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# Displaced Worker Angst and Far Right Populism

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## ***Background***

Nothing causes more anguish and frustration than downward social mobility such as that experienced by less-educated workers and especially by displaced workers. Those who lose economic status lose more than income because they become so socially isolated that they are further frustrated through loneliness (Case and Deaton 2020). Hanna Arendt points out that lonely men are susceptible to authoritarian influence (1973, p. 475).

There is yet another aspect to the downward social mobility of low skilled men, namely that they are losing ground not only relative to social norms but also relative to the wages of low-skilled women. In 1973 men *without* a high-school diploma earn \$4/hour more than women *with* a high-school diploma (no college). However, by 2016 they are earning \$1.20/hour less, a decline of \$5.20/hour in their relative incomes. This also matters to their psychological alienation. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has a report that notes that 8.9 million manufacturing workers were displaced by imports from 1991 to 2019 and that 5.4 million workers were needed to produce the growing exports (Rose 2021). However, trade really cannot be blamed for this net loss of 3.5 million workers according to CSIS. Instead, most of the lost jobs come from rising productivity due to fewer workers needed in manufacturing. To make matters worse, CSIS points out that the US does less than its foreign competitors to help and retrain workers displaced due to layoffs, downsizing, and/or foreign trade competition.

However, the concept of net loss can be a deceptive term in a dual economy because the net really does not count for some workers. That is, many of the displaced workers were not able to find jobs in the expanding sectors such as IT and finance.

This chapter looks at how downward socio-economic mobility of displaced workers is fueling the rise of right-wing populism. After a review of relevant literature on worker displacement and angst follows an analysis of its implications for US politics. Data from government sources suggest that displacement has contributed to the deeply conservative populism. Finally, survey data demonstrate those who are more subject to bouts of unemployment are more likely to believe that immigrants take jobs away from US citizens and that “free” trade agreements are not good for the US.

### ***Previous Research on Worker Insecurity, Downward Mobility, and Politics***

researchers have explored the issues of and linkages among working class anxiety over economic conditions, declines in its standard of living, real or perceived threats to its standards of living, and its relationship to other issues, especially feelings toward wealthier classes and immigrants. In the US, Cummings (1977 and 1980) and Cummings and Lambert (1997 and 1998) show by examining national survey databases that many working class whites have biases towards other domestic racial and ethnic groups as well as immigrants due to several factors among which lower educational and occupational levels appear to be associated with greater bias and more negative views of other groups. The perception of individual or family downward mobility and the reasons for economic pessimism regarding the future appear to cut across all groups and not just members of lower occupations and lower incomes. Such pessimism was associated with greater support for immigration restrictions and nationalistic sentiments. Many believe that immigrants take jobs away from native workers (Cummings and Lambert 1998).

More recently while analyzing the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the US Presidency in 2016 and using more recent polling data, Ferguson, Page, Rothschild, Chang, and Chen (2020) find that economic and not just racial and social concerns have motivated many voters to support conservative populist candidates (Komlos 2017).<sup>1</sup> Many of their concerns appear to revolve around the threats of foreign imports, increasing immigration (competition from low-wage workers), growing inequality, and resentment toward the wealthy whereas socially they tend to be white, male, and somewhat biased against racial minorities and women. Many are disproportionately high school graduates, veterans, and evangelicals (Ferguson, Page, Rothschild, Chang, and Chen 2020). They do not live in higher income areas. The authors note that these industries are typically located in areas that are mostly conservative politically and resent government regulation (agriculture and mining) or have workers who fear foreign imports (agriculture and manufacturing).

Rebeche and Rohde (2023) Finally, Komlos (2023a, 2023b) finds that most of the right-wing insurgents who attacked the US capitol on January 6, 2021 and arrested lived in lower, middle income zip codes. These zip codes also have a higher than average portion of schools which participate in the free and reduced lunch federal program, which is an indicator of many children living in poverty. These findings offer some support to those of Ferguson, Page, Rothschild, Chang, and Chen (2020) and others (Buffet 2011, Bartels 2016, Bardhan 2022, Davis and Johnson 2022) who believe that much of right-wing populism is driven by worker anxiety and a fear of being left behind economically and socially.

