Executive Summary: US Public Opinion on Immigration

Review of relevant scholarly literature on and survey of recent US public opinion polls suggest that the general public has become more supportive of immigration issues overtime. While immigration continues to be a polarizing issue across parties during the Trump era, this report finds that framing immigration policies is an important instrument to influence the state of public opinion. Below are the main findings from the contemporary literature and polling data:

- Self-identified democrats and leaning democrats are more supportive of immigration than republicans and leaning republicans.

- Younger, people of color, and more educated people are more likely to support immigration than older, white, and undereducated.

- While democrats' opinions on immigration policies are more coherent throughout, republicans' opinions are divided within due to Trump supporters being the most aggressive opponents of immigration.

- Framing immigration policy can be instrumental in swaying public opinion.

- Using words such as 'children' and including the years of immigrants' residence (ten years or more) in the U.S. and emphasizing the cost of deportation can be effective in shaping public opinion on immigration.

- Lastly, novelty of messaging matters. Message become more effective when it is a new frame that the public has not been previously exposed to and/or comes from an unexpected source.

Introduction

The total immigrant population in the U.S. in 2016 was approximately 45.6 million people and of them about 12.5 million resided in the U.S. without authorization in 2017 (Camarota and Zeigler 2017, Raley 2017). The American public's attitude toward this population is increasingly driven by political partisanship, with Republican's being less supportive of both documented and undocumented immigration than Democrats or Independents. According to a poll conducted by Gallup in 2016, for example, the gap in attitudes between Republicans and Democrats towards the desirable level of immigration has grown by 29 points since 2003 (Figure 1). According to the same poll, the percentage of Republicans supporting new restrictions on the number of permissible immigrants has increased by 7%, from 53% in 2003 to 60% in 2016. The percentage of Democrats who take the same position has dropped by 18%, in contrast, plummeting from a high of 42% in 2003 to 20% in 2016 (Newport and Dugan 2017).
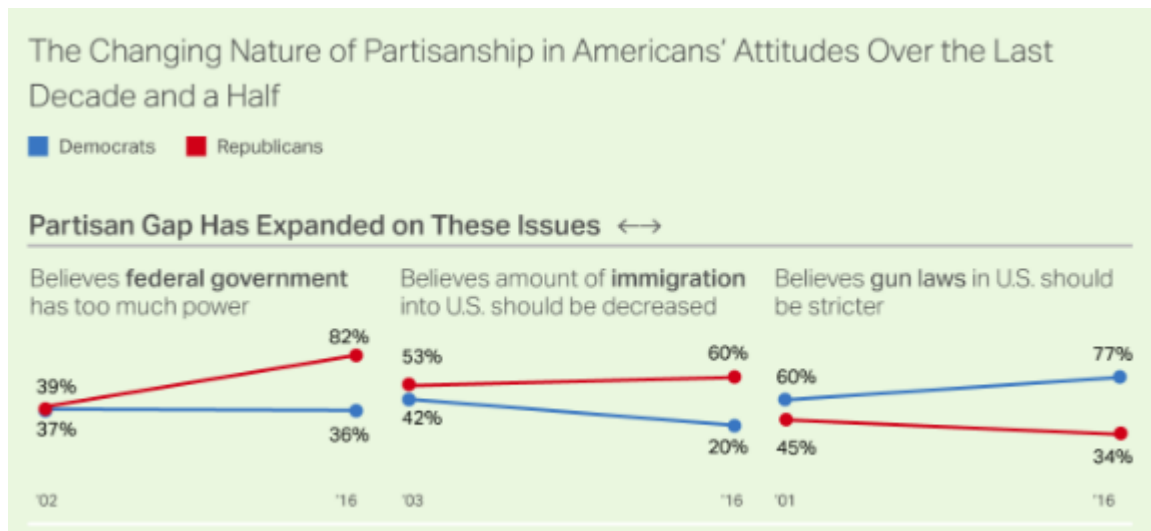

Figure 1. Increasing Partisan Gap on the Level of Immigration
Source: Gallup Poll (2016)

Despite the impact of partisanship, my review of 20 high quality surveys conducted from June 2015 to June 2017 suggests that overall, the US public has become more positively inclined towards immigration. Polling on immigration first began in 1965 (Kohut 2015), but this short briefing paper focuses on 2015-2017 in particular in order to focus on recent public

attitude on immigration, especially the change in public opinion on immigration in relationship to the 2016 presidential election.

