

Red and Blue Immigrants: Political (Mis)Alignment, Immigration Attitudes, and the Boundaries of American National Inclusion¹

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Conventional theories of attitudes toward immigrants emphasize either conflict between civic and ethnocultural conceptions of national identity or a consensus favoring highly skilled, culturally assimilable immigrants. This article advances an alternative paradigm: natives' immigration attitudes are contingent on their perceived (mis)alignment with newcomers' politics. Drawing on six descriptive and experimental studies across two surveys, I first document that Americans view immigrants as future Democrats who are culturally right-wing and economically left-wing. I then demonstrate that Americans' receptiveness to immigrants, as well as judgments about their legal status and deservingness, are highly sensitive to whether newcomers are potential partisan allies or adversaries. Notably, the influence of perceived political (mis)alignment eclipses classic predictors of immigration attitudes. Contemporary debates over immigration further underscore the salience and potency of these political motivations. These findings offer a novel lens for understanding the modern foundations of immigration attitudes and the boundaries of national membership.

During the 2024 presidential election debate, Donald Trump ignited a media firestorm with unfounded allegations that Haitian immigrants had been

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involved in the consumption of Americans' pets. Buried beneath these headline-grabbing claims was another incendiary assertion: that the Biden-Harris administration, and by extension the entire Democratic Party apparatus, was engaged in a concerted political scheme to allow unrestricted immigration into the United States in order to aid their electoral fortunes. "They're trying to get them to vote. . . . These people are trying to get them to vote. And that's why they're allowing them to come into our country," Trump declared. This rhetoric linking immigration attitudes to the alleged partisan behavior of newcomers, although not entirely new, has in recent years become a staple of political discourse. For instance, this language was echoed just two weeks prior to the debate by Elon Musk, who proclaimed on X: "The U.S. Democratic Party as a whole has a massive incentive to bring in and legalize illegal immigrants, as they vote overwhelmingly Democrat."²

These assertions provoke intriguing questions. Do Americans broadly believe that immigrants are politically allied with the Democratic Party? More importantly, how do Americans' perceptions of whether newcomers share or oppose their political beliefs influence their attitudes toward immigrants? Remarkably, the academic literature to date has been largely silent on these questions (Hawley 2011; Whitaker and Giersch 2021). In fact, five major review articles on immigration attitudes published since 2010 across sociology, political science, and psychology make no mention of the topic (Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Fussell 2014; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Berg 2015; Esses 2021). Instead, much of the extant academic discourse explaining Americans' attitudes toward immigrants continues to be discussed through the lens of "cultural threat" (e.g., fears of "White replacement" and anxieties about whether immigrants will assimilate) or "economic threat" (e.g., concerns about labor market competition and the fiscal burden posed by newcomers).

This article contributes to the interdisciplinary literature by developing a theory of immigration attitudes grounded in *political threat*. Drawing on six preregistered descriptive and experimental studies across two nationally representative surveys ($N = 3,417$), I first explore Americans' perceptions of immigrants' future political affinities. I find that Americans have multifaceted beliefs about immigrants' politics. On the one hand, they express a bipartisan consensus that new arrivals are likely to be future voters aligned with the Democratic Party. On the other hand, they perceive immigrants as culturally right-wing and economically left-wing. There is also significant

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² <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1829186852181409799>.

heterogeneity in these beliefs. For example, Americans broadly assume that Mexican immigrants are future Democrats, but a majority simultaneously believe Russian immigrants are future Republicans, while there is a nearly evenly divided judgment about the partisanship of Chinese immigrants. Overall, the descriptive findings point to a plausible explanation for why, in recent decades, right-wing politicians and news media have become starkly anti-immigration: Republicans expect continued immigration will herald a fundamental transformation of the US electoral equilibrium to their permanent disadvantage.

I then employ vignette, conjoint, and information provision experiments to provide robust causal evidence linking Americans' perceptions of immigrants' political orientation to their attitudes toward newcomers. Three central findings emerge. First, I demonstrate the potency of political (mis)alignment in shaping public attitudes by manipulating the hypothetical partisan composition of immigration flows to the United States. I show that as the putative share of right-wing immigrants increases, Democratic respondents express stronger anti-immigration attitudes, while Republican participants correspondingly become more supportive of immigration. Strikingly, the partisan gap in immigration attitudes is wholly erased when immigrants are portrayed as uniformly right-wing voters.

Second, I evaluate the influence of political (mis)alignment on Americans' immigration attitudes in comparison to key predictors informed by long-standing cultural and economic threat theories. I uncover that the relative impact of political (mis)alignment on public sentiment toward immigration is substantial, broadly outpacing the effects of immigrants' national origin, gender, education, occupation, and English-language ability. In fact, when asked to choose between two stylized immigrant groups, a majority of Americans explicitly express a preference for politically aligned newcomers with high school degrees, employed in service work, and with limited English ability rather than politically misaligned immigrants with graduate degrees, employed in white-collar occupations, and with high English proficiency.

Finally, I leverage the 2024 presidential election results in which an unexpectedly large share of Hispanic Americans voted for Donald Trump. In particular, the Venezuelan community stands out as an immigrant-origin group from Latin America that overwhelmingly supported the Republican candidate (Colomé 2025). How might exposure to information about the partisan proclivities of Venezuelans in the United States shape Americans' immigration attitudes? This example also takes advantage of a timely policy shift: the Trump administration upon returning to the presidency announced that Venezuelans no longer qualified for temporary protected status (TPS). I find that receiving information about the right-leaning political behavior of the Venezuelan community causes Democratic respondents to become more supportive of this punitive immigration policy and more likely to categorize

those who overstay their TPS as undocumented (rather than lawful), while Republicans become more sympathetic to the plight of Venezuelan migrants and defensive of their precarious legal status.

These results pose important theoretical and empirical implications for two areas of research. For the literature on immigration attitudes, I bring into focus an increasingly undeniable *political* undercurrent that motivates whether Americans are receptive or opposed to newcomers. This perspective complements, but is not reducible to, prevailing theories of cultural and economic threat (Mayda 2006; Berg 2013), and it complicates the notion of a “hidden American immigration consensus”—one that purportedly transcends partisan lines—that favors highly educated immigrants in high-skilled professions (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). My empirical findings further illuminate the potential and power of perceived political (mis)alignment to shape future public attitudes toward immigration. In today’s polarized environment, Americans’ beliefs about immigrants are highly susceptible to manipulation by partisan actors seeking electoral advantage.

This article also bridges the adjacent literature on the boundaries of US national membership (Smith 1997; Schildkraut 2007, 2014; Citrin and Wright 2009; Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Bonikowski, Feinstein, and Bock 2021). Scholars have long debated whether being “truly American” is rooted in civic ideals, ethnocultural norms, or a heterogeneous combination of these traditions (Okura and Karim 2025). Yet this framework overlooks a critical development: political affiliation has emerged as a dominant axis along which Americans draw the social and symbolic boundaries of their nation. Indeed, I argue that natives’ attitudes toward immigrants are not merely reflections of an inclusionary or exclusionary national ethos; they are driven, in part, by strategic calculations grounded in perceptions of political (mis)alignment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Sociotropic Threats and Immigration Attitudes

What factors underlie natives’ openness—or opposition—to immigrant newcomers? An immense body of interdisciplinary research has shed light on the many factors that shape the attitudes of native-born majority groups toward immigrants and immigration policy, particularly in the United States and Europe (Lamont 2000; Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Fussell 2014; Berg 2015; Bloemraad, Silva, and Voss 2016; Esses 2021; Dražanová et al. 2024; Wimmer et al. 2024). This extensive scholarship often contrasts two competing theoretical perspectives: the “economic” and “cultural” determinants of immigration attitudes. The former stresses natives’ economic self-interest (Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Mayda 2006; Facchini and Mayda 2009;

Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013), while the latter foregrounds anxiety regarding immigrants' willingness to assimilate, along with broader concerns about their cultural and demographic impact on the nation (Zolberg and Long 1999; Waters and Jiménez 2005; Citrin and Sides 2008; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Sáenz and Douglas 2015; Pérez, Deichert, and Engelhardt 2019; Drouhot 2021).

In recent years, scholars have come to a general consensus that this dueling theoretical contrast is misleading, if not greatly overstated (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Branton et al. 2011; Choi, Poertner, and Sambanis 2023). On the one hand, studies that attempt to explain attitudes toward immigration by individual-level labor market motivations have yielded null, or at best weak, empirical support, making it something of a “zombie theory” (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). In contrast, there is abundant evidence that cultural factors powerfully motivate and inform natives' attitudes toward immigrants (Lamont 2001; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Sides and Citrin 2007; Hopkins, Tran, and Williamson 2014; Schachter 2016). At the same time, many studies indicate that economic factors *can* be strongly predictive of immigration attitudes if financial interest is defined on a societal level, such as through perceived detrimental effects on welfare, social services, or fiscal burden (Dustmann and Preston 2007; Dancygier 2010; Gerber et al. 2017; Kustov 2025). Taken together, natives appear to be primarily concerned about the *sociotropic* effects of immigration on the nation as a whole (e.g., its identity and overall well-being), whether such anxieties are conceptualized as “cultural” or “economic” threats (Chavez 2008).

To date, however, scholars have largely neglected *political fears* about immigrants as a distinct type of sociotropic threat. For instance, in one of the most influential studies on attitudes toward immigrants in the United States, Jens Hainmueller and Daniel Hopkins (2015) employ a conjoint experiment and report that Americans express a pronounced preference for immigrants who are, among other characteristics, well-educated and employed in high-skilled professions. Most notably, they further find that these preferences vary little across respondent characteristics, including between Democrats and Republicans. The authors muse that there is a “hidden American immigration consensus,” and they conclude: “Beneath partisan divisions over immigration lies a broad consensus about who should be admitted to the country” (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015, p. 529). However, such a declaration may be premature, as their study omits what is arguably the most pronounced and consequential sociotropic fissure in the United States today: political misalignment (Iyengar et al. 2019; DellaPosta 2020).³

³ In fairness to the authors, they were writing a decade ago when public discourse had not yet foregrounded the notion of immigrants as future political threats with the frequency and intensity seen today.

Indeed, there is suggestive evidence that natives' attitudes toward immigrants are influenced by expectations about how newcomers may be positioned within the domestic political landscape. For instance, Beth Whitaker and Jason Giersch (2021) find that Republican opposition to Puerto Rican migration to the United States increased when reminded that such migrants, who are US citizens, could benefit a Democratic presidential candidate. Related studies likewise offer emerging evidence of this phenomenon across various national contexts (Ayasli 2024; Holland, Peters, and Zhou 2024; Morgül and Savaşkan 2025). This article builds on this concurrent work by offering the most comprehensive theoretical and empirical account to date of how perceptions of political (mis)alignment structure immigration attitudes and the boundaries of national membership.

Immigrants as a Political Threat

Political fears about immigration are not mutually exclusive with conceptions of cultural and economic threat. For instance, Democrats may oppose immigrants who are perceived to be future Republicans in order to protect women's access to abortion and to veto additional tax breaks tailored to billionaires and big business. Meanwhile, Republicans may oppose immigrants presumed to be future Democrats in order to preserve unrestricted access to firearms and to prevent the expansion of social welfare programs. These "political" concerns may respectively be classified as "cultural" and "economic" in a technical sense. However, there are three reasons why a distinction is arguably warranted. First, political fears often defy straightforward classification as cultural or economic in nature. For example, Democrats' efforts to safeguard environmental and healthcare protections do not fit neatly into either category, at least as traditionally conceptualized. Second, the existing literature typically focuses on *direct* threats posed (or perceived to pose) by immigrants, such as their purported lack of linguistic assimilation or their reliance on welfare and social services (Enos 2014; Gerber et al. 2017; Choi, Poertner, and Sambanis 2021). In contrast, political fears may be channeled *indirectly* through immigrants' anticipated electoral impact and its downstream consequences. Finally, in an era of deepening partisan animosity and affective polarization, many Americans may simply distrust and oppose immigrants whom they perceive as likely to be politically misaligned, even if such newcomers offer positive cultural and economic benefits for their country.

