



FRAME WORKS INSTITUTE



Getting to “We”:

Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Immigration and Immigration Reform

A FRAMEWORKS RESEARCH REPORT

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Introduction

“We have a unique opportunity to fix our broken system in a way that upholds our traditions as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. We just need Congress to finish the job.”

– President Obama

While those who support comprehensive immigration reform emphasize the need to make the system more flexible and functional, there is a set of deep cultural understandings that leads the American public to a very different way of thinking about this topic. Americans typically do not share reformers’ understanding of how the immigration system works, or how it fails to work, and, as a result, struggle to recognize *why* and *how* the system needs to change.

Despite this lack of “how it works” knowledge, Americans have a robust set of understandings that they apply to think about immigration. Frames embedded in statements like the one above are powerful cues that activate these ways of understanding — or what anthropologists call “cultural models.” For example, the emphasis on “laws” in the President’s statement is likely to cue the powerful, but implicit, assumption that immigrants have entered “illegally,” *breaking* American laws, operating outside of societal norms and, thus, constituting a “them” to the American “us.”

This report shows that, when thinking about immigration in terms of illegality, people’s reasoning about reforming the system turns punitive — focusing on severely and uniformly punishing those who are understood to have willfully transgressed American laws, and securing America’s borders so that no more immigrants can illegally enter “our” country. *In short, frames influence the way that people understand immigration and constrain their ability to reason about a range of appropriate and effective policy measures.* In order to be strategic in communicating about immigration reform, communicators need to know what they are up against in public understanding, and how various ways of reframing the issue affect public support for reforms. This report is an integral part of a larger project that seeks to answer these communication questions.

This report documents what experts working on comprehensive immigration reform want to be able to communicate, and how members of the public understand immigration issues. The report also details the communication challenges that emerge from comparing these expert and public perspectives, and presents initial strategies to use in addressing these challenges and leveraging emerging communications opportunities.

The research reported here was conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and sponsored by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Foundation’s U.S. Immigration Policy Initiative. It is part of a larger, multi-method collaborative project designed to reframe immigration and immigration reform. The goal is to design and test

communication strategies that can be used by members of the field to generate a broader public understanding of what the immigration system is and how it works, and, in turn, increase public support for the policies and programs necessary to improve the U.S. immigration system and the myriad outcomes it shapes. The Foundation's U.S. Immigration Policy Initiative seeks to support efforts to reform current systems so that they better address the economic, fiscal and social implications of immigration. As a part of this effort, the MacArthur Foundation is supporting research by the FrameWorks Institute to investigate what policymakers, the media and the public currently think about immigration, and to develop an evidence-based underpinning for future communication. This research will help Americans reconsider their existing attitudes and assumptions about immigration, and take into account evidence about the contributions and challenges posed by immigrants in the United States. The goal of the Foundation in supporting this work is to inform and reframe the public discourse, such that the national debates over immigration result in the adoption of policies that are beneficial to all Americans, whether immigrants or native born.

The research presented here suggests that the American public has the potential to think in two very different ways about immigration, and that the frames embedded in discourse determine which sets of understandings become active and shape thinking. When immigrants are framed as "them," and positioned as separate from native-born Americans, people focus on "illegal" immigrants — modeled primarily as Mexicans who breach the border, take American jobs and pull from a pool of already overstretched government resources. When employing these cultural models, people arrive at a set of punitive reforms: secure the border and punish and remove those who have violated the rule of law.

Alongside this perspective, there exists, in individuals across political ideologies, a powerful "us" cultural model. While accessed less frequently than the "them" perspective described above that positions immigrants as "others," Americans have access to ways of thinking in which immigrants are understood as "people just like you and me" trying to achieve the dreams to which all Americans aspire. This set of understandings is based on the notion that America is a country founded by immigrants whose presence enriches our social and civic experiences, and contributes to our economic success.

This report explores these "us" and "them" cultural models, as well as other highly patterned understandings that Americans use to think about immigration. The report also holds these perspectives up against those that comprehensive reform supporters wish to communicate. The central challenge identified here, and the focus of the prescriptive reframing research which is part of this larger project, lies in finding the most effective ways to predictably and selectively engage and disengage these two ways of thinking that exist in the minds of Americans.

