

Border Fortifications and Global Diffusion of Far-right Movement

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Abstract

Border walls are argued to be prominent symbols invoking politics of protectionism and nationalism in the homeland. But what effect do border fortifications have on political attitudes beyond the two states that share the fortified border? Our project advances research into border walls as political symbols by considering the ‘transnational’ ideological effects that such fortifications might have. Border walls can serve as shared symbols through which individuals espousing exclusionary attitudes in different states recognize and affirm their respective ideas on sovereignty and security from external threats. In this sense, foreign border walls can resonate and amplify far-right populism in third-party states, contributing to what might be called ‘transnational nationalism’ or ‘illiberal internationalism’—where nationalist actors draw rhetorical and symbolic legitimacy from abroad. To test this argument, we field survey experiments cross-nationally, possibly in USA, Poland, France, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and/or Taiwan. The respondents are exposed to texts, images, and/or videos of fortified borders abroad and we measure how it shapes political attitudes. We expect to find that that right-wing individuals exposed to foreign border fortifications feel a stronger sense of ideological kinship with like-minded groups abroad, which in turn intensifies their support for exclusionary policies at home. This paper aim to demonstrate that, in a globalized media environment, border fortification not only signals national closure but also facilitates the international diffusion of right-wing identity, revealing how walls meant to block cross-border flows of people can instead accelerate cross-border flows of ideology.

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1. Motivation

Border fortifications are not merely material instruments of territorial control. Walls, fences, checkpoints, surveillance towers, and militarized border zones also operate as political symbols through which states communicate sovereignty, membership, and exclusion. Borderlands are often sites of what [Longo \(2017\)](#) calls “sovereign anxiety,” where states seek to render territorial authority visible in response to external and transnational threats. From this perspective, border fortification does more than regulate movement across territory; it materializes the distinction between insiders and outsiders and symbolizes the state’s capacity to define, defend, and administer the national community ([Brown, 2010](#)). Existing research therefore treats walls and fortified borders as visible expressions of sovereignty, exclusion, protectionism, and nationalist politics ([Brown, 2010](#); [Jones, 2012](#); [Vallet, 2014](#)). In this sense, walls dramatize the idea of the nation as a bounded community under threat.

The political effects of border fortification are especially clear within the states that build them. Governments often justify walls and fortified borders as necessary responses to migration, terrorism, crime, territorial insecurity, smuggling, public-health threats, or civilizational danger ([Andreas, 2003](#); [Hassner & Wittenberg, 2015](#); [Carter & Poast, 2017](#)). Yet the appeal of fortification is not only functional. Border walls can also address what scholars describe as ontological or identity-based insecurity: mass anxieties about group cohesion, national identity, labor-market competition, and the perceived dangers of cross-border flows ([Simmons & Kenwick, 2022](#); [Simmons & Shaffer, 2024](#)). Because borders help define place-based identity, fortification is often presented as a means of protecting dominant ethnonational communities from allegedly undesirable outsiders ([Simmons & Kenwick, 2022](#); [Gazzotti, 2021](#)). These justifications can activate nationalist sentiment by presenting the state as the protector of the homeland and by framing outsiders as sources of danger. Border fortification may therefore strengthen support for exclusionary policies at home, not only because citizens believe such policies are effective, but also because walls provide a powerful visual and rhetorical symbol of national closure ([Andreas, 2003](#); [Brown, 2010](#); [Simonneau, 2016](#)).

Border fortification can also shape attitudes in neighboring states. When a state hardens a shared border, neighboring publics may interpret the action as a hostile signal rather than a purely defensive measure. This is especially likely when the border is disputed, militarized, or historically associated with conflict. Existing research shows that wall-building and fortification are more likely between country-pairs with prior militarized disputes, suggesting that walls are often embedded in broader interstate rivalry rather than neutral border management ([Carter & Poast, 2017](#); [Simmons & Kenwick, 2022](#)). Fortification can also improve a state’s capacity for surveillance, mobilization, and military deployment in peripheral regions, thereby increasing its bargaining leverage over adversaries ([Aleprete Jr & Hoffman, 2012](#); [Fravel, 2008](#); [Lee, 2020](#)). As a result, a wall or fortified border zone may suggest distrust, rejection, territorial ambition, or preparation for coercion. In this way, fortification can generate reactive nationalism among neighboring publics, especially where historical grievances, territorial disputes, or migration conflicts already exist ([Vasquez, 1993](#); [Toft, 2010](#)). In these cases, the wall becomes a symbol not only of the builder’s national identity, but also of the neighbor’s exclusion, humiliation, or insecurity.