I will first disaggregate and explore American public attitudes by four frequently used question types: (1) The impact of immigration on diversity; (2) Citizenship for undocumented immigrants; (3) Deportation policies; and (4) Construction of a wall along the Mexican-US border. Next, I analyze the drivers of public opinion towards immigration by incorporating the scholarly literature, and discuss the ways in which political messaging can influence attitudes.

Overall, I find that negative messaging is more powerful than positive messaging. For instance, associating immigrants with low levels of education and criminal records is more effective in shaping public opinion on immigration than positive messaging such as including the word 'child' or emphasizing the length of stay in the U.S. Also, novelty of messaging matters. Positive messaging can be as effective as negative messaging if it is a new message the public has not been previously exposed to and/or comes from an unexpected source.

Public Opinion by Immigration Issue

While the phrasing of questions on immigration differs from one survey to another, the public's responses seem remarkably consistent over time. The website *PollingReport.com* aggregates the results of recent opinion surveys by a range of agencies and institutions, including Quinnipiac, Monmouth University, ABC News/Washington Post, CNN, CBS News, the Pew Research Center, NBC News/Wall Street Journal, and Marist. Since neither Human Rights Watch nor other peer organizations commission their own polls to study current state of US public opinion on immigration, these reference polls are highly relevant and provide important insights into where the American public stands with regards to various immigration policy issues.

General Impact of Immigration

Public opinion on the general impact of immigration on the United States has shifted overtime from negative to positive. According to the polls conducted by Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies[1], the majority of public has changed from the position that immigration weakens the U.S. (48%) in 2005 to it strengthens the U.S. (64%) in 2017. As figure 2 demonstrates, since 2010 negative public opinion (red bar) has decreased and positive public opinion (blue bar) has increased gradually, reaching the highest 64% in 2017. Today, the majority of the public thinks that immigration strengthens the country thanks to provision of diversity, labor force and creativity.
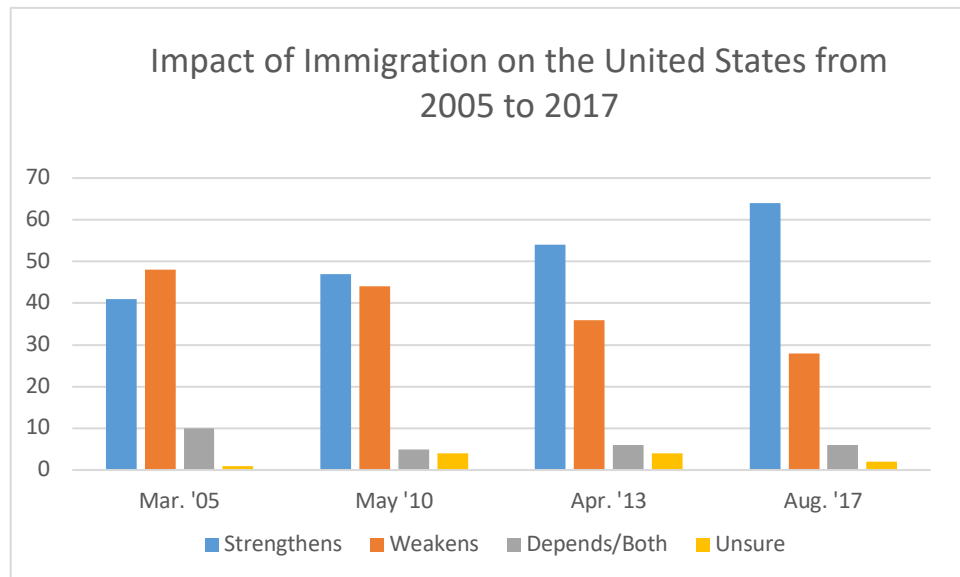

Figure 2. Impact of Immigration on the United States from 2005 to 2017
Source: NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll. N=1200 adults nationwide. MOE ± 2.8

This positive public attitude on the impact of immigration is also reflected in other surveys. Gallup poll asked respondents the following question: "On the whole, do you think immigration is

