Perceived China Threat, Conspiracy Belief, and Public Support for Restrictive Immigration Control During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
During the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an unprecedented increase in the level of political blame attributed to China for the health crisis and other associated xenophobic discourses. Although previous research has revealed the effects of perceived outgroup threats on popular support for policies that control outgroups, threats posed by foreign countries have received little empirical attention. This study advances previous research by focusing on the independent effects of the perceived China threat to public support for restrictive immigration control during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a sample drawn from the 2020 American National Election Studies, the results showed that the perceived China threat substantially heightened public support for restrictive immigration control. More importantly, demand for restrictive immigration control intensified when individuals had stronger perceptions of threats and conspiracy beliefs about the virus leak from a Chinese lab. Taken together, our findings demonstrate the roles of politically constructed threats and conspiracy beliefs during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing new mechanisms of popular attitudes toward social control.

Keywords
Perceived China threat, conspiracy belief, U.S. immigration control, public opinion in the United States, COVID-19

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**Introduction**

In March 2020, former President Trump declared the COVID-19 pandemic a national emergency in the United States (Trump, 2020). The public health crisis has posed a threat to the economy, politics, and everyday life for Americans (Tessler et al., 2020). With the virus purportedly originating in Wuhan, China, U.S. politicians have blamed China for its inadequate initial response to the virus (Rubin & Agostinone-Wilson, 2021). Although perceptions of the China threat to the United States have a long history (e.g., Broomfield, 2003; Gertz, 2002; Roy, 1996), U.S. political leaders and media during the ongoing pandemic have amplified the threat by referring to COVID-19 using fear-provoking names such as the “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu” (Costello, 2020).

Informed by intergroup conflict theory, perceived threats from outgroups may increase public support for social control of outgroups to secure the current social order (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1983). Consistent with this logic, previous studies have shown how threats posed by Blacks, Latinos, and immigrants strengthen public support for restrictive immigration control (Berg, 2013; Chiricos et al., 2014; Pickett et al., 2014; Rocha & Espino, 2008; Stupi et al., 2016); yet, less is known about the role of perceived threats from foreign countries. Thus, this study investigates whether the perceived China threat—constructed and intensified through political and media endorsement during the COVID-19 pandemic—has independent effects on the public’s attitudes toward restrictive forms of immigration policy.

Perceived threat can be elevated by other factors, which require further empirical attention. During the ongoing pandemic, one conspiracy theory (i.e., the lab-leak conspiracy theory) claimed that a Chinese lab intentionally created and leaked the new virus (Maxmen, 2022; Schaeffer, 2020). Viewing the pandemic situation through the lab-leak lens could make the public perceive threats from China to a greater extent, leading them to support more punitive control of outgroup members. Accordingly, our research investigates the joint effects of perceived China threats and the conspiracy beliefs on public support for restrictive immigration policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research is timely as it explains how perceptions of a pandemic-specific threat and a political plot may shape popular opinion about out-group control.

Using data from the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES), the current study addresses the abovementioned research goals. Our empirical findings show that, as hypothesized, perceptions of the China threat significantly impact public support for restrictive immigration control. We also find that the association between perceived China threat and preferences for restrictive immigration control is stronger among conspiracy theory believers, suggesting that politicians may disseminate conspiracy theories to mobilize public support for social issues. Taken together, our findings highlight the pivotal role of the China threat in popular attitudes toward immigration control issues in the ongoing pandemic. Overall, our results reveal new mechanisms of social control by clarifying the threat perceptions and conspiracy beliefs about a particular country during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Background and Hypotheses

Social Control and Restrictive Immigration Control

Foreign entities have long been stigmatized as the origin of diseases and viruses (Markel & Stern, 2002). Consequently, immigration has been restricted during public health crises. For example, during the 1900s bubonic plague outbreak, the public demanded systemic regulations on those perceived to carry the disease, such as Chinese immigrants (Risse, 2012). Similarly, when HIV/AIDS became a social issue during the 1980s, entry bans were imposed on HIV-positive immigrants and visitors to the United States (Fairchild & Tynan, 1994).

In December 2019, the COVID-19 virus was first discovered in Wuhan, China. The virus quickly spread across the world. In the early months of the pandemic (March-May, 2020), 2 million COVID-19 cases were confirmed, and 130,000 people died from the virus in the United States (World Health Organization, 2020). To delay the spread of the new virus, many Americans favored restricting immigration. According to a Pew Research Report (Deane et al., 2021), 95% of respondents favored restricting immigration. Indeed, in March 2020, former President Trump announced a travel ban for people from many European countries that had experienced surges of COVID-19 cases, while the Department of State halted visa services (embassies and consulates across the world; History.com, 2021). These defensive reactions align with common sense; when people see increased cases of a new virus, which is believed to stem from a foreign country, they naturally desire strict control over foreigners to mitigate the virus’s spread (Errett et al., 2020). Yet, proponents of the intergroup conflict perspective explain that this public support for control over outgroups during the pandemic is not merely a disease avoidance tactic but also could be a response to perceptions of threats posed by foreign entities.

This intergroup conflict perspective offers the most fundamental rationale for the increasing demand for outgroup control (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1983). The theory posits that when ingroup members perceive potential harm to the current social order by outgroups, they will support stricter social control. Outgroups are perceived to pose various threats to economic, political, cultural, and social conditions. Scholars have noted that any type of threat usually involves punitive and discriminatory practices toward outgroup members. This is because public support for such exclusionary policies toward outgroups expresses the desire to maintain the current social order (Stupi et al., 2016).