Less understood, however, is whether border fortification affects publics beyond the states

directly separated by the wall.¹ In a globalized media environment, images of fortified borders travel far beyond their immediate geographic setting. Foreign walls can become internationally recognizable symbols of order, sovereignty, exclusion, and threat. They may therefore shape political attitudes among third-party publics who are not directly affected by the border itself. Existing scholarship has examined why states build walls, how border fortification responds to security threats, how walls express sovereign anxiety, and how border hardening shapes domestic and neighboring-state politics (Brown, 2010; Hassner & Wittenberg, 2015; Carter & Poast, 2017; Simmons & Kenwick, 2022). Other work shows that border security policies are often bound up with broader anxieties about globalization, migration, and cross-border flows of people, goods, and ideas (Andreas, 2003; Longo, 2017; Simmons & Shaffer, 2024). Yet we know less about whether foreign fortifications diffuse political attitudes across national contexts. Do third-party publics see foreign walls as legitimate acts of defense, threatening signs of authoritarian closure, or inspirational symbols of nationalist politics? More importantly, do such perceptions affect their own policy preferences at home, including support for exclusionary immigration policies, border security, or right-wing political movements? This paper addresses this gap by examining the transnational attitudinal effects of border fortification.

2. Theoretical Argument

We argue that border walls can function as shared ideological symbols through which individuals in different countries recognize and affirm similar ideas about sovereignty, security, and national identity. This argument builds on the insight that border fortification is not only a functional response to security threats, but also a symbolic representation of national sovereignty (Brown, 2010). Border fortification renders the state visible at the territorial edge, dramatizing its claim to control movement, distinguish insiders from outsiders, and protect the national community. Because borders define place-based identity, walls and fortified borders can become especially powerful symbols for publics concerned with cultural cohesion and national belonging (Simmons & Kenwick, 2022). In this sense, border fortifications are not only instruments of exclusion; they are also ideological objects that communicate a particular vision of political order: a bounded nation protected by a sovereign state against threatening external flows.

This symbolic quality helps explain why border walls may resonate across national contexts. Globalization has intensified the cross-border movement of capital, goods, people, and ideas, while also generating renewed efforts to police borders against the very flows that globalization enables (Andreas, 2003; Longo, 2017). If border fortification responds to shared anxieties about migration, smuggling, terrorism, cultural threat, and economic insecurity, then foreign walls may be legible to publics who face, or believe they face, similar problems at home. Exposure to a foreign border wall may therefore invite comparison: individuals may interpret another state's fortification as evidence that their own preferred understanding of sovereignty, threat, and national protection is also valid.

This process should be especially pronounced among individuals already inclined toward right-wing or exclusionary politics. Existing work links border control to identity-based con-

¹Only example I currently see is Mutz & Simmons (2022) where they examine how border fortification affects the nation's image through cross-national survey experiments.

cerns about cross-border flows and shows that populist leaders advancing exclusionary nationalist ideas are disproportionately likely to pursue border fortification (Linebarger & Braithwaite, 2022). Border fortification is also often justified through appeals that depict outsiders as cultural, criminal, or security threats, thereby stoking outgroup animosity and fear (Kurz & Berry, 2015; Lamour & Varga, 2020). For right-wing individuals, then, foreign border walls may not appear merely as another country's security policy. They may instead function as models of national protection and as visible evidence that like-minded actors abroad are confronting analogous threats. Seeing foreign states adopt similar exclusionary policies may validate respondents' own preferences, making border fortification appear less isolated, extreme, or nationally specific and more like part of a broader international response to shared problems. In this way, foreign fortifications can foster transnational ideological affinity and increase confidence in supporting comparable border-control policies at home.

The same symbolic process may also shape domestic policy preferences. If a foreign wall is interpreted as a successful or legitimate expression of sovereign control, it may increase support for comparable exclusionary policies at home, including stricter immigration enforcement, greater border militarization, or restrictions on allegedly undesirable cross-border flows. This expectation follows from research showing that border fortification often serves to reassure domestic publics that the government has control, even when its practical effects on migration, smuggling, or conflict spillovers are uncertain (Simonneau, 2016). Walls may therefore matter politically not only because they stop movement, but because they make state control visually and emotionally available to publics. When such images circulate internationally, they may provide symbolic resources that domestic actors and voters can use to justify similar policies in their own national context.