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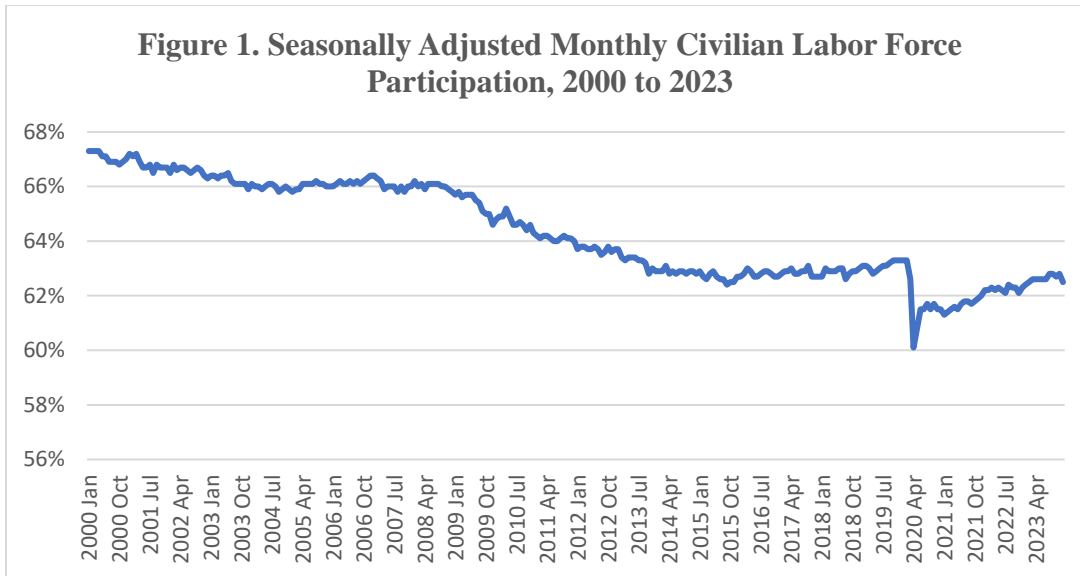
<sup>1</sup> Komlos believes that policies going back to 1980s and subsequent periods are to blame.

In other nations, there have been similar findings with only slight variations. Berman (2021) writes that economic concerns are important in the US and Europe to those who support conservative populism, especially among workers, whereas Oesch (2008) shows research findings for Austria, Belgium, France, Norway, and Switzerland that agree somewhat but also demonstrate that issues of cultural and national identity are more important to working class adherents to such populism. Mols and Jetten (2016) survey Australia, Austria, and Sweden and find that appeals to conservative populism can be strong regardless of how a nation's overall economy is doing and that "supply side" factors such as politicians and others playing up how workers are victims of uncontrolled immigration and/or wealthy elites boost right-wing views among moderate income, working class natives.<sup>2</sup> And in Western European nations, Sipma and Berning (2021) show that negative perceptions of the economy and anti-immigrant feelings among voters drive right-wing populist support, although those who consider the economy the most important issue do not necessarily vote for the right.

*Some recent trends and the importance of displaced workers*

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<sup>2</sup> In the literature surveyed for this chapter, "demand side" factors for conservative populism usually emanate from bad economic conditions such as recession, inflation, or stagflation in which workers are experiencing declining standards of living and downward mobility.



**Source: Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, US Bureau of Labor Statistics.**

We are especially interested in the prospects of the short or long term unemployed who have lost their jobs on an involuntary basis. These are former workers who become part of the underemployed and discouraged workers and are categorized as displaced workers. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics,

“Displaced workers are defined as persons 20 years of age and over who lost or left jobs because their plant or company closed or moved, there was insufficient work for them to do, or their position or shift was abolished.”  
<https://www.bls.gov/cps/lfcharacteristics.htm#displaced> ).

