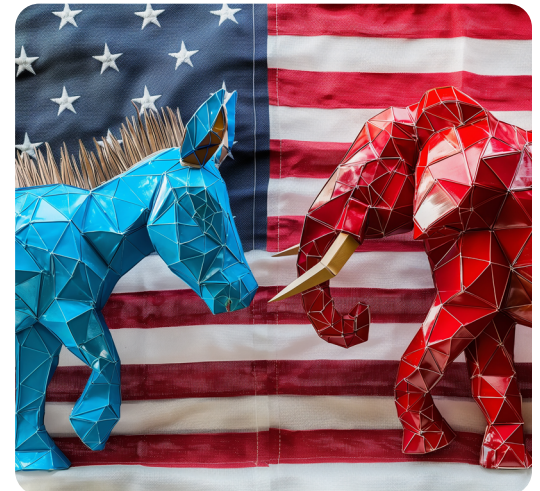




Beyond Political Polarization: Finding Common Ground on Immigration in the United States

Matthew Wright

Research brief prepared by Nadia Almasalkhi



Andres Mejia | stock.adobe.com

Key Ideas

- Despite what the extremist positions of many political leaders and pundits might suggest, **the American public is not so polarized on immigration issues.** Most Americans' attitudes toward immigration are centrist. On the aggregate, most Americans have slightly positive views of immigration and immigrants.
- People's **preferences on immigration policy are motivated largely by civic values**, which are widely-shared moral beliefs about what is desirable in the public realm, and their perception of how well a given policy aligns with civic values – not by feelings of economic or ethnocultural threat.
- **Americans' stances on immigration issues can change.** Immigration attitudes change over time, and rhetorical framing strategies can increase support for specific policies.

Recommendations

- **Politicians should adopt more pragmatic, centrist immigration policy positions.** Few U.S. citizens support extremist policy measures. Political elites are often out-of-step with the majority of voters, even within their own party, on immigration.
- **Advocates of immigration reform should emphasize how their proposed policies align with core American values.** Value-based arguments are effective in shifting people's attitudes on immigration. It can help to dive into policy details.

Analysis of public opinion data suggests that there may be more common ground and flexibility in Americans' immigration attitudes than headlines and politicians' rhetoric imply.

The loudest voices in politics and media create the impression that immigration is a highly contentious and polarizing issue in the United States – an issue that deeply divides the country along immovable, identity-based lines. Indeed, the rhetoric of U.S. Congress members on immigration has become more and more polarized along party lines over the last forty years, and this trend is accelerating in the twenty-first century. But do headlines and political rhetoric reflect a similar degree of polarization within the American citizenry?

Research by Dr. Matthew Wright, a political scientist at the University of British Columbia and affiliate of UBC's Centre for Migration Studies, indicates that this conventional wisdom may be wrong: analysis of public opinion data suggests that there may be more common ground and flexibility in Americans' immigration attitudes than headlines and politicians' rhetoric imply.² Professor Wright and his collaborators tackle questions like, how polarized is the American public on the topic of immigration, actually? What are Americans' immigration policy preferences? What drives their views? And how stubbornly set are Americans in their immigration attitudes? The research suggests that most Americans are relatively centrist, moderately pro-immigrant, supportive of immigration policies driven by pragmatism and civic values, and open to changing their views.

Key Findings

More Centrism than Polarization

The American public is not as polarized on immigration as political leaders would make it appear. On a range of immigration-related issues and attitudes, very few Americans – less than 10 percent of the population – consistently support right-wing or left-wing positions. Rather, Americans tend to hold mixed positions. Wright and colleagues charted how – and how strongly – Americans felt about 17 immigration-related issues. They found, as shown in Figure 1, that most Americans fall in the middle of the two extremes, and even lean slightly towards the pro-immigration side of the spectrum. Few ended up close to a score of 0, which represents Americans who strongly disagree with the right-wing position for all 17 survey questions, and few people fell close to a score of 1, which represents Americans who strongly agree with the right-wing positions.

In fact, there are multiple areas of consensus. There is broad support among Americans for policies that provide a path to legal status for undocumented immigrants under certain conditions. Only one-third of Americans are strictly opposed to “amnesty” programs. The share opposing amnesty drops down to only 11 percent when it comes to legalizing “Dreamers,” who entered the United States unauthorized when they were children. Most Americans also agree that it is important for immigrants to learn English, be financially self-sufficient, and feel patriotic. The majority of Americans think immigration is good for the economy; only 12 percent think the opposite. Indeed, Americans support increasing immigration specifically to admit people who can fill jobs that need more workers.

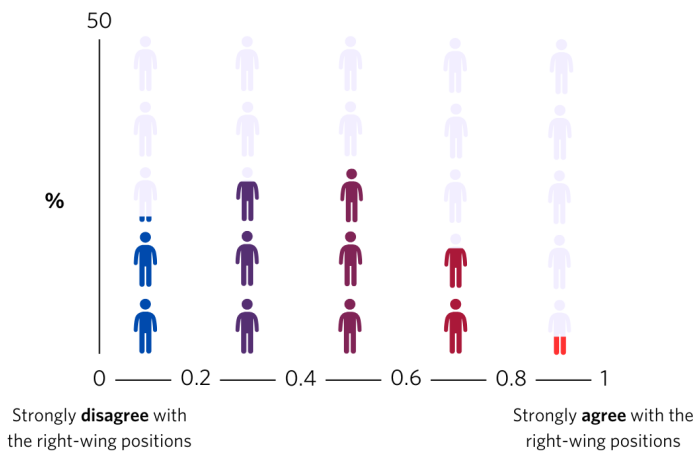


Figure 1. Immigration Attitudes among U.S. Citizens
(Source: ANES 2020)

Value-driven Policy Preferences

American voters’ policy preferences on immigration are motivated by core American values about economic individualism, family, rule of law, humanitarianism, and egalitarianism.³ For example, the value of individualism

motivates Americans’ demand that immigrants be self-reliant and learn English. The value of rule of law is prominent in shaping Americans’ opinions towards undocumented immigrants. People’s policy preferences are shaped by how they think immigration policies line up with these kinds of values.

