

Why Trump's Wall is not racist, the Muslim ban is, and why the difference matters

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2017/01/30/why-trumps-wall-is-not-racist-the-muslim-ban-is-and-why-the-difference-matters/

1/30/2017

In recent days, President Donald Trump has signed an order to construct his long-promised border wall with Mexico, and another which would stop Syrian refugees from entering the US and placed a 90-day ban on immigrants from seven Muslim countries. [Eric Kaufmann](#) writes that Trump's Muslim ban is racist as it is based on an irrational fear of Muslims, but the Wall is not, as it normal for states to wish to control their borders. It is important, he argues, that we should not apply the label "racist" indiscriminately, or it will become harder to spot real racism when it appears.

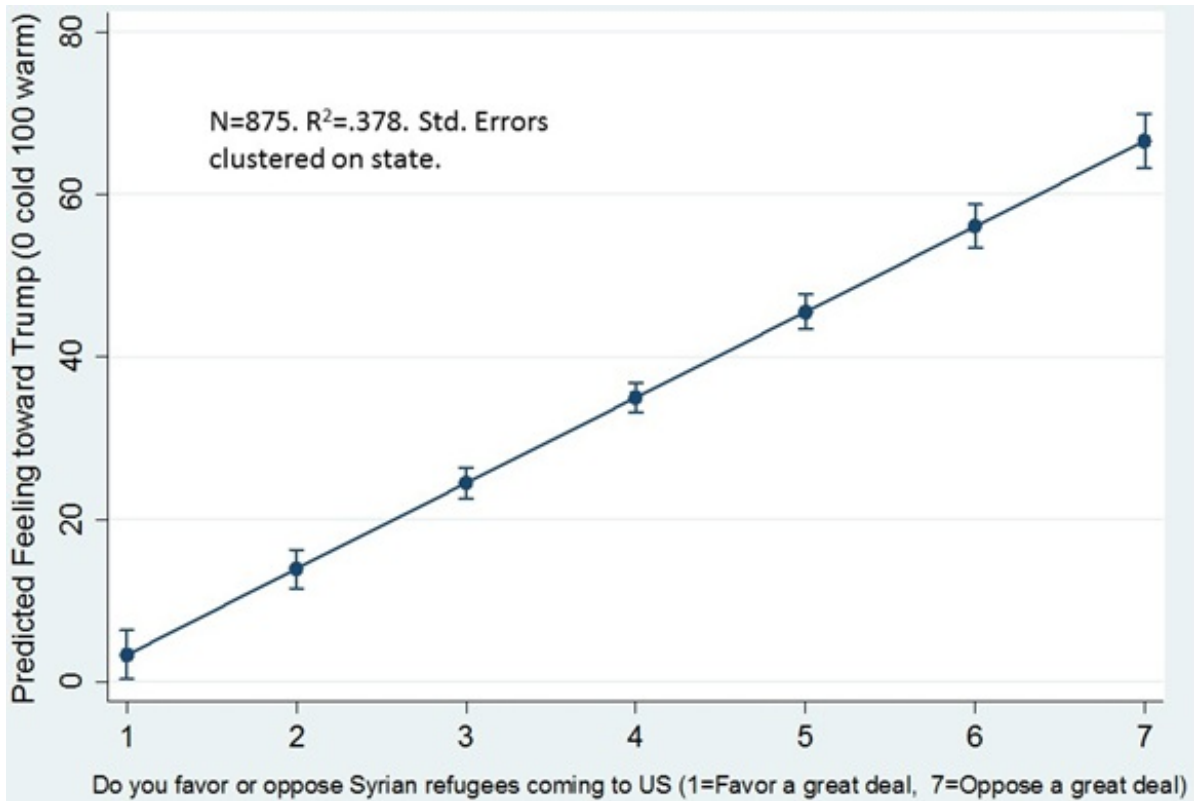


Trump's wall is not racist, but his ban on immigration from seven Muslim countries is. It's extremely important to make the distinction. At a time of rising polarization between liberals and conservatives, we need to guard a rational centre which condemns racism but doesn't smear reasonable differences of opinion.

Donald Trump released two bombshells this week. First, he signed the order to [construct a border wall](#) with Mexico. Then he ordered a halt to the admission of Syrian refugees and a 90-day [ban](#) on immigrants from a series of Muslim countries. Both actions were [condemned by progressives as racist](#), stoking a predictable [counter-reaction](#) from conservatives. But if we want to defend reason and liberal democracy, it's important to reserve the racist charge only for clear violations. This won't change Trump's thinking, but it could draw moderate conservatives and liberals together. To do otherwise is to invite conservative resentment and a politics of unreason.