These are workers who were affected adversely by foreign trade, economic downturns, or working for firms in declining industries such as coal mining or cigarette manufacturing and who could feel the greatest downward mobility, social isolation, and economic angst when compared to most members of society. In general, as Figure 1 shows, US labor force participation rates have been contracting. Table 1 shows that although around two-thirds of displaced workers (short-tenure and long-tenure<sup>3</sup>) are re-employed somewhere during a 2-year time period for

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<sup>3</sup> Short-tenure workers are those who have lost a job after working for an employer less than 3 years whereas long-tenure workers are those who have lost a job after working for an employer for 3 years or more.

which the BLS collects data, a significant portion of these workers are still unemployed or have dropped out of the labor force.<sup>4</sup> Typically these are less educated and lower skilled workers who have the most difficulty in finding another job. Unfortunately those who do find work often find pay rates lower than what they have earned previously (Fallick 1996, Birinci, Park, Pugh and See 2023). Farber (2017) notes that the biggest losses in earnings come from the transition from one job to the next.

**Table 1: Status of Displaced Worker after Two Years**

<b>Years</b>	<b>Total (000s)</b>	<b>Re-employed within 2 years</b>	<b>Unemployed</b>	<b>Not in Labor Force</b>
<b>2019-2021</b>	8,589	67%	14%	19%
<b>2017-2019</b>	6,334	71%	15%	14%
<b>2015-2017</b>	6,825	68%	16%	16%
<b>2013-2015</b>	7,440	67%	17%	17%
<b>2011-2013</b>	9,529	61%	24%	16%
<b>2009-2011</b>	6,121	56%	27%	17%

**Note: Source is US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Economic News Releases, Worker Displacement. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/disp.toc.htm>**

Figure 2 displays the portion of reemployed displaced workers on a biannual basis<sup>5</sup> from 2012 to 2022 who are only earning 80% of their current pay or less than 80% of the pay that they earned at their previous job (US BLS 2012, 2014, 2016, 2020, 2022). Since many are earning less than 80%, a conservative estimate using 70% is used. Next, Figure 3 illustrates, using

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<sup>5</sup> The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) only collects the data and publishes it on an every two year basis. Long-tenured displaced workers are those who have lost a job involuntarily and who have had a 3 year tenure with the employer with whom they were laid off or lost a job. For 2012 to 2022 the numbers of long-tenured, displaced workers were, in thousands, 3,003, 2,220, 1,838, 1,755, 1,672, and 1,954.

estimates of median, hourly earnings for US workers, how much roughly could have been lost in the pay of long-tenured displaced workers who have reported earning 80% or less of their former pay (70% is applied in the calculations) levels (US BLS 2012, 2014, 2016, 2020, 2022).<sup>6</sup>

Anywhere from 20 to around 34% of these workers report lower subsequent earnings.