Supporting this theoretical argument, previous studies have documented evidence of white support for punitive policies that target Black people (Bobo & Johnson, 2004; Cochran & Chamlin, 2006; Unnever & Cullen, 2007). Additionally, studies have shown heightened perceptions of threats posed by Latinos and immigrants to increase public support for punitive immigration control (Berg, 2013; Pickett, 2016; Rocha & Espino, 2008; Stupi et al., 2016). These studies’ results show how perceived outgroup threats, often constituting aggregated racial/ethnic groups and immigrants,
shape hostile attitudes toward and support for punitive control of outgroup members. However, less is known about the public response to threats posed by a foreign country. In the next section, drawing on the intergroup conflict perspective, we discuss the significance of perceptions of the China threat for public attitudes toward punitive immigration control during COVID-19 pandemic.

The China Threat During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Public Support for Immigration Control

Existing research framed by the intergroup conflict perspective has highlighted changes in the types and levels of threats depending on social contexts (Olzak, 1990; Quillian, 1995). For example, after the U.S. Civil War, levels of perceived threat posed by Black people intensified, particularly in rural areas of southern states (Olzak, 1990). Similarly, in the aftermath of 9/11, there were heightened perceptions of threats posed by immigrants and by terrorists (Oswald, 2005; Tessler et al., 2020). Such social changes enhance public anxiety, and the public often seeks a scapegoat. Under these circumstances, blame often falls on outgroups as sources of social, political, and economic turmoil (Muzzatti, 2005; Pickett et al., 2014; Quillian, 1995). Thus, the types and levels of perceived threats differ based on the social context; that is, the outgroup that receives the most blame varies across historical and social conditions.

At the end of March 2020, 42 states issued stay-at-home orders in response to the COVID-19 outbreak, placing 95% of the American population in physical isolation (Secon & Woodward, 2020). In the first month of the pandemic, small businesses in many states shut down, and at least 26 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits (Gura, 2020). Tessler et al. (2020, p. 639) note that “the threat of a global pandemic to people’s everyday lives is something that most Americans have not experienced before.” That is, these events show that the China threat during the pandemic was salient and provoked multiple forms of threat, including threats to the economy, health, and well-being.

In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, media outlets and politicians have exaggerated the China threat (e.g., Flores, 2018; Menjívar et al., 2018; Olzak & Shanahan, 2014). For example, President Trump accused China of being the origin of COVID-19 at a press conference: “It’s from China. That’s why. It comes from China. I want to be accurate” (Fallows, 2020, p. 6). Trump then consistently used fear-provoking terms to link the virus with China, such as the “China Virus,” “Kung Flu,” and “Wuhan virus” in his Tweets, media interviews, and press conferences (Costello, 2020; Moreno, 2020; Rogers et al., 2020). U.S. politicians have provoked fear and anxiety about China, and the media have further disseminated these messages to the public, heightening the salience of the China threat. A Wall Street Journal article described China as “the real sick man of Asia” (Mead, 2020). Similarly, a New York Times article included the phrase “…a deadly Chinese…” in its title (Grady, 2020).
Through these “claims-making” processes executed by politicians and the media, objective social conditions—the COVID-19 pandemic and China—took on social meaning and became perceived as major threats by the public (e.g., Beckett, 1997; Flores, 2017, 2018). According to extant studies, China has long been considered a threat to U.S. military, political, and economic systems (e.g., Broomfield, 2003; Gertz, 2002; Roy, 1996). Despite their longstanding influence, perceptions of the China threat reached a historic high during the pandemic. According to a Gallup report, while only 25% of American respondents expressed unfavorable perceptions of China in 1980, this figure has peaked since the COVID-19 outbreak, reaching 79% in 2022, a 216% increase over the past four decades (Gallup, 2022).

Scapegoating outgroups enhances negative emotions toward them and encourages public support for exclusionary policies (Flores, 2017, 2018). When the perceived threat of outgroup members is heightened, it increases feelings of animosity toward outgroup members that manifest in discriminatory and punitive social policies (Unnever & Cullen, 2009). One related example occurred in the southern states during the 1970s and 1980s. Politicians conveyed symbolic messages that linked Black people to crime; such messages evoked working-class whites’ fear of Blacks and successfully garnered support for highly punitive crime policies, known as the Southern Strategy (Alexander, 2010; Beckett & Sasson, 2004; Tonry, 2010). Likewise, when former President Trump falsely linked Mexican immigrants to criminal behaviors, there were increased hostile attitudes and behaviors toward racial/ethnic minority groups in the United States (Burke, 2016; Flores, 2018).

In accordance with prior research findings, during the pandemic, the perceived China threat and negative portrayals of China have fueled hatred toward racial/ethnic groups and encouraged exclusionary practices targeting outgroup members (Rubin & Agostinone-Wilson, 2021). After Trump tweeted the fear-provoking term “Chinese virus” in March 2020, about 777,000 hashtags with #chinesevirus were posted across online communities. Immigrants and people of color experienced racial discriminations; these groups of people were often told to “Go back to [their] country” after politicians’ repeated use of anti-Chinese rhetoric (Gstalter, 2021). Based on these descriptive trends, the next logical step is to empirically examine whether the China threat has meaningfully shaped public demands for restrictive out-group control during the pandemic. Accordingly, our study addresses this question by examining the independent effects of the China threat on public attitudes toward restrictive immigration control. Thus, this study proposes the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Perceptions of the China threat will be positively linked to public support for restrictive immigration control.