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[1] "Which of these statements comes closer to your point of view? Statement A: Immigration adds to our character and strengthens the United States because it brings diversity new workers, and new creative talent to this country. Statement B: Immigration detracts from our character and weakens the United States because it puts too any burdens on government services, causes language barriers, and creates housing problems." (NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll conducted by Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies. Aug 5-9, 2017. B=1200 adults nationwide. Margin of error ± 2.8)

a good thing or a bad thing for this country today?"[2] Between 66% to 73% think that it is a good thing whereas 22% to 33% think that it is a bad thing, consistent with the earlier results. Another survey asks about the impact of immigrants' diversity on the country. Pollsters working for Quinnipiac University asked, "Which comes closer to your point of view: immigration from diverse countries makes the United States better, or immigration from diverse countries makes the United States worse?" 78% of respondents said better while only 12% said worse.[3]

Relief for Dreamers

From June 2015-17, one of the most frequently asked immigration questions was whether respondents supported legislation allowing undocumented migrants brought to the U.S. *as children* to remain and apply for legal status (the "Dreamers" act). In the polls I analyzed, anywhere from 58% to 87% of respondents favored the new legislation, while 11% to 25% expressed opposition. Public support for the bill climbs to over 80%, however, when survey questions included two descriptions or requirements of immigrants in addition to being children: 'completion of high school or military service,' and 'no criminal record' (ABC News/Washington Post, CNN, CBS News, Monmouth University). Describing immigrants as brought to the country as children, educated individuals, soldiers, or without criminal intent substantially increases public support for "dreamers" and their regularized legal status (Haynes et al. 2016).

Building the Border Wall

Building a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico was one of Trump's signature campaign proposals, and he consistently insists that the "people want the border wall" (AP interview). In fact, however, polls consistently show that public opposition to the wall exceeds its support.

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[2] June 7-11, 2017. N=1,009 adults nationwide. MOE ± 4
[3] (Neither 3%, Unsure/refused 7%, Jan.12-16, 2018. N=1,212 registered voters nationwide. MOE ± 3.4).

Based on my review of the June 2015-17 polls, anywhere from 53% to 63% of respondents oppose the wall, while only 34% to 40% support it.

Public attitudes on *funding* for the wall is a separate but related in question. Pollsters working for Quinnipiac University, for example, asked respondents, "As you may know, President Trump has said that Mexico will eventually pay for the border wall, one way or another. Do you believe that this is true or not?" Only 25% said they expected this to in fact happen, while 71% said they did not.[4] Most of the US public is unfavorable towards the wall's construction, while an even greater percentage appears to mistrust President Trump's wall-financing plan.

Deportation

In 2017, the Trump administration deported fewer undocumented residents than in 2016, but arrested more than at any time since 2009 (Bialik 2018). The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) arrested more than 155,000 undocumented persons in 2017—30% of whom were non-criminals—and deported nearly 215,000, over 40% of whom had no criminal records (Kopan 2018).

Against this background, surveyors working for CNN/ORC asked respondents, "Do you think the government should attempt to deport all people currently living in the country illegally or should the government not attempt to do that?" Between 63% to 71% said the government should not; 27% to 35% said the government should engage in such deportations; and 2-4% were unsure.[5] However, when the question addresses the deportation of undocumented immigrants with a criminal record, the result flipped. Between 78-83% of respondents answered that the government should deport while 15-19% answered that it should not when asked, "Do

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[4] 4% were unsure; Quinnipiac University, May 4-9, 2017, N=1078 registered voters nationwide, Margin of error ±3.
[5] CNN/ORC Poll. March 1-4, 2017. N-1025 adults nationwide. MOE ± 3

you think the government should attempt to deport all people currently living in the country illegally **who have been convicted of other crimes** while living in the U.S.?" The different attitudes to these questions illustrate how US public opinion is likely to change drastically when undocumented immigrants are portrayed in different ways. Unsurprisingly, the public feels much more warmly towards immigrants portrayed as children, students, soldiers, and law abiding; the public is much colder towards persons portrayed as criminals.

Trump Supporters

The division of public opinion towards immigration along partisan lines is not new, but a closer look at differences between self-identified Republicans leads to some interesting findings. While self-identified Democrats remain relatively unified in their views on permanent legal status and building the border wall, Republicans differ substantially along significant ideological and demographic lines.

