

ABSTRACT

Is America's promise no longer as a nation of immigrants?

Cultural heritage, Identity, and Multiculturalism in the context of making a voting decision in the 2016 election.

By

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Although our nation was founded by those escaping persecution, on principles of equality and protection from prejudice and oppression, there is often dissonance between our founding principles and how we treat newer immigrants in our society. A central paradox of our time is that many Americans do not identify as immigrants, and even fear immigrants, although they themselves are descended from immigrants. Prior research indicates that fear of immigrants, and of other aspects of social change, shapes our political decisions. Personality characteristics that reflect a desire for stable hierarchies, such as authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, have been associated with prejudicial values against many types of diversity and with conservative political stances. Recent research demonstrates that fear inducing events, such as terrorist attacks, can activate latent authoritarian tendencies and contribute to “unexpected” outcomes of elections. The current dissertation focuses on just such an outcome, Donald Trump’s “surprise” win of the United States presidential election in 2016, by exploring the voting decisions of students attending college in a primarily conservative borough (Staten Island) within a larger, highly multicultural and liberal urban area (New York City). The unique political and geographical confluence at the site of this research acts as a lens through which we can

investigate factors that may shape how young people vote, including students' own identities, attitudes toward immigrants, contact with diversity, ability to evaluate information critically (media literacy), personality characteristics and beliefs about morality. Prior research has not examined if cultural heritage contributes to political decision making in multicultural contexts. Given the degree to which immigration was a central aspect of the discourse surrounding the 2016 presidential election (and other recent elections around the world), a primary aim of this dissertation was to evaluate if our cultural heritage continues to shape how we relate to others and make political decisions even after our families have lived for generations as Americans. Ongoing debate about what constitutes "fake news" and how it can be deployed to shape political decision making has made it essential to understand how voters consume information in the brave new world of digital media. This dissertation was driven by an overarching research question: how can we pull together the threads from recent research to create a model which predicts voting decisions? Using an extensive online survey, we replicated a number of findings demonstrated through less extensive assessments. As predicted, fear of terrorism predicted authoritarian psychological states, which, in turn, predicted a preference to vote for Donald Trump. Sexism (but not being a man) and being white also predicted voting for Donald Trump. Given ongoing debate in cross-cultural psychology about the degree to which culture can be studied as an individual difference or as a characteristic of one's heritage country, we examined associations between individual difference measures of cultural values and the mean cultural value orientation of one's heritage country or countries. Findings suggest that the impact of heritage cultures, or the values, norms, and rules brought by our ancestors from our heritage countries and regions is a significant component that shapes voting decisions while individual difference cultural variables are less predictive. This novel finding speaks to a broader debate in

cross-cultural psychology by providing support for Hofstede's assertion that cultural values represent coherent wholes that are more than the sum of the values of the people comprising them. With better understanding of where identities, values and ideas come from, we believe that interventions aimed at persuading voters can be more pluralistically sensitive to different ideologies while still increasing awareness of social justice issues.

Keywords: voting, political ideologies, polarization, culture, ecology, media literacy, morality, multicultural, identity, personality