Role of Subjective Understanding of the Public Health Crisis

Notably, perceptions of external factors can make people more susceptible to feeling threatened, which can result in a desire for stronger social control over outgroups that...
are perceived as unfavorable (e.g., Oliver & Wong, 2003; Stupi et al., 2016; Wang, 2012). Consistent with this idea, previous research has shown that the effects of the perceived HIV/AIDS threat on exclusionary attitudes toward immigrants were stronger among those who believed that the disease originated from a foreign country (Herek & Capitanio, 1999). Similarly, Prati and Pietrantoni’s (2016) research demonstrated that the perceived threat of Ebola led to discrimination toward foreigners and was stronger among individuals who had received misinformation about the disease.

Under uncertain social conditions, people tend to believe in plots that explain the causes of tumultuous social events, also known as conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). Conspiracy theories often accuse a particular group for social problems, making claims that are less than scientific (Douglas et al., 2019; Jolley et al., 2020). Based on previous studies, it is possible that individuals feel more threatened by an accused group due to conspiracy beliefs.

The pandemic context is critical for researchers to consider because outgroup members could be more vulnerable to harm from conspiracy theories during an uncertain health crisis. On January 26, 2020, conservative news outlet The Washington Times first published a story claiming that the COVID-19 virus had originated from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Later, this lab-leak theory was endorsed by a high-profile U.S. politician, Republican Senator Tom Cotton (Brewster, 2020). While scientists are still seeking to confirm the virus’s origin, the lab-leak conspiracy theory—emphasizing China’s mishandling of the new virus from the outset—has dominated U.S. political debate (Landay & Hosenball, 2021). In accordance with previous findings, understanding the pandemic through the lens of the lab-leak conspiracy theory may make the public more vulnerable to perceptions of the China threat, thus leading them to demand more punitive social control of outgroups. On these grounds, our second research hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 2**: The association between perceptions of the China threat and public support for restrictive immigration control will be stronger among the lab-leak conspiracy theory believers.

**Data and Methods**

**Data and Sample**

To address the abovementioned research hypotheses, this study analyzed data from the ANES, which is a nationally representative survey conducted in the United States. The ANES data include respondents’ sociodemographic information, stereotypes of racial minorities and immigrants, and public opinion on immigration policy. Social scientists including sociologists, criminologists, and political scientists have noted that the ANES data offer comprehensive and important information for understanding public opinion, attitudes, and behaviors concerning social issues, such as immigration policy (e.g., Citrin et al., 1997; Garand et al., 2017; Unnever & Cullen, 2010). Our study focused specifically on the ANES 2020 Time Series Study, which was conducted
early in the COVID-19 pandemic through probability samples of U.S. citizens age 18 or older (N = 8,280). The 2020 data were collected at two timepoints: before and after the Presidential election (November 3, 2020). After listwise deletion for the dependent variable (support for restrictive immigration control) and key covariates (perceived China threat and conspiracy belief about COVID-19’s origin), 1,072 respondents were excluded (12.9% of the original sample). When missing cases for all other covariates were further deleted, the final sample included 5,563 respondents, with 2,717 total missing cases (32.8% of the original sample).

**Measures**

Our dependent variable was public support for restrictive immigration control. The ANES (2020) survey included an item assessing support for controlling the number of immigrants: “Do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased a lot, increased a little, left the same as it is now, decreased a little, or decreased a lot?” This item utilized a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (“increased a lot”) through 3 (“left the same as it is now”) to 5 (“decreased a lot”), with higher scores indicating stronger support for restrictive immigration control.

The two important covariates were perceptions of the China threat and belief in the lab-leak conspiracy theory. The former was assessed with the item “How much is China a threat to the United States?” rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) through 3 (“A moderate amount”) to 5 (“A great deal”). The latter was assessed by a binary item asking whether the respondent believes that COVID-19 was intentionally developed in a lab (1 = Yes, 0 = No). This binary variable reflects a distinctive subjective perspective on the ongoing public health crisis—more specifically, misperception of the context—among U.S. adults.

Moreover, we controlled for other important variables that might influence public perceptions of threat and attitudes about immigration policies, such as individuals’ political ideology, attitudes toward racial minorities and immigrants, and socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Race and immigration research suggests that awareness of racial inequality can shape individuals’ policy preferences in ways that target racial/ethnic minority groups (e.g., Reny et al., 2019). Accordingly, this study controlled for the degree to which respondents perceive discrimination against Asians in the United States. Higher scores indicated less awareness about discrimination against Asians. The response scale ranged from 1 (“A great deal”) through 3 (“A moderate amount”) to 5 (“Not at all”). With respect to previous findings of the positive link between the public’s stereotypical beliefs about immigrants and support of restrictive immigration policies (e.g., Berg, 2013; Pryce, 2018; Rocha & Espino, 2008), we controlled for negative stereotypes about immigrants; this variable comprised the average of three items each rated on a 5-point scale (1 = “Strongly disagree” through 3 = “Neither agree nor disagree” to 5 = “Strongly agree”) assessing the degree to which respondents agree with the following statements: “Immigrants are generally good for America’s economy” (reverse-coded); “America’s culture is
generally harmed by immigrants”; and “Immigrants increase crime rates in the United States.” Higher scores indicated stronger agreement with the statements (i.e., negative stereotypes about immigrants). According to threat research, when individuals perceive economic insecurity, the perceived economic threat could lead them to support restrictive forms of social control (e.g., Chiricos et al., 2014; Reny et al., 2019). Therefore, this paper controlled for negative perception of the economy (perceived economic insecurity; 1 = “Very good” through 3 = “Neither good nor bad” to 5 = “Very bad”).

