Immigrant Rights are American Values

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Contrary to these prevailing assumptions, American values may be the most compelling frame to generate sympathy for the undocumented.

The number of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. has fallen to its lowest level in more than a decade, yet anti-immigrant politicians have achieved significant electoral and policy victories while the pro-immigrant rights movement seems to have lost traction. To understand how pro-immigrant allies might effectively advocate for undocumented people, BIMI-affiliates Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad, along with co-author Fabiana Silva, asked over three thousand registered California voters what should be done to help California residents — including undocumented residents — needing health care, facing sexual harassment, or going hungry.

Immigrant advocates regularly make claims using the language of human rights. How do California voters respond to such framing strategies?

Since nativist political rhetoric often casts immigrants as undeserving of sympathy and services, immigrant advocates have turned to a human rights framework to argue for immigrants' rights, regardless of documentation or citizenship status. Voss, Silva, and Bloemraad test how effective human rights frameworks are compared to other frames used by advocates, specifically, those invoking civil rights and American values. They further tested if the effectiveness of arguments changed when applied to undocumented people or to U.S. citizens. The California voters in the study were presented with short vignettes of either an undocumented Mexican woman or a Mexican-American citizen experiencing a hardship. The survey respondents were randomly assigned to vignettes highlighting American values, civil rights, or human rights or to a control group. All of the voters were asked if the government should do something to help the woman in the story, and those not in the control group were asked whether or not the women's situations violated American values, civil rights, or human rights.

The researchers found that survey takers were most likely to agree that the hardships faced by both undocumented and documented women were violations of American values or human rights, and they were least convinced that these hardships violated civil rights. One major finding is that when the vignette used a civil rights or American values frame, voters discriminated against the undocumented woman in determining whether her situation violated those standards. However, the human rights frame prompted roughly equal levels of support for the idea that the person faced a hardship, irrespective of whether the person was portrayed as undocumented or a citizen. In line with activists' intuition, the human rights frame seems to be the most equalizing frame for undocumented immigrants when it comes to voters recognizing violations of rights or values.
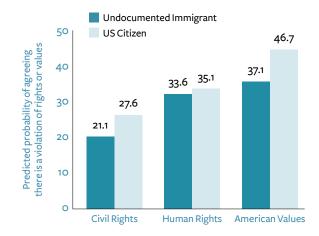
Figure 1: When framed as a human rights issue, California voters are equally likely to agree that lack of healthcare, going hungry or experiencing workplace sexual harassment is a human rights violation, regardless of somebody's legal status. However, they are even more likely to see hardships as violations of American values, especially for citizens, but even for undocumented residents.
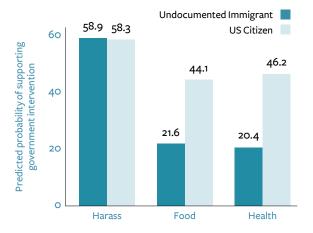

Figure 2: California voters are much more likely to support government intervention to help a U.S. citizen facing food insecurity or needing medical care than to help an undocumented California resident. But they are equally supportive of government intervention in the case of workplace sexual harassment.

The most effective frame, both for undocumented people and citizens, was the American values frame. Given the history of progressive thought in the United States, this finding is surprising. At least since the 1960s, progressives have shied away from a discourse of national values, often seeing negative connotations in such language. Yet, these BIMI-affiliates' research shows that contrary to these prevailing assumptions, American values may be the most compelling frame to generate sympathy for the undocumented.

Yet, even if voters believe that a woman's hardship violates human rights or American values, they might not support government action to help the person in question. When participants were presented with stories about a Mexican American woman who suffered a lack of medical care, insufficient food, or who experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, survey respondents believed that the government should do something to help the woman. However, in the story portraying an undocumented Mexican woman, most voters believed that the government should help only in the case of sexual harassment.

The researchers theorize that this might be because the sexual harassment scenario invoked a workplace—and thus a worker—rather than a stigmatized and politicized potential welfare recipient. An alternate explanation is that Americans think of negative rights (like the right to be free from harassment) differently from positive rights (like entitlement to healthcare or food). Whatever the reason, since the research was conducted in early 2016, more than a year before the #MeToo movement put sexual harassment front-and-center in public debate, it is clear that Californians react strongly to sexual harassment and make little distinction by legal status.

In short, this research suggests that while California voters, on average, are much more likely to agree that the government should help a U.S. citizen needing food assistance or health care than an undocumented resident, the public makes no such distinction when it comes to workplace sexual harassment. More generally, the study provides new insights on which framing strategies are most effective in generating compassion for undocumented people. Many immigrant advocates have turned to human rights frameworks to build sympathy for the plight of undocumented residents, but these BIMI-affiliates' research shows that, contrary to the prevailing assumption of U.S. liberals, American values may be the most compelling frame to shift public opinion. If this is the case, immigrant rights are American values.

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About the Author

Nadia Almasalkhi is a Ph.D. student and Magistretti Fellow in Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Before beginning graduate school, she worked as a casework intern in a refugee resettlement agency, as a legal assistant to immigration attorneys, and as a research assistant investigating the effects of trauma on refugees in the U.S. She holds a B.A. in International Studies and a B.A. in Arabic and Islamic Studies, both from the University of Kentucky. Her research interests include the experiences of Middle Eastern emigrants, the politics of immigration law, and the intersection of nationalism and forced migrations. Her current project studies Syrian American transnational activism.