Executive Summary

Analysis of data from interviews with immigration experts and relevant materials revealed a set of messages that constitute the gist of what comprehensive reformers want to be able to communicate to the public. These points include the following:

- Comprehensive reform experts believe that immigration is a net benefit for the country, improving the United States' economic and social vitality.
- Experts define the U.S immigration system as a set of laws, policies and procedures that determine what happens to individuals who seek to enter and live in the United States.
- Reform experts discuss a number of challenges that face this system — chief among them: the large number of immigrants who currently live and work in the United States without authorization; the growing dispersion of immigrants into areas ill-equipped and/or unaccustomed to providing services to immigrant communities; an outdated employment-based visa system; a backlogged family reunification procedure; inefficient and ineffective enforcement policies; and a legal system which fails to provide basic human rights to immigrants.
- Experts explain that addressing these challenges requires procedures that: provide legal documentation and citizenship to those currently living in the United States without authorization; align the visa system with the country's current and future economic needs; increase capacity and create new ways to reunify families; and protect the basic rights of immigrants.
- Experts also emphasize the need to shift resources away from border enforcement and towards other parts of the immigration system, where they are more likely to improve outcomes.

Figure 1 provides a summary of this expert account.

Untranslated Expert Story of Immigration and Immigration Reform

Why is immigration important?

- Immigration, whether through legal or illegal avenues, is inevitable.
- Immigration drives long-term economic growth.
- Immigration makes societies more diverse, which benefits social, cultural and civic life.

What does the United States' immigration system do and how does immigration happen?

- The basic function of the immigration system is to decide *how many* people from *which groups* to let into the country.
- The immigration system controls the legal avenues by which people can enter. These include family-based visas, employment-based visas, asylum/refugee protection and diversity visas.
- While illegal immigration can happen through unauthorized entry, it is frequently the result of people overstaying their visas.

What are the challenges facing the immigration system?

- Many immigrants currently in the U.S. lack legal authorization.
- The employment-based visa system is overly rigid, and poorly aligned with our economic needs.
- The family reunification system is backlogged and does not fully reflect changing definitions of family.
- Enforcement policies are costly and ineffective.
- Immigrant rights are inadequately protected.
- Immigrants are more diverse and more dispersed than in the past.

How should the system be reformed?

- Provide a pathway to legal status for undocumented immigrants.
- Reform the visa system to better meet economic demands and changing definitions of family.
- Dial back border enforcement, and refocus resources on employer-based immigration laws.
- Reform the detention system to better protect immigrant rights.

Our research shows that the public that reformers want to deliver these messages to draws on a complex set of cultural models — or shared and implicit understandings — to organize their thinking about immigration. These cultural models are of differing strategic value to those seeking to increase public support for comprehensive immigration reform. Therefore, one of the key tasks in reframing the public discussion is to foreground productive ways of thinking about immigrants, immigration and reform, while simultaneously muting those ways of thinking that impede the public's ability to seriously consider comprehensive reforms.