According to previous studies, demographic characteristics play important roles in individuals’ attitudes toward social policies (e.g., Baumer et al., 2003; Chiricos et al., 2014; Enns & Ramirez, 2018; Rocha & Espino, 2008). Thus, we accounted for gender, race/ethnicity, foreign-born status, age, education, household income, political ideology, religion, and region in our analyses. Gender was coded as 1 (female) or 0 (male). Race/ethnicity was measured with six categories: 1 = white, non-Hispanic (reference group); 2 = Black, non-Hispanic; 3 = Hispanic; 4 = Asian or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander; 5 = Native American/Alaska Native or other race; and 6 = multiple races. Respondent’s country of origin (foreign-born status) indicates whether they were born in another country regardless of their current citizenship. Education level was measured on an 8-point scale, considered as a continuous variable in later analyses: 1 = less than high school, 2 = high school graduate or equivalent (e.g., GED certification), 3 = some college but no degree, 4 = associate’s degree—occupational/vocational, 5 = associate’s degree—academic, 6 = bachelor’s degree, 7 = master’s degree, and 8 = professional or doctoral degree.

Household income levels spanned 22 categories, treated as a continuous variable in the analyses: 1 = under $9,999, 2 = $10,000–14,999, 3 = $15,000–19,999, 4 = $20,000–24,999, 5 = $25,000–29,999, 6 = $30,000–34,999, 7 = $35,000–39,999, 8 = $40,000–44,999, 9 = $45,000–49,999, 10 = $50,000–59,999, 11 = $60,000–64,999, 12 = $65,000–69,999, 13 = $70,000–74,999, 14 = $75,000–79,999, 15 = $80,000–89,999, 16 = $90,000–99,999, 17 = $100,000–109,999, 18 = $110,000–124,999, 19 = $125,000–149,999, 20 = $150,000–174,999, 21 = $175,000–249,999, and 22 = $250,000 or more). The average household income was approximately $60,000–64,999. Political ideology was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (“extremely liberal”) to 7 (“extremely conservative”). Religion encompassed eight denominations: 0 = not religious (reference group), 1 = Mainline Protestant, 2 = Evangelical Protestant, 3 = Black or undifferentiated Protestant, 4 = Roman Catholic, 5 = other Christian, 6 = Jewish, and 7 = other religion. Age was a continuous variable ranging from 18 to 80. Finally, region encompassed four categories: 1 = Northeast (reference group), 2 = Midwest, 3 = South, and 4 = West. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics, and Table 2 presents the correlational coefficients of variables.

**Analytic Strategy**

Figure 1 presents the research model. To answer the research questions, our paper constructed two sets of linear regression models. The first model examined the independent associations of the perceived China threat (independent of conspiracy belief)
with the outcome variable (preference for restrictive immigration control), testing Hypothesis 1. The second model examined the interplay between the China threat and conspiracy belief, testing Hypothesis 2.

### Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N = 5,563).

| Continuous Variables                              | Mean | S.D. | Min | Max |
|---------------------------------------------------|------|------|-----|-----|
| Support for restrictive immigration control        | 2.95 | 1.14 | 1   | 5   |
| Perceived China threat                            | 3.64 | 1.15 | 1   | 5   |
| Low-perception of discrimination against Asians    | 3.31 | 0.95 | 1   | 5   |
| Negative stereotypes against immigrants            | 2.21 | 0.95 | 1   | 5   |
| Perceived economic insecurity                      | 3.24 | 1.11 | 1   | 5   |
| Age                                                | 51.51| 17.03| 18  | 80  |
| Education                                          | 4.79 | 2.00 | 1   | 8   |
| Household income                                   | 12.45| 6.61 | 1   | 22  |
| Political ideology (conservative)                  | 4.04 | 1.68 | 1   | 7   |

| Categorical Variables                              | N    | %   |
|---------------------------------------------------|------|-----|
| Conspiracy belief in COVID-19’s origin             |      |     |
| Not originated from the Chinese lab (ref.)         | 3146 | 56.6|
| Intentionally developed in the Chinese lab         | 2417 | 43.4|
| Gender                                            |      |     |
| Male (ref.)                                        | 2633 | 47.3|
| Female                                             | 2930 | 52.7|
| Race                                               |      |     |
| white, non-Hispanic (ref.)                         | 4246 | 76.3|
| Black, non-Hispanic                                | 380  | 6.8 |
| Hispanic                                           | 447  | 8.1 |
| Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander        | 193  | 3.5 |
| Native American, Alaska Native, or other race      | 107  | 1.9 |
| Multiple races                                     | 190  | 3.4 |
| Origin of country                                  |      |     |
| Born in the United States territories (ref.)       | 5110 | 91.9|
| Foreign-born                                       | 453  | 8.1 |
| Religion                                           |      |     |
| Not religious (ref.)                               | 1290 | 23.2|
| Mainline Protestant                                | 798  | 14.3|
| Evangelical Protestant                             | 850  | 15.3|
| Black or undifferentiated Protestant               | 453  | 8.1 |
| Roman Catholic                                     | 1134 | 20.4|
| Other Christian                                    | 667  | 12.0|
| Jewish                                             | 140  | 2.5 |
| Other religion                                     | 231  | 4.2 |
| Region                                             |      |     |
| Northeast (ref.)                                   | 918  | 16.5|
| Midwest                                            | 1362 | 24.5|
| South                                              | 2015 | 36.2|
| West                                               | 1268 | 22.8|
Table 2. Correlational Matrix.

