perceive discrimination, it is not straightforward whether this will hinder or increase their political participation and likelihood of integrating into the electorate.

In this paper, we test how groups singled out by targeted political threat adjust their naturalization and voting behavior during the Trump administration. Our central result is that the naturalization response is *conditional*: it does not point in a single direction but depends on the cost of incorporation and on the value of the immigrant's outside option. Where citizenship can be added cheaply and exit is unattractive, the protection effect dominates and threat deepens incorporation; where citizenship requires surrendering the origin membership and exit is valuable, the exit-preservation effect dominates and threat pushes the group away from the polity. For Mexicans (among the most targeted and largest immigrant groups, and previously shown to be the most politicized by Trump's rhetoric) naturalizations rise, because dual nationality keeps the cost of naturalizing low and a weaker home labor market makes the outside option unattractive. For Chinese-born immigrants the same rhetoric produces the opposite movement: naturalization requires renouncing Chinese citizenship, and their comparatively strong outside options make that renunciation costly, so heightened hostility pushes them away from naturalization rather than toward it. This extends Fouka's finding that discrimination can spur assimilation by showing that the sign of the response is conditional on these two margins, with Mexico and China as the two arms of one model.

The turnout patterns are consistent in sign and timing with this account (Mexican turnout is elevated in 2016 and Chinese turnout reverses from 2016 to 2020) but they are not separately identified from the broad immigrant-turnout movements of those election cycles: the pooled effects do not survive randomization inference, and the exploratory Chinese reversal contrast, though of the predicted sign, does not reach conventional significance. We therefore treat the turnout evidence as supporting rather than central, and rest the paper's identified claims on the naturalization results.

The null results deserve emphasis as well. The effect does not seem to have spilled over to other closely related immigrant groups from other Latin American countries, perhaps because

their identity was not particularly triggered or made salient by Trump’s attacks, since most of these were specific to Mexicans and Mexico. This boundary is also what the economics of group formation would predict: Konrad and Morath (2015) show that external competition governs how individuals coalesce into groups and how intensely they mobilize, so that a national-origin identity singled out by hostile rhetoric is activated as a unit while adjacent, untargeted groups (here, non-Mexican Latinos) remain comparatively unmoved. Additionally, the null effects found for individuals belonging to Muslim countries could be due to the fact that this group of countries that was banned from traveling to the U.S. was not clearly defined, and nationalities kept being added and removed from this group throughout Trump’s presidency (see Online Appendix Section E). On the other hand, if this group faced both political systematic discrimination (which is hypothesized to increase political behavior) and interpersonal discrimination (e.g. in the form of personal hate crimes, which is hypothesized to decrease political behavior) (Oskooii, 2016), the net effect may be null.

Beyond the immigration setting, the results speak to how polities shape their own membership. Targeted political threat does not merely change attitudes; it changes who chooses to become a citizen, and therefore who the electorate contains. A political strategy that singles out a group may durably alter the composition of the demos, drawing in those for whom membership is protection and turning away those with somewhere else to go. The choice between incorporation and exit, made one immigrant at a time, thus bears directly on democratic responsiveness: whom the polity must answer to depends in part on whom it makes feel safe enough to join.

Artificial Intelligence Disclosure. We used an AI assistant (Claude, Anthropic; accessed via the Claude desktop application, June–August 2026; <https://claude.ai>) to help make our ideas clearer, to organize the flow of the document, to check spelling and grammar, to compare the manuscript against earlier drafts, and to carry out a final revision pass. All the ideas presented in this document are our own and are the product of an extensive process of thought and research by the authors.

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