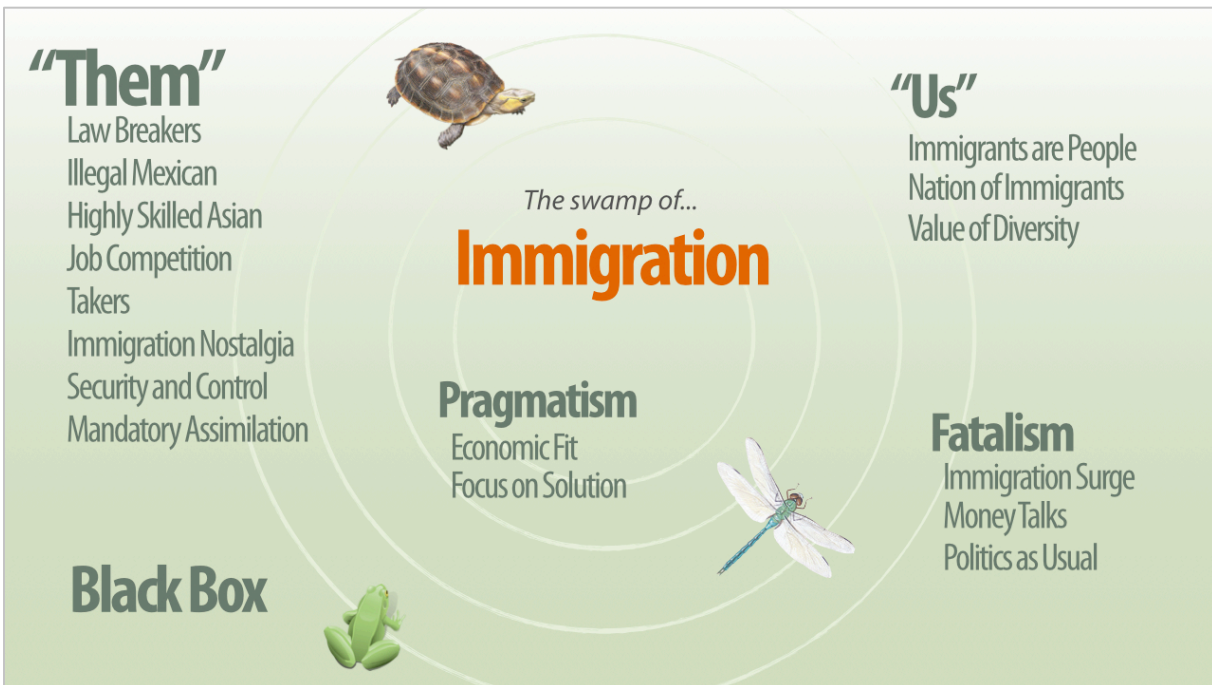
The following foundational cultural models shape public thinking about immigration issues:

- Thinking with the *Immigrants As Them* cultural model, people focus on the difference between “Americans” and “immigrants,” and tend to understand this latter group as law-breaking “others” who take American jobs and steal from the limited pool of public resources. Thinking of immigrants through this “othering” perspective, people view the immigration system primarily as a way to secure the border and make sure that more of “them” don’t get in to threaten “us” and take “our” resources.
- Alongside this “othering” perspective is an *Immigrants As Us* model. Employing this model, people view immigrants as “really just like you and me,” who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. According to this humanistic perspective, the

United States is “a nation of immigrants,” one where immigrants bring a diversity of skills, experiences and cultures that benefit all people living in the United States. In some cases, the application of this “us” perspective supports calls for reforms to better align the immigration system with these values.

- There is also a strong undercurrent of *Fatalism* that shapes the way that people speak and think about immigration, and especially immigration *reform*. This *Fatalism* cultural model leads people to focus on the perception that rates of immigration in the United States are rising dramatically and unsustainably, and shapes the view that the United States is bursting at the seams from the flood of immigrants. From a fatalistic perspective, people also see the system as intransigently corrupt — where having money allows you to jump the line, and where the involvement of party politics pushes meaningful change out of the realm of possibilities.
- Next to this deeply problematic *Fatalism* model is a more pragmatic way of thinking about immigration and the ability to improve this system. Reasoning from this *Pragmatic* cultural model, the system is seen as serving an important function in maintaining a balance between the number of people coming into the United States and the number of jobs available. People employ this pragmatic model particularly when asked to reason about the millions of undocumented immigrants living in the United States, where they reason that we need to do “what makes sense” to make undocumented individuals part of American society and pay taxes.
- In addition to these cultural models, there is a “black box” understanding of the immigration system. This *Black Box* refers to the fact that Americans struggle to think about how the immigration system works, a struggle that explains people’s difficulty in reasoning about reform proposals. If people don’t understand how the system works, how can they evaluate the ability of changes to this system to improve outcomes?

Together, these models comprise the “swamp” of public thinking about immigration — a set of implicit understandings and assumptions that exist just under the surface and become active when people are asked to think about immigration issues. The following graphic depicts this swamp of public understanding.