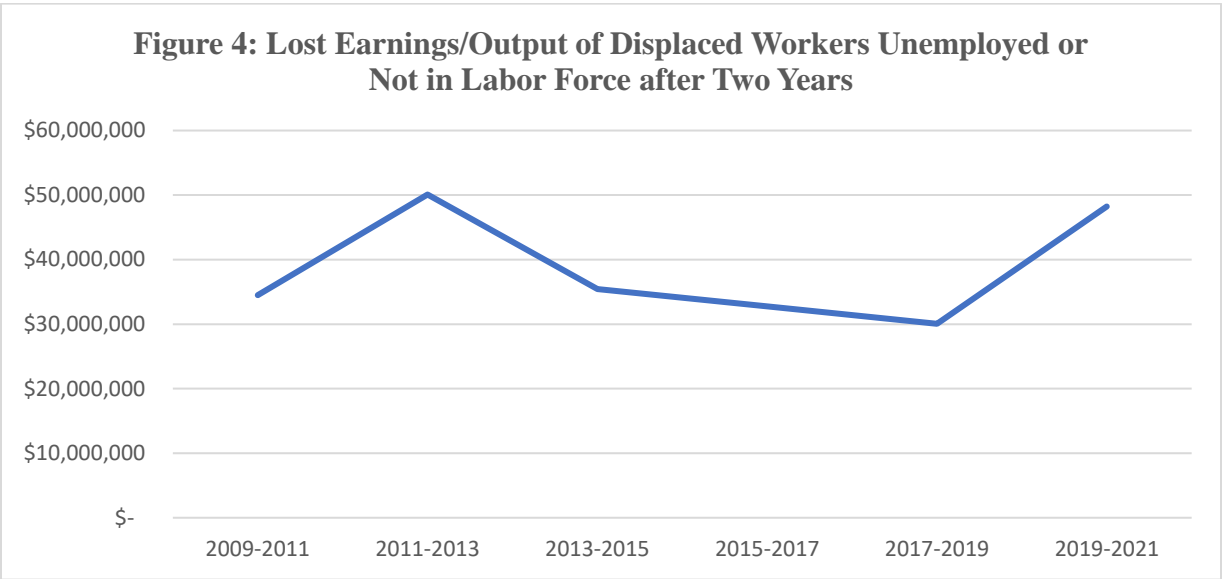
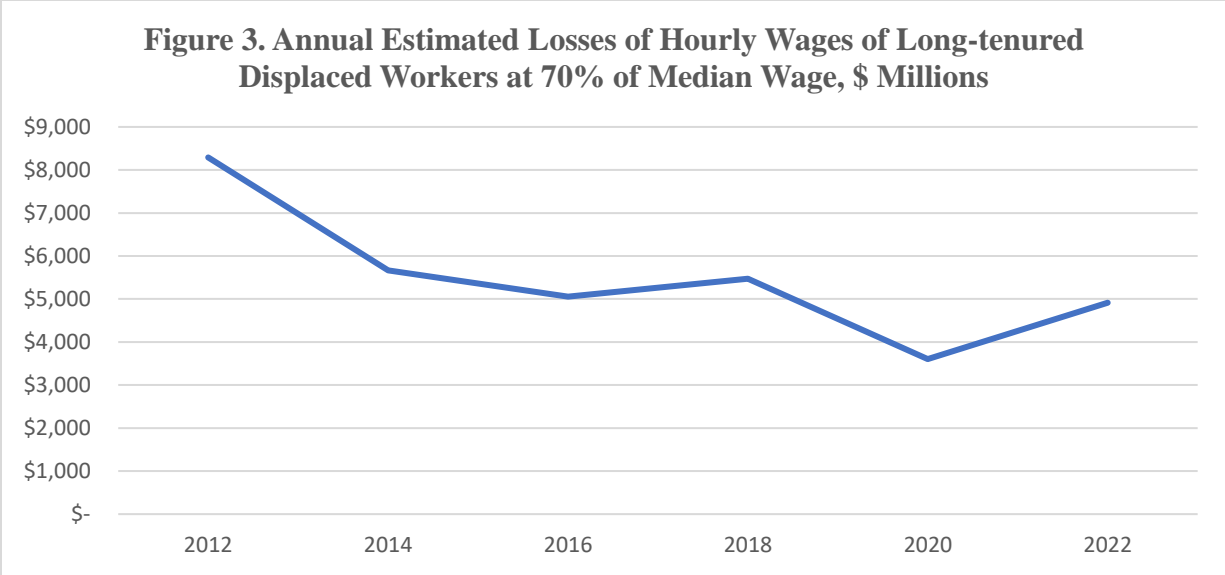
According the literature surveyed for this paper, the lower real earnings tend to persist for such workers. And finally, using US median hourly earnings, Figure 4 illustrates the lost pay (and output) of those displaced workers (short and long-tenured) unemployed or not in the labor force after 2 years from 2009 to 2022 in millions of dollars.