According to the PEW survey (Tyson 2018), younger Republicans are more favorable to immigrants than older Republicans. 57% of Republicans younger than 50 years old support a legalization policy which grants permanent legal status to undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children compared to 34% who opposed. By contrast, Republicans older than 50 exhibited evenly divided attitudes where 45% favored and 45% opposed the policy. Similarly, while most Republicans are in favor of expanding the US-Mexico border wall, those between 18 to 49 years old (60%) are less likely to support this policy than those over 50 or older (83%). Republican women are generally somewhat more favorable toward legalization policy than Republican men, and college-graduate Republicans are more likely to support than non-college graduate Republicans. With regards to ideology, moderate and liberal Republicans (58%) tend to support legalization policy while most conservative Republicans are split into 46% support and 44% opposition.

Trump supporters show more extreme behavior when it comes to immigration issues. Politico conducted a survey in 2017, comparing the opinion of Trump voters to that of the general public. The graph be shows that 75% of Trump supporters are in favor of building wall compared to only 35% of general public.

Americans' Preferences for Building A Wall Along the Mexican Border
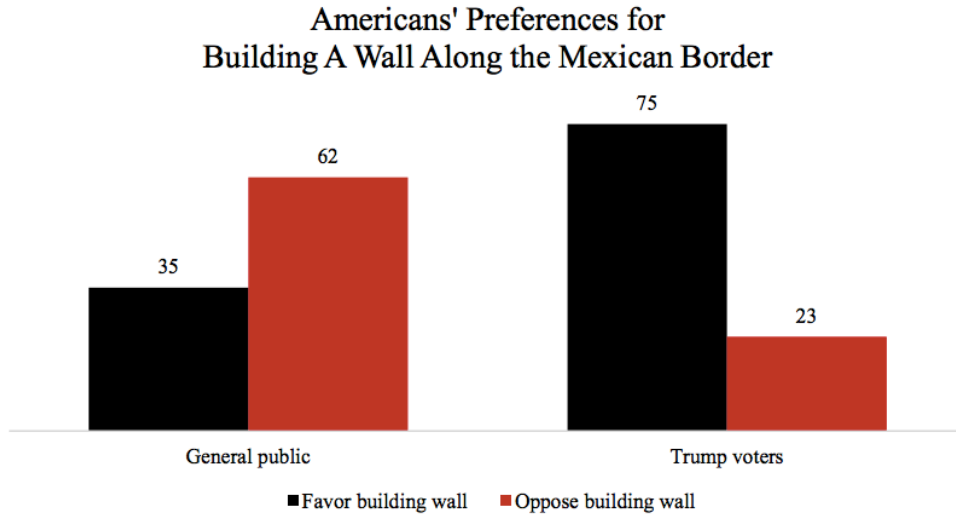

Figure 3. Trump Supporters vs. General Public on Building a Wall
Source: Politico-Harvard University Poll (2017) N=1,023.

The next graph shows that 57% of Trump supporters perceive the number of unauthorized immigrants in the US is a very serious problem compared to only 30% of general public.
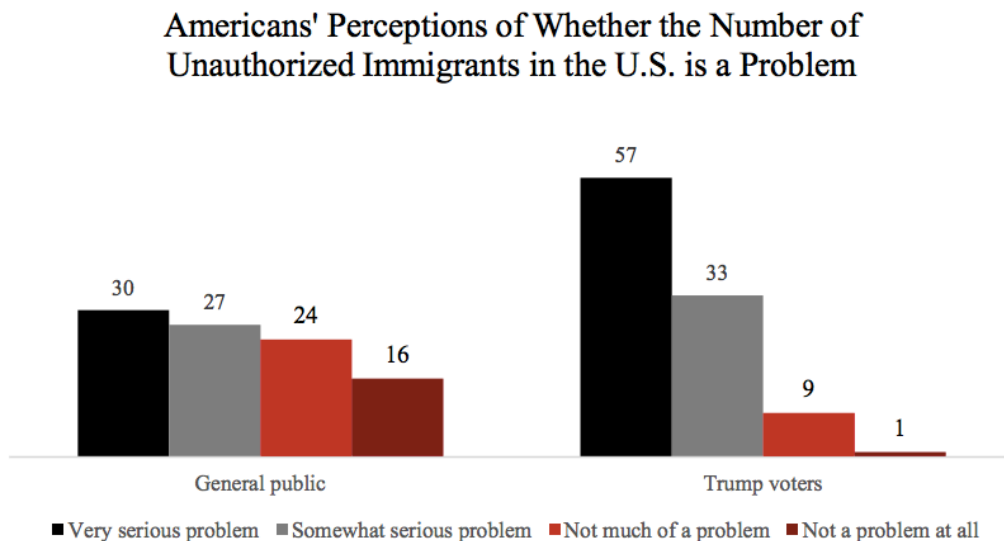
Americans' Perceptions of Whether the Number of Unauthorized Immigrants in the U.S. is a Problem