Few issues polarize like [Trump's Wall](#) and [Muslim immigration](#). Back in January, during the Republican primary, the American National Election Study ([ANES](#)) asked Americans whether they favoured Syrian refugees coming to the United States. This question split the Trumpians from other Republican and Democratic candidates better than any of the many questions in the survey. You can see the strength of the relationship in Figure 1, restricted to white Americans, which controls for a person's state and whether they are a Republican, Democrat or Independent. Recall that this was a tight primary race with many competing Republican candidates. Even so, those most in favour of admitting Syrian refugees scored him 66 out of 100, and those most against only 5 out of 100.

Figure 1 – Trump rating and opinions on Syrians by US whites

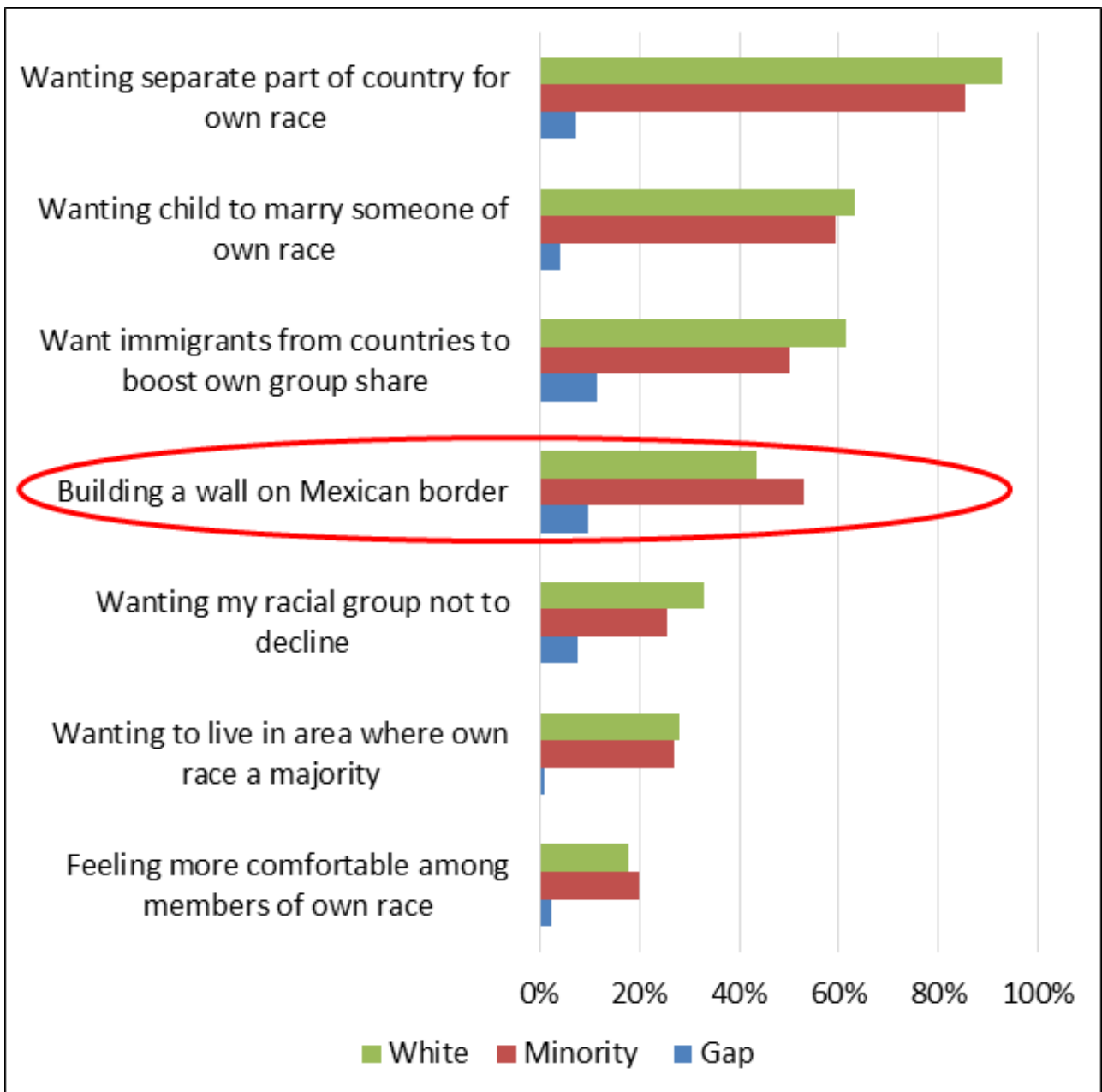


Source: 2016 American National Election Study pilot survey.