From a historical perspective, perceptions about immigrants' political inclinations may help explain the evolution of partisan polarization over immigration policy in the United States. The Democratic and Republican Parties expressed similar rhetoric toward immigration until the late 1980s; it was only in the past several decades that the partisan disagreement over immigration crystallized (Card et al. 2022). Indeed, the landmark Immigration

and Nationality Act of 1965—now credited with the dramatic rise of the Latino and Asian American population—passed the US Congress with an overwhelming bipartisan consensus. Meanwhile, it was the conservative Reagan-Bush administration that in 1986 oversaw the passage of the most recent comprehensive immigration reform bill that granted amnesty to millions of undocumented immigrants. This bygone bipartisan consensus over immigration policy could partially be explained by the fact that immigrants at the time were neither a highly visible and consequential voting bloc nor linked to the political fortunes of one party. For instance, while Latino Americans have historically favored the Democratic Party, George W. Bush captured 44% of their vote (Abrajano, Alvarez, and Nagler 2008). Meanwhile, Asian Americans were long perceived to be a reliable Republican constituency (Wong and Ramakrishnan 2023). The 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, however, marked a key turning point. Political observers widely credited Barack Obama's campaign victories to the decisive support he received from Latino and Asian American voters (Heavey 2012; Khalid 2015). This electoral reality may have contributed to a growing partisan gap in which Republicans have become stringently anti-immigration and Democrats staunchly pro-immigration.

The 2024 presidential election may yet mark another key inflection point that reverses such trends. Notably, Democratic support for immigration could decline over time if perceptions of immigrants' partisan alignment with the Democratic Party begin to wane (Fraga, Velez, and West 2025; Pérez, Lee, and Luna 2025). However, shifts (or stability) in perceived political (mis)alignment need not be grounded in *factual* trends. In today's polarized climate, such beliefs are vulnerable to partisan manipulation. For example, during the 2024 election, prominent right-wing elites and news media repeatedly portrayed immigrants as uniformly aligned with the Democratic Party. This narrative was propagated despite signs of declining Democratic support among immigrant-origin groups in the 2016 and 2020 elections. Such messaging likely had a measurable impact on the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment among Republican voters, and it underscores both the potential and likelihood of its continued weaponization in the future.

Legal Versus Undocumented Immigrants

How does legal status influence the relationship between political (mis)alignment and Americans' immigration attitudes? It would be remiss not to acknowledge that contemporary right-wing opposition over immigrants typically single out the undocumented, particularly their alleged propensity to illegally vote for the Democratic Party in US elections (Asbury-Kimmel 2023; Dorn 2024). It is thus possible that the effect of political (mis)alignment on immigration attitudes is moderated by newcomers' legal status.

For instance, Republicans may only perceive undocumented, but not legal, immigrants as a political threat. However, in practice, conservative elites and media outlets often conflate legal and undocumented immigration. For instance, during the 2024 electoral campaign season, a Breitbart front-page headline proclaimed: “Welcome, New Democrats! Foreign-Born Population Hits 49.5 Million Under Biden—Largest Ever in American History” (Binder 2023). This rhetoric casts *all* immigrants, irrespective of legal status, as either current or future supporters of the Democratic Party.⁴ Moreover, during the 2024 vice presidential debate, then-Senator J. D. Vance insisted that the Haitian residents in Springfield, Ohio, were “illegal aliens,” despite the fact that most of them were in the country legally (Astor 2024).

Conversely, Americans may only care about the political orientation of legal immigrants to the extent that those who have proper documentation have a clear pathway to US citizenship. This may be especially applicable for Democrats, who categorically reject the claim that undocumented immigrants vote in US elections. However, partisan animosity in the United States is not confined to those who actively vote for the opposing party (Ahler and Sood 2018; Rothschild et al. 2018). Moreover, many Americans assume undocumented immigrants will one day become US citizens, particularly through legislative reforms that offer amnesty. As a result, the causal effect of perceived political (mis)alignment on Americans’ immigration attitudes is unlikely to be substantively moderated by newcomers’ legal status or their nominal voting eligibility.

More fundamentally, Americans’ determinations of newcomers’ legal status are arguably not fixed judgments that shape attitudes toward immigrants but are partially endogenous to those very sentiments. That is, I posit that Americans first form opinions about which immigrant groups they “like” or “dislike” based on factors such as their racial status or perceived political orientation. When Americans view an immigrant group favorably, those newcomers are seen as deserving of inclusion in the national community and thus considered “legal,” even if this requires making exceptions or amendments to current policies or laws. In contrast, when Americans view an immigrant group unfavorably, even nominally legal entry may be framed as illegitimate or undeserved and therefore “illegal.” This argument is a logical extension of prior scholarship documenting how illegality is not a stable, inherent condition but rather socially constructed (Flores and Schachter 2018).

⁴ The conflation of legal and undocumented immigration is made clearer in the Breitbart news article, which notes that “though much attention is given to illegal immigration, the nation’s policy of annually importing more than a million legal immigrants accounts for 75 percent of the total foreign-born population today.”

The Politicization of National Identity

Immigration is arguably the most politically contentious policy issue in the United States today. But unlike other emotionally charged topics such as healthcare or abortion, immigration directly implicates deeply held conceptions of national membership and the boundaries of American identity (Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013; Abascal 2015; Warikoo and Bloemraad 2017; Thompson 2022). Scholars have thus argued that Americans' attitudes toward immigrants are intertwined with beliefs about who is or is not deserving to be included in the national community (Wimmer 1997; Adem and Ambriz 2023). However, much like the existing literature on immigration attitudes has yet to fully recognize the influence of perceived political threat, I advance the scholarship on national boundaries by foregrounding the partisan contours of US national identity (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Bonikowski et al. 2021).

This proposition builds on long-standing narratives of American national identity as told through two competing archetypes: the *civic republican* creed and the *ethnocultural* tradition. Civic understandings of national identity are inclusive in that they are characterized by beliefs and behaviors that anyone can possess—for example, a commitment to active citizenship, adherence to the rule of law, and collective responsibility (Tocqueville [1835] 2000; Levy and Wright 2020). In contrast, the ethnocultural vision of American identity emphasizes ascriptive or exclusionary norms, such as being White, English speaking, and Christian (Waters 1990; Ignatiev [1995] 2008; Theiss-Morse 2009). Americans who endorse ethnocultural norms of the nation are more likely to perceive immigrants as cultural and economic threats and thus oppose immigration, while those who adhere to civic ideals are less likely to harbor such sociotropic fears and are more welcoming of immigrants (Masuoka and Junn 2013; Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Thompson 2022). Indeed, the cultural and economic threat frameworks commonly used to explain immigration attitudes are inextricably linked to long-standing debates over the boundaries of American identity.

This article contributes to such classic perspectives on US nationalism in two ways. First, I argue that political affiliation has emerged as a dominant axis along which Americans draw the social and symbolic boundaries of their nation. Democrats and Republicans today routinely accuse each other of being “un-American” and “destroying America” over virtually every conceivable social and political issue—from abortion, taxes, healthcare, welfare, gun control, foreign policy, race relations, vaccine mandates, and “culture wars” broadly defined (Gage 2017; Liberman et al. 2018; Tavernise 2021; Gorski and Perry 2022; Ray 2022).⁵ However, the literature on American

⁵ Americans have long employed the rhetoric of “un-American” to denounce each other for a vast range of political convictions (Gage 2017). However, the depth of contemporary partisan acrimony is arguably unprecedented, driven in part by the amplification of ideological echo chambers on social media (Iyengar et al. 2019; Bail 2021).

nationalism rarely discusses the extent to which the boundaries of Americanness have *in themselves* become defined in overtly political terms. For instance, many influential studies draw on the General Social Survey (GSS), which asks survey respondents to indicate whether being White, Christian, and speaking English are important to being truly American, but the GSS does not probe whether advocating for select political positions is also a part of being truly American, or whether out-party membership is un-American (Citrin and Wright 2009; Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016).

Second, this study challenges the conventional wisdom that some individuals (e.g., Democrats) are committed to an inclusionary national ethos, while others (e.g., Republicans) uphold exclusionary or discriminatory norms. I argue that Democrats are ready to *exclude* and Republicans are willing to *include* to further their political interests. For instance, Republicans may reflexively scrutinize non-White immigrants with deep skepticism, but their racially motivated fears may be substantially ameliorated if the potential newcomers reveal themselves to be staunchly anti-communist, anti-gun control, and anti-abortion. Meanwhile, Democrats may become resolutely xenophobic if newcomers are supportive of the Republican Party and their efforts to cut taxes for the rich and gut environmental protections. That is, I contend that Americans' immigration attitudes are at least partially provisional and contextually dependent rather than guided by inflexible commitments to civic or ethnocultural conceptions of national identity. This argument advances a logic of *conditional inclusiveness*: Political expediency, in addition to disparate nationalist values, may influence whether immigrants are welcomed or rejected.⁶

DATA AND METHODS

To examine the research questions at hand, I draw on two original, pre-registered surveys on nationally representative samples of American adults. Survey 1 ($N = 2,108$) was fielded in September 2024 (notably, prior to the election) through Forthright and their online panel of US-based participants. Survey 2 ($N = 1,309$) was administered in March 2025 through the same platform. Respondents who participated in Survey 1 were not eligible to enroll

⁶ An alternative, more generous interpretation is that Democrats' adherence to an inclusionary national ethos motivates them to exclude those they perceive to be exclusionary—i.e., the paradox of tolerance (Popper [1945] 2013). However, many political positions of the Republican Party (e.g., being opposed to abortion, gun control, and environmental protections) cannot be neatly partitioned as “inclusionary” or “exclusionary.” More fundamentally, the logic by which specific ideological or policy positions are construed to be inclusionary or exclusionary is in itself deeply politicized. Indeed, many Republicans would categorically reject the very premise that they are exclusionary while Democrats are inclusionary.

in Survey 2. Both surveys employed quota sampling by demographic targets along race, gender, age, education, and political party. Online appendices A and H provide the respective survey sample descriptive statistics, while online appendices B and I display the corresponding preregistration information. I will elaborate on the details of the two survey designs and their results in chronological order.

Overview of Survey 1 and 2

I begin with a broad overview of the two surveys. Survey 1 has three components. Study 1A involves a descriptive exploration of Americans' perceptions of immigrants' political orientations (their party affinity, policy positions, and 2024 voting preference). This includes observational analyses examining the association between political (mis)alignment and immigration attitudes. Study 1B investigates the hypothesized causal relationship more robustly through an information provision experiment in which respondents are primed that a significant number of immigrants are either Republicans or Democrats. Study 1C extends this experimental design by introducing a vignette that directly manipulates the hypothetical partisan composition of newcomers to assess the full potential impact of perceived political (mis)alignment on immigration attitudes.

Survey 2 also has three components. Study 2A fields a conjoint experiment to assess the relative weight of political (mis)alignment on immigration attitudes compared to attributes tied to classic cultural and economic threat theories. Study 2B employs a stylized choice task where survey participants are explicitly asked to choose between admitting a stereotypically "desirable" but politically misaligned immigrant group and a stereotypically "undesirable" but politically aligned immigrant group. Study 2C explores how political (mis)alignment shapes immigration attitudes in a real-world context by leveraging factual data on the Venezuelan community's right-leaning political behavior in the 2024 presidential election.

Survey 1 Design

Figure 1 presents a visual illustration of the survey's structure and design. For Study 1A, survey participants reported their demographics and their perceptions about the political propensities of "most Americans" and "immigrants (in general)" (step 1).⁷ They were also randomly assigned to evaluate

⁷ These categories are included to serve as benchmarks to assess (1) how Americans' perceptions of newcomers' politics compare with assumptions about the politics of their fellow Americans and (2) which immigrant groups Americans have in mind when they think about immigrants in a generic and nondescript way.