| Variables                                                                 | (1)  | (2)  | (3)  | (4)  | (5)  | (6)  | (7)  | (8)  | (9)  | (10) | (11) | (12) | (13) | (14) | (15) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| (1) Support for restrictive immigration control                           |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (2) Perceived China threat                                               | 0.20*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (3) Conspiracy belief in COVID-19’s origin                               | 0.37*** | 0.21*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (4) Low-perception of discrimination against Asians                       | 0.25*** | 0.11*** | 0.14*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (5) Negative stereotypes against immigrants                              | 0.60*** | 0.17*** | 0.44*** | 0.21*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (6) Perceived economic insecurity                                        | -0.32*** | -0.17*** | -0.30*** | -0.24*** | -0.37*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (7) Gender (Female)                                                       | -0.01 | -0.07*** | -0.01 | -0.08*** | -0.01 | 0.08*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (8) Race (white)                                                         | 0.05*** | 0.09*** | -0.05*** | 0.13*** | 0.05*** | -0.12*** | -0.01 |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (9) Race (Black)                                                         | -0.02 | -0.07*** | 0.05*** | -0.08*** | 0.01 | 0.13*** | 0.05*** | -0.49*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (10) Race (Hispanic)                                                     | -0.04*** | -0.05*** | 0.04*** | -0.06*** | -0.06*** | 0.01 | 0.00 | -0.53*** | -0.08*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (11) Race (Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander)                     | -0.03* | -0.03* | -0.06*** | -0.05*** | -0.06*** | 0.03* | -0.02 | -0.34*** | -0.05*** | -0.06*** |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| (12) Race (Native American, Alaska Native, others)                       | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.05*** | -0.02 | 0.02 | 0.01 | -0.02 | -0.25*** | -0.04*** | -0.04*** | -0.03* |      |      |      |      |
| (13) Race (multiple)                                                     | -0.01 | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.04*** | 0.00 | 0.04*** | 0.00 | -0.34*** | -0.05*** | -0.06*** | -0.04*** | -0.04*** | -0.03* |      |      |
| (14) Foreign-born                                                         | -0.03*** | -0.04** | 0.00 | -0.03* | -0.09*** | 0.03* | -0.01 | -0.30*** | 0.00 | 0.20*** | 0.37*** | 0.02 | 0.02 |      |      |
| (15) Age                                                                 | 0.12*** | 0.24*** | 0.01 | 0.12*** | 0.06*** | -0.09*** | -0.01 | 0.19*** | -0.05*** | -0.14*** | -0.07*** | 0.00 | -0.09*** | 0.01 |      |
| (16) Education                                                           | -0.21*** | 0.00 | -0.25*** | -0.01 | -0.30*** | 0.09*** | 0.01 | 0.06*** | -0.07*** | -0.08*** | 0.09*** | -0.01 | 0.00 | 0.02 | -0.01 |
| (17) Household income                                                    | -0.09*** | 0.05*** | -0.13*** | 0.05*** | -0.16*** | -0.05*** | -0.10*** | 0.1*** | -0.12*** | -0.06*** | 0.06*** | -0.04*** | -0.03* | -0.01 | -0.04*** |
| (18) Political ideology (conservative)                                    | 0.50*** | 0.29*** | 0.43*** | 0.31*** | 0.53*** | -0.52*** | -0.10*** | 0.19*** | -0.09*** | -0.02 | -0.04*** | 0.01 | -0.04*** | -0.02 | 0.16*** |
| (19) Religion (not religious)                                            | -0.19*** | -0.14*** | -0.20*** | -0.11*** | -0.21*** | 0.21*** | -0.06*** | 0.01 | -0.08*** | 0.00 | 0.05*** | 0.00 | 0.03*** | 0.00 | -0.19*** |
| (20) Religion (Mainline Protestant)                                      | 0.03 | 0.04*** | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.02 | -0.02 | 0.04*** | 0.09*** | 0.00 | -0.09*** | -0.04*** | -0.02 | 0.03*** | -0.06*** | 0.14*** |
| (21) Religion (Evangelical Protestant)                                   | 0.13*** | 0.06*** | 0.16*** | 0.07*** | 0.19*** | -0.11*** | 0.02 | -0.05*** | 0.19*** | -0.07*** | -0.05*** | -0.02 | 0.02 | -0.07*** | 0.05*** |
| (22) Religion (Black/undifferentiated Protestant)                        | 0.05*** | 0.03* | 0.07*** | 0.04*** | 0.05*** | -0.07*** | 0.03 | 0.01 | 0.02 | -0.03* | -0.02 | 0.03 | 0.00 | -0.01 | 0.04*** |
| (23) Religion (Roman Catholic)                                           | 0.05*** | 0.03* | 0.01 | 0.04*** | 0.03* | -0.08*** | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.11*** | 0.15*** | -0.03 | -0.04*** | -0.05*** | 0.05*** | 0.06*** |
| (24) Religion (other Christian)                                          | 0.03* | 0.02 | 0.08*** | 0.02 | 0.06*** | -0.05*** | 0.02 | -0.04*** | 0.04*** | 0.02 | -0.03* | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.00 | -0.08*** |
| (25) Religion (Jewish)                                                   | -0.05*** | -0.02 | -0.07*** | -0.03* | -0.07*** | 0.04*** | -0.02 | 0.05*** | -0.04*** | -0.01 | -0.02 | -0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.03* |
| (26) Religion (other)                                                    | -0.08*** | -0.02 | -0.04*** | -0.06*** | -0.10*** | 0.08*** | 0.00 | -0.09*** | -0.03* | -0.03* | 0.19*** | 0.09*** | 0.04*** | 0.17*** | -0.02 |
| (27) Region (Northeast)                                                  | -0.03* | 0.00 | -0.05*** | -0.02 | -0.04*** | 0.04*** | 0.00 | 0.04*** | -0.03* | -0.04*** | 0.01 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.03* | 0.02 |