At the same time, exposure to foreign fortification may not produce uniformly positive reactions. For some respondents, walls may signal authoritarian closure, xenophobia, aggression, or coercive state power. Border fortification is connected not only to ontological security but also to militarized disputes, surveillance, mobilization, and the projection of state authority into peripheral regions (Carter & Poast, 2017; Simmons & Kenwick, 2022; Aleprete Jr & Hoffman, 2012; Lee, 2020). Fortified borders may therefore be read as threatening when they appear to consolidate control, restrict mobility, or harden conflict with neighboring populations. This means that foreign border walls may generate two opposed reactions: ideological admiration among individuals who view exclusionary sovereignty positively, and negative evaluation among individuals who interpret fortification as evidence of repression, aggression, or illiberal nationalism.

[Theoretical Mechanism for Right-wing Individuals]

Foreign government's border fortification

- ⇒ Perceived transnational ideological affinity
- ⇒ Ideological validation of pre-existing exclusionary preferences
- ⇒ Increased support for similar border fortification in one's own country

In doing so, border fortification may paradoxically produce a form of cross-border ideological diffusion. Walls are built to restrict movement across territory, but their images, meanings, and political lessons can travel across publics. They may help right-wing individuals in different countries recognize one another as participants in a shared politics of sovereignty, exclusion,

and national protection. At the same time, they may also mobilize opposition among publics who associate walls with authoritarianism or xenophobia. The central claim of this paper is therefore not simply that border walls affect the states that build them, but that foreign border fortifications can become transnational political symbols that shape ideological affinity, threat perception, and domestic policy preferences far beyond the fortified border itself.

H1: The effect of exposure to third-party border fortification on support for domestic border fortification is moderated by ideological orientation, such that the effect is stronger among individuals with more right-wing ideological orientations.

H2: The effect of exposure to third-party border fortification on perceived transnational ideological affinity is moderated by ideological orientation, such that the effect is stronger among individuals with more right-wing ideological orientations.

H3: Exposure to third-party border fortification increases exclusionary nationalism, particularly among individuals with more right-wing ideological orientations.

H4: Perceived transnational ideological affinity mediates the effect of exposure to third-party border fortification on support for domestic border fortification.

3. Research Design

To test our argument, we conduct parallel survey experiments in Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and/or Taiwan. These three cases allow us to examine whether foreign border fortifications shape political attitudes among publics that are not directly located on the fortified border. The design therefore focuses on third-party publics: respondents are exposed to information about border fortification abroad and then asked about their own political attitudes, ideological affinity with foreign actors, and support for similar policies in their own country. Fielding the experiment across three different national contexts also allows us to examine whether the symbolic effects of foreign walls travel across distinct political environments, including two Western democracies with salient immigration politics and one East Asian democracy with different security and migration contexts.

The experiment includes two types of treatments. The first treatment uses a hypothetical case involving an abstract foreign state. Respondents are told that a foreign government has recently expanded border fortification through walls, fences, surveillance systems, patrol roads, and checkpoints. The hypothetical treatment allows us to isolate the general symbolic effect of border fortification without attaching the stimulus to a specific country, leader, region, or conflict. This design reduces the risk that responses are driven by prior attitudes toward a particular foreign state rather than by the border-fortification cue itself. In this condition, the wall is presented as a generic foreign policy adopted by another country in response to cross-border migration and security concerns. The treatment vignette would be presented as follows:

State A recently announced a major expansion of border and security infrastructure in several regions of the country. The new policy includes additional fences,

surveillance systems, patrol roads, checkpoints, and administrative facilities near the national border. Government officials say the policy is intended to restore control over the country's borders, protect national sovereignty, and prevent unauthorized entry. Supporters argue that the new investments will defend the national community, preserve public order, and show that the government is putting its own citizens first.

The second treatment uses a real case of border fortification. We employ Poland's border fortification along its frontier with Belarus as the primary real-world treatment because it is a recent and politically meaningful example of border hardening associated with migration control, national security, territorial sovereignty, and the securitization of external threats.² The Poland–Belarus case captures the contemporary politics of exclusionary border enforcement in a European context, while also involving a broader security narrative in which migration, border control, and geopolitical confrontation are closely intertwined. Because the case is external to all three survey countries, it is suitable for testing third-party effects among respondents in Denmark, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and/or Taiwan.

In this condition, respondents are shown a short news video about Poland's border fortification (or other European country's) with Belarus.³ We use a video stimulus because border walls are highly visual political symbols: their effects may operate not only through policy information, but also through images of fences, patrols, checkpoints, surveillance systems, and territorial closure. The video therefore allows respondents to encounter the border fortification in a form closer to how foreign border hardening is often seen in real-world media environments. After viewing the video, respondents answer manipulation-check questions assessing whether they perceived the policy as a form of border fortification and whether they associated it with migration control, national security, sovereignty, geopolitical threat, or exclusion.

