

Changing Partisan Opinions on Immigration

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“How can people’s opinions on immigration—or any other controversial issue, for that matter—be changed?”

Politics in Western countries has become more and more polarized in the last few decades. One particularly polarizing, partisan issue in the U.S. is immigration.¹ Unfortunately for immigrant advocates, studies show that efforts to change people’s political opinions often backfire, causing people’s opinions to radicalize even further.² In that case, how can people’s opinions on immigration—or any other controversial issue, for that matter—be changed?

The Potential of Frame-Bridging Techniques

BIMI-researcher and assistant professor of political science Dr. Cecilia H. Mo and her colleague Dr. Tabitha Bonilla address this question in their 2018 experimental study, “Bridging the Partisan Divide on Immigration Policy Attitudes.”³ The results of this study are promising for both policymakers and immigrant

advocates. Their study shows that people can be persuaded to shift their position on this contentious issue through the use of “bridging frames,” a persuasive technique that presents two distinct issues as being linked to one another.

Drs. Mo and Bonilla use the issue of human trafficking as the bipartisan issue area or “bridging frame” in their experiment. While opinions on immigration are polarized, human trafficking is uniformly condemned in the U.S. Drs. Mo and Bonilla conducted an experimental study to see if connecting the bipartisan issue of human trafficking to the partisan issue of immigration can lead people to shift their opinion on either issue.

For their first experiment, they divided participants into two groups, with each group including a mix of Democrats and Republicans. The first group was shown a passage from a news article about human trafficking. The second group was shown the same passage, but with an extra two sentences about how migrants are at risk of being trafficked.

Among the Republicans who read about human trafficking alone, 30% said afterward that they were in favor of increasing the amount of immigrants admitted to the U.S. However, among Republicans who read about human trafficking and its connection to

1 Pew Research Center. 2016. “On Immigration Policy, Partisan Differences but Also Some Common Ground.” Retrieved February 16, 2020 (<https://www.people-press.org/2016/08/25/on-immigration-policy-partisan-differences-but-also-some-common-ground/>).

2 Gubler, Joshua R., Christopher F. Karpowitz, J. Quin Monson, and David A. Romney. 2014. “Preaching to the Choir: When Empathy Fails to Induce Positive Attitudes Towards the Outgroup.” Presented at the 72nd Annual Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago.

3 Bonilla, Tabitha and Cecilia Hyunjung Mo. 2018. “Bridging the Partisan Divide on Immigration Policy Attitudes through a Bipartisan Issue Area: The Case of Human Trafficking.” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 5(2):107-120.



Human Trafficking: A Major Problem

Every year, millions of men, women, and children are trafficked in countries around the world. It is estimated that human trafficking is a \$32 billion per year industry. Traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion to lure their victims and force them into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. They look for people who are vulnerable for a variety of reasons, including economic hardship, natural disasters, or political instability.



Reuters

Left: Stylized representation of the passage shown to the control group.

Right: Stylized representation of the passage including the “bridging frame,” shown to the experimental group.

Human Trafficking: A Major Immigration Issue

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migration, 41% responded that they were in favor of increasing immigration levels. This eleven point jump shows how effective bridging frames can be—but did this jump come from connecting the partisan issue, immigration, to a *bipartisan* issue, or did it result from the passage evoking sympathy for migrants? Drs. Mo and Bonilla investigated this question in a second experiment that compared the effects of the bridging frame to the effects of other ways of talking about immigration that *also* evoke sympathy.

For Republicans who read about human trafficking and its connection to migration, the percent in favor of higher immigration increased by eleven points.

Human Smuggling: A Major Immigration Issue

Every year, millions of men, women, and children look to migrate to different countries around the world. It is estimated that smuggling is a \$35 billion per year industry. Many smugglers use force, fraud, or coercion to lure their potential victims and force vulnerable migrants into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. They look for people who are vulnerable, including immigrants, who will accept risky arrangements to escape violence, instability, and/or poverty in their home countries because strict immigration policy makes migration difficult. For instance, the recent global tightening of asylum admissions has increased the victimization of the asylum seekers by forcing many desperate people to turn to smugglers.