(continued)
Table 2. (continued)

| Variables                    | (1)     | (2)     | (3)     | (4)     | (5)     | (6)     | (7)     | (8)     | (9)     | (10)    | (11)    | (12)    | (13)    | (14)    | (15)    |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| (28) Region (Midwest)        | 0.02    | -0.04***| 0.00    | 0.03*   | 0.03    | -0.03*  | 0.01    | 0.13*** | 0.03*   | -0.10***| -0.05***| -0.03*  | -0.03*  | -0.08***| -0.02*  |
| (29) Region (South)          | 0.06*** | 0.04**  | 0.10*** | 0.01    | 0.10*** | -0.09***| 0.00    | -0.09***| 0.11*** | 0.04*** | -0.04***| 0.03*   | 0.01    | 0.00    | 0.01    |
| (30) Region (West)           | -0.06***| 0.00    | -0.07***| -0.03*  | -0.10***| 0.10*** | 0.01    | -0.06***| -0.07***| 0.09*** | 0.09*** | 0.00    | 0.02    | 0.06*** | 0.00    |
| (17) Household income        | 0.36*** |
| (18) Political ideology (conservative) | -0.18***| -0.02 |
| (19) Religion (not religious)| 0.06*** | 0.00    | -0.33***|
| (20) Religion (Mainline Protestant)| 0.06*** | 0.04** | 0.03*   | -0.22***|
| (21) Religion (Evangelical Protestant)| -0.13***| -0.09***| 0.22*** | -0.23***| -0.17***|
| (22) Religion (Black/ undifferentiated Protestant)| 0.02    | 0.00    | 0.11*** | -0.16***| -0.12***| -0.13***|
| (23) Religion (Roman Catholic)| -0.02   | 0.06*** | 0.08*** | -0.28***| -0.21***| -0.21***| -0.15***|
| (24) Religion (other Christian)| -0.07***| -0.04***| 0.08*** | -0.20***| -0.15***| -0.16***| -0.11***| -0.19***|
| (25) Religion (Jewish)       | 0.08*** | 0.06*** | -0.09***| -0.09***| -0.07***| -0.07***| -0.05***| -0.08***| -0.06***|
| (26) Religion (others)       | 0.08*** | -0.02   | -0.12***| -0.11***| -0.09***| -0.09***| -0.06***| -0.11***| -0.08***| -0.03* |
| (27) Region (Northeast)      | 0.05*** | 0.05*** | -0.08***| 0.00    | 0.00    | -0.11***| -0.04***| 0.12*** | -0.06***| 0.10*** | 0.03*   |
| (28) Region (Midwest)        | -0.05***| -0.02   | 0.01    | -0.03*  | 0.06*** | -0.03   | 0.00    | 0.05*** | 0.00    | -0.05***| -0.05***| -0.25***|
| (29) Region (South)          | -0.04***| -0.06***| 0.13*** | -0.07***| 0.01    | 0.21*** | 0.02    | -0.09***| -0.02   | -0.04***| -0.03*  | -0.34***| -0.43***|
| (30) Region (West)           | 0.06*** | 0.05*** | -0.09***| 0.11*** | -0.07***| -0.11***| 0.01    | -0.05***| 0.08*** | 0.01    | 0.05*** | -0.24***| -0.31***| -0.41***|

* p < .05  ** p < .01  *** p < .001 (two-tailed test)
Results

Main Findings

Table 3 shows our main findings. Model 1 examined whether perceptions of the China threat significantly affected public attitudes about restrictive immigration policy. We found that when individuals perceived the China threat to a greater extent, they tended to support restrictive forms of immigration control more strongly (\(b = 0.037, p < .001\)). This result supported our first hypothesis. Independent of perceptions of the China threat, when individuals believed that COVID-19 originated in a lab, they tended to express a stronger preference for restrictive immigration control (\(b = 0.166, p < .001\)). For the sensitivity check, we tested each variable separately (not shown), which yielded similar results as those of Model 1. We also note that other variables were significantly related to attitudes toward restrictive immigration control: negative stereotypes about immigrants, other ideological, and political attitudes. When individuals were less aware of racial inequality (particularly with respect to Asians), they were more likely to favor restrictive immigration control (\(b = 0.094, p < .001\)). Similarly, individuals holding negative stereotypes about immigrants tended to show a stronger preference for restrictive immigration control during the pandemic (\(b = 0.526, p < .001\)). Unlike previous findings, perceived economic insecurity was not significantly related to restrictive immigration control.

Several demographic characteristics were also significantly related to attitudes toward restrictive immigration control in Model 1, consistent with previous findings. Individuals who were older (\(b = 0.003, p < .001\)), less educated (\(b = -0.020, p < .01\)), and more conservative (\(b = 0.136, p < .001\)) tended to favor restrictive immigration control. Although previous immigration studies have found that male adults tend to support punitive social policies (e.g., Baumer et al., 2003; Rocha et al., 2014), we found that women were more likely to support restrictive immigration control (\(b = 0.067, p < .01\)), which is reinforced by some recent findings on women’s desire for punitive policies (Snedker, 2006). Recent research shows that when women feel obligated to protect their children and family members, they tend to demand more punitive
social policies. During uncertain situations such as a pandemic, women who feel anxious about their families’ health and financial conditions might exert a stronger desire for punitive forms of social control, including with immigration.

