

PERCEPTIONS OF IMMIGRANT  
THREATS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL  
DARWINISM

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### Perceptions of Immigrant Threats: The Role of Social Darwinism

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Despite being a nation of immigrants, the United States has seen spikes in anti-immigrant sentiment throughout its history (Higham, 2002), including today. Two perceived threats are implicated with driving these negative sentiments: (1) resource threats, reflecting economic competition with immigrants, and (2) symbolic threats, reflecting a cultural mismatch with immigrants, whose values undermine the host culture. Do resource threat and symbolic threat share a common ideology, or are they distinct? The current research aimed to answer this question. This study examined the predictive utility of two previously theorized ideological motivations, social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), as well as a prevalent yet overlooked ideology, social Darwinism (i.e. “survival of the fittest”), as the underlying motivations for both resource and symbolic threat concerns pertaining to immigration. Findings from this study reveal that these three ideologies perform similarly well in predicting both resource and symbolic threat perceptions, challenging the idea that SDO solely drives resource threat perceptions and RWA solely drives symbolic threat perceptions. Moreover, these findings reveal the need to include social Darwinism among the arsenal of belief systems driving anti-immigrant attitudes.

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## **Perceptions of Immigrant Threats: The Role of Social Darwinism**

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

These words, engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, characterize America as a safe refuge for those arriving to its borders. Former President Obama recently emphasized that America is defined by “every American who stands up for immigrants because they know that their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents were immigrants too, and they know that America is an idea that only grows stronger with each new person who adopts our common creed” (Obama, 2017). Yet despite being a nation of immigrants, the U.S. has seen spikes in anti-immigrant sentiment throughout its history (Higham, 2002), including today. For example, 80% of Republicans want President Trump to build a wall to stop Mexican immigrants (New American Economy, 2018), thereby keeping a promise he made throughout the 2016 election campaign (Osnos, 2015).

What factors ignite anti-immigrant prejudice? Literature in social and political psychology point to two perceived threats: (1) resource threats, reflecting economic competition with immigrants, and (2) symbolic threats, reflecting a cultural mismatch with immigrants, whose values undermine the host culture. Numerous studies find that these perceived threats covary with prejudice against immigrants (e.g., Tausch, Hewstone, Kenworthy, Cairns & Christ, 2007; Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan & Martin, 2005; Testé, Maisonneuve, Assilaméhou, & Perrin, 2012; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, & Prior, 2004; Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998). Therefore, illuminating the ideologies that inform perceived threats from immigrants is vital for understanding anti-immigrant prejudice. As described below, researchers have pursued this issue (for a

review, see Huddy, 2013). However, studies comparing the ideological sources of each threat are sparse (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010; Duckitt, 2001; Huddy, 2013). Do resource threat and symbolic threat share a common ideology, or are they distinct? The current research aimed to answer this question.

Ideological research has focused on social dominance orientation (SDO), or positive attitudes toward hierarchy (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA; Altemeyer, 1988) as predictors of xenophobic attitudes. Both have been found to covary with anti-immigrant prejudice (Esses et al., 2001; Duckitt, 2001). Notably, the relationships among these two ideologies and anti-immigrant prejudice are thought to differ. According to Duckitt's (2001) dual process model, people high on SDO should reject immigrants who embody resource threat (i.e., who materially threaten native-born citizens), whereas people high on RWA conform to societal norms and therefore, they should reject immigrants who symbolically threaten cultural values. However, the existing literature does not provide consistent evidence linking resource and symbolic threats to these ideological motivations. In a cross-cultural meta-analytic study of 17 nations, Cohrs and Stelzl (2010) found that RWA did not inform attitudes toward immigrants who threaten cultural values, and SDO did not predict attitudes toward immigrants who compete for jobs with native-born citizens. Instead, only RWA predicted prejudice against immigrants stereotyped as high in criminality, whereas only SDO predicted prejudice against immigrants with a high rate of unemployment, relative to native-born citizens (i.e., immigrants who did *not* compete for jobs). These findings challenge Duckitt's model, with the caveat that perceived resource (economic) and/or symbolic (cultural) threats were not directly assessed.

In my thesis, I propose that a prevalent yet overlooked ideology, social Darwinism (i.e. “survival of the fittest”), serves as an underlying motivation for both resource and symbolic threat concerns pertaining to immigration. Appearing during the industrial era (late 1800s), social Darwinism posits that humans, like plants and animals, are in a constant struggle for survival (Spencer, 1866/1921). In this competitive worldview, groups in positions of power seem deserving because natural law has “endowed” them with superior intellectual and cultural merits. According to social Darwinism, reformers seeking to attenuate hierarchies (e.g., via policies designed to enhance equal opportunity) undermine social welfare by disrupting the natural order, which weakens humanity. Thus, social Darwinism is foundational to presumptions of economic entitlement and cultural superiority on the part of high status groups, and could provide an overarching explanation for both resource and symbolic immigrant threat assessments.

In this introduction, I describe social Darwinism and the evidence supporting its relevance to my objectives after reviewing prior research on immigrant threat perceptions. Next, I outline the current study, which examined ideological motivations for resource and symbolic threat perceptions with a focus on Mexican immigrants to the United States.

### **Perceived Threats from Immigrants**

**Resource Threats.** Realistic group conflict theory (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood & Sherif, 1954/1961) posits that when groups compete for limited resources, whether actual or perceived, their conflicting goals create hostility. Perceiving resources as fixed, or zero-sum, where gains for one group presumably mean losses for another group, is a

key factor informing competition-derived resentment (Bobo, 1999). Another factor concerns status differences between groups. For example, Blumer (1958, p. 5) argued that “the source of race prejudice lies in a felt challenge to [White’s] sense of position.” In other words, status itself may be construed as a fixed resource, such that progress made by minority groups can be perceived by dominant group members as a loss (Wilkins, Wellman, Babbitt, Toosi, & Schad, 2015).