AMERICAN SURVEY RESPONDENTS (N = 2108)

Quota Sampled by: Age, Race, Gender, Education, and Political Party.

STEP 1: PRETREATMENT MEASURES

- Respondent demographics (e.g., political party affiliation)
- Perceived politics of “Most Americans” and “Immigrants (in general)”



STEP 2: RANDOMIZED TO EVALUATE THREE IMMIGRANT GROUPS



STEP 3: RANDOMIZED INTO ONE OF THREE FACTUAL INFORMATIONAL TREATMENT CONDITIONS



STEP 4: RANDOMIZED INTO ONE OF FIVE HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIOS



FIG. 1.—Schematic provides a visual overview of the first survey’s design.

three of the following nine immigrant groups: Mexican, Chinese, Indian, German, Cuban, Russian, Muslim, African, and migrants crossing the US southern border (step 2).⁸ Perceived political orientation was operationalized along four dimensions: (1) political party affiliation, (2) 2024 presidential election voting preference, (3) cultural policy position, and (4) economic policy position. The response options for the 2024 presidential election preference question were Kamala Harris, Donald Trump, or someone else. The cultural and economic policy positions were operationalized through perceived agreement with the following two statements: “Women should prioritize family over work” and “Welfare support for the poor should be increased.”⁹ For each immigrant group, respondents also indicated their receptiveness toward admitting them into the United States on a 6-point scale from “strongly oppose” to “strongly support.”

In Study 1B (step 3), survey participants were randomized into one of three experimental conditions involving a factual informational prompt regarding immigrants’ political leanings. Two of these texts primed respondents that a “significant” number of immigrants were aligned with either the Democratic or Republican Party.¹⁰ Respondents in the third (control) condition received no text. All participants were then asked whether they believed that the number of immigrants allowed into the United States should be reduced, increased, or kept the same. As a manipulation check, subjects

⁸ My rationale for the selection of these nine categories is as follows. First, I include Mexican, Chinese, and Indian immigrants because they are the largest and arguably the most prominent immigrant groups in the United States today. Second, although large-scale German migration to the US ended long ago, I include them as a well-established “White ethnic” group, especially given that German remains the most commonly reported ancestry among Americans (see Van Dam 2024 for further discussion). Third, I include Cuban and Russian immigrants because they are notable examples of immigrant groups that may be associated with the Republican Party. Fourth, I include Muslim and African immigrants because, although not numerically dominant, they are nonetheless highly visible and well-recognized immigrant populations in the United States. I deliberately do not invoke specific national origins for these two categories because Americans are more likely to think stereotypically about Muslim or African immigrants broadly rather than about specific Middle Eastern or African countries such as “Iranian” or “Kenyan.” Finally, I include migrants crossing the US border given that much of contemporary US discourse about immigrants specifically focuses on this group. I likewise intentionally invoke this category in an unspecified way to examine the extent to which Americans’ views about border migrants mirror their perceptions of Mexican immigrants.

⁹ Prior to the main data collection, I explored Americans’ perceptions regarding immigrants’ policy preferences and social attitudes across multiple additional domains (e.g., gay marriage, abortion, healthcare access, and so forth). I found that there were two clusters of beliefs, one about immigrants’ “cultural” ideology (e.g., gay marriage, women’s rights) and one about immigrants’ “economic” ideology (e.g., welfare, healthcare).

¹⁰ This information prompt is “bundled” insofar as it also includes information about the immigrants’ politics along additional dimensions such as their likely cultural and economic policy positions and their 2024 election vote preference (see app. D to view the treatment).

were also asked to estimate the percentage of immigrants they believed would (if eligible to do so) vote for the Democratic and Republican Party.

In Study 1C (step 4), survey participants were randomized into one of five experimental conditions that provided a vignette about the hypothetical partisan makeup of incoming immigrants.¹¹ On one end, respondents were told to imagine a scenario in which 100% of immigrants were future Republican voters; on the other extreme, respondents were told to imagine a scenario in which 100% of immigrants were future Democratic voters. The remaining three conditions either described scenarios involving a 75-25 or a 50-50 partisan split. Participants were then asked to indicate their support for increasing or decreasing the flow of immigration to the United States given the provided scenario.

DESCRIPTIVE AND OBSERVATIONAL RESULTS (STUDY 1A)

Americans' Perceptions of Immigrants' Future Partisan Affiliation

What are Americans' perceptions of immigrants' politics? Figure 2 displays Democratic and Republican respondents' beliefs about the future partisan affiliation of nine immigrant groups as well as "most Americans" and "immigrants in general."¹² For instance, panel A indicates that 68% of Democratic participants believe that Mexican immigrants are future Democratic voters, while only 14% believe that Mexican immigrants will be Republican voters. The remaining 18% predict Mexican immigrants will identify as political Independents. In contrast, a majority (52%) of Democratic survey respondents believe that Russian immigrants are future Republicans.

Panel B reveals that Republican survey participants share similar beliefs about the partisan affiliation of immigrants. For instance, there is widespread agreement that (1) immigrants are future Democrats rather than Republicans and (2) this consensus is stronger when evaluating some groups (e.g., Mexicans, Africans, and border migrants) relative to others (e.g., German and Chinese immigrants). Moreover, there is suggestive evidence that Americans of both political parties associate "immigrants in general" with Latin American migrants who cross the Southern border. This is despite the fact that a

¹¹ To address concerns that Study 1B had a causal effect on the results of Study 1C, appendix F provides analyses that restrict the sample to the $N = 702$ respondents who were in Study 1B's no-text control condition. The supplementary findings are consistent with those reported in the main results.

¹² As preregistered, the main findings reported in this article primarily focus on subgroup analyses based on political party affiliation (Democrat vs. Republican) and exclude Independents. However, survey respondents who identified as Independent were asked whether they agreed more with the Democratic or Republican Party. Appendix G shows that the results including Independents are largely identical with the main findings.

Red and Blue Immigrants

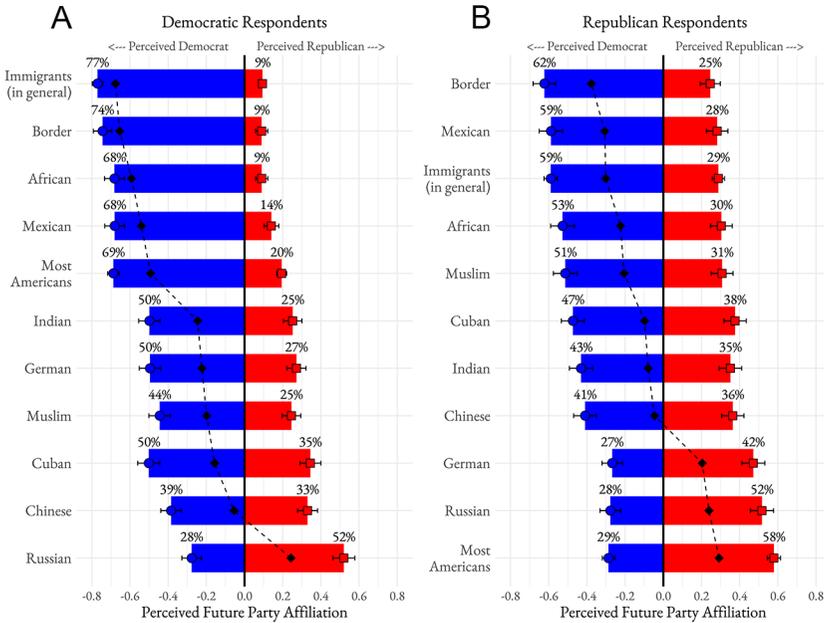


FIG. 2.—Democratic (panel A) and Republican (panel B) respondents’ perceptions about the future partisan affiliation of immigrants. The y-axis indicates the nine immigrant groups as well as “most Americans” and “immigrants (in general).” The x-axis is the proportion of respondents who either believe these groups are Democrats (circle) or Republicans (square). For ease of interpretation, percentage values are displayed instead of proportions. Within each panel, the 11 categories are ranked by the strength of consensus that they are Democrats—i.e., the percentage of respondents who believe most individuals from a given group will be (or are) Democrats minus the percentage who conversely believe them to be Republicans. The degree of this consensus is also illustrated by the difference point estimates (diamond). The percentage of respondents who perceive the evaluated group to be Independents is not shown, but this value can be inferred by subtracting the combined percentage of perceived Democrats and Republicans from 100. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

substantial proportion of immigrants today arrive from Asian countries, most prominently China and India.

There is also a broader pattern of in-group bias: Republican survey participants are more likely than Democratic respondents to assume that most evaluated immigrant groups are future Republicans, and vice versa ($P < .05$). This finding is particularly striking: Despite the frenzied right-wing discourse depicting immigrants as loyal to the Democratic Party, Republican respondents are *less* likely than their Democratic counterparts to indicate such a belief when evaluating the various immigrant groups. One implication of this finding is that, perhaps, Republicans do not perceive immigrants as dire partisan threats. However, this observation should be coupled with another important pattern: Democratic and Republican respondents further express strong

in-group bias when evaluating the opinions of *most Americans*. This is a crucial reference point: A majority of Republican respondents (58%) view “most Americans” as fellow partisan allies, while only 29% view “immigrants in general” as politically aligned. In sharp contrast, Democrats are *more* likely to view “immigrants in general” as partisan allies than they are to view “most Americans” the same way (77% vs. 69%, $P < .01$). Phrased another way, there is a stark partisan discrepancy in the *perceived equilibrium threat*: Republicans believe that continued immigration flows will fundamentally transform US electoral politics to their disadvantage, while Democrats presume that immigrants will favorably, albeit modestly, shift the electoral status quo.

In appendix C, I further examine Americans’ perceptions of immigrants’ politics in the context of a high-stakes political outcome: the 2024 presidential election. The findings are consistent with the results from figure 2. First, most survey respondents, regardless of whether they intend to vote for Kamala Harris or Donald Trump, believe that immigrants, if eligible to vote, are would-be Harris voters rather than Trump supporters. Second, there is heterogeneity in these perceptions across different immigrant categories. Notably, many groups (e.g., Mexican, African, and border migrants) are overwhelmingly perceived to be pro-Kamala Harris, while some (e.g., Russian immigrants) are perceived to be heavily pro-Donald Trump. Third, there is in-group bias such that respondents who plan to vote for Donald Trump are relatively more likely than Kamala Harris supporters to believe that immigrants are pro-Trump. At the same time, there is once again a discrepancy in the electoral equilibrium threat: While Harris supporters believe both immigrants and Americans are politically aligned in support of Kamala Harris, Trump supporters perceive a political tension where most Americans are pro-Donald Trump but immigrants are pro-Kamala Harris. This divergence again points to a plausible explanation of contemporary right-wing frenzy over immigration: Republicans perceive immigrants as an existential threat to their political power.