In addition, most liberals view both policies as racist. In December, after Trump's election, I ran a small pilot survey on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) platform as part of a Birkbeck College-[Policy Exchange](#) project. I asked a sample of around 200 people what they consider racist or not. MTurk has a strong skew toward white liberals, but this shouldn't affect comparisons between groups.

The first point is that whites and minorities largely agree on what is, and is not, racist. Look at the results by race in Figure 2. Notice how small the differences are between the white and minority responses (green and red bars). None of the gaps (in blue) are significantly different from chance, including views on whether the Wall is racist.

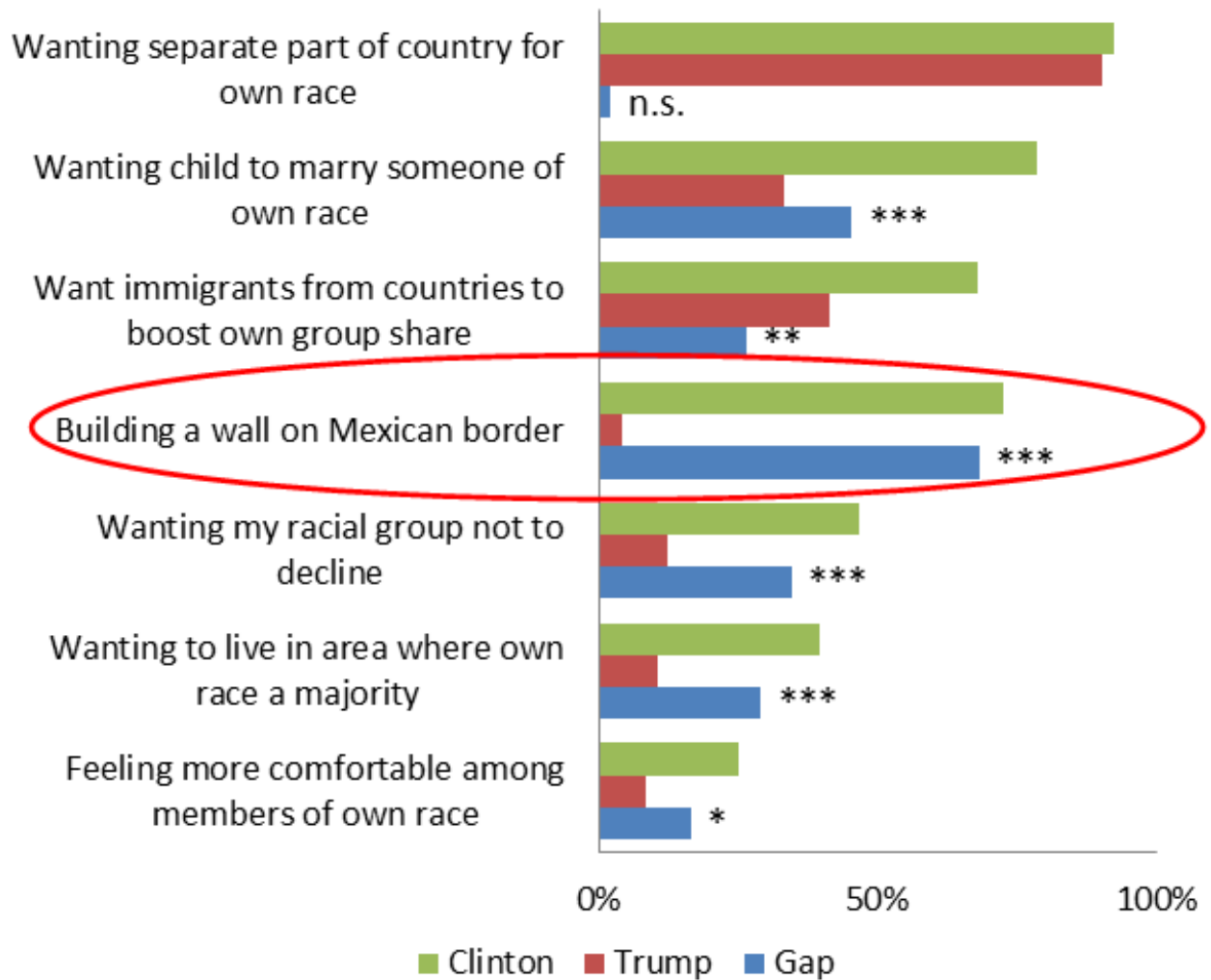
Figure 2 – Which of the following do you consider racist? Whites v. Nonwhites (% saying 'racist')



Source: Amazon Mechanical Turk survey, Nov. 29. N=46-56 minorities, 119-139 whites. Excluding don't knows.