Building on this reasoning, the instrumental model of group conflict (Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998) posits that resource scarcity (whether actual or perceived), coupled with a salient competing outgroup, leads to group conflict and a desire to eliminate the conflict through various means (e.g., immigrant deportation). In this literature, group competition is operationalized as zero-sum beliefs—beliefs that outgroups compete with the ingroup for a fixed pie of resources. The current study adapted the zero-sum beliefs scale from Esses et al. (1998) to measure specific perceptions of resource threat from Mexican immigrants in order to elucidate the relationship between ideologies, resource threat perceptions, and anti-immigrant attitudes.

**Symbolic threats.** Symbolic threats have been considered in various lines of work on intergroup attitudes. The foundational work of Rokeach and Merzei (1966) demonstrated that perceived value similarity was a stronger predictor of social choices (e.g., choice of co-workers) than race or ethnicity. Similarly, symbolic racism research (Kinder & Sears, 1981) illustrates that perceived value conflict legitimizes negative attitudes toward several outgroups, including Black Americans (Sears & Henry, 2003), homosexuals (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993), and religious minorities (Struch &

Schwartz, 1989). Whether value conflict is operationalized as the violation or blocking of values by outgroup members (Biernat, Vescio & Theno, 1996; Haddock et al., 1993), or as differences in perceived hierarchies of values cherished by in-group versus out-group members (Struch & Schwartz, 1989), symbolic threat repeatedly predicts outgroup antipathy in the prejudice literature.

How do perceptions of symbolic threat inform attitudes toward immigrants? In a framework tested by Stephan and Stephan (1996), measures of symbolic threat (e.g., “Immigration from Mexico is undermining American culture”) predicted prejudice against Mexican immigrants, even after adjusting for resource threat, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. According to integrated threat theory (Stephan, Ybarra & Bachman, 1999), these four factors combine to inform negative outgroup affect. Symbolic threat is defined in this literature as threat from perceived differences in “morals, values, norms, standards, beliefs, and attitudes” between an outgroup and one’s ingroup (Stephan et al., 1999, p. 2222). The construct is thus operationalized broadly in measures and manipulations of symbolic threat (e.g. Stephan, Diaz-Loving, & Duran, 2000; Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan, & Martin, 2005).

In this line of work, symbolic threat has been shown to inform negative attitudes toward Mexican, Asian, and Cuban immigrants on the part of Americans (Stephan & Stephan, 1996; Stephan et al., 1999), and toward Ethiopian immigrants on the part of Israelis (Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez & Tur-Kaspa, 1998). By contrast, symbolic threat did not predict negative attitudes toward Russian immigrants on the part of Israeli participants, or Moroccan immigrants on the part of Spanish participants (Stephan et al., 1998), even though different measures of symbolic threat were tailored to each



population studied. Therefore, not all immigrant groups are perceived as holding values that are negatively dissimilar to the host cultures' values.

In studies conducted in European countries, hostility toward immigrants and refugees appears when they are seen as threatening the national culture (e.g. Sniderman, Hagendoor, & Prior, 2004; Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998; Teste, Maisonneuve, Assilamehou, & Perrin, 2012). Consistent with work on symbolic threat, hostility stems from perceiving that immigrants' values are dissimilar to the host society's (Teste et al., 2012), and when immigrants are perceived as unwilling to assimilate (Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998). Positive attitudes are reported toward immigrants who assimilate or integrate (Van Oudenhoven et al., 1998). By assimilating, immigrants gain acceptance by reducing the symbolic threat of perceived value dissimilarity.

In summary, the instrumental model of group conflict (Esses et al., 1998) emphasizes resource competition over value conflicts and has mainly employed SDO, whereas integrated threat theory (Stephan et al., 1999) considers value and resource conflicts among other factors such as intergroup anxiety and stereotypes without considering their ideological motivations. Although the dual process model gives equal weight to both types of conflicts and incorporates both ideologies (Duckitt, 2001), its central tenets have been challenged by a cross-cultural meta-analysis (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010). Examining the ideological roots of symbolic and resource threats posed by immigrants requires a coherent theory of their underlying source. My thesis research worked toward this aim. Using previously validated measures of ideologies, as well as

resource and symbolic threat concerns, the current study tested whether these perceived conflicts share common roots in social Darwinian beliefs.

### **Social Darwinism**

Inspired by Darwin's (1859) principle of natural selection, the sociologist Herbert Spencer coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” (1866/1921, Vol. 1, p. 530) to describe social Darwinism, whereby humans, like plants and animals, compete in a struggle for existence. According to Spencer, “All mankind in turn subject themselves more or less to the discipline described [survival of the fittest]; they either may or may not advance under it; but in the nature of things, only those who *do* advance under it eventually survive” (italics in original, 1866/1921, Vol. 2, pp. 527-528). By implication, if some social groups are genetically superior, then policies that interfere with human competition to equalize opportunity (e.g., welfare) are detrimental because society benefits when the most naturally fit wield power and authority (Hofstadter, 1944/1992; Spencer, 1866/1921; Frey & Powell, 2009).

Social Darwinism has yet to be incorporated into the social psychology of legitimacy. Two key factors may explain this oversight. The first is distaste. For example, when describing the sociobiological origins of social dominance theory, Jost et al. (2001) noted that, “We are not suggesting that social dominance theorists have themselves sought to justify existing status and power differences between groups, only that the history of using evolutionary meta-theory to understand human social behavior is a troubled one, ideologically speaking, as it has been allied with social Darwinism and other political attempts to justify the dominance of some groups over others” (p. 379). Indeed, social Darwinism was morally discredited by the Holocaust, and theoretically

discredited by anthropologists (e.g., Franz Boas and Margaret Mead) who argued that culture sets humans apart from animals (Degler, 1991; Whitman, 2017). Nonetheless, a dog-eat-dog philosophy of “jungle law” that justifies systemic inequalities persists in the U.S. today, as described in more detail at the end of this section.