Americans’ Perceptions of Immigrants’ Cultural and Economic Ideology

The results thus far indicate that Americans broadly assume immigrants will align politically with the Democratic rather than the Republican Party. But political party (or voting preference) can be a noisy proxy for another consequential operationalization of politics: *ideological beliefs*. Do Americans perceive immigrants to be “liberal” (left-wing) or “conservative” (right-wing)?¹³ How might these beliefs diverge across *cultural* versus *economic*

¹³ I invoke the terms “left-wing” and “right-wing” to avoid potential ambiguities associated with the term “liberal.” For instance, an “economic liberal” could either refer to a person who supports social equality, wealth redistribution, and protection for workers

Red and Blue Immigrants

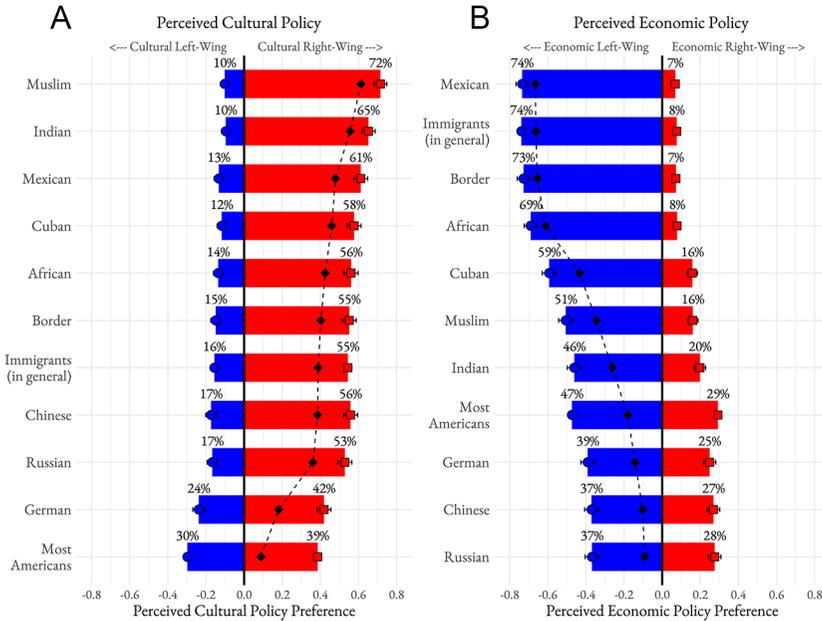


FIG. 3.—Americans’ perceptions regarding immigrants’ policy (ideological) positions. Panel A indicates Americans’ beliefs about immigrants’ cultural policy position as measured by their perceived opinions about the role of women in society; panel B plots Americans’ beliefs about immigrants’ economic position, proxied by their perceived attitudes toward increasing welfare for the poor. The y-axis presents the nine immigrant groups as well as “most Americans” and “immigrants (in general).” The x-axis is the proportion of respondents who either believe immigrants are left-wing (circle) or right-wing (square). For ease of interpretation, percentage values are displayed instead of proportions. Panel A ranks immigrant groups by the strength of consensus that they are culturally right-leaning, from strongest to weakest; panel B ranks immigrant groups by the strength of consensus that they are economically left-leaning, from strongest to weakest. The degree of this consensus is also illustrated by the difference point estimates (diamond). The percentage of respondents who believe that immigrants are neither left- nor right-wing (i.e., would not agree or disagree with the statements about gender roles and welfare programs) are not shown, but this value can be inferred by subtracting the combined perceived percentage of left- and right-wing immigrants from 100. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

dimensions of political ideology? Figure 3 investigates these questions: Panel A presents Americans’ beliefs about immigrants’ cultural policy positions, as measured by their perceived opinions about the role of women in society; panel B displays Americans’ beliefs about immigrants’ economic

or conversely (nearly diametrically) someone who supports economic policies that prioritize free markets and minimal government intervention. I employ the phrase “left-wing” to refer to individuals associated with the former ideological viewpoint and “right-wing” to denote the latter group.

policy positions, proxied by their perceived attitudes toward increasing welfare for the poor. I use the full respondent sample for these analyses because Democratic and Republican survey participants articulate similar views.

A major finding that emerges is that Americans widely perceive immigrants to be simultaneously culturally right-wing and economically left-wing. There is some heterogeneity in these evaluations across different immigrant groups. For instance, Americans indicate a stronger consensus that Muslim immigrants are culturally right-wing relative to German immigrants and that Mexican immigrants are economically left-wing compared to Cuban immigrants ($P < .01$). However, panel A suggests that Americans perceive *all* immigrant groups to be more culturally right-wing than their fellow US citizens, while panel B implies that Americans view most immigrant groups as more economically left-wing than most Americans.

Taken together, figures 2 and 3 reveal that Americans hold a multifaceted view of immigrants' political positions. On the one hand, they broadly assume that immigrants will align themselves with Democratic partisan politics, and that they would, if eligible, vote for Kamala Harris over Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election. At the same time, there is a widespread perception that immigrants are culturally right-wing and economically left-wing.

Partisan (Mis)alignment and Immigration Attitudes

How do Americans' perceptions of immigrants' politics affect their receptiveness toward newcomers? Before turning to this fundamental motivating research question, I examine a first-order matter: Americans' support for admitting immigrants. Figure 4 highlights the heterogeneity in Americans' attitudes toward immigration across the 10 evaluated immigrant groups between Democratic (panel A) and Republican (panel B) respondents. A key finding is that Democrats are more supportive of admitting *any* group of immigrants relative to Republicans.¹⁴ Figure 4 is consistent with Hainmueller and Hopkins's (2015) "hidden American immigration consensus" narrative insofar as Americans of both parties prefer some immigrant groups (e.g., Germans) over others (e.g., Muslims). At the same time, figure 4 underscores the importance of distinguishing between *relative and baseline preferences* when discussing Americans' immigration attitudes: There may be a bipartisan (relative) preference for German over Muslim immigrants, but

¹⁴ Democrats' level of support for their least favored immigrant group (Russian) is statistically indistinguishable ($P > .05$) from Republicans' level of support for their most favored immigrant group (German). However, this exception does not negate the stylized fact that Democrats are more pro-immigration than Republicans.

Red and Blue Immigrants

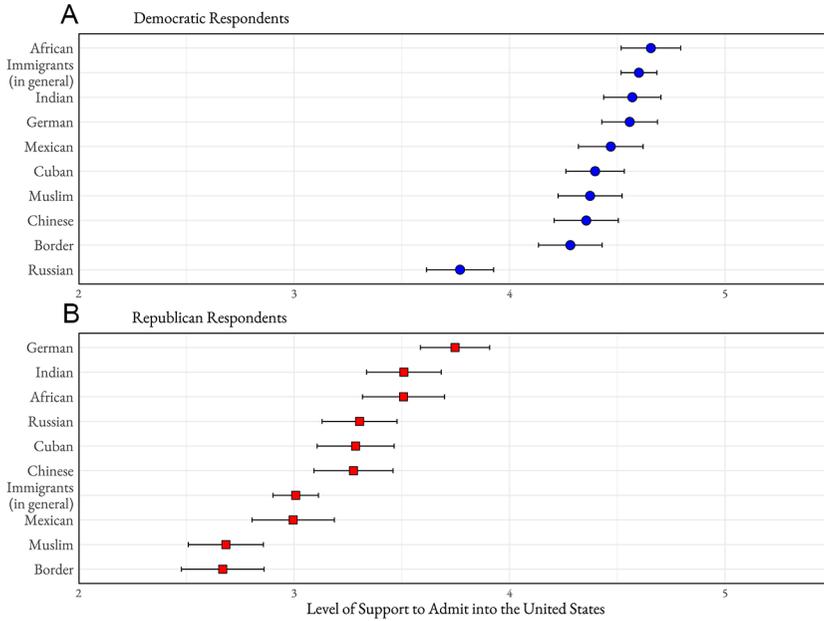


FIG. 4.—Democratic (panel A) and Republican (panel B) respondents’ support for admitting immigrant groups into the United States. The y-axis lists the nine immigrant groups and “immigrants (in general).” The x-axis shows the average level of support for immigration measured on a 6-point scale from “strongly oppose” to “strongly support.” Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Democrats are more supportive of Muslim immigrants than Republicans are of German immigrants (baseline contrast).

To examine whether Americans’ receptiveness toward immigrants are predicted by their corresponding beliefs about newcomers’ political beliefs, I estimate a series of regressions exploring how perceived political (mis)alignment is associated with levels of support for admitting immigrants. Specifically, I constructed several political “(mis)alignment” dummy indicators. For instance, Democratic respondents who perceived Russian immigrants to be future Republican voters were characterized as “misaligned,” while Republican respondents who expressed the same beliefs were categorized as “aligned.” I created these political (mis)alignment variables for each operationalization of political disposition.¹⁵ I then employed ordinary least squares estimation

¹⁵ There are two ways to conceptualize “misalignment.” The first option is to categorize any type of discrepancy between respondent’s own political leaning and their perceptions of an immigrant group’s politics. For example, a Donald Trump voter who believes that Mexican immigrants would support anyone other than Donald Trump (i.e., not only Kamala Harris but third-party candidates such as Jill Stein) may be classified as perceiving a

to examine the relationship between political (mis)alignment and attitudes toward immigrants, controlling for respondent race, gender, age, education, and generation status.

Table 1 presents the results of this analysis across the 10 immigrant groups. For instance, the positive coefficients in column 1 indicate that Democratic respondents who presume immigrant groups to be fellow Democrats (i.e., aligned) are more likely to support admitting them into the United States relative to Democratic respondents who judge immigrants to be future Republicans (i.e., misaligned). However, this relationship is statistically significant only for evaluations of German and Russian immigrants ($P < .01$). In contrast, there is a robust association among Republican participants (col. 2). Across all 10 immigrant groups, Republicans' attitudes toward immigration are significantly predicted by their perceived (mis)alignment with newcomers' politics.

Columns 3–4, 5–6, and 7–8 repeat the same analyses for three alternative dimensions of political (mis)alignment: 2024 vote preference, cultural policy position, and economic policy position. For instance, column 3 indicates that Kamala Harris voters who perceive immigrants to favor Kamala Harris over Donald Trump express stronger pro-immigration views relative to Kamala Harris voters who believe otherwise. Column 4 replicates this finding for Donald Trump supporters. Echoing columns 1 and 2, however, the results are more consistently and substantively significant among Donald Trump voters relative to Kamala Harris voters. In other words, there is a stronger relationship between perceived political agreement and pro-immigration attitudes among Republicans and Donald Trump voters relative to Democrats and Kamala Harris voters. Meanwhile, alignment with cultural or economic policy positions (cols. 5–6 or 7–8, respectively) also generally yields positive coefficients, lending further evidence to the argument that political (mis)alignment, broadly defined, is predictive of immigration attitudes. However, these results inconsistently reach conventional levels of statistical significance, suggesting that purported policy agreement is a weaker predictor of immigration attitudes relative to political party or vote alignment.

Overall, these analyses suggest that Americans' beliefs about immigrants' political leanings are related to their receptiveness toward potential newcomers. However, a major limitation of table 1 is that it relies on observational associations that are susceptible to various alternative causal explanations. For instance, consuming conservative news media (e.g., Fox News, Breitbart) may cause Republicans to hold negative attitudes toward immigration *and*

political "misalignment." The second option is to examine *sharp* misalignment—i.e., those who believe immigrants support *directly antagonistic* politics. As stated in the preregistration, this article employs the latter method of constructing political misalignment. The main findings are consistent across either operationalization of misalignment.