Now let's see what happens when we compare Trump and Clinton voters in Figure 3.

Figure 3 – Which of the following do you consider racist? Trump v. Clinton voters (% saying 'racist')



Source: Amazon Mechanical Turk survey, Nov. 29. N=117-144. Excluding don't knows. *Statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .001$. N.S. – not significant.**

All of a sudden, big, statistically-significant canyons open up. 72 percent of Clinton voters, but only 4 percent of Trump voters, think the Wall is racist. This is not just asking people whether they approve of the Wall or not, but concerns racism, one of the most serious accusations you can make in American society. In short, 72 percent of Clinton voters are accusing Wall supporters of racism. In a Birkbeck-YouGov-Policy Exchange follow-up survey of 2600 Americans, the same pattern of partisan divisions vastly exceeding racial ones emerged over whether it is racist rather than [racially self-interested](#) for whites to want less immigration. Jon Haidt [notes](#) that group loyalty is part of conservative, but not liberal, moral psychology – and Figures 2 and 3 clearly show that Trump and Clinton voters, regardless of race, divide sharply over whether favoring one's group is racist.

Who's right?

The Wall

Let's begin with the Wall. I define racism as an irrational fear or hatred of another race, a sense of racial superiority or a desire to maintain race purity. By this yardstick, Trump's comments suggesting Mexican immigrants are disproportionately rapists are racist. But while Trump's comments are racist toward Mexicans, there are many reasonable motives for constructing a more extensive border wall. For instance, the head of the union representing US Border Patrol staff [argues](#) that this will greatly improve security. It's normal for states to want to control their borders for a whole host of reasons, including sovereignty, security, economics and cultural demography. The US-

Mexico border is the only part of the world where a first-world economy shares an extensive land border with the developing world. Europe, Britain and Australia are all insulated by moats which are much easier to control and harder to traverse. When people try to cross, they are easy to apprehend and send back to Turkey, Calais or Nauru.

Since 1970, millions have crossed the US-Mexico border in search of a better life. This is a major reason why a third of babies born in the US are now Hispanic, up from a few percent in 1970. Yet if Britain, where I live, or Canada, where I'm from, had hundreds of thousands entering illegally each year, there would be an outcry.

Mexico is now a middle-income country with a birth rate similar to America's, so as many leave as enter the US. But migrants from Central America, Africa and Asia are replacing Mexicans in the flow across the border. Despite Trump's racist statements about Mexicans, many who make the case for building or extending the Wall do so on the basis of legitimate motives, rational thought and evidence.

Muslims

Banning Muslims from certain countries, or Syrian refugees, is an entirely different matter. This is racist because it's based on an irrational fear of an ethno-cultural group. While Muslims are not an ethnic group, all but a few converts are Muslim because they were born into Muslim ethnic groups. Why is fear of Muslims irrational? I approach this like an insurance adjuster: is the risk of a Muslim immigrant harming an American appreciably higher than the risk of a non-Muslim immigrant doing so? There should be a presumption against discriminating against cultural groups, but this is not absolute. I have no problem excluding dangerous ones like ISIS or Aum Shinriko. On these grounds, Muslims simply don't qualify.

Shias have never committed terrorism on western soil. A Sunni Muslim from a war-torn country is more likely to commit a terrorist act than a non-Muslim and less likely to kill someone driving drunk. On both counts, the difference is infinitesimal – nothing like the risk of admitting men between the ages of 18 and 30 into the US, who account for almost all violent crime. If people want complete security, then ban young men. Banning Muslims from war-torn countries is a disproportionate response, not based on rational calculation of risks, but on an irrational fear of a cultural group, which is racism.

Partisan lobbyists and the media will always make their case in a biased way. But when mainstream news outlets chastise conservative unreason while failing to criticize [liberals](#) who accuse Wall proponents of racism, they betray the cause of reason, and, by extension, a civilized centre ground. Taboos such as racism are meant to induce a gut, emotional response of disgust. This should be reserved for clear cases. As David Goodhart [writes](#), when the racism label is applied indiscriminately, this de-sensitizes people to this charge. This permits real racism to be smuggled past conservatives who may once have resisted it.

It also creates resentment and polarization. Those who feel a wall is justified but are uneasy about Trump's remarks about Mexicans are pushed into the hardline corner because there is no trusted centre to present a nuanced rather than tribal perspective.

Trump seamlessly intertwines racist policies such as banning Muslims from certain countries with legitimate conservative positions such as the Wall. His #NoWallNoBan adversaries label everything racist, bundling Trump's disgusting and merely conservative policies together. Right-wing media respond accordingly, fueling the spiral of Us and Them.

It's time to elevate the discussion.

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