Overlaps and Gaps in Understanding

Comparing these expert and public perspectives reveals several areas of agreement, which provide points that comprehensive reformers can leverage in expanding public understanding and creating effective messages. These points include the fact that both experts and members of the public discuss the way that immigration creates a diversity of cultures, which enriches the experiences of those living in the United States; that both experts and members of the public are able to see that current enforcement policies cost too much and accomplish too little; that experts and members of the public agree that the immigration system should align immigration to match the country’s employment needs; and that experts and members of the public focus on merit and incentive-based criteria for a pathway to citizenship rather than more punitive measures.

There are also notable gaps between expert and public understandings, which impede the public’s ability to access expert perspectives on immigration reform and, therefore, represent targets for reframing strategies. Notable gaps include the fact that experts emphasize the potential contributions that immigrants stand to make to society, whereas members of the public tend to view immigrants as threatening the country’s security and stressing the economy; that experts understand the economy as expandable and immigration as a contributor to this expansion, while members of the public model the economy as a limited entity from which immigrants take a valuable piece; that experts hold the view that the U.S. population is of relatively low density, while the public conceptualizes immigration rates to be “surging” and threatening to “overpopulate” the country; that experts believe that a continued focus on securing the southern border diverts attention from other aspects of the immigration system that require reform, while

members of the public view securing the border from illegal Mexican immigration as the central task of reform; and that experts see the solution to immigration issues as lying in a more flexible, humane, pragmatic and responsive set of policies, while members of the public either focus on border security or disengage from what they see as a problem that can't be fixed.

An Emerging Framing Strategy

Deep cultural models of immigrants as lawbreaking and threatening “others,” and fatalistic assumptions about the improbability of meaningfully changing the system, constitute serious challenges for those communicating about comprehensive immigration reform. Add to these challenges the fact that the American public lacks an understanding of how the immigration system does, and could, work, and the picture looks bleaker still. But within this mix of cultural models, there is a set of understandings that provide a more optimistic view of the task facing comprehensive reformers — models that, when active and applied in thinking about immigration, help people to productively consider comprehensive reform proposals.

To be successful, communicators will have to employ strategies that *push* unproductive models to the cognitive background, and activate and *pull* more productive perspectives to the forefront. FrameWorks' recent experimental research has shown that, by making moral arguments and focusing on the value of *Pragmatism*,¹ communicators can be effective in this pushing-and-pulling work. In addition to these values, future communications research should experiment with other frame elements as ways of effectively orchestrating these background-to-foreground cultural models maneuvers. But no amount of pushing and pulling will fill in the public's *Black Box* understanding of the immigration system and how it functions. For this, communicators will need to work on building new understandings for the public — a task for which explanatory metaphors are particularly well suited. These subsequent pieces of the communications puzzle will be addressed in forthcoming research.

Research Methods

I. Expert Interviews

To explore and distill expert messages on immigration and comprehensive immigration reform, FrameWorks researchers conducted 19 one-on-one, one-hour telephone interviews with researchers and policy experts who favor comprehensive immigration reform. These interviews were conducted in March and April 2013 and, with the informants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for review and analysis. The final list was designed to reflect the diversity of disciplines and perspectives of those working on comprehensive immigration reform from research and policy perspectives.

Expert interviews consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture expert understandings about the historical and current role of immigration in American economic, social and civic life; the ways in which the immigration system is *currently* structured; and the ways in which the immigration system *should* be structured. In responding to these questions, expert informants were encouraged to lay out how the immigration system (and proposed policy reforms) affects the economy, native-born Americans, and immigrants themselves. Interviews also included a series of prompts designed to challenge experts to explain their research, experience and perspectives, and to break down complicated relationships and simplify concepts and findings. Interviews were semi-structured in the sense that, in addition to preset questions, interviewers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification, and encouraged experts to expand upon those concepts that they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach in which common themes were pulled from each interview and categorized, resulting in a refined set of themes that synthesized the substance of the interview data. The analysis of this set of interviews resulted in the drafting of an initial summary of expert perspectives on the field of immigration and comprehensive immigration reform.