TABLE 1
ASSOCIATION BETWEEN AMERICANS' PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL (MIS)ALIGNMENT AND SUPPORT FOR ADMITTING IMMIGRANTS

	Political Party			2024 Vote Preference			Cultural Policy			Economic Policy	
	Democrat	Republican		Kamala Harris	Donald Trump		Cultural LW	Cultural RW	Economic LW	Economic RW	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)			
Immigrants (in general) . . . . .	.14 (.14)	.60*** (.12)	.34* (.15)	.40*** (.10)	.09 (.14)	.64*** (.20)	-.21 (.20)	.01 (.19)		
Mexican . . . . .	.16 (.22)	.62*** (.22)	.47* (.22)	.55*** (.18)	-.32 (.27)	.47 (.29)	.18 (.35)	.07 (.37)		
Chinese . . . . .	.34 [†] (.19)	1.20*** (.20)	.57*** (.15)	.67*** (.16)	.09 (.24)	.49 [†] (.27)	-.04 (.19)	.92*** (.28)		
Indian . . . . .	.28 (.17)	.93*** (.20)	.18 (.16)	.74*** (.15)	-.26 (.31)	1.33*** (.34)	.35 [†] (.19)	.09 (.30)		
German . . . . .	.53*** (.17)	1.02*** (.20)	.41*** (.13)	.51*** (.16)	.42 [†] (.22)	.32 (.23)	.39* (.19)	.50 [†] (.29)		
Cuban . . . . .	.22 (.16)	.89*** (.19)	.28 [†] (.14)	.85*** (.15)	.31 (.27)	.84* (.35)	.21 (.22)	.31 (.25)		
Russian . . . . .	.56** (.18)	1.07*** (.20)	.48*** (.15)	.81*** (.17)	-.61* (.25)	.78*** (.26)	.07 (.18)	.68* (.27)		
Muslim . . . . .	.21 (.19)	.93*** (.19)	.61*** (.15)	.82*** (.15)	-.51 (.38)	.61* (.28)	.09 (.23)	.50 [†] (.29)		
African . . . . .	.09 (.25)	1.15*** (.21)	.46 [†] (.25)	1.05*** (.17)	.27 (.28)	.56 [†] (.32)	-.10 (.34)	.70* (.35)		
Border . . . . .	.31 (.27)	1.53*** (.21)	.64* (.28)	1.02*** (.18)	.81*** (.26)	.92*** (.32)	.45 (.40)	-.07 (.36)		

NOTE.—This table presents regression coefficients estimating how perceived political (mis)alignment predicts support for admitting immigrants. The independent variable equals 1 if there is a match between respondents' politics (e.g., Republican identification) and their beliefs about immigrants' politics (i.e., that those admitted will be fellow Republicans); 0 indicates that there is a perceived mismatch (i.e., that they will be future Democrats). The dependent variable is support for admitting immigrant groups on a 6-point scale from "strongly oppose" to "strongly support." This analysis is repeated across four operationalizations of political (mis)alignment: partisan identity, 2024 vote preference, cultural policy position, and economic policy position. All regressions include covariates for respondent race, gender, age, education, and generation status. Heteroskedasticity-consistent robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. LW = left-wing; RW = right-wing.

[†] $P < .1$.
* $P < .05$.
** $P < .01$.
*** $P < .001$, two-tailed tests.

increase their beliefs that immigrants are future Democrats. It is also plausible that Republicans who dislike immigrants assign negative qualities to newcomers, such as perceptions of partisan misalignment. Meanwhile, among Democratic respondents, only 9% report beliefs that “immigrants in general” are future Republicans, raising concerns about whether these individuals are different from their same-party counterparts in ways *other* than their perceived political (mis)alignment with immigrants. To address these various issues, I incorporated two experiments into Survey 1, which I discuss next.

EXPERIMENTAL DATA AND RESULTS (STUDY 1B AND 1C)

Information Provision Experiment

To examine the causal effect of political (mis)alignment on immigration attitudes, survey respondents were first randomized into one of three conditions that provided factual information prompt about immigrants’ political leanings (Study 1B). Two of these texts presented statements that a “significant” number of immigrants were aligned with either the Democratic or Republican Party. Respondents in the third (control) condition received no text. All respondents were asked whether immigration flows to the United States should be reduced, increased, or kept the same. To examine whether the information provision was successful, participants were also asked to estimate the percentage of immigrants who would vote for the Democratic and Republican Party.

Figure 5 presents the results of Study 1B. Panel A displays the conditional average treatment effects of the information priming on immigration attitudes for Democratic and Republican respondents. For instance, Republican participants who were informed that a substantial number of immigrants are Republican voters are significantly *more* likely to support increasing immigration flows to the United States relative to their counterparts in the no-text control condition ($P < .05$). Meanwhile, Democratic participants who viewed the same information treatment are *less* likely to support immigration relative to their partisan peers in the control condition ($P < .1$). In contrast, when survey respondents were informed that many immigrants are aligned with the Democratic Party, there is no effect on their public attitudes.

Panel B displays the estimated percentage of immigrants who respondents believe would vote for the Republican Party across the three experimental conditions. Overall, the information nudges achieved their manipulations in the expected directions. Republican and Democratic respondents in the control condition, respectively, believe that 39% and 34% of admitted immigrants are Republicans. This increases to 52% (+13) and 49% (+15) when they are reminded that many immigrants are Republican, and it decreases to 34% (-5) and 27% (-7) when they are reminded that many immigrants are Democrats. The apparent difference in the degree of successful manipulation between

Red and Blue Immigrants

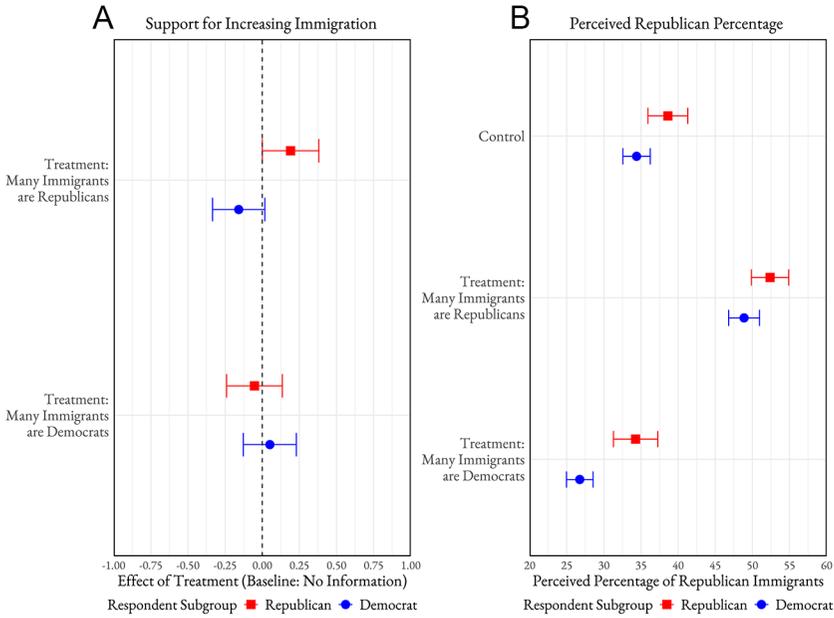


FIG. 5.—Conditional average treatment effects of the two experimental primes on immigration attitudes for Republican (square) and Democratic (circle) respondents. The y-axis shows the two treatment conditions, while the no-text control is the omitted reference condition. The x-axis represents the causal effects of the treatments on support for increasing immigration. Regressions include covariates for respondent race, gender, age, education, and generation status, and they employ heteroskedasticity-consistent robust standard errors. Panel B presents survey participants’ estimated percentage of Republican immigrants (x-axis) across the three experimental conditions (y-axis). Perceptions of immigrants as Independents were not provided as an option, and estimates were required to sum to 100%. In other words, the difference between 100 and the estimates provided in panel B yields the perceived percentage of immigrants who would vote for the Democratic Party. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

these two treatments also credibly explains the disparity in results from panel A: Americans from both political parties have strong prior beliefs that immigrants are Democrats (recall fig. 2). As a result, the “Many immigrants are Democrats” information treatment has little effect on either perceptions of political (mis)alignment or immigration attitudes.

Overall, while the factual information treatment was modestly successful in affecting both Americans’ beliefs about the political composition of immigrants and their attitudes toward immigration, the experimental design achieved a limited exploration of the research question. Rephrased simply, the treatments caused survey subjects to update their beliefs about the partisan composition of immigrants by 5 to 15 percentage points. It thus remains unclear whether larger percentage point shifts could induce more meaningful effects on immigration attitudes and whether there are threshold effects (e.g., Democratic

respondents' pro-immigration attitudes may be durable so long as they believe that a majority of immigrants share their party affiliation).

Vignette Experiment

To more fully investigate how Americans' perceptions of political (mis)alignment affect attitudes toward immigration, Study 1C presented survey respondents with a vignette that directly manipulated the hypothetical partisan composition of newcomers to the United States in 25 percentage point increments. Subjects were assigned to one of five experimental conditions: (1) 100% Democrat/0% Republican, (2) 75% Democrat/25% Republican, (3) 50% Democrat/50% Republican, (4) 25% Democrat/75% Republican, or (5) 0% Democrat/100% Republican. To ensure that manipulating the partisan share of immigrants did not cause unintended spillover effects (e.g., altering perceptions about the racial, gender, or legal composition of the immigrants), the prompt instructed respondents to imagine that all other attributes of newcomers remained unchanged. Survey participants were then asked to indicate their support for increasing or decreasing the flow of immigration to the United States given the provided scenario.

Figure 6 reports the levels of support for immigration across the five vignette scenarios for Democratic and Republican respondents. There is unambiguous evidence that political (mis)alignment has a substantial causal effect on attitudes toward immigration: Republican respondents' support for immigration surges as the proportion of Democratic immigrants declines (or, equivalently, as the proportion of Republican immigrants rises), while Democratic respondents exhibit a mirrored reaction as evidenced by their tumbling corresponding support for immigration. In the vignette where all immigrants are future Republicans, the partisan gap in attitudes toward immigration flows is wholly nullified.

Figure 6 reveals several additional noteworthy findings. First, the *range* of the treatment effects on immigration attitudes is larger among Democratic relative to Republican respondents. Moving from 100% partisan alignment to 100% partisan misalignment negatively shifts Democratic respondents' immigration attitudes by 0.89 points (3.26 minus 2.37), which is larger than the 0.63 decline (2.35 minus 1.72) for Republican respondents ($P \approx .16$). Second, there is evidence of *threshold* effects. Notably, respondents of both political parties express similar immigration attitudes whether the immigrant composition is described as either 100% or 75% Democratic or Republican ($P > .05$).

To frame the effect of partisan misalignment on immigration attitudes in more tangible terms, appendix E examines the probability of *opposition to immigration*, where 1 indicates that respondents reported that immigration should be "reduced a lot" or "reduced a little" and 0 denotes they provided

Red and Blue Immigrants

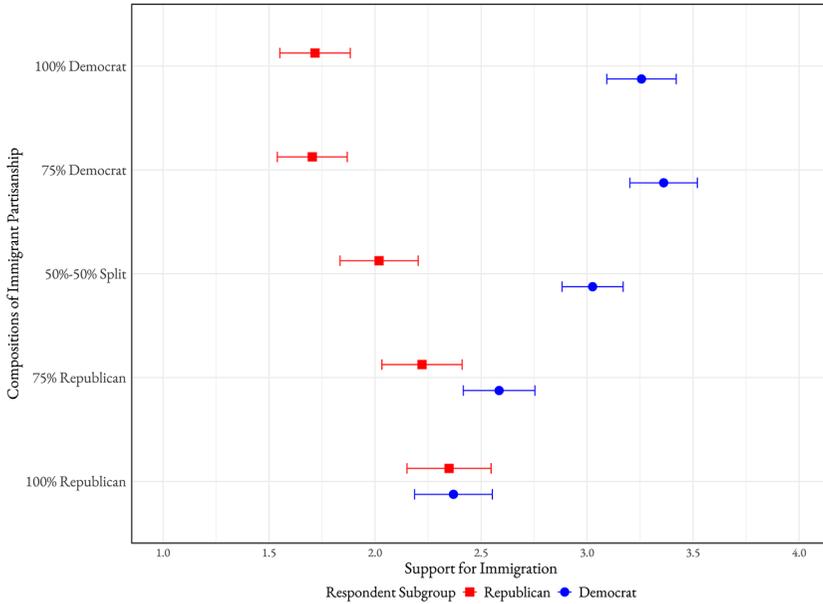


FIG. 6.—Republican (square) and Democratic (circle) respondents’ level of support for immigration across the five hypothetical compositions of immigrant partisanship. The y-axis reflects the five scenarios: (1) 100% Democrat/0% Republican, (2) 75% Democrat/25% Republican, (3) 50% Democrat/50% Republican, (4) 25% Democrat/75% Republican, and (5) 0% Democrat/100% Republican. The x-axis is support for immigration flows to the US measured on a 5-point scale from “reduced a lot” to “increased a lot.” Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

either a positive or neutral answer. As expected, 78% and 77% of Republican respondents in the high misalignment conditions (i.e., scenarios where 75% or 100% of immigrants were described as Democrats) signal their opposition to immigration. However, this prevalence declines sharply to 54% in scenarios where all immigrants are described as politically aligned ($P < .01$). Meanwhile, Democratic respondents are staunchly pro-immigration *as long as the proportion of Democratic immigrants are described as at or above 50%*. In high misalignment conditions, their opposition to immigration more than doubles to the point where a majority (54%) of Democrats express anti-immigration views.