Figure 4. Trump Supporters vs. General Public on Building a Wall
Source: Politico-Harvard University Poll (2017) N=1,023.

Literature in Public Opinion on Immigration

There are largely two approaches to explaining public opinion on immigration: political economy and sociopsychology. The political economy model argues that immigration attitudes are partly rooted in material self-interest, and workers with lower skill levels tend to oppose immigration because they usually have low-skilled immigrants in mind when answering a survey question (Scheve and Slaughter 2001). Yet other political scientists and economists have found that immigration's negative economic impacts are ambiguous and might not be grounded in economic reality (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010, Hainmueller et al. 2011). Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010) establish an important link between education and support for immigration. They argue that this correlation does not stem from self-interest about wages but from differences in cultural values and beliefs about immigrations' sociotropic impacts. In sum, more educated individuals have lower levels of ethnocentrism, value cultural diversity, and show optimistic attitude regarding the economic impacts of immigration (Bobo and Licari 1989, Citrin et al. 1997, Chandler and Tsai 2001, Card et al. 2012).

Recent scholarship in social psychology emphasizes ethnocentrism, group-specific stereotypes, and the role of the mass media. In Brader et al. (2008), race and ethnic identity of immigrants—who the immigrants are—matters in altering public perceptions about severity of the problem. When it is non-whites, say Latinos, opposition against immigration policy grows stronger than when it is white immigrants from Europe. White Americans, for example, are more easily influenced by negative images of undocumented immigrants than any racial minority. When immigrants are constructed as "threats," whites often identify undocumented residents as "Latinos" (Chavez 2013). Whites tend to consider Asians, by contrast, as "model minorities" (Maddux et al. 2008). People have a preconceived notion or stereotype of immigrants, and this perception resonates with media's spotlight on immigration issue, and further consolidates one's opinion of immigrants. The number of negative frames associated with Latinos by elites and the

media also exceeds that of negative frames about whites or other immigrant racial groups (Brader et al. 2008, Newman et al. 2018).

According to Brader et al., "when stereotypes are undermined, the emotional impact wanes. When details are simply absent, people "fill in" the missing pieces with negative stereotypes, and the emotional impact remains" (976). This is supported by Mendelberg (2001)'s argument that implicit racial messages are more powerful than explicit racial messages because the public fills in the empty space with emotions. This is consistent with the earlier argument presented by Haimueller and Hiscox (2010). Those who are more educated and aware of immigration issues up to date are less likely to be emotionally charged than those who are less knowledgeable about immigration policies and news.

What Brader et al. fail to fully account for is the predisposition of respondents or general American public when answering survey questions with sensitive topics or contents. People's reaction to immigrants is not monotonous. It varies depending on their predisposition, social network, and physical distance to immigrants as well as media's portrayal of immigrants. Luttig and Lavine (2016) challenge the framing literature's ignorance in individual-level heterogeneity in the effectiveness of different types of frames, and attempts to explore personality-by-frame interactions by asking who is susceptible to which frames in the context of political persuasion.

They conduct an experimental study where they survey 907 respondents through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and randomly assign them one of two framed policy statements. Luttig and Lavine argue that individuals are more likely to be persuaded on policy issues when the message frame matches the individuals' predisposition, which is classified into promotion focus and prevention focus, in the self-regulation of affect, cognition, and behavior. The authors assert that some individuals with a promotion focus respond more to gain frames while others with a prevention focus respond more to loss frames. This claim is in contrast to prospect theory's assertion that people are generally more responsive (sensitive) to losses than gains, which ignores heterogeneity in the effectiveness of different frame types and moderation of

personality. While framing of policies in terms of potential gains or losses has been a common elite rhetorical strategy, the persuasion effect is found to be stronger among politically inattentive individuals (less educated) than better-informed individuals (more educated) as the latter are more constrained by ideological beliefs.