Often we assume that immigration attitudes are motivated by economic concerns or by ethnic or racial prejudice. Research shows that economic motives have only a minor effect. Voters’ desires to increase or decrease immigration are not linked to how they think immigration will affect their personal economic situation, and only slightly linked to how they think immigration will affect the U.S. economy as a whole.⁴ Regarding prejudiced motives, research does find that ethno-racial prejudice is correlated with negative attitudes toward immigration. However, Wright and colleagues suggest that this is because, in the absence of policy-relevant information, people rely on stereotypes to make assumptions about whether immigration conflicts or aligns with their core civic values. For example, Americans may oppose increasing immigration from a certain country if stereotypes suggest that those immigrants will not learn English. When Americans have information that debunks ethnic stereotypes or clarifies the implications of immigration policies, the effect of their ethno-racial prejudice on their immigration attitudes decreases significantly. These kinds of interventions are less effective in boosting acceptance of Muslim immigrants though.

Americans’ Immigration Attitudes Change

Public opinion has become more supportive of immigration and immigrants over time. From 1994 to 2021, the proportion of Americans who said they want to decrease immigration halved. Further, rather than immigration attitudes being set in stone, people are as likely to change their attitudes on immigration as they are to change their attitudes on government spending for social security or education. Wright and colleagues show that about a third of people change their immigration attitudes over the course of a couple years.

How might views change in the future? The research shows that people’s views on specific policy proposals and on immigration in general can shift by framing the issue and policy details to resonate with American values. Americans are significantly more likely to support a policy to increase immigration when it is framed as upholding values of family unity, humanitarianism, and economic individualism. These frames even remain effective in the face of countervailing messages about how immigrants ‘take jobs from Americans.’

Methods

These findings come from *Immigration in the Court of Public Opinion* (2023) by Jack Citrin, Morris Levy, and Matthew Wright. The researchers analyzed data from thousands of respondents who answered questions about immigration in the American National Election Survey from 2012 to 2020 and the General Social Survey from 2000 to 2020, as well as data from original survey experiments conducted by the authors.

Conclusion

Americans do, on average, have different outlooks on immigration based on their political party preferences, but these differences are not nearly as large as partisan leaders would make it seem. Most Americans fall in the middle of the political spectrum on immigration issues, and agree on many immigration-related topics.

The idea that immigration attitudes are deeply rooted in people's identities and therefore resistant to change also misses the mark. Americans' immigration attitudes are shaped by their deeply held values, which inform their understanding of what is fair and right: values about rule of law, humanitarianism, egalitarianism, economic individualism, and family. Their policy preferences are influenced by the salience and perceived alignment of these values with a given policy. Salience and alignment can be affected by the rhetorical framing and substantive details of a policy. This means that immigration reform advocates can win support among much of the American public if policies plausibly uphold core – and sometimes competing – American values.

References

- 1 Card, Dallas, Serina Chang, Chris Becker, Julia Mendelsohn, Rob Voigt, Leah Boustan, Ran Abramitzky, and Dan Jurafsky. 2022. "Computational Analysis of 140 Years of US Political Speeches Reveals More Positive but Increasingly Polarized Framing of Immigration." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 119 (31): e2120510119. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2120510119>.
- 2 Citrin, Jack, Morris Levy, and Matthew Wright. 2023. *Immigration in the Court of Public Opinion*. Immigration & Society Series. Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press.
- 3 Levy, Morris, and Matthew Wright. 2020. *Immigration and the American Ethos*. 1st ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108772174>.
- 4 Citrin, Jack, Donald P. Green, Christopher Muste, and Cara Wong. 1997. "Public Opinion Toward Immigration Reform: The Role of Economic Motivations." *The Journal of Politics* 59 (3): 858–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2998640>.

Citation

Almasalkhi, Nadia. 2024. "Beyond Political Polarization: Finding Common Ground on Immigration in the United States." CMS Migration Insights Series. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Centre for Migration Studies.

Contact

Marie Frileux - Communications Specialist
UBC Centre for Migration Studies
comms.migration@ubc.ca

Centre for Migration Studies, University of British Columbia
C. K. Choi Building
324 - 1855 West Mall
Vancouver, B.C., V6T 1Z2, Canada
www.migration.ubc.ca

About the Authors

Matthew Wright is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of British Columbia. His research focuses on political psychology and explores how political identities and values shape views on immigration, policy, and diversity. His recent books on these topics include *Immigration in the Court of Public Opinion* (with J. Citrin and M. Levy) and *Immigration and the American Ethos* (with M. Levy). He earned his BA from McGill University and his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. Before joining UBC, he was an Associate Professor of Government at American University in Washington, DC.

Nadia Almasalkhi is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. She is a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow. She holds bachelor's degrees in International Studies and Modern Languages (Arabic and French) from the University of Kentucky. Her current research studies the political integration and political transnationalism of Middle Eastern immigrants and diasporas.



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Centre for Migration Studies