Taken together, Study 1B and 1C provide evidence that Americans’ perceptions of partisan (mis)alignment have a meaningful causal effect on their immigration attitudes. One key implication is that contemporary US political dynamics in which Democrats are pro-immigration and Republicans anti-immigration can be explained, at least in part, by diverging perceptions of political (mis)alignment: Democrats presume immigrants to be partisan allies, while Republicans consider them to be partisan foes. However, the

empirical evidence thus far has focused narrowly on the causal effect of political (mis)alignment. In the real world, Americans' immigration attitudes are informed by multiple factors simultaneously. How substantively important is this attribute relative to explanations that rely on conventional measurements of cultural and economic threat? Moreover, how do perceptions of political (mis)alignment influence immigration attitudes in the context of real-world developments, such as the unexpected support for Donald Trump among many immigrant-origin groups in the 2024 election?

SECOND DATA COLLECTION (STUDY 2A, 2B, AND 2C)

Survey 2 Design

To examine these questions, I fielded a second nationally representative survey of 1,309 American adults in March 2025 through Forthright. The first component of this additional data collection is a conjoint experiment (Study 2A) where survey respondents evaluated profiles of hypothetical immigrant groups along six attributes: (1) national origin, (2) gender, (3) English proficiency, (4) educational attainment, (5) expected occupation, and (6) future political party affiliation. Each respondent evaluated seven immigrant groups, one at a time, and indicated their opposition or support for admitting each profile on a scale from 1 to 7. Further details regarding the setup of the conjoint design, including my rationale regarding the selection of the profile attributes, is available as part of the preregistration (see app. I).¹⁶ The objective of this conjoint experiment is twofold. First, it tests the hypothesis that political considerations shape Americans' immigration attitudes in ways that cannot be explained away by the existing literature's emphasis on cultural and economic threat. For instance, it allows me to disentangle the influence of separate but highly correlated traits such as immigrants' national origin and their putative politics. Second, it illuminates the relative impact of immigrant political (mis)alignment on Americans' public attitudes compared to other theoretically salient factors.

In Study 2B, survey participants were presented with a pair of immigrant group profiles but with preselected (as opposed to randomized) attributes and asked to indicate which of the two profiles they preferred to admit. The aim of this stylized (nonexperimental) choice task is to assess the proportion of

¹⁶ A unique feature of this conjoint design is that respondents evaluated immigrant *groups* rather than individuals. Specifically, participants were asked to imagine a group of 1,000 immigrants, which is why the profile attributes are described in plural terms. I use the phrase "most" when presenting these attributes to avoid implying that all 1,000 immigrants share identical characteristics, which might seem implausible or overly precise. This group-based design reflects the notion that Americans often think about immigration not in terms of individuals but as judgments about larger groups of people.

Americans willing to prioritize political alignment over key cultural and economic immigrant attributes when evaluating potential newcomers. Finally, in Study 2C, respondents were exposed to a factual information treatment much like in the first survey, but this time drawing on a concrete and timely development regarding Venezuelan migrants and TPS. This experiment examines whether informing survey participants that Donald Trump received strong support from the Venezuelan community in the 2024 presidential election influences Americans' immigration policy preferences and related attitudes. Further details on Studies 2B and 2C are presented in their respective results sections.

Conjoint Experiment

Figure 7 presents the results from the conjoint experiment (Study 2A), stratified by Democratic respondents (panel A) and Republican respondents (panel B). Many of the patterns related to the nonpolitical profile attributes

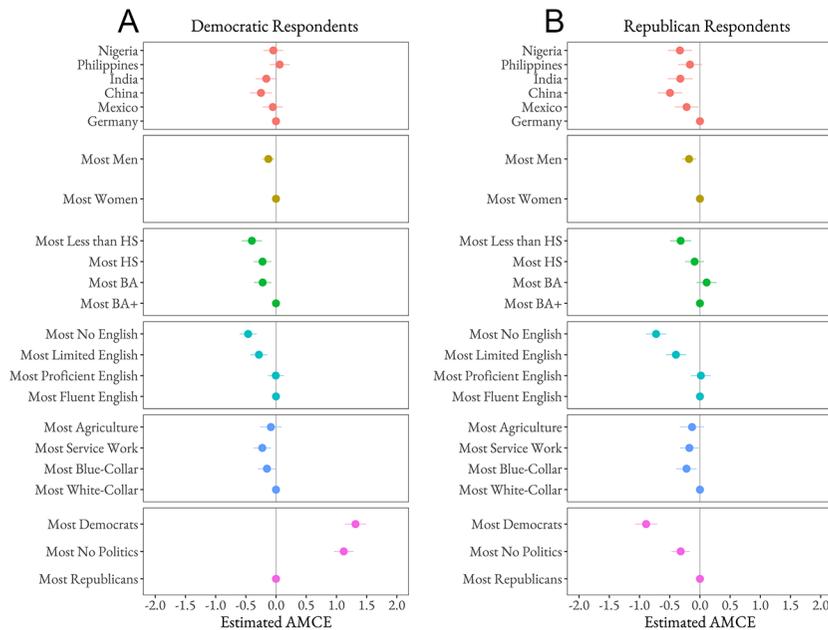


FIG. 7.—Average marginal component effects (AMCEs) from the conjoint experiment. The dependent variable is support for admitting randomized immigrant groups, measured on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 7 (strongly support). Panel A presents results for Democratic respondents, while panel B presents results for Republican respondents. The points without horizontal bars indicate the reference category for each attribute. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

are consistent with the prior literature. For instance, Americans strongly prefer immigrants who speak English fluently or proficiently relative to those who speak limited or no English. There are also expected partisan differences in these immigration attitudes: Republican respondents consistently favor German-origin immigrants over those from non-White, non-European countries, suggesting that racial considerations shape their immigration attitudes; however, this pattern is more mixed among Democratic respondents.

The key attribute of interest is immigrants' future political party affiliation. The results showcase a clear partisan in-group bias: Democratic respondents oppose admitting would-be Republican immigrants relative to would-be Democratic immigrants, while the reverse is true for Republican respondents. Moreover, the magnitude of this effect is considerable: for Democratic respondents, the penalty of immigrant political misalignment dwarfs the effects of all other attributes included in the design; for Republicans, this influence is smaller but nonetheless substantively large. These interpretations are consistent when the patterns are alternatively displayed as marginal means (see app. K).

Stylized Choice Task

In Study 2B, survey participants were shown a pair of immigrant groups with *fixed attributes* and asked to indicate which profile they preferred to admit. The motivation of this stylized choice task is to force a trade-off: Participants selected between a stereotypically "desirable" but politically misaligned immigrant group or a stereotypically "undesirable" but politically aligned immigrant group. For instance, Republican respondents were asked to choose between welcoming a group of Democratic immigrants with graduate degrees, employed in white-collar occupations, and with high English proficiency (profile 1) or a group of Republican immigrants with high school degrees, employed in service work, and with limited English ability (profile 2). Democratic respondents were presented with the reverse scenario. The nationality and gender of the immigrant groups were held constant. The primary aim of this task is to explore to what extent Democrats and Republicans would prioritize political alignment, especially when doing so requires sacrificing traditionally focal immigrant characteristics along cultural and economic dimensions.¹⁷

¹⁷ An alternative way to present this type of analysis is to make use of the conjoint data and generate predicted values of support for admitting specific archetypes of immigrant profiles (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). I conducted additional analyses with this approach and recover similar results. However, I deliberately collected these data with fixed (rather than randomized) profile attributes because they offer a more direct test of the potential trade-offs, whereas with the conjoint experiment, the predicted values are based on averaging over many different randomized profiles, few of which directly correspond to the features of the theoretical archetypes.

Red and Blue Immigrants

Panel A of figure 8 reveals that 61% of Democratic and 53% of Republican respondents express a preference for profile 2 over profile 1. These estimates are virtually unaffected when including Americans who identify as politically independent (see app. M). That is, a *majority of Americans* explicitly prefer admitting politically aligned immigrants who have low levels of educational, occupational, and English-language skills rather than welcome politically misaligned immigrants with high levels of educational, occupational, and English-language skills. Meanwhile, panel B displays the rating advantage of profile 2 relative to profile 1. Democratic respondents evaluate profile 2 more favorably for admission than profile 1 by 0.85 points ($P < .01$), while the corresponding difference for Republican respondents is 0.27 points ($P < .05$). Moreover, it is crucial to underscore that a “null” difference in rating would simply indicate that the

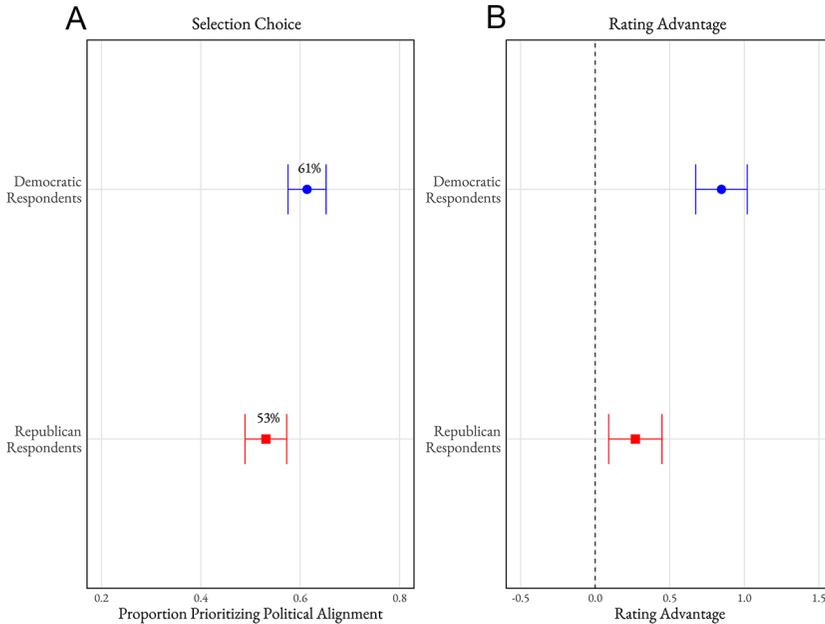


FIG. 8.—Proportion of Republicans and Democrats who express a preference for politically aligned immigrants with high school degrees, employed in service work, and with limited English ability over politically misaligned immigrants with graduate degrees, employed in white-collar occupations, and with high English proficiency. For ease of interpretation, percentage values are displayed instead of proportions. Panel B shows the extent to which the politically aligned group was rated more favorably for admission to the US relative to the politically misaligned group. The x -axis therefore represents the ratings advantage for the former relative to the latter immigrant group profile. For example, a value of 0 indicates that the two stylized profiles received equal ratings. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

two archetypes are rated *equally*. A true absence of the effect of political (mis)alignment on immigration attitudes would require a sizeable *negative* effect.

Taken together, these results both affirm the conclusions from Survey 1 and offer two additional contributions. First, they provide compelling evidence that the effect of political (mis)alignment on Americans' immigration attitudes cannot be explained away by traditionally scrutinized immigrant attributes such as their national origin, gender, education, occupation, or English-language ability. Second, the findings point to the considerable weight of perceived political threat in shaping Americans' immigration attitudes. Indeed, the relative causal effect of this largely overlooked dimension greatly exceeds that of long-standing cultural and economic considerations.