Additionally, individual psychological factors are another influence on immigration perceptions. Most notable study is carried out by Aeroe et al (2017). They connect emotion and disgust to political attitudes through automated psychological mechanisms called the behavioral immune system. The immune system works unconsciously and arouses feelings of disgust to motivate avoidance of potentially infected objects and people. Authors argue that opposition to immigration stems from this sensitive behavioral immune system that relate immigrants as carriers of pathogens and grow hypervigilant against unfamiliar individuals.

Instead of examining the demographics of immigrants such as race, Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan (2016) explore a wide range of issue frames on immigration policies such as legalization, the DREAM Act, and deportation. They believe that it is the framing of immigration policy that can influence public opinion, more so than image of immigrants themselves because people already have a fixed image of undocumented immigrants obtained from the media. Issue frames can have large effects on public opinion with the manipulation of just a few words.

Different Messages and Their Impact on the Public Perception of Immigrants

Respondents' reactions towards different question wording and "frames," defined as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, p.143), are driven by factors at the individual and contextual levels. Factors at the individual level include political **partisanship, race, level of political knowledge, and emotions**, while factors at the contextual include the strength of a frame, its novelty, and the credibility of the sources cited in the question. In this section, I examine the varying effects of

different issue frames with regards to immigration policies on the public perception of undocumented immigrants.

Frame 1: Illegal vs. Undocumented

Framing of messages is important as different words, tone and strength of frame, and credibility of source often matter greatly. Not always, however. When surveys describe undocumented persons as either "illegal" or "undocumented," for example, they find no effects on respondent support for various legalization programs (Knoll et al. 2011). In this case, researchers hypothesized that respondents already had a fixed negative image of undocumented persons due to previous media exposure. What is more effective in such a case is to use different words or phrases in a survey question with regards to immigration policy. The public is relatively less informed and familiar with policy issues that they are more likely to be influenced by messaging effects (Haynes et al. 2016).

Frame 2: National Security Threat

Negative frames are more influential than positive frames in swaying people's opinion (Merolla, Pantoja, and Cargile 2012). In particular, when social and national security frames (either positive or negative) are used, people show more support for restrictive policies, compared to when economic frames (either positive or negative) are used. For example, when the word "Criminal" or "Amnesty" is used in survey questions, it cools support for legalization, the Dream Act, and DACA, and increases support for deportation. The use of such words portray undocumented immigrants as law breakers and not worthy of receiving a legal status, alarming national security threat in the mind of the American public. This means that the American public is more responsive to social and national security frames because they tend to consider immigrants "threats" to their security. This type of framing is often used by Republicans and conservative news outlets to arouse fear and anxiety.

Frame 3: Deportation Breaking Families Apart

Social disruption frame including breaking up families is one of the con-deportation arguments. In contrast to my intuition that it is likely to warm up public opinion on pro-immigration, exposure to this frame was ineffective across the analysis of 2007 CCES survey data.[6] In fact, Haynes and his colleagues find that this frame is less effective than economic costs frame, which is discussed below. In the experiment, they compared the mean support for deportations by two con-deportation arguments with a control group that received no argument. The mean support for deportations for control group was 0.539, which is somewhat supportive of deportations. Exposure to the families frame decreased support for deportations as expected (mean=0.389), but the difference between control group and affected group was not statistical significant. Ineffectiveness of family-oriented frame is largely due to people's familiarity with the frame. Most people already have these considerations about family in minds that additional exposure to the frame does not shift their opinion much.

Frame 4: Economic Costs

Economic costs frame is also one of con-deportation arguments and has received very little coverage in the media (Haynes et al. 2016). In the same experiment discussed above, respondents were exposed to the following cost argument: "Some people say that deporting 12 million people would be very expensive and cause economic disruption" (Haynes et al. 2016, pp.133). The mean support for deportations decreased to 0.281 among those who were exposed to the cost frame and this mean is significantly different from the control group. According to their experiment, arguments about the costs of deporting undocumented immigrants are more effective than talking about breaking up families. This suggests that effectiveness of frame is contingent on the novelty of frame (Druckman and Leeper 2012).