II. Cultural Models Interviews

The cultural models findings presented below are based on 30 in-depth interviews conducted in Chicago, Ill., Frederick, Md., Santa Monica, Calif., and Omaha, Neb., by four researchers in July and August 2013. A sizable sample of talk, taken from each of our informants, allows us to capture the broad sets of assumptions — cultural models — that informants use to make sense and meaning of information. Recruiting a wide range of people and capturing a large amount of data from each informant ensures that the cultural models we identify represent shared patterns of thinking about a given topic. And, although we are not concerned with the particular nuances in the cultural models across different groups at this level of the analysis (an inappropriate use of this method and its sampling frame), we recognize and take up this interest in subsequent research phases.

Informants were recruited from a database of U.S. residents (with being born in the United States serving as a selection criterion) by a professional marketing firm and were selected to represent variation along the domains of ethnicity, gender, age, residential location (inner metro, outer metro and regional/rural areas up to three hours from city centers), educational background, political ideology (as self-reported during the screening process) and involvement, religious involvement, and family situation (married, single, with or without children, ages of children).

The sample included 14 men and 16 women. Of the 30 informants, 19 self-identified as Caucasian, five as African American and six as Latino. Fifteen informants described their political views as “middle of the road,” eight as liberal and seven as conservative. The mean age of the sample was 43 years old, with an age range from 20 to 67. Ten informants had a high school diploma, 12 had college degrees and the remaining eight had some post-graduate education. Fifteen informants were married, and 18 had at least one child under the age of 18.

Informants participated in one-on-one, semi-structured “cultural models interviews” lasting approximately two hours. Cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues — in this case, what immigration is, what the effects of immigration are, how the immigration system works, and how the system should be reformed. As the goal of these interviews was to examine the cultural models informants use to make sense of and understand these issues, it was important to give informants the freedom to follow topics in the directions they deemed relevant. Therefore, the interviewers approached each interview with a set of areas to be covered, but largely left the order in which they were covered to the informant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Analytical techniques employed in cognitive and linguistic anthropology were adapted to examine how informants understand issues related to immigration.² First, patterns of discourses, or common, standardized ways of talking, were identified across the sample. These discourses were analyzed to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, logical steps and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual’s transcript and across the sample. In short, our analysis looked at patterns both in what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was not said (assumptions). In many cases, analysis revealed conflicting models that people brought to bear on the same issue. This is a normal feature of cognition, though frequently one of the conflicting models is given more weight than the other. FrameWorks’ researchers use the concept of dominant and recessive models to capture the differences in the cognitive weight given to these conflicting models. Dominant models are those used frequently, and in a top-of-mind and automatic way. They are the ways of thinking that people default to most immediately, and fall back on most readily, when asked to reason about a topic. Recessive models can be thought of as ways that are available to the public to think about an issue, but that are not as readily or immediately employed. Put another way, these recessive models require specific cuing to become active in the mind. Recessive models are less top-of-mind and are frequently displaced in thinking by more dominant and practiced ways of understanding the issue.

Findings

I. Expert Interviews

Below, we present a distillation of the themes that emerged from the analysis of expert interviews and our review of relevant materials. These themes can be categorized as responding to four foundational questions:

1. Why is immigration important?
2. What is the immigration system and how does immigration happen?
3. What are the challenges currently facing the immigration system?
4. How should the immigration system be reformed to address these challenges?