Venezuelan Migrants and TPS

The empirical data presented thus far have remained somewhat abstract, invoking the political affiliations of immigrant groups in imagined scenarios and across hypothetical profiles. How might perceptions of political (mis)alignment shape Americans' immigration attitudes in a real-world scenario? I now turn to explore a concrete application of my argument. Notably, the 2024 presidential election marked a historically significant moment: an unexpectedly large share of immigrant-origin voters, particularly Latino Americans, supported Donald Trump. What are the consequences of this shifting political landscape for public attitudes toward immigration?

To explore these questions, Study 2C capitalizes on recent (and ongoing) political developments. For instance, the Venezuelan community stands out as a Latino immigrant-origin group that overwhelmingly supported Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election (Colomé 2025). How might exposure to information about the partisan proclivities of Venezuelans shape Americans' immigration attitudes? Will Democrats, for example, become supportive of vindictive policies that strip protections from Venezuelan migrants? Might Republicans, in turn, become more disapproving of such punitive immigration policies? To test this possibility, I designed a survey experiment that leveraged a concrete policy shift: the Trump administration's announcement that Venezuelans no longer qualified for TPS, a US immigration designation for individuals from countries experiencing armed conflict, environmental disaster, or other extraordinary conditions.

Survey participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. The control condition received a basic overview of TPS and was informed that many Venezuelans in the United States were admitted through this program. The treatment group was presented with the same information, along with an additional note about the Venezuelan community's steadfast support for Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election. Appendix J provides the language used in these two experimental conditions. The main outcome of interest is

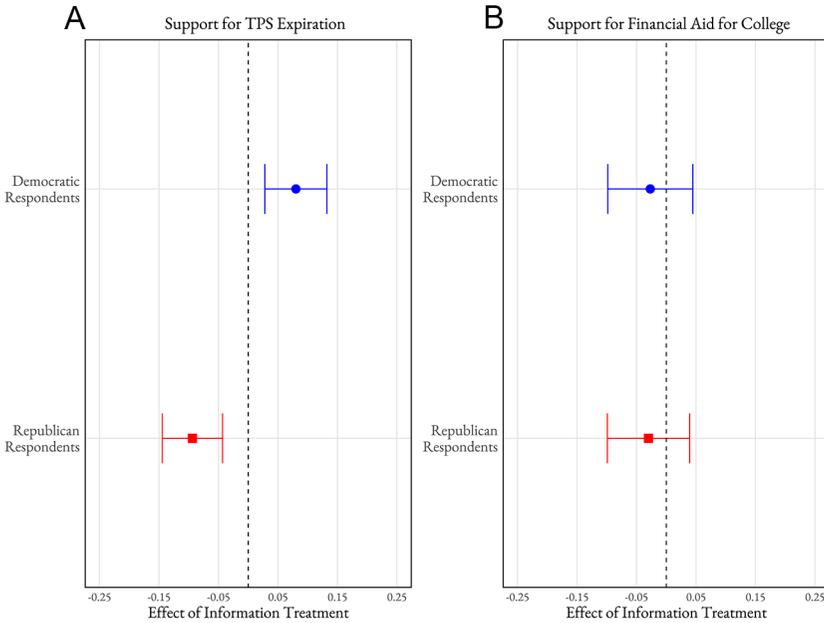


FIG. 9.—Conditional average treatment effects of the “Venezuelans are Republican” information treatment on support for the termination of TPS (panel A) and federal financial college aid for Venezuelan youth (panel B). The first outcome variable is rescaled to range from 0 to 1, while the second outcome is measured as a binary variable. Estimates are derived from regressions that include covariates for respondent race, gender, age, and education, with robust standard errors. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

respondents’ support for the impending policy change, measured on a 5-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” I also included a binary outcome measure assessing respondents’ views on whether 17-year-old Venezuelans on TPS should be eligible for federal financial aid for college.

Figure 9 presents the conditional average treatment effects, stratified by respondent’s political party identification. Panel A reveals that exposure to information about the right-leaning political behavior of the Venezuelan community significantly increases Democratic respondents’ support for the end of TPS ($P < .01$), while it has the opposite effect among Republican respondents ($P < .01$). Stated differently, Democrats become more supportive of this punitive immigration policy, while Republicans seemingly become more sympathetic to the plight of Venezuelan migrants.¹⁸ However, panel B indicates that this treatment effect does not extend to a secondary outcome regarding

¹⁸ Democrats maintain higher baseline opposition to ending TPS than Republicans in either condition ($P < .01$).

whether Venezuelan youth on TPS ought to be eligible for federal financial aid to attend college.

Legal Versus Undocumented Immigrants

How does legal status influence the relationship between political (mis)alignment and Americans' immigration attitudes? One potential critique of this study's analyses is that the practical impact of political threat may be *conditional* on the legal status of immigrants. For example, some Americans may care only about the politics of legal newcomers who are plausible future voters due to their clear pathway to US citizenship. In order to investigate this possibility, the conjoint experiment randomized instructions specifying that the evaluated immigrants would either eventually become "US citizens" or "US residents but not US citizens." The results, presented in appendix L, indicate that the impact of political threat on Americans' support for admitting immigrants does not significantly diverge based on whether the immigrants are future voters or nonvoters. In other words, there is little evidence to suggest that the effect of political (mis)alignment on Americans' immigration attitudes is meaningfully heterogeneous by newcomers' legal status or voting eligibility.¹⁹

More importantly, I argue that Americans' determinations of immigrant legal status are in themselves endogenous to factors such as perceived political (mis)alignment. To examine this hypothesis, Study 2C also solicited participants to characterize the legal status of Venezuelan migrants who choose to remain in the United States after their TPS is terminated. This is a binary outcome measure, where 1 indicates a belief that those who remain should be considered undocumented, while 0 indicates a belief that they should be considered legal residents. Figure 10 presents the results. Strikingly, Democratic respondents in the treatment condition are 11 percentage points *more* likely to characterize Venezuelans who overstay their TPS as undocumented ($P < .01$), while Republican respondents in the treatment condition are 6 percentage points *less* likely to do the same ($P \approx .15$). That is, there is suggestive

¹⁹ An alternative design would have been to randomize survey participants to evaluate immigrants explicitly described as "legal" or "undocumented." However, I chose not to pursue this approach because it is conceptually strange to ask Americans whether they would support admitting undocumented immigrants into the country. The very notion of admission implies a lawful, sanctioned process, which contradicts the concept of undocumented or unauthorized entry. Moreover, as I subsequently argue, Americans' beliefs about immigrants' legal status are not objective reflections of law, but rather subjective judgments shaped by perceptions of deservingness and group affinity. As a result, I adopt a more logically and theoretically defensible approach, albeit one that manipulates perceptions of voting eligibility rather than legal status per se, by asking respondents to consider immigrants who would become future residents but not citizens.

Red and Blue Immigrants

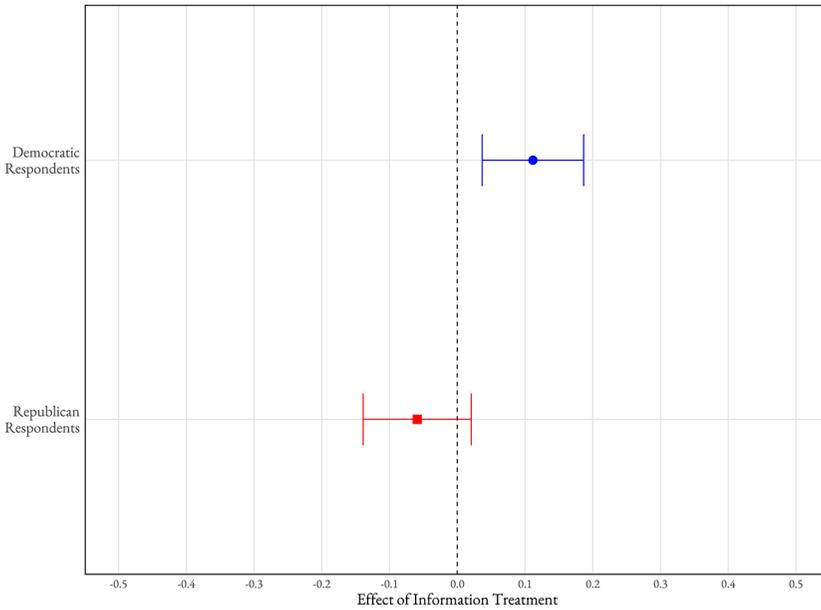


FIG. 10.—Conditional average treatment effects of the “Venezuelans are Republican” information treatment on Americans’ characterization of Venezuelan migrants who overstay their TPS as “undocumented.” The outcome is a binary variable, where 1 indicates classification as undocumented immigrants and 0 indicates classification as legal residents. Estimates are derived from regressions that include covariates for respondent race, gender, age, and education, with robust standard errors. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

evidence that Americans’ portrayals of immigrants’ legal status are shaped, in part, by perceptions of political (mis)alignment.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Ayub Ibrahim was resting in the sweltering San Vicente migrant camp in Panama when he was suddenly ambushed by right-wing activist Laura Loomer, two Republican House members, and affiliates of Steve Bannon, the former executive chairman of Breitbart News (Bensinger 2024). “Do you guys like Ilhan Omar? What do you think about Joe Biden?” The conservative provocateurs had descended on the Darién Gap, a perilous stretch of Panamanian jungle, to barrage migrants with politically charged questions. Their goal: to produce and disseminate propaganda videos aimed to reinforce the right-wing conspiracy theory that the Democratic Party is orchestrating an immigrant invasion into the United States to harvest loyal voters and secure an electoral coup d’état.

This frenzied yet increasingly familiar narrative raises urgent questions. First, what are Americans' perceptions of immigrants' politics? While elite and media rhetoric on this matter has plausibly influenced public opinion (Flores 2018), it remains unclear whether and how these perspectives are reflected in the beliefs of ordinary US citizens (Zhirkov 2020; Flores and Azar 2023). Second, how do beliefs about whether newcomers are future political allies or adversaries shape Americans' immigration attitudes? Such expectations regarding political (mis)alignment may help (1) explain the modern partisan divide over immigration and (2) forecast future shifts in nativist sentiments toward immigrants and immigration policy.

I examine these timely descriptive and causal questions with six studies across two surveys and uncover numerous novel empirical findings. First, Americans have multifaceted perceptions of immigrants' political orientations. Although there is indeed a bipartisan presumption that immigrants are future Democrats, Americans also assume that they are culturally right-wing and economically left-wing. One implication of this divergence is that Americans assess immigrants' voting behavior as motivated by their financial self-interest more so than their cultural policy preferences. Meanwhile, Americans' views about immigrants' politics vary substantially across the evaluated groups. For instance, while there is a strong consensus that Mexican, African, and border migrants are future Democrats, Americans are relatively more divided on the probable partisanship of Chinese and Cuban immigrants, while a majority views Russian immigrants as future Republican voters. Moreover, a clear majority of Americans assume "immigrants in general" to be future Democrats, suggesting that Americans continue to associate immigration with Latin American newcomers; however, the largest sources of migration over the past two decades have been from Asian countries such as China and India.²⁰

At the same time, I observe an intriguing paradox in partisan perceptions of immigrants' political threat. On the one hand, I find that despite the barrage of right-wing elite and media rhetoric that immigrants are future Democrats, it is *Democrats* who most strongly believe this proposition; Republicans are *less* likely to believe that immigrants are Democrats across nearly all 10 evaluated immigrant groups. This unexpected pattern, however, should not be interpreted to signify that Republicans harbor little political anxiety over immigration. Notably, there is a stark partisan gap in the perceived political threat of

²⁰ Immigration flows from Latin America to the United States have historically outpaced those from Asia. However, this gap narrowed significantly in recent decades, and it now fluctuates without a dominant trend. For instance, between 2007 and 2018, Asians outnumbered Hispanics among new immigrant arrivals. In 2019, this trend reversed itself again, but the proportion of Asian newcomers on a year-to-year basis remains comparable (Moslimani and Passel 2024).

immigration on the electoral equilibrium: Republicans presume “immigrants in general” to be future Democrats while simultaneously viewing “most Americans” as Republican; in contrast, Democrats believe both immigrants and Americans politically lean toward the Democratic Party. In other words, Republicans expect continued immigration flows will bring about a fundamental transformation of US electoral politics to their detriment. This existential political fear also offers a plausible explanation for why Republicans in recent decades have become stringently anti-immigration.