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[6] Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES), which were conducted online through YouGov in the study by Haynes et al. 2016.

Frame 5: Child

The use of word "Child" is the most oft-used and effective frame. Support for DACA and legalization increases when the word "Children" is included in a survey question such as "immigrants brought to the U.S. *as children*." Policies known to benefit children are viewed more positively and gain greater support than those specifically for older adults or general population. Moreover, support for legalization increased in the 80s when undocumented immigrants are portrayed as students and non-criminals.

Frame 6: Length of Stay in the U.S.

The years in residence frame applied to immigrant legalization shifted opinion from neutral to positive in a survey experiment (Haynes et al. 2016). It increases support for legalization as well as decreases support for deportation the longer the undocumented have lived in the US. Its impact was greater when undocumented immigrants have lived in the country 10 years or more as opposed to those who lived in the U.S. only for two or five years. It is particularly effective due to the novelty of message. "However, we do not find much news mention of duration of stay in the United States, either in terms of actual years or through the use of terms like "long-term residents" or "recent arrivals." Thus, our findings suggest that pro-immigration advocates could increase public support for legalization if they consistently emphasize more novel frames like the long-term nature of the settled population of undocumented immigrants.

Frame 7: Novelty of Frame

Another contextual factor is novelty of frame. Individuals are more likely to be influenced by new frames on immigration policy that they are not already saturated with. A good example is ineffective "breaking up families" frame. While it includes humane stories in empathetic language, its impact has been diminished overtime due to exceeding saturation point. Strength of frame matters in a non polarized partisan environment; a strong pro-frame wins more support

than a weak con-frame. However, when two strong frames are pitted against each other, partisans follow the party cues even in a non polarized setting. Without a doubt, in a polarized partisan environment, people follow party cues regardless of the strength of the frame in either direction (Druckman et al 2013; Goren 2005).

Conclusion and Relevance to HRW

Current administration's hard immigration policies and ongoing tragedies in detention centers demand our attention to the American public attitudes on immigration issues. It is critical to first understand what the general American public thinks of immigration issues and know how to influence popular opinion because public opinion is malleable and political elites cannot completely ignore the public opinion in democracies (Hall and Wayman 1990).

Among the literature, Luttig and Lavine (2016) article especially has several key implications for our human rights work. First, political elites cannot fully convince the public by employing one type of political message frame across the board. Considering different individual predispositions, human rights organizations and politicians who advocate human rights issues need to use more than one type of messages framed either in terms of the gains to be achieved from a recommended policy action or in terms of the losses to be incurred from not taking the policy action. Second, human rights organizations have better chance of influencing the opinions of politically inattentive people than that of politically sophisticated. However, this is again problematic as politically inattentive or less educated people tend to be relatively more ignorant about politics or social issues than their counterparts. Moreover, people who are less engaged in politics and less knowledgeable about immigration issues have more rooms to "fill in" the missing information. Therefore, they are far more likely to be swayed by emotion and make emotional judgment than their counterparts who are less likely to be influenced by emotion alone. Hence the HRW needs to be creative in delivering the messages framed in

either terms via diverse sources of communication to which the politically inattentive have most access.

Mass media is largely responsible for varying degrees of anxiety; more frequent exposure to the negative portrayal of immigrants and the tone in which the news are reported matters significantly. But do undocumented immigrants or Latinos in general have the capability to improve their group image? Do they have the power to prime their own image and issue in ways that benefit them? Immigrants tend to be an economically and politically unprivileged group of people. Unfortunately, they themselves do not have the means to improve their already stigmatized image as low-skilled, uneducated, outsiders or even intruders.

Based on my analysis, I suggest using a novel and positive messages that include the words like child, emphasize the length of stay and cost of deportation to influence public opinion. Drawing from work in neurobiology, human brain processes positive and negative information differently. Negative information causes individuals to stop, pay attention, and process information so it produces a stronger effect on opinion. Yet this does not mean positive messaging is ineffective. Novelty of messaging matters as people are generally more likely to be moved by frames to which they have not yet been exposed or frames that come from an unexpected source (Lau 1982; 1985; Fiske 1980). So when positive messaging is new, comes from an unexpected source, and includes words like "children," public opinion is more likely to be influenced.

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