Note: “Within 80%” is 80 to 99% of their previous wages.

<sup>6</sup> Using BLS reports for these years, the numbers of long-tenured displaced workers who reported earning only 80% or less of their previous earnings is multiplied by 30% of the US median hourly wage which in turn is multiplied by 52 weeks and 40 hours per week to get some type of an approximation of lost earnings. Unfortunately there is no data for short-tenured workers who have lost a job. . For 2012 to 2022 the numbers of long-tenured, displaced workers were, in thousands, 3,003, 2,220, 1,838, 1,755, 1,672, and 1,954.





There is a large volume of research on how badly displaced workers have been harmed economically. Going back to the early 1990s, Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan (1993) find significant earnings losses over time (25% after one year of the job separation) for long-tenured workers who have lost their jobs. Those who later find work usually do not get back their former levels of earnings. Since then, other studies in the US and elsewhere have found similar results or worse (Couch and Placzek 2010, Hijzen, Upward, and Wright 2012, Carrington and Fallick

2017, Pytka and Gulyas 2021). In a study of displaced workers in Washington state after the Great Recession, Lachowska, Mas, and Woodbury (2020) find that “five years after a job loss, displaced worker’s earnings were 16 log points or around 20% less than those of a stably employed comparison group.” Most of the research cited shows losses of 25% or more persisting over many years for the displaced worker. As mentioned earlier, research in the US and elsewhere and going back to elections held before or during 2016 highlight the beliefs of many of those who feel marginalized (often low-income, less educated, working class) that immigrants and the adverse impacts of trade agreements are the reasons for their downward mobility.

Tables 2 and 3 give some idea of displaced worker sentiments compared to others. Compared to those answering “no”, those who answer “yes” to “lost a job or laid off in the last 6 months?” feel differently when asked if they believe that 1) immigrants take jobs away from natives and 2) whether they favor or oppose free trade agreements (American National Election Studies 2021). Those who have been out of work or laid off within the last six months are more likely to believe that immigration will take away jobs from US workers and are more likely to oppose free trade agreements. Chi-square analysis is acceptable with a mixture of nominal and ordinal variables (Agresti 2013), and the Chi-square statistic is statistically significant for difference in the responses in Tables 2 and 3. Finally, as data from the General Social Survey (Davern, Bautista, Freese, Herd, and Morgan 1972-2024) indicates in Table 4, those who have suffered job displacement within the last 10 years or so are in favor of restricting immigration in general.

**Table 2. Displaced Workers and Attitudes toward Immigrants Taking Away Jobs**

		<b>How likely immigration will take away jobs</b>				
		<i>Extremely likely</i>	<i>Very likely</i>	<i>Somewhat likely</i>	<i>Not at all likely</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Out of work</b>	<i>1. Yes</i>	8.8%	16.4%	38.7%	36.1%	100.0%
<b>or laid off</b>	<i>2. No</i>	6.6%	14.6%	39.3%	39.5%	100.0%
<b>in last 6 months</b>	<i>Total</i>	7.1%	15.1%	39.1%	38.6%	100.0%

Note: Chi-square statistic = 12.113, p-value is .007006. Result is significant at  $\alpha < 0.05$ . Actual numbers are in table A2 in the appendix.

**Table 3. Displaced Workers and Attitudes toward Free Trade Agreements**

		<b>Favor/oppose free trade agreements</b>							
		<i>Favor a great deal</i>	<i>Favor moderately</i>	<i>Favor a little</i>	<i>Neither Favor/Oppose</i>	<i>Oppose a little</i>	<i>Oppose moderately</i>	<i>Oppose a great deal</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Out of work</b>	<i>1. Yes</i>	10.7%	19.7%	4.5%	44.9%	1.4%	4.7%	3.1%	100%
<b>or laid off</b>	<i>2. No</i>	12.7%	23.0%	6.9%	39.1%	1.3%	3.2%	2.4%	100%
<b>in last 6 months</b>	<i>Total</i>	12.7%	22.8%	5.4%	40.6%	1.2%	3.5%	2.7%	100%

Note: Chi-square statistic = 37.052, p-value < 0.001. Result is significant at  $\alpha < 0.05$ . Note: Actual numbers are in table A3 in the appendix.