The use of both hypothetical and real-world treatments allows us to balance internal and external validity. The hypothetical treatment provides a cleaner test of whether border fortification as such affects attitudes. The real-world treatment tests whether the same mechanism operates when respondents encounter an actual foreign case with concrete political associations. If both treatments produce similar patterns, this would strengthen the claim that foreign border fortification can operate as a portable political symbol. If the real-world treatment produces stronger effects, this may suggest that the symbolic power of walls depends partly on their association with recognizable political actors, narratives, and conflicts.

Respondents are randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a control condition, a hypothetical border-fortification condition, or a real-case border-fortification condition. In the control condition, respondents read a neutral vignette about a foreign government investing in general infrastructure, such as roads and communications facilities, without reference to border security, migration control, or fortification. In the treatment conditions, respondents read information about border hardening abroad. After exposure, respondents answer manipulation-check questions measuring whether they perceived the policy as a form of border fortification, whether they viewed it as defensive or exclusionary, and whether they associated it with national

²We may use other cases of border fortifications for our survey in Poland. Also, the discussed case used in the treatment may differ, but it will be aligned in terms of its general context.

³For example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wvATirtcE34>. Different types of publicly available news clips will be used in countries where English is not the primary language.

security, sovereignty, or migration control.

Our main dependent variable is support for border fortification in the respondent's own country. We measure this using a multi-item scale asking respondents whether they support stronger border walls or fences, increased border surveillance, more checkpoints and patrols, and expanded government spending on border security. These items capture both physical fortification and broader border-control infrastructure. Responses are measured on a seven-point agreement scale and combined into an index, with higher values indicating stronger support for domestic border fortification.

In addition to support for domestic border fortification, we measure broader ideological outcomes to assess whether exposure to foreign border walls activates a more general nationalist worldview. Our primary ideological outcome is exclusionary nationalism, which we define as the belief that the national community should be protected from external threats through stronger territorial, cultural, and political boundaries. This measure allows us to examine whether foreign border fortification affects not only support for a specific policy, but also the ideological orientations that make such policies attractive. Respondents are asked to indicate their agreement with statements such as: "My country should prioritize its own citizens over foreigners," "Protecting national identity requires stronger control over borders," "The government should do more to protect the national community from outside influence," and "Maintaining national identity is more important than accommodating outsiders." Responses are recorded on a seven-point agreement scale and combined into an additive index, with higher values indicating stronger exclusionary nationalism.

We also measure perceived transnational ideological affinity as a key mechanism. This mediator captures whether exposure to foreign border fortification increases respondents' sense that their broader political worldview is shared by like-minded actors in other countries. Rather than measuring affinity only in relation to border policy, we conceptualize this mechanism as a more general perception of ideological commonality at the international level. Items include agreement with statements such as: "There are people in other countries who share my political values," "Political movements in different countries can be part of the same broader ideological struggle," and "I feel a sense of common purpose with people in other countries who hold political views similar to mine." These items are designed to capture perceived ideological commonality, international validation, and confidence that one's political worldview is not isolated within one's own national context.

Because our theory expects heterogeneous effects by ideology, we measure respondents' left-right ideological orientation before treatment. The central expectation is that exposure to third-party border fortification will increase support for domestic border fortification most strongly among right-wing respondents. We further expect this conditional effect to operate through perceived transnational ideological affinity. That is, right-wing respondents exposed to foreign border fortification should become more likely to see exclusionary border politics as part of a broader international project, which in turn should increase their support for similar policies at home.

In addition to the main dependent variable, we include secondary outcomes measuring related policy preferences and political evaluations. These include support for stricter immigration enforcement, support for military or police presence at the border, willingness to vote for

candidates who prioritize border security, and evaluations of the foreign government that built the wall. These additional outcomes allow us to distinguish between two possible responses to foreign fortification: ideological emulation and negative evaluation. Some respondents may see foreign walls as legitimate models of national protection, while others may interpret them as signs of authoritarianism, xenophobia, or aggression.

4. Analysis Plan

The empirical analysis proceeds in three steps. First, we estimate the average treatment effects of exposure to hypothetical and real-world border fortification on support for domestic border fortification. Second, we test whether these effects are moderated by respondents' ideological orientation, with particular attention to whether right-wing respondents respond more strongly to the treatments. Third, we assess whether perceived transnational ideological affinity mediates the relationship between treatment exposure and domestic policy support.

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