Moreover, I draw on vignette, conjoint, and information provision experiments to provide evidence that Americans’ perceptions of immigrants’ politics have a robust causal effect on their immigration attitudes. For instance, I demonstrate the potency of political (mis)alignment in shaping public attitudes by manipulating the hypothetical partisan composition of immigration flows to the United States. I find that as the purported share of right-wing immigrants increases, Democratic support for immigration collapses, while Republican opposition diminishes. In fact, when newcomers are described as exclusively right-wing, the partisan divide in immigration attitudes disappears entirely.

I further contextualize these results by evaluating the impact of political (mis)alignment on immigration attitudes alongside established predictors drawn from mainstream cultural and economic threat theories. I find that the effect of perceived political (mis)alignment dominates the relative influence of national origin, gender, education, occupation, and English-language ability. In fact, 61% of Democratic and 53% of Republican respondents indicate an explicit preference to admit politically aligned immigrants with high school degrees, employed in service work, and limited English ability rather than politically misaligned immigrants with graduate degrees, employed in white-collar occupations, and high English proficiency.

Finally, I take advantage of a real-world political development following the 2024 presidential election by examining how exposure to information about the partisan affinity of Venezuelans in the United States shapes Americans’ attitudes toward these newcomers. Revealing the right-leaning political behavior of the Venezuelan community causes Democratic respondents to become more supportive of the Trump administration’s revocation of their protected status and more likely to classify those who overstay as undocumented, while Republicans become more sympathetic to their plight and defensive of their precarious legal status. These findings both reinforce the main results and demonstrate the potency of perceptions of political (mis)alignment to shape public attitudes toward immigration.

Indeed, an illustrative real-world development occurred in May 2025, when the Trump administration welcomed a group of Afrikaners as refugees to the United States, signaling a selective openness toward immigration when it involves White South Africans. This initiative provoked an unfamiliar political divide over immigration policy: Republicans expressed strong support, but

Democrats voiced strong opposition (Romano 2025). What accounts for this inverted partisan dynamic? The prevailing explanation, offered by most political commentators, centers on Afrikaners' racial status: Democrats interpret the episode as further evidence of Republicans' pro-White bias, while Republicans claim that Democratic opposition reflects anti-White sentiment. However, such an interpretation explains neither the Trump administration's concurrent efforts to deport (White) Ukrainian refugees fleeing armed conflict nor Democrats' denunciation of those policies. Instead, I contend that the underlying motivation is less about the *race of the immigrants (Afrikaners' Whiteness)* as much as *their political and ideological beliefs regarding polarizing societal issues such as racial inequality*. Most conspicuously, Afrikaners seeking refugee status explicitly endorse political beliefs about "White genocide" and "reverse discrimination." Stated plainly, it is difficult to conceive of an immigrant group whose ideological worldview more clearly *politically aligns* with the Republican Party and *politically misaligns* with the Democratic Party.²¹

Another real-world development that merits attention is the Trump administration's efforts to target international students by revoking visas or blocking their entry into the United States (Pamuk 2025). This move runs counter to standard narratives of immigrant desirability, as international students exemplify the "ideal" immigrant: They are typically independently wealthy, highly educated, fluent or proficient in English, and widely recognized as cultural and economic assets. Yet the Trump administration's actions indicate that *political* opposition to immigrants' *political* expression and activism can override these conventionally valued attributes.²²

²¹ To be clear, my contention is not that Americans are indifferent to immigrants' racial status or that attitudes toward immigrants are *exclusively* driven by perceptions of political (mis)alignment. Recall that the conjoint experiment (fig. 7) suggests that Republicans prefer White over non-White immigrants. Indeed, Donald Trump has on multiple occasions conveyed a thinly veiled preference for White immigrants. For instance, at a fundraiser during the 2024 election, he reportedly asked: "Why can't we allow people to come in from nice countries? Nice countries, you know like Denmark, Switzerland? Do we have any people coming in from Denmark? How about Switzerland? How about Norway?" (Benen 2024). However, I argue that Whiteness alone is not necessarily a *sufficient* condition to induce support for immigration among Republicans, particularly when newcomers are perceived as strongly politically misaligned (e.g., Ukrainians).

²² Two clarifications are in order. First, while international students are not technically classified as "immigrants," they are often perceived and treated as such within the context of immigration politics in both policy and public discourse. Second, political threat provides a more credible explanation for the administration's actions toward certain international students—such as those involved in campus political activism—than for its treatment of others. For instance, the Trump administration's targeting of Chinese students appears to be motivated primarily by national security concerns.

This article is not without caveats. For instance, the specter of a broader political realignment, particularly among Latino and Asian Americans, following the 2024 election *may have already begun* to reshape Americans' perceptions of immigrants' political orientations. It is thus possible that my descriptive findings overstate how strongly immigrant groups are perceived to align with the Democratic Party. Moreover, whether immigrant-origin groups will once again become a reliable Democratic constituency or continue along a path of partisan realignment remains an open question. This uncertainty underscores the need for scholars to monitor how Americans' perceptions of political (mis)alignment with immigrants evolve (or persist) over time.

Moreover, the *content* of political threat remains conceptually ambiguous. While it is plausible that Americans oppose politically misaligned immigrants due to their potential impact on the electoral status quo, the specific political issues driving this partisan hostility remain unclear. For example, do Democrats oppose Republican-leaning immigrants in order to protect reproductive rights and other progressive policy priorities? Or is their opposition driven more by their disdain over the perceived moral and ethical failings of partisan enemies? Likewise, Republicans may harbor a distinct set of political fears when evaluating Democratic-leaning immigrants. Future research could shed light on the specific motivations that underlie perceptions of political threat.

Meanwhile, I do not explore immigrants' *actual* political orientations. While Americans' attitudes toward immigrants are likely influenced more by what they *think* rather than *know* about immigrants' politics, future studies could explore the latter question to examine misperceptions (Abascal, Huang, and Tran 2021; Alesina and Tabellini 2024). This topic can also shed light on how Americans' beliefs about immigrants' politics are formed and maintained, which in turn may have important implications for the findings presented in this study.

Implications for Immigration Attitudes and National Boundaries

This article offers eight innovative theoretical and empirical implications for the study of immigration attitudes and national boundaries. First, I marshal extensive descriptive and experimental data to document an increasingly undeniable *political* undercurrent shaping immigration discourse in the United States. In doing so, I contribute to a framework of immigration attitudes that moves beyond the premise of conflicting nationalist commitments or the notion of a hidden bipartisan consensus. Instead, I argue that Americans' attitudes toward newcomers are contingent and malleable, shaped by whether those seeking entry are perceived as political allies or adversaries.

Second, contemporary anti-immigrant rhetoric often stresses the importance of "following the law," framing deservingness in binary terms: "legal" versus "illegal." Yet this study reveals that such a distinction is far from objective.

Perceptions of legitimate entry are not impartial judgments but are instead endogenous to Americans' predispositions regarding which immigrants they view favorably. This finding serves as a crucial reminder that rhetoric denouncing "illegal immigration" often functions as a veiled expression of deeper political, cultural, and economic anxieties.

Third, I highlight the potential and power of perceived political (mis)alignment to shape future public attitudes toward immigration. For example, Democratic support for newcomers could decline over time if current beliefs regarding immigrants' affinity with their party (see fig. 2) begin to erode (Fraga et al. 2025; Pérez et al. 2025). At the same time, evolving perceptions of immigrant political (mis)alignment need not be driven by *factual* trends. Notably, the current political climate renders beliefs regarding immigrants' politics highly vulnerable to partisan manipulation. For instance, deliberate messaging in recent years by Republican elites and media portraying immigrants as future Democratic voters likely contributed to a measurable shift in Republican support for more restrictive immigration policies. To the extent that such calculated political engineering continues, even an objective rise in immigrant support for the Republican Party may not prompt a parallel increase in Republican support for immigration.²³

Fourth, I argue that previous studies of immigration attitudes may have overstated the importance of race and national origin in shaping nativist sentiment by neglecting the extent to which these cues simultaneously signal concerns about political threat. For example, scholars reflexively attribute right-wing opposition to immigration from non-White, non-Western countries to racial prejudice, including fears of "White replacement." Yet racial anxiety is intertwined with political fears: conservatives tend to associate non-White immigrants with left-wing ideologies such as socialism or communism. As such, studies that purport to explain immigration attitudes through classic predictors such as race and national origin, while overlooking highly correlated perceptions of political threat, may inadvertently misattribute or exaggerate their true effects.

Fifth, I contribute to theories of US nationalism by underscoring the centrality of partisan politics in shaping contemporary debates about American national identity. In particular, I build on recent work on the partisan sorting of nationalist beliefs by demonstrating the extent to which the social and symbolic boundaries of Americanness have *in themselves* become recast through the lens of partisan conflict (Bonikowski et al. 2021). Indeed, the new normal

²³ One possible future scenario is that Democrats could become less supportive of immigration due to mounting evidence indicating that immigrants do not share their political values to the extent previously assumed. Republicans, however, may not conversely become more supportive of immigration, particularly if conservative media continue portraying immigrants as aligned with the Democratic Party.

of American politics features Democrats and Republicans accusing one another of being “un-American” over virtually every conceivable social and political issue—abortion, taxes, healthcare, welfare, gun control, foreign policy, race relations, vaccine mandates, and “culture wars” broadly defined (Gage 2017; Liberman et al. 2018; Tavernise 2021; Gorski and Perry 2022; Ray 2022). Future research should account for how partisan polarization has reconfigured the contours of what it means to be truly American.

Sixth, this study challenges the conventional narrative that some individuals (e.g., Democrats) are intrinsically committed to an inclusionary ethos, while others (e.g., Republicans) inevitably uphold exclusionary norms. I show, instead, that perceived political (mis)alignment can meaningfully induce Democrats to adopt more anti-immigration views and Republicans to become more pro-immigration. Indeed, my findings reveal a logic of *conditional inclusiveness*. One practical implication is that it is possible to increase support for immigration among ethnocultural nationalists by admitting newcomers politically aligned with them. However, this strategy risks alienating natives who presently (and ostensibly) claim to uphold pro-immigration ideals. More broadly, my findings cast doubt on the optimistic argument that anti-immigrant sentiment can be substantively reduced simply by informing natives of immigrants’ positive cultural and economic contributions.

Seventh, although my empirical conclusions are grounded in the specific sociopolitical context of the United States, they theoretically speak to underlying dynamics with relevance across national settings (Holland et al. 2024; Morgül and Savaşkan 2025). Native citizens in other countries may similarly oppose immigrants not only due to well-established concerns about cultural anxiety or economic burden but also because of the perception that immigrants are politically misaligned actors positioned to redistribute power, reshape policy agendas, and disrupt established hierarchies. I encourage scholars to investigate these fundamental dynamics in a systematic manner across a range of national and institutional contexts.

Finally, I point to an ironic inversion of a foundational assumption in the scholarly literature on national identity. In his classic treatise on the rise of nationalism and the emergence of the modern state, Benedict Anderson (1983) defined the nation as an *imagined political community* in which members feel a profound sense of camaraderie—a “deep, horizontal comradeship”—with their fellow citizens (p. 7). In the contemporary United States, however, such an observation appears almost quaint. Americans are bitterly divided over the social and symbolic boundaries of their nation, and they may very well regard US citizens with politically misaligned beliefs (i.e., “enemies from within”) as less deserving of inclusion in the national community than even *foreigners* with shared political beliefs. This article offers evidence suggestive of this emergent social reality, but much work remains to be done to unpack the dynamics and consequences of this national fragmentation.

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