A second reason why social Darwinism has been largely overlooked by social psychologists is the absence of a reliable instrument. In the business ethics literature, social Darwinism has been identified as a prevailing philosophy (Neumann & Reichel, 1987). However, researchers have operationalized social Darwinism as justifying ruthless business practices (e.g., “Competition and profits are ideals in their own right; it is empty idealism to speak of higher purposes for business”; Miesing & Preble, 1985), or as support for unethical behaviors (e.g., stealing office supplies; Bageac, Furrer, & Reynaud, 2011), not as endorsing natural selection as the key to social welfare. In an exception, Frey and Powell (2009) employed a measure that more closely captures social Darwinism (e.g., “The fittest members of our society naturally rise to the top”), but with only three items, its reliability was poor ( $\alpha = .43$ ). To increase its internal consistency, Rudman and Saud (2017) expanded their measure to eight items in order to examine social Darwinism as an ideological motive for defending systems of inequality (see Appendix A).

In four studies investigating American adults, Rudman and Saud (2017) confirmed that social Darwinism is a prominent ideology that sustains hierarchies based on race, class, and gender. Participants who defended each hierarchy also (1) opposed the Black Lives Matter movement; (2) supported budgetary policies that slashed the social

safety net for the poor in order to protect the wealthiest Americans; and (3) rejected Hillary Clinton in favor of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election.

These findings beg the question, “Why are social hierarchies deemed worthy of defense?” We compared social Darwinism to previously established ideological correlates, including SDO (Pratto et al., 1994) and racial, gender, or class essentialism (Brescoll, Uhlmann, & Newman, 2013; Williams, & Eberhardt, 2008; Kraus, & Keltner, 2013). Although each ideology is based on biological determinism, social Darwinism was a better predictor of defending social hierarchies in each study than SDO or essentialism, explaining more than twice the variance, whether or not we adjusted for covariates (e.g., political identity and demographics). We argued that social Darwinism performed better because it provides both a rationale for the existence of hierarchies and a positive orientation toward them. By contrast, essentialism provides only the former, whereas SDO provides only the latter. Moreover, only social Darwinism captures the belief that social reforms designed to equalize opportunity or protect the weak are harmful because they undermine the advancement of the species. By relying on “natural laws” to defend social inequalities, social Darwinism should have broad applicability for intergroup relations research, including assessments of immigrant threats.

**Social Darwinism and Immigrant Threats.** Why would social Darwinian beliefs motivate immigrant threat perceptions? Considering social Darwinism’s role in justifying other hierarchies (Rudman & Saud, 2017), its function as an overarching ideology that promotes anti-immigrant attitudes by legitimizing perceptions of resource and symbolic threats is plausible for at least two reasons. First, because social Darwinism endows the powerful with economic entitlement, “poor laws” (i.e., legislative attempts to

alleviate poverty) are regarded as a severe blow to the optimal social order (Spencer, 1866/1921, vol. 2, p. 532). Thus, social Darwinists resist policies that redistribute wealth from the powerful to putatively weaker groups (Rudman & Saud, 2017, Study 4). Second, Social Darwinism endows the powerful with cultural superiority because they endured a competition involving “intellectual and moral stress” in order to become “superior” (Spencer, 1866/1921, p. 532-533). The victors of this contest deserve the spoils, which include not only wealth and other material resources, but also symbolic resources (e.g., their values should prevail). Assuming that Americans who perceive strong resource and symbolic threats from immigrants also view native-born Americans as culturally superior and economically entitled, social Darwinism may emerge as a strong predictor of immigrant threat perceptions - plausibly, stronger than either SDO or RWA. This hypothesis is developed further in the remainder of my introduction.

**Immigration and Social Darwinism in the Trump Era.** Social Darwinian arguments have emerged in the recent mobilization around Donald Trump to “make America great again.” As a candidate, Trump's rhetoric employed nativism, defined in the Oxford dictionary as “the policy of protecting the interests of native-born or established inhabitants against those of immigrants, ” to justify America’s need for strict immigration policies. For example, during his campaign, besides advocating for a wall along the southern border, Trump proposed to deport undocumented immigrants and their children, even children who emigrated at an early age, claiming, “we will not be taken advantage of anymore” (Osno, 2015). Since taking office, President Trump has maintained an agenda of increasing law enforcement for deportation and border security (Associated

Press, 2017), shifting to a merit-based immigration policy, and restricting green cards to reduce immigration to the U.S. (Nakamura, 2017).

Not surprisingly, Trump appealed to Americans who feel threatened by immigration. According to a 2016 Pew survey, 60% of Americans who agreed that increasing numbers of immigrants is threatening to American values felt warmly toward Trump; as did 63% of those who saw the predicted U.S. demographic shift to minority-White in 30 years as bad for the country (Jones & Kiley, 2016). Similarly, perceiving that the foreign influence of immigrant groups threatens America was a strong predictor of voting for Trump in the election (Cox, Lienesch, & Jones, 2017). By tapping into the nativist beliefs of White Americans and their immigration fears, Trump's campaign profited from a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment.

The nativist approach to immigration evident in the Trump era may derive from a worldview that is especially social Darwinian. Insofar as nativists view native-born citizens as superior to immigrants, I contend that social Darwinism is closely married to nativist sentiments because of social Darwinism's key role in legitimizing views of natural superiority that warrant preserving America for White, native-born Americans.

**Social Darwinism versus SDO.** Past research suggests that SDO serves as an ideology motivating perceptions of resource threat. For example, research testing the instrumental model of group conflict has shown that Canadians and Americans high in SDO were more likely to hold negative attitudes toward immigrants as mediated by their perception of zero-sum resource competition with immigrants (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001). Similarly, SDO has been theorized to motivate only resource (not symbolic) threat concerns in a dual process model (Duckitt, 2001).