**Table 4. Displaced Workers and Whether Immigration Should be Increased or Decreased**

		<b>Increase or decrease immigrants to US?</b>					
		<b>Inc Lot</b>	<b>Inc Little</b>	<b>Same</b>	<b>Dec Little</b>	<b>Dec Lot</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Unemp.</b>	<i>1. Yes</i>	3.3%	6.6%	32.0%	26.6%	31.6%	100%
<b>in Last</b>	<i>2. No</i>	2.8%	3.3%	41.5%	24.5%	28.0%	100%
<b>10 Years?</b>	<i>Total</i>	2.9%	4.3%	38.4%	25.2%	29.2%	100%

Note: Chi-square statistic = 21.9, p-value < 0.001. Result is significant at  $\alpha < 0.05$ . Actual numbers are in table A4 in the appendix.

Furthermore, since Donald Trump is an alleged leader of right-wing populism in the US, then Tables 5 and 6 reinforce this belief. Tables 5 and 6 indicate that those who feel that immigrants are taking jobs away from US natives and that those who oppose free trade

agreements tend to vote for Trump against Joe Biden in the 2020 Presidential Election (American National Election Studies 2021). These findings are similar to those found in previous studies. The Chi-square results for each are statistically significant at the alpha 5% level. During the 2016 Presidential election, his time as President, and then during the 2020 Presidential election, Trump has made restricting immigration and renegotiating “bad” trade deals important parts of his agenda.

**Table 5. 2020 Presidential Vote According to Whether One Thinks Immigrants Will Take Jobs Away**

		2020 Presidential Vote		
		Joe Biden	Donald Trump	Total
<b>How likely immigration will take away jobs?</b>	<b>1. Extremely likely</b>	2.7%	14.9%	<b>7.9%</b>
	<b>2. Very likely</b>	6.8%	27.3%	<b>15.4%</b>
	<b>3. Somewhat likely</b>	34.5%	44.6%	<b>38.8%</b>
	<b>4. Not at all likely</b>	54.8%	11.9%	<b>36.7%</b>
	<b>Total</b>	100.0%	100.0%	<b>100.0%</b>

Note: Chi-square = 1475.944, p-value = 0.0004 and statistically significant at alpha 5%. Actual numbers are in table A5 in the appendix.

**Table 6. 2020 Presidential Vote and Whether One Favors/Opposes Free Trade Agreements**

		2020 Presidential Vote		
		Joe Biden	Donald Trump	Total
<b>Favor/Oppose Free Trade Agreements</b>	<b>Favor a great deal</b>	16.6%	13.4%	15.2%
	<b>Favor moderately</b>	32.6%	20.3%	27.4%
	<b>Favor a little</b>	7.5%	4.6%	6.3%
	<b>Neither favor/oppose</b>	38.9%	49.0%	43.1%
	<b>Oppose a little</b>	0.9%	1.9%	1.3%
	<b>Oppose moderately</b>	1.9%	5.9%	3.6%
	<b>Oppose a great deal</b>	1.6%	4.9%	3.0%
	<b>Total</b>	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Note: Chi-square statistic = 274.605, p-value < 0.001, and statistically significant at alpha 5%. Actual numbers are in table A6 in the appendix.