Left: Stylized representation of the sympathetic passage about migrants' struggles

Right: Stylized representation of the sympathetic passage about American values and immigration

Pursuing the American Dream: A Major Immigration Issue

Millions of men, women and children have come to America to seek a better life. Immigrants are just like others who came to America in years past. The ancestors of many Americans came to this country to live the American dream. Today immigrants and refugees have chosen to come to America, so they too can live that same American dream. That dream is what this nation was founded on, it is what brought previous generations to this great land, and it is the great success story that these immigrants want to be a part of.

The Advantage of Frame-Bridging over Sympathetic Techniques

In addition to passages from the first experiment, participants in the second experiment also read two passages that evoke sympathy for immigrants without connecting migration to human trafficking. After reading their assigned passage, participants answered questions about their opinions on several immigration issues. The results of these questions were combined to create an "Immigration Attitude" score for each participant.

Among Republicans, the sympathy-evoking passages had no significant effect on their attitudes toward immigration, while the bridging frame did have a significant, positive effect on their immigration attitudes. Arguments that intend to evoke sympathy for immigrants (or any group whose situation is debated along partisan lines) often produce a backlash effect,

where people with hostile, anti-immigrant attitudes actually increase their support for strict and punitive policies.⁴

In this study, however, bridging the issues of human trafficking and immigration did not change Republicans' view of human trafficking while it did positively change their view of immigration.

⁴ Gubler et al (2014)

This experiment thereby confirmed that connecting a bipartisan issue to a polarized, partisan issue is uniquely effective in changing people’s opinions on the polarized, partisan issue.

Drs. Mo and Bonilla’s experiment shows that this persuasive technique works by connecting an uncontroversial, bipartisan issue area to a controversial, partisan issue area. If the bipartisan opinion (e.g., “Human trafficking should be prevented”) is shown to conflict with a person’s partisan opinion (e.g., “Immigration policy should be more strict”), then the person adjusts their partisan opinion to align more with the broadly-supported bipartisan opinion (e.g., “There should be more avenues for legal immigration”). Armed with this knowledge of frame-bridging, policy-makers and advocates can create bipartisan support for controversial policies by making a rational argument that the implementation of the controversial policy can help achieve bipartisan goals.

Lawmakers in the U.S. House seem to have successfully applied the frame-bridging strategy in December 2019 when they [passed a rare partisan bill](#) that would allow undocumented agricultural workers to apply for legal status, would create more visas for new agricultural workers, and would create a path to citizenship for foreign-born agricultural workers.

While undocumented immigration and related immigration reforms have been hotly debated over partisan lines, the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2019 was co-sponsored by 37 Democrats and 25 Republicans. In arguing for the speedy passage of the bill through the Senate, both Democrats and Republicans emphasized how the Farm Workforce Modernization Act would provide stability for American farmers and ranchers who currently rely on the labor of undocumented workers.⁵ This bridging-frame connected immigration reform to the bipartisan goal of supporting U.S. farmers, ultimately securing votes from 34 House Republicans.

This bipartisan success in the U.S. House demonstrates that the frame-bridging strategies that work in experimental studies can be successfully applied to real-world politics. In addition to alleviating some of the deep political divisions among Americans, frame-bridging can help state and national governments pass productive, bipartisan legislation. The tactic of connecting a bipartisan issue to polarized issues, as explained by Drs. Mo and Bonilla, could be the secret to bypassing political gridlock.

⁵ Office of Congressman Doug LaMalfa. 2019. “Farm Workforce Modernization Act Passes House.” Press Release. Retrieved February 16, 2020 (<https://lamalfa.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/farm-workforce-modernization-act-passes-house>).

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