I hypothesized that social Darwinism would perform better than SDO as a predictor of both resource and symbolic threats for three reasons. First, a meta-analytic study across 17 nations found that SDO was uncorrelated with perceived competition with immigrants for jobs (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010). Second, social Darwinism performed better than SDO as a distal predictor of discrimination based on gender, race, and class (Rudman & Saud, 2017). As noted, social Darwinism measures both support for social hierarchy and its rationale (i.e., “survival of the fittest”) whereas SDO only provides positive attitudes toward social hierarchy.

Finally, as previously noted, social Darwinism legitimizes beliefs regarding both the economic entitlement and cultural superiority of native-born Americans over immigrants. As a result, it should provide a unifying ideology for perceiving both types of immigrant threats (resource and symbolic). In essence, relying on social evolution to explain America’s global superiority mandates protecting her from threatening outgroups for the sake of the species, whether perceived threats are material or symbolic. Thus, in the current study, I expected social Darwinism to perform better than SDO as a distal predictor when perceived threats are the proximal predictor of discrimination against immigrants.

**Social Darwinism versus RWA.** RWA captures the desire to preserve cultural norms and traditions, submission to authority figures who uphold them, and aggression against those who oppose them, presumably due to a mix of fear of a dangerous world and moral self-righteousness (Altemeyer, 1988). Despite the fact that cultural preservation and fear of a dangerous world seem directly tied to immigrant threat perceptions, RWA’s relationship to immigrant attitudes is inconsistent in the literature

(Esses et al., 2001) and is not well predicted by extant immigration theories (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010; Stephan et al., 1998). As Duckitt (2001, p.85) describes, those high on RWA will dislike outgroups “because they are seen as threatening and dangerous to social or group cohesion, security, values, and stability.” However, a cross-cultural meta-analysis did not find a link between RWA and prejudice against immigrants based on value threats specifically; instead, RWA correlated with prejudice against immigrants stereotyped as either impoverished (a resource threat) or criminals (a security threat; Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010). Given the need for a more coherent theory of immigrant threat perceptions, I predicted that social Darwinism would emerge as a better predictor of resource and symbolic threats than RWA in the current study for the same reasons that I expected social Darwinism to perform better than SDO. Again, only social Darwinism provides a legitimizing explanation for supporting nativism, whereas RWA and SDO assess attitudes only, not a rationale.

My central research question was whether resource and symbolic threats are best legitimized by the ideology of social Darwinism, compared with SDO and RWA. The current research investigated the role of these ideologies in the current immigration debate in the U.S., with a focus on Mexican immigrants. Figure 1 shows the model that was tested. As noted, prior research has demonstrated that Americans’ negative attitudes toward Mexican immigrants are informed by both resource and symbolic threat concerns, supporting paths b1 and b2 in the model (Stephan & Stephan, 1996; Stephan et al., 1999; Stephan et al., 2000). Several studies similarly support paths a1 and a2 in the model by showing links between ideological motives and anti-immigrant sentiments (e.g., Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010; Esses et al., 1998; Esses et al., 2001; Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt, 2006). At least



two studies support Figure 1's predicted mediation. First, Esses et al. (1998) found that zero-sum beliefs (resource threat) mediated the relationship between SDO and anti-immigrant attitudes. Second, Duckitt (2006) found that the relationship between RWA and prejudicial attitudes toward various outgroups was mediated by perceived symbolic threats, whereas the relationship between SDO and prejudice was mediated by perceived resource threats. Thus, I adopted this model in order to test social Darwinism's fit to these theorized relationships as compared to SDO and RWA.

I expected that the hypothesized paths between ideologies, resource and symbolic threat perceptions, and support for anti-immigrant policies would emerge. According to Figure 1, I expected threat assessments to mediate the association between social Darwinism and support for anti-immigrant policies. The empirical question concerned the ideological paths to resource and symbolic threat concerns (paths a1 and a2 in Figure 1); specifically, whether these would be stronger for social Darwinism, compared with SDO or RWA (when each was substituted in the model), resulting in more variance explained ( $R^2$ ).

**Pilot study.** This hypothesis was motivated by both the rationale described above and a pilot study using the prescreen for Rutgers' undergraduate research pool (Fall 2017), which included measures of social Darwinism, SDO, and resource threat (operationalized as zero-sum beliefs regarding immigrants in general). Because my thesis sample was limited to native-born White participants, I analyzed the pilot data for only White participants. The correlation between social Darwinism and zero-sum beliefs,  $r(303) = .61, p < .001$ , was significantly more positive than the correlation between SDO and zero-sum beliefs,  $r(303) = .47, p < .001, Z = 3.25, p < .001$ . For a more conservative

test, I subsequently analyzed the pilot data when excluding only Latino participants. In this analysis, the correlation between social Darwinism and zero-sum beliefs,  $r(838) = .51, p < .001$ , remained significantly more positive than the correlation between SDO and zero-sum beliefs,  $r(838) = .45, p < .001, Z = 2.10, p = .036$ . Such findings provided initial evidence that perceived threat (or at least resource threat) from immigrants generally is more strongly related to social Darwinism than to SDO.

### **Summary of Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1 was that social Darwinism would emerge as a stronger predictor of both resource and symbolic immigrant threat concerns compared with both SDO and RWA. Specifically, compared to SDO or RWA, social Darwinism would correlate more positively with resource threats and symbolic threats (H1a) and contribute more unique variance than SDO or RWA to resource threats and symbolic threats, after adjusting for immigrant attitudes and demographic predictors in separate regression analyses (H1b). Hypothesis 2 was that resource and symbolic threats from immigrants would covary with anti-immigrant policy support better than ideologies (social Darwinism, SDO, or RWA).