Table 3. Regression Analysis: Estimating Public Support for Restrictive Immigration Control.

| Covariates                                      | Model 1          | Model 2          |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Perceived China threat * Conspiracy belief      | 0.037 *** (0.011)| 0.047 * (0.021) |
| Perceived China threat                         | 0.037 *** (0.011)| 0.016 (0.014)   |
| Conspiracy belief in COVID-19’s origin          | 0.166 *** (0.028)| -0.006 (0.082)  |
| Low-perception of discrimination against Asians | 0.094 *** (0.013)| 0.094 *** (0.013)|
| Negative stereotypes against immigrants        | 0.526 *** (0.016)| 0.525 *** (0.016)|
| Perceived economic insecurity                   | -0.014 (0.013)  | -0.013 (0.013)  |
| Female (ref. = male)                            | 0.067 ** (0.024) | 0.066 ** (0.024)|
| Race (ref. = white, non-Hispanic)               |                  |                  |
| Black, non-Hispanic                             | 0.036 (0.049)   | 0.042 (0.049)   |
| Hispanic                                        | -0.037 (0.046)  | -0.034 (0.046)  |
| Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific islander     | 0.132 (0.071)   | 0.128 (0.071)   |
| Native American, Alaska Native, or other race   | 0.038 (0.085)   | 0.035 (0.085)   |
| Multiple races                                  | 0.046 (0.065)   | 0.049 (0.065)   |
| Foreign-born                                     | 0.031 (0.048)   | 0.030 (0.048)   |
| Age                                             | 0.003 *** (0.001)| 0.003 *** (0.001)|
| Education                                       | -0.020 ** (0.007)| -0.020 ** (0.007)|
| Household income                                | -0.001 (0.002)  | 0.001 (0.002)   |
| Political ideology (conservative)               | 0.136 *** (0.010)| 0.136 *** (0.010)|
| Religion (ref. = not religious)                |                  |                  |
| Mainline Protestant                             | -0.025 (0.041)  | -0.022 (0.041)  |
| Evangelical Protestant                          | -0.096 * (0.043)| -0.095 * (0.043)|
| Black or undifferentiated Protestant            | -0.044 (0.050)  | -0.041 (0.050)  |
| Roman Catholic                                  | -0.002 (0.038)  | 0.002 (0.038)   |
| Other Christian                                 | -0.077 (0.043)  | -0.076 (0.043)  |
| Jewish                                          | -0.009 (0.078)  | -0.009 (0.078)  |
| Other religion                                  | -0.053 (0.063)  | -0.047 (0.063)  |
| Region (ref. = Northeast)                       |                  |                  |
| Midwest                                         | -0.006 (0.037)  | -0.003 (0.037)  |
| South                                           | -0.044 (0.036)  | -0.042 (0.036)  |
| West                                            | 0.001 (0.038)   | -0.002 (0.038)  |
| (Intercept)                                     | 0.708 *** (0.103)| 0.779 *** (0.108)|
| R-Squared                                       | 0.429           | 0.430           |

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p < .001 (two-tailed test)
Additionally, unlike previous studies that found stronger support for outgroup control among evangelicals (e.g., Levchak et al., forthcoming), our results showed that evangelicals were less likely than the non-religious to support restrictive immigration control during the pandemic ($b = -0.096, p < .05$). During this ongoing health crisis, these religious people express true faith in God’s protection of their health (e.g., Schnabel & Schieman, 2021), which may lead them to perceive outgroups as less threatening.

Model 2 examined the interplay of perceptions of the China threat and conspiracy belief about COVId-19’s origin, which provided evidence supporting our second hypothesis ($b = 0.047, p < .05$). Figure 2 plots predicted values of public support for restrictive immigration control as a function of perceptions of the China threat and belief in the lab-leak theory. When individuals felt more threatened by China and more strongly believed that COVID-19 originated from a Chinese lab, they tended to support restrictive immigration control to a significantly greater extent than did those who felt threatened by China but did not espouse the conspiracy theory belief. Other covariates that were significant in Model 1 were significant in Model 2 as well.

**Supplementary Analysis**

It is well-documented that U.S. citizens are ideologically divided, maintaining divergent opinions on social issues based on their political ideologies (e.g., McCarty et al., 2006). According to our additional descriptive statistics, there was a large partisan gap in endorsement of the lab-leak theory (66.5% of conservatives vs. 18.7% of liberals). The supplementary findings (not shown) illustrate that

![Figure 2](image_url)

**Figure 2.** Predicted values of support for restrictive immigration control: by the China threat and conspiracy beliefs.
perceptions of the China threat and belief in the lab-leak conspiracy theory affect attitudes toward immigration control differently according to individuals’ political ideology.

Given that politically conservative individuals are already familiar with the lab-leak theory from their ideological circles, more in this group believe the theory. Because of their familiarity with the information, their perceptions of the China threat may not be substantially changed by the conspiracy theory. In contrast, on average, liberal individuals are less likely to endorse conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019; Jolley et al., 2020). If liberals do believe the conspiracy theory, however, they may feel more threatened, in turn producing stronger attitudes in favor of social control of immigrants. The interplay between perceptions of the China threat and the conspiracy belief could be larger in magnitude among liberals compared to moderates or conservatives (Figure 3). In our study, believing the lab-leak conspiracy theory increased the likelihood of supporting restrictive immigration control, particularly among liberals. These supplementary analyses provide evidence that politicians’ continuous, active engagement in creating and spreading conspiracy theories can mobilize broad public opinion.

**Discussion and Implications**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, perceptions of the China threat were heightened through political endorsements and media portrayals. According to existing
scholarship, perceived threats from outgroups can lead the public to support restrictive social policies to maintain the current social order (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1983). While previous studies demonstrate the effects of aggregated threats of Blacks, Latinos, and immigrants on public preferences for punitive social control (Berg, 2013; Pickett, 2016; Rocha & Espino, 2008; Stupi et al., 2016), this study examined the independent effects of perceptions of the China threat on public attitudes toward restrictive immigration control using the 2020 ANES data. Additionally, we investigated the joint effects of perceptions of the China threat and belief in the conspiracy theory that accused China of leaking the virus on public support for restrictive immigration control. Overall, our results support the intergroup conflict theoretical perspective. Next, we discuss important findings in terms of their contributions and implications.