## ***Conclusion***

Given the literature cited above that indicates growing right-wing populist sentiments, which include anti-immigrant, anti-upper class, and anti-free trade feelings, and government data that show employment and inequality data not favoring those who consider themselves working class or lower middle class, one possibly can understand better how ultra-conservative political rhetoric can appeal to those who are fearful about losing their jobs, those who have lost a job and given up looking for work, and those who have suffered from downward mobility due to income or job losses. If the surveys are correct, many working class people now blame immigrants, wealthy elites, and unfair foreign trade policies for job losses and economic suffering. What is left out of right-wing political rhetoric which usually mentions such threats to workers is that many worker problems could emanate from US policies that fail to provide for adequate job re-training or education programs for those who have suffered from job displacement and subsequent lower paying occupations and jobs; policies that have generally been unfavorable to unions, which is a source of good paying jobs for most people; cuts to educational programs over the last several decades which make career advancement harder for most; and a tax code that has allowed those at the top of the income ladder to take a disproportionate share of corporate earnings while worker earnings have stagnated. A message to US workers and to those of modest income levels needs to be one that addresses the latter set of topics and issues and not the former one that is favored by ultra-conservatism. Unless this is done, right-wing populism or neo-fascism will continue to develop and grow in the US and perhaps globally. If the January 6, 2021 riots in Washington, DC is any indication, then their growth are serious concerns for political democracy.

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## Appendix

### Table A2

**How likely immigration will take away jobs**

		<i>Extremely likely</i>	<i>Very likely</i>	<i>Somewhat likely</i>	<i>Not at all likely</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Out of work or laid off in last 6 months</b>	<i>1. Yes</i>	117	218	513	479	1327
	<i>2. No</i>	247	552	1481	1488	3768
	<i>Total</i>	364	770	1994	1967	5095

### Table A3

**Favor/oppose free trade agreements**

		<i>Favor a great deal</i>	<i>Favor moderately</i>	<i>Favor a little</i>	<i>Neither Favor/Oppose</i>	<i>Oppose a little</i>	<i>Oppose moderately</i>	<i>Oppose a great deal</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>Out of work or laid off in last 6 months</b>	<i>1. Yes</i>	158	292	66	666	20	69	46	1482
	<i>2. No</i>	537	972	293	1656	56	137	101	4233
	<i>Total</i>	1053	1885	447	3360	95	287	224	8280

### Table A4

**Increase or decrease immigrants to US?**

			<b>Inc Lot</b>	<b>Inc Little</b>	<b>Same</b>	<b>Dec Little</b>	<b>Dec Lot</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Unemp. in Last 10 Years?</b>	<i>1. Yes</i>		19	38	185	154	183	579
	<i>2. No</i>		33	39	497	294	335	1198
	<i>Total</i>		52	77	682	448	518	1777

**Table A5**

		<b>2020 Presidential Vote</b>		
		<b>Joe Biden</b>	<b>Donald Trump</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>How likely immigration will take away jobs?</b>	<b>1. Extremely likely</b>	96	386	<b>482</b>
	<b>2. Very likely</b>	240	705	<b>945</b>
	<b>3. Somewhat likely</b>	1221	1151	<b>2372</b>
	<b>4. Not at all likely</b>	1937	308	<b>2245</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3537</b>	<b>2582</b>	<b>6119</b>

Chi-square = 1475.944, p-value = 0.0004 and statistically significant at alpha 5%.

**Table A6**

		<b>2020 Presidential Vote</b>		
		<b>Joe Biden</b>	<b>Donald Trump</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Favor/Oppose Free Trade Agreements</b>	<b>Favor a great deal</b>	578	338	<b>916</b>
	<b>Favor moderately</b>	1133	515	<b>1648</b>
	<b>Favor a little</b>	261	116	<b>377</b>
	<b>Neither favor/oppose</b>	1351	1241	<b>2592</b>
	<b>Oppose a little</b>	31	48	<b>79</b>
	<b>Oppose moderately</b>	66	150	<b>216</b>
	<b>Oppose a great deal</b>	56	123	<b>179</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>3476</b>	<b>2531</b>	<b>6007</b>

Chi-square statistic = 274.605, p-value < 0.001, and statistically significant at alpha 5%.