Subsequently, I compared the ideologies as distal predictors of policy support through resource and symbolic threats (see Figure 1). Hypothesis 3 was that the model with social Darwinism as the distal ideological predictor would provide greater support for Figure 1 than competing models using SDO or RWA.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

American MTurk workers ( $N = 823$ ) were recruited to participate in a “Social Issues Study” in exchange for \$1.00. Only native-born White citizens were included (i.e.,

those who answered “yes” to the screening question, “Were you born in the U.S.?” and who selected “White” as their ethnicity). Of the participants who passed the screening ( $N = 614$ ), seven indicated in the final screen at the end of the survey that they were either not White or not born in the US. I excluded these participants, leaving data for  $N = 607$  for the analyses described below. In terms of gender, 363 (60%) participants were female and 244 (40%) were male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 99 ( $M = 40.48$ ,  $SD = 13.42$ ). Extensive bootstrapping research indicated that a sample of  $N = 462$  would detect even a small but significant mediation effect at 80% power (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007).

## **Materials**

**Social Darwinism.** Social Darwinian beliefs were assessed using the Social Darwinism Scale (Rudman & Saud, 2017; Appendix A). Participants rated eight items on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include, “The fittest members of our society naturally rise to the top”; and “Social reformers who want to make us all equal just do not understand that people are by nature unequal.” Responses were averaged such that high scores reflect stronger endorsement of social Darwinism ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ).

**Social dominance orientation (SDO).** Preference for social hierarchy was measured using the social dominance orientation scale (Pratto et al., 1994). Participants evaluated sixteen items on a scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 7 (*very positive*). Sample items include, “Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups”; “It’s OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others”; and “If certain groups stayed in their place, we would have fewer problems.” Responses were reverse-coded as

needed and then averaged such that high scores reflected a preference for inequality between groups in society ( $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ).

**Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA).** RWA was measured using a scale adapted from Kandler, Bell & Riemann (2016; Appendix C). Participants rated eleven items on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include “Instead of more civil rights, America needs more upholding of law and order”; “Turning away from tradition will prove to be America’s downfall”; and “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues that children should learn.” After recoding, responses were averaged such that high scores indicate a greater degree of RWA ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ).

**Resource threat.** Beliefs that Mexican immigrants compete with native-born Americans for economic resources was measured using a zero-sum beliefs scale (adapted from Esses et al., 1998; Appendix D). Participants rated nine items on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include, “When Mexican immigrants make economic gains, American citizens lose out economically”; and “Mexican immigrants are taking jobs away from American citizens.” Responses were averaged such that high scores indicated stronger beliefs that Mexican immigrants pose a threat to economic resources ( $\alpha = .97$ ,  $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ).

**Symbolic threat.** Beliefs that Mexican immigrants threaten American culture and values were measured using a symbolic threats scale (adapted from Stephan et al., 1999; Appendix E). Participants rated twelve items on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include, “Mexican immigrants should learn to conform to the norms of American society as soon as they arrive”; and “Americans are

being asked to change too much to accommodate cultural differences with Mexican immigrants.” After recoding, responses were averaged such that high scores indicate stronger perceptions of symbolic threat from Mexican immigrants ( $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ).

**Immigration policy support.** Six items scaled from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 6 (*strongly support*) measured support for policies proposed or enacted by the Trump administration that restrict immigration (Appendix F). The items describe policies on immigration generally (e.g., “Establishing a merit-based immigration system that limits the number of family members living outside the U.S. who can join their relatives in the U.S.”) but also that specifically target Mexican immigrants (e.g., “Building a physical wall between the U.S. and Mexico that spans the entire border” and “Refusing a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and their children.”). Responses were averaged such that high scores indicate stronger policy support ( $\alpha = .93$ ,  $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ).

**Immigrant attitudes.** For use as a covariate, negative attitudes toward Mexican immigrants was measured using feeling thermometers. Participants were asked “How cold (unfavorable) or warm (favorable) do you feel toward the following groups?” Participants rated two subsequent groups using a slider on a scale from 0 (*very cold*) to 100 (*very warm*). The groups of interest were “Mexican immigrants” and “native-born Americans.” Negative attitudes toward Mexican immigrants was computed by subtracting “Mexican immigrant” scores from “native-born American” scores (Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz & Cotterill, 2015). Results of a one-sample *t*-test showed that participants strongly favored the native-born American,  $M_{\text{difference}} = 16.81$ ,  $SD = 29.62$ ,

$t(606) = -13.97, p < .001$ .

**Demographics.** For use as covariates, I assessed demographics. After indicating their gender and age, participants responded to four other measures. Immigrant background was measured using two items with the response choices “Yes” or “No”: “Was your father [mother] born in the United States?” For these items, 584 (96%) participants reported that their father was born in the US, and 577 (95%) reported that their mother was born in the US. These latter two items had low variability and did not correlate with focal variables, so I excluded them from further analyses. Following prior research (Rudman & Saud, 2017), the remaining items were used as covariates in regression models.

Political identity was measured using the item, “What is your political orientation?” on a scale from 1 (*very liberal*) to 10 (*very conservative*) ( $M = 4.98, SD = 2.78$ ). Religious identity was measured with two items: “Would you describe yourself as religious?” on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*); and “What are your feelings toward orthodox (strict, devout) religious beliefs?” on a scale from 1 (*very unfavorable*) to 6 (*very favorable*). These two items were averaged to form a religious identity score ( $r(606) = .69, p < .001, M = 3.06, SD = 1.58$ ).

To assess SES, participants were asked to indicate, “Which of the following best describes your socioeconomic status?” using four options: (1) *working class*, (2) *middle class*, (3) *upper middle class*, (4) *wealthy* ( $M = 2.72, SD = .82$ ). To assess level of education, participants were asked to indicate, “What is the highest degree or level of schooling that you have completed?” using five options: (1) *less than high school*, (2) *high school degree or GED*, (3) *some college*, (4) *4 year college degree*, (5) *beyond 4*

*year college degree (e.g., master's, PhD, or professional degree) ( $M = 3.63, SD = .92$ ).*

### **Procedure**

Participants completed the focal measures described above in randomized order. Participants then completed demographic items in the order described above. For screening purposes, participants again reported their ethnicity and U.S. citizenship status. Finally, they were fully debriefed and compensated.