Our first key finding was the significant effect of perceived China threat on public attitudes toward immigration control, supporting Hypothesis 1. That is, perceptions of the China threat were significantly associated with greater support for restrictive immigration policy, consistent with previous findings regarding perceived threats from outgroups and public punitiveness (Berg, 2013; Pickett, 2016; Rocha & Espino, 2008; Stupi et al., 2016). Perceptions of the China threat intensified due to unprecedented uncertainties created by the new virus and political blame on China for the pandemic. Our results contribute to the literature by clarifying how politically constructed foreign threats can shape public opinion during public health crises. More importantly, the results imply that increased public discourse on immigration control has been driven by those who are fearful of China. Our study thus highlights that public opinion and attitudes about immigration issues might be best understood by considering time- and context-specific threats rather than aggregated measures.

The second important finding was the role of the lab-leak conspiracy belief in amplifying perceptions of the China threat, thus leading to stronger popular support for immigration control during the pandemic, which supported Hypothesis 2. The results show that individuals with stronger perceptions of the China threat who also believe in the lab-leak conspiracy are likely to exhibit stronger support for restrictive immigration policy. Considering previous findings on the link between misinformation and elevated threat perception, this result may be explained by individual-level psychological processes. Information acquisition about the link between COVID-19’s origin and the role of China could intensify negative feelings toward the targeted group, which could justify discriminatory social policies toward outgroup members, such as restrictive immigration policy (Jolley et al., 2020).

Our supplementary findings reveal that the connection between perceptions of the China threat and belief in the lab-leak conspiracy theory is stronger among ideological liberals compared to moderates or conservatives. Politicians often create and propagate conspiracy theories to solidify their support base (Atkinson & DeWitt, 2018; Douglas et al., 2019). Such conspiracy theories have had a broader impact during the pandemic. In these circumstances, the lab-leak conspiracy theory was propagated to unify a nation by blaming a foreign actor as the source of the ongoing social problem. As Republican
politicians have consistently and widely promoted the lab-leak theory, the idea has gained traction among the public. Our findings show that consistent and publicized political plots could even mobilize attitudes about immigration issues among those who are considered less affected by the other political party’s political claims. This finding offers insights into why political elites and elected officials repeatedly disseminate conspiracy theories and less-than-scientific political claims.

Our study has several limitations that should be addressed by future research. First, public opinion and immigration studies have highlighted racial/ethnic differences in individuals’ support for punitive immigration control. Thus, we recommend that future studies examine whether the relationship between perceptions of the China threat and public support for immigration policies varies across racial/ethnic groups. For example, Asian Americans may respond to the purported China threat and conspiracy theories differently. However, we cannot test this hypothesis due to data limitations in the ANES survey; further data collection thus will be necessary. The most recent year of the pandemic has raised our awareness about Asian hate crimes. Indeed, FBI statistics (2020) show that reported Asian hate crime incidents have substantially increased compared to the pre-pandemic period. Since perceptions of threats can shape not only popular attitudes but also public actions (e.g., Flores, 2017), future studies should investigate how the perceived China threat leads to anti-Asian racism and hate crimes. This line of research is critical for understanding the unprecedented increase anti-Asian sentiment and behavior (Yam, 2022).

Finally, because this paper analyzed a cross-sectional survey dataset, we were unable to address how other types of threats affect public opinion about immigration policies in different social contexts. For instance, have perceptions of threats by the Middle East driven public opposition to expanding immigration post-9/11? Did the perceived threat by Syrian refugees shape public attitudes toward restrictive immigration control under the Trump administration? How have perceptions of the Russia threat affected public opinion about immigration after the country’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022? These are questions that future research could examine to advance our understanding of how context-dependent threats affect public opinion.

This research brings our attention to the forces that have shaped public support for restrictive immigration control during the pandemic. By providing evidence on important connections between politically constructed foreign threats, conspiracy theories, and public attitudes, the current study has implications for U.S. immigration policy and related debates. Given that public opinion substantially shapes immigration enforcement and practices (e.g., Arizona SB 1070 and 287 (g) program; Chand & Schreckhise, 2015; Wong, 2012), our findings could help clarify changes in immigration control during the recent pandemic period. Additionally, U.S. immigration hardliners have long argued for more restrictive immigration control for security purposes. However, the current research contributes evidence that immigration control is rather politically motivated (e.g., Rocha et al., 2011). To clarify previous findings, future research must continuously navigate forces that motivate policies for outgroup control and hinder inclusion of underrepresented groups in the United States (e.g., Chen & Wu, 2021; Lee & Jang, 2021).
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Notes
1. This study focuses on the threat posed by China as a country, not Chinese people.
2. ANES is a two-wave survey conducted during presidential election years (e.g., 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020). Its respondents, therefore, complete both pre-election and post-election surveys (see https://electionstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/HowToAnalyzeANESData.pdf).
3. This paper conducted a sensitivity analysis using multiple imputations (not shown). Our sample based on listwise deletion (N = 5,563) includes fewer Blacks but more educated and richer individuals than the sample from multiple imputations (N = 7,208). However, the main results were similar across the samples.
4. We further examined whether a theoretically comparable foreign threat has significant effects on public attitudes about immigration control during the pandemic. While Russia has long posed multiple threats to the United States (Stent, 2020) similar to those posed by China, the Russia threat has been less salient during the pandemic and not targeted by conspiracy theories related to COVID-19. Following our theoretical logic, we expected that the Russia threat and the lab-leak theory together would not significantly affect public attitudes about immigration issues during the pandemic. This expectation was supported by the results of additional analyses (not shown).

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