1. WHY IS IMMIGRATION IMPORTANT?

- **Immigration is inevitable.** Experts argued that immigration is inevitable — that is, the realities of a global economy are such that immigrants will always be attracted to countries like the United States that offer economic and social opportunity. One of the key considerations for reformers, therefore, is whether U.S. policies channel immigrant populations into legal or illegal avenues of entry.
- **Immigration drives long-term economic growth ...** Experts emphasized that immigration has substantial economic benefits and is a major contributor to the United States' long-term prosperity. Experts identified multiple ways in which immigration drives economic growth. First, because of the relatively low population density of the United States, as well as its declining birthrate, immigrant populations provide new sources of workers and consumers. Second, immigration meets the needs of multiple industries by serving as a source of workers at all skill levels. Third, new immigrant groups bring with them an aspirational energy that drives new business and entrepreneurial activity, and serves as a source of job creation. Lastly, experts noted that a diverse, multilingual workforce — with connections to all corners of the globe — is better positioned to be competitive in the global economy.
- **... But there are some short-term costs.** Alongside the benefits listed above, experts noted that there are short-term and targeted costs of immigration. High levels of immigration tend to have a negative impact on U.S.-born workers with low education levels because of increased competition and resulting wage depression. However, experts were clear in their view that the economic benefits of immigration outweigh the economic costs.
- **Immigration makes societies more diverse, and increased diversity benefits social, cultural and civic life.** Experts argued that immigration builds racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity in a population, and that such diversity ultimately enriches collective social and civic experiences. All agreed that the United

States' history of immigration has led to the formation of a rich and varied culture that benefits both immigrant and U.S.-born populations.

2. WHAT IS THE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM AND HOW DOES IMMIGRATION HAPPEN?

Experts explained that the basic function of the U.S. immigration system is to determine *how many* people from *which groups* to let into the country. In other words, the immigration system is a set of laws, policies and procedures that determine what happens to immigrants who seek to enter and live in the United States.

- **The immigration system controls the avenues by which people can legally enter the country.** Experts described four avenues for legal immigration: family reunification or family-based visas, which are the largest source of legal immigration — accounting for approximately 60 to 65 percent of the visas distributed each year; employment-based visas, which are used when employers sponsor individuals to enter the United States on either a temporary or permanent basis, and which account for roughly 30 percent of the visas awarded each year; asylum/refugee protections, which are reserved for people who are at risk of persecution in their country of origin; and the diversity lottery, which awards visas to a random selection of individuals from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States, with the goal of increasing diversity among the U.S. population. The system determines and sets quotas regarding how many people can enter through each visa category.
- **Illegal immigration can happen through illegal entry, but is also frequently the result of overstaying a visa.** Experts explained that illegal immigration as a result of illegal entry into the country is declining. Over the last 20 years, it has become increasingly difficult to cross into the United States without documentation. Economic recession in the United States, as well as a declining birth rate in Mexico, have also contributed to a reduction in illegal immigration across the southern border. Instead, a substantial proportion of illegal immigration now results from people who have entered the country legally (through one of the visa mechanisms described above) and have remained after the expiration of their visa.

3. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES CURRENTLY FACING THE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM?

- **A large population of immigrants who currently live and work in the United States lack legal documentation.** Experts estimated that approximately 10 to 12 million people currently live in the United States without authorization. They explained that living in “the shadow of illegality,” as one expert put it, has serious consequences for undocumented immigrants and their families, making it far more difficult to participate fully in economic, social and civic life, and increasing the likelihood of experiencing abuse or exploitation. The number of people in this situation also challenges the country as a whole by limiting the potential pool of small business owners, homebuyers and other economic agents; contributing to tension within communities between undocumented and legal or U.S.-born residents; and distracting from more serious threats to U.S. security.