### **Results**

Correlations among variables are shown in Table 1. Results supported known groups validity for all three ideological measures. Specifically, social Darwinism and SDO correlated significantly with gender, political and religious identity, as well as SES. Thus, conservatives, men, wealthy participants, and religious people scored more highly on these two ideological measures, as expected based on past research (Rudman & Saud, 2017). RWA correlated positively with political and religious identity and negatively with level of education. That political conservatives, religious people, and those with less formal education scored more highly on RWA is consistent with prior findings (Altemeyer, 1988; Carvacho, Zick, Hays, Gonzalez, Manzi, Kocik, & Bertl, 2013). Supporting their convergent validity, Table 1 also shows positive, significant relationships among the three ideologies, and between each ideology and immigrant resource and symbolic threat perceptions. Finally, Table 1 reveals positive, significant relationships between immigration policy support and threat perceptions, as well as each ideology. This further demonstrates convergent validity among the key measures for this study.

### **What Motivates Immigrant Threat Perceptions?**

Hypothesis 1a stated that social Darwinism would covary with resource threat and symbolic threat better than SDO and RWA. Using Fisher r-to-z transformations, I examined significant differences in correlations between each of the three ideological variables and the two threat variables. Unexpectedly, RWA correlated most highly with immigrant threat perceptions. First, the correlation between resource threat and RWA,  $r(606) = .72, p < .001$ , was significantly more positive than the correlation between resource threat and (1) social Darwinism,  $r(606) = .66, p < .001, Z = 2.72, p = .006$ , and (2) SDO,  $r(606) = .62, p < .001, Z = 4.19, p < .001$ . Second, the correlation of symbolic threat and RWA,  $r(606) = .76, p < .001$ , was significantly more positive than the correlation between symbolic threat and (1) social Darwinism,  $r(606) = .69, p < .001, Z = 3.41, p < .001$ , and (2) SDO,  $r(606) = .65, p < .001, Z = 4.93, p < .001$ . Compared with SDO, social Darwinism correlated significantly more with resource threat,  $Z = 1.89, p = .058$ , and symbolic threat,  $Z = 1.98, p = .048$ , though significance was marginal in the former comparison. Thus, Hypothesis 1a was not supported.

Hypothesis 1b stated that social Darwinism would contribute more unique variance than SDO or RWA to resource and symbolic threats, after adjusting for immigrant attitudes and demographic predictors. To test this hypothesis, I separately regressed resource threat on social Darwinism, SDO, or RWA in Step 2, after adjusting for demographics and prejudice in Step 1 (using standardized predictors). Table 2 shows the results. I then repeated this analysis by substituting symbolic threat for resource threat. Table 3 shows the results. Considering resource threat first, social Darwinism contributed more unique variance to resource threat (10%) compared with SDO (7%) and RWA (9%). However, RWA contributed more unique variance to symbolic threat (9%)



compared with SDO (6%) and social Darwinism (8%). These results partially support Hypothesis 1b. Nonetheless, the small differences in variance explained for social Darwinism and RWA (1% in each equation) suggest that they performed similarly.

### **Predicting Anti-Immigrant Policy Support**

Hypothesis 2 stated that perceived resource and symbolic threats from immigrants would covary with anti-immigrant policy support better than ideologies. The correlation between policy support and resource threat,  $r(606) = .81, p < .001$ , was significantly more positive than the correlation between policy support and (1) social Darwinism,  $r(606) = .68, p < .001, Z = 6.63, p < .001$ , and (2) SDO,  $r(606) = .63, p < .001, Z = 8.37, p < .001$ , but not RWA,  $r(606) = .79, p < .001, Z = 1.26, p = .207$ . However, the correlation between policy support and symbolic threat,  $r(606) = .86, p < .001$ , was significantly more positive than the correlation between policy support and (1) social Darwinism,  $r(606) = .68, p < .001, Z = 10.34, p < .001$ , (2) SDO,  $r(606) = .63, p < .001, Z = 11.99, p < .001$ , and (3) RWA,  $r(606) = .79, p < .001, Z = 5.13, p < .001$ . Notably, the correlation between symbolic threat and policy support was also significantly greater than the correlation between resource threat and policy support ( $Z = 4.5, p < .001$ ). To summarize, with RWA performing similarly to resource threat as a covariate of policy support, these results only partially supported Hypothesis 2.

To examine which ideology best predicts policy support as mediated by resource and symbolic threat, I tested three mediation models, with social Darwinism, SDO, and RWA as the distal predictors in each one respectively; symbolic and resource threats as mediators; and policy support as the outcome variable (see Figure 1). Hypothesis 3 stated

that the model with social Darwinism as the distal ideological predictor would provide more support for Figure 1 than competing models using SDO or RWA.

I used PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) to conduct three mediation analyses with bias-corrected bootstrapping based on 1,000 iterations. Each analysis tested Figure 1 while adjusting for prejudice and demographic covariates. For each model, if the confidence intervals for indirect effects did not contain 0, then the relationship between ideology and policy support was significantly mediated by resource and/or symbolic threats. Because I found that symbolic threat covaried more strongly with policy support than resource threat, I also examined whether the indirect effects of each threat significantly differed.

Table 4 reveals that Hypothesis 3 was not supported because bootstrapped results for the three models were too similar to be conclusive. Although the  $a_1$  and  $a_2$  path coefficients were descriptively larger for RWA (Model C), compared with social Darwinism (Model A) or SDO (Model B), the  $b_2$  path coefficients were larger for SDO and social Darwinism, compared with RWA ( $b_1$  path coefficients were smaller but similar in each model). As a result, the amount of variance explained in anti-immigrant policy support was nearly identical: 79% for social Darwinism and SDO; 80% for RWA. Therefore, each ideology performed similarly as a distal predictor of anti-immigrant policy support.

Turning to mediation, the indirect effects for resource threat were nearly identical and always significant, ranging from  $b = .23$  for SDO to  $b = .24$  for social Darwinism and RWA. Likewise, the indirect effects for symbolic threat were similar and always significant, ranging from  $b = .47$  for SDO to  $b = .49$  for social Darwinism and RWA.

Comparing these indirect effects revealed that symbolic threat was a significantly stronger mediator in each model (contrast  $b = .23$  in Model A and Model C, contrast  $b = .24$  in Model B), all  $ps < .05$  (see Table 4). Thus, compared with resource threat, symbolic threat was a more effective mediator of the relationships between each ideology and policy support.

### Discussion

To my knowledge, the present study is the first to examine the influence of social Darwinism on anti-immigrant attitudes, comparing this ideology with two others—RWA and SDO—that have been linked with anti-immigrant sentiments in prior research (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010; Esses et al., 1998; Esses et al., 2001; Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt, 2006). Like RWA and SDO, social Darwinism positively covaried with prejudice against Mexican immigrants; perceived economic and value conflicts with Mexican immigrants; and support for anti-immigrant policies, such as building a wall across the southern border and denying the children of undocumented immigrants a path to U.S. citizenship. The major findings were as follows: (1) RWA covaried with perceived resource and symbolic threats significantly more than social Darwinism and SDO (which did not differ); (2) regression analyses suggested that resource threats were best explained by social Darwinism, and symbolic threats were explained best by RWA, but the differences between these ideologies were small, involving only 1% of variance accounted for; (3) social Darwinism, SDO, and RWA similarly supported Figure 1 (the theorized ideology → threats → policy support mediation model); and (4) symbolic threat was a stronger mediator of the influence of each ideology on anti-immigrant policy support, compared with resource threat.

The present research confirmed that perceived resource and symbolic threats from immigrants mediate the relationships between ideologies and anti-immigrant sentiments (Esses et al., 1998; Duckitt, 2006). However, my prediction that social Darwinism would perform best as the ideological underpinning to both resource and symbolic threats and therefore, would emerge as the best distal predictor of policy support in Figure 1, was not supported. To claim even partial support is too strong, given that differences in the amount of variance explained were small (Tables 2-4). Instead, it appears that all three ideologies are strong contenders for being prime motivators of anti-immigrant sentiments. Therefore, while social Darwinism should be included in the arsenal of belief systems that defend nativism, it did not have primacy over other ideologies.

This conclusion is surprising for two reasons. First, as noted, social Darwinism provides both a positive orientation toward social hierarchies and the rationale for defending them (biological determinism). By contrast, RWA and SDO are strictly evaluative measures. In prior research, social Darwinism proved to be a better predictor of defending social hierarchies compared with SDO or essentialism, plausibly because it provides a “full value” justification for power disparities (Rudman & Saud, 2017). That social Darwinism did not emerge as a superior ideology in this study may be telling of the uniqueness of the issue at hand. Perhaps anti-Mexican immigrant sentiments are more exclusionary (desiring to keep them away), rather than adoptive of immigrants into a system that incorporates them, but keeps them on a lower status rung relative to native-born citizens.

Second, my predictions were bolstered by the results of a pilot test showing stronger relationships between social Darwinism and immigrant resource threat,

compared with SDO. According to Duckitt (1991), SDO is a key predictor of economic threats. Given that social Darwinism performed better than SDO, the pilot data were promising for my hypothesis. In the present research, SDO and social Darwinism showed similar correlations with anti-immigrant sentiments, including resource threat, despite using a nearly identical measure of economic conflict (based on zero-sum beliefs). The only difference was that it was tailored to Mexican immigrants, rather than immigrants in general. Because different results are unlikely due to that change, or to using a more adult sample (rather than undergraduates), the lesson to be drawn is that pilot data are not guaranteed replication.

The present research sought to provide a more cohesive theory for understanding anti-immigrant threats due to inconsistencies in prior results. In particular, a cross-cultural meta-analysis (Cohrs & Stelz, 2010) did not support Duckitt's dual-process model (1991), which contends that *only* SDO [RWA] should predict resource [symbolic] threat. However, resource and symbolic threats were not measured (instead, they were inferred based on stereotypes of immigrant targets). The current research directly measured both types of threat and Duckitt's model was still not supported. First, at the bivariate level, RWA covaried with each threat more strongly than SDO. Second, after adjusting for covariates, RWA and SDO each predicted both resource and symbolic threats (as did social Darwinism). Although the present research adapted a prior measure of RWA (Kandler et al., 2016), mainly by rewording items that were outdated, improving the measure is an unlikely cause of the discrepancies between the present results and Duckitt's model. Rather, the strong correlation between the two types of threats ( $r = .85$ ) suggests instead that they should not even be viewed as distinct constructs, much less as

involved in distinct processes, at least in the context of American's beliefs about Mexican immigrants.

In summary, the present findings suggest that the desire to exclude Mexican immigrants and reserve “America for Americans” is justified by at least three ideologies: biological determinism (social Darwinism), preference for group-based dominance (SDO), and fears regarding security as well as a desire to preserve societal norms and tradition (RWA). There was no indication that any belief system performed substantially better than other contenders, but there was strong evidence that social Darwinism deserves a place in the pantheon of anti-immigrant ideologies.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The present research has several limitations. With correlational studies, structural equation modeling should be employed in order to (1) control for measurement error, and (2) assess goodness-of-fit indexes, which might provide more clarity of results. In the future, I plan to learn SEM to achieve that goal. Nonetheless, correlational research prevents any causal conclusions. Therefore, future studies should use experimental methods to test the causal effect of ideologies on immigrant threat perceptions.

Future research might also compare the influence of social Darwinism (with SDO and RWA) on policies that are especially dehumanizing, such as the Trump administration's policy of separating families at the border and incarcerating children. Although the program was stopped after mass protests, several hundred children remain in the U.S. after their parents were deported. Notably, a majority of Republicans (58%) supported that inhumane policy (Blake, 2018).

Although Figure 1 should pertain to other immigrant groups, the current research was limited to Mexican immigrants. Future research should test its generality. In particular, President Trump's efforts to ban Muslim immigrants are popular among his supporters (Clement, 2017). As with Mexican immigrants, perceived threats (i.e., fear of Muslim terrorists) have spurred a desire for closed borders throughout the West. Most recently, the Supreme Court upheld a ban on individuals entering the United States from several Muslim countries (Liptak & Shear, 2018). If my predicted results can be extended to Muslims in the U.S., I will seek to collaborate with international researchers to replicate my findings in the U.K. and other European countries.

The question of why some groups are shunned in a country made up almost entirely of immigrants is complex, and research is needed to better determine the interplay of ideologies, perceived threats, and anti-immigrant sentiment. Results might then inform strategies for tempering perceived threats from immigrants. In this way, an antidote may emerge, so that a nation with a global reputation for welcoming immigrants continues to do so in a manner that does not disrupt the cohesion of the society.

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## Appendix A

## Social Darwinism Scale (Rudman &amp; Saud, 2017)

**Directions:** Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*).

1. The fittest members of our society naturally rise to the top.
2. In the race to the top, nature dictates that those without the superior qualities needed to compete will lose.
3. Social reformers who want to make us all equal just do not understand that people are by nature unequal.
4. Poor people are poor because they do not possess natural qualities needed to succeed.
5. Tampering with pure competition by propping up naturally weaker groups prevents society from reaching its full potential.
6. The most naturally fit people appropriately take over the best positions and resources for their own benefit.
7. Society benefits most when the fittest people in society keep the resources they earn as opposed to spreading resources to lower classes through high taxes.
8. Policies that promote weaker groups to positions of power threaten the natural order.

## Appendix B

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO7) Scale (Ho, Sidanius, Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington, Pratto, Henkel & Stewart, 2015)

**Directions:** Show how much you favor or oppose each idea below by selecting a number from 1 to 7 on the scale below. You can work quickly; your first feeling is generally best.

1. Some groups of people must be kept in their place.
2. It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.
3. An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom.
4. Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.
5. Groups at the bottom are just as deserving as groups at the top.
6. No one group should dominate in society.
7. Groups at the bottom should not have to stay in their place.
8. Group dominance is a poor principle.
9. We should not push for group equality.
10. We shouldn't try to guarantee that every group has the same quality of life.
11. It is unjust to try to make groups equal.
12. Group equality should not be our primary goal.
13. We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed.
14. We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups.
15. No matter how much effort it takes, we ought to strive to ensure that all groups have the same chance in life.
16. Group equality should be our ideal.

## Appendix C

Right Wing Authoritarianism Scale (Adapted from Kandler, Bell, & Riemann, 2016)

**Directions:** Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

1. Instead of more civil rights, America needs more upholding of law and order.
2. The days when women were submissive to their husbands belong strictly in the past. A “woman’s place” should be wherever she wants to be. (R)
3. Turning away from tradition will prove to be America's downfall.
4. There is no crime that justifies the death penalty. (R)
5. Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues that children should learn.
6. Gays and lesbians deserve to keep the right to be legally married. (R)
7. What our country really needs are strong, determined leaders who will crush evil and dissent.
8. It is good to give young people the time and freedom to protest against things they don’t like. (R)
9. Progress is made by law-abiding people, not protesters who challenge society’s norms and traditions.
10. It is important to protect fully the legal rights of even radical protesters and extremists. (R)
11. The real keys to a good life are obedience, discipline, and sticking to the tried and true.

## Appendix D: Resource Threat

Zero-Sum Resources Measure (Adapted from Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998)

**Directions:** Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*).

1. When Mexican immigrants make economic gains, American citizens lose out economically.
2. Money spent on social services for Mexican immigrants means less money for services for American citizens.
3. The more Mexican immigrants gain economic power, the more native-born Americans lose their economic power.
4. As Mexican immigrants take advantage of American education, there are fewer opportunities available for native-born U.S. students.
5. Mexican immigrants are taking jobs away from American citizens.
6. Mexican immigrants threaten the livelihoods of native-born Americans.
7. The more Mexican immigrants America accepts, the harder it is for native-born Americans to financially get ahead.
8. More jobs for Mexican immigrants means lower wages for native-born Americans.
9. More financial aid to Mexican immigrants means less aid for native-born Americans.

## Appendix E: Symbolic Threat

Symbolic Threats Scale (Adapted from Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999)

**Directions:** Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*).

1. Mexican immigrants should learn to conform to the norms of American society as soon as they arrive.
2. The core values of Mexican immigrants are not compatible with American core values.
3. Too many Mexican immigrants are unwilling to assimilate, or adopt American cultural values.
4. The values and beliefs of Mexican immigrants are similar to those of most Americans. (R)
5. Mexican immigrants should NOT have to accept American customs and language. (R)
6. Mexican immigrants should learn English as soon as they arrive and teach it to their children.
7. The U.S. should NOT translate ballots and other voting materials into Spanish to accommodate Spanish speakers.
8. Americans are being asked to change too much to accommodate cultural differences with Mexican immigrants.
9. Mexican immigrants should adopt American values and not the other way around.
10. Mexican immigrants threaten American values by entering the U.S. illegally.
11. Mexican immigrants tend to bring drugs and crime to America.

12. Mexican immigrants threaten American culture by changing its demographic makeup.

## Appendix F

## Immigration Policy Support Items (Author Designed)

**Directions:** The Trump administration has proposed or already enacted several new immigration policies. Please indicate your level of opposition or support of each of the new policies described below using a scale from 1 (*strongly oppose*) to 6 (*strongly support*).

1. Building a physical wall between the U.S. and Mexico that spans the entire border.
2. Expanding U.S. Border Patrol and tripling the number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers to increase arrests of undocumented immigrants.
3. Decreasing legal immigration by half within a decade by reducing the number of green cards issued and no longer prioritizing immigrants' family members for legal entry.
4. Establishing a merit-based immigration system that limits the number of family members living outside the U.S. who can join their relatives in the U.S.
5. Refusing a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and their children.
6. Creating a new government agency (Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement) devoted solely to American victims of crimes committed by immigrants.