- **Immigrants to the United States are more diverse and more dispersed than in the past.** Experts explained that, while Europeans constituted the largest group of immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most immigrants today arrive from Latin America and Asia. Experts also described how immigration used to be a “six-state issue” (New York, California, Arizona, Illinois, Texas and Florida) — but that there are now growing immigrant populations in states with historically low levels of immigration. The increased diversity and dispersion of immigrant populations, according to experts, has made the challenges of immigrant integration even more salient.
- **The employment-based visa system is outdated, overly rigid, and does not meet current economic needs.** Experts argued that, while the economic needs of the country have changed over the last 25 years, the quota system that governs the types and number of employment-based visas has not — a disconnect viewed as highly problematic. Experts also criticized the lack of flexibility in this system. Under the current system, there is no mechanism to adjust employment-based visa quotas based on specific industry needs; once those quotas are met, potential workers no longer have the option of immigrating legally. In short, experts argued that the current system is outdated, overly rigid, and poorly positioned to respond to changing economic demands.
- **The family reunification system is backlogged and does not reflect different and changing definitions of family.** While experts lauded the family reunification system as an important source of integration and social support for immigrant populations, they also argued that the wait times for permission to enter the country via family-based visas are too long and present undue hardships for families. At the time of the interviews, experts also criticized the fact that family-based visas are limited to heterosexual spouses, children, siblings and parents — thus failing to recognize same-sex families or the importance of extended relatives as family members in other cultures. At the time the interviews were conducted, immigration agencies did not recognize same-sex marriages because of the application of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) to all matters under federal law. In June 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court held that portions of DOMA were unconstitutional. As a result, as of July 1, 2013, immigration visa petitions filed on behalf of a same-sex spouse are treated in the same manner as those filed on behalf of an opposite-sex spouse.
- **Enforcement policies are costly and ineffective.** Experts explained that current enforcement policies are poorly aligned with the realities of immigration patterns. They highlighted two aspects of the enforcement system as particularly problematic. First, experts described how heightened enforcement along the border disrupts circular patterns of migration by making it more difficult for immigrants to move back and forth between the United States and their country of origin. As a result, these policies actually *contribute* to the number of people living in the United States without authorization by making it more difficult for them to return to their home country and reenter legally. Second, experts criticized current detention policies that

require mandatory detention for many categories of immigrants as unnecessary, inhumane and extremely costly.

- **Immigrant rights are poorly protected.** Experts explained that the current immigration system includes policies and procedures that deny immigrants basic rights or increase their risk of abuse or exploitation, and that certain aspects of this system — such as the fact that immigrants are not guaranteed legal representation and, in certain cases, can be deported without judicial review — violate immigrants’ right to due process. Experts also explained that the practice of tying employment-based immigration to a specific employer and position, such that legal residence is contingent on staying with the same employer who sponsored the initial visa request, increases the likelihood of worker exploitation.

4. HOW SHOULD THE IMMIGRATION SYSTEM BE REFORMED TO ADDRESS THESE CHALLENGES?

- **Provide pathways to legal status for undocumented immigrants.** Experts argued that immigrants currently in the country without documentation should be afforded a quick and simple means for obtaining legal status. They asserted that pathways to legal residence should be fast, minimally burdensome for the applicant, and should not include overly punitive measures such as requiring the applicant to return to his or her country of origin for a period of years before being able to reenter the United States legally.
- **Reform the visa system so that it is better aligned with economic demands.** Experts asserted that the employment-based visa system needs to be more flexible and responsive to economic factors. They argued that the system should be agile enough to restrict immigration during periods of economic decline and expand immigration during periods of economic growth, and that mechanisms should be put in place to allow temporary workers to convert to permanent status.
- **Improve the family reunification system so that it is better aligned with changing definitions of family.** At the time of the interviews, experts argued that the goal of keeping families intact is not being met by current family reunification policies. Several experts advocated for moving away from policies based on outdated notions of what constitutes a “family,” and, instead, allowing visas for same-sex couples as well as extended family members. As noted above, recent changes to policy have, at least in part, addressed this expert recommendation.
- **Reform the detention system to better protect immigrant rights.** Experts asserted that current immigration policies are overly punitive with regards to the detention of immigrants. They recommended a number of reforms, such as making illegal entry a violation of civil, rather than criminal, law; reconsidering what criminal offenses should render a person deportable; allowing greater judicial discretion in deportation and detention hearings; and providing immigrant detainees with full access to legal representation.

- **Dial back border enforcement.** Experts viewed the current system’s emphasis on border enforcement to be futile, counterproductive and a misuse of resources. They explained that the size of the United States’ border makes it nearly impossible to secure; that the flow of illegal immigration does not necessarily decline when border enforcement is increased, but rather shifts illegal entry points to more remote and dangerous terrains, thereby making both crossing and enforcement more dangerous and costly; and that efforts to secure the border actually impede return migration to the country of origin. For all these reasons, experts recommended that resources be shifted away from border enforcement and towards other aspects of the immigration system — such as enforcing immigration laws focused on employers.
- **Implement better enforcement of employer-focused immigration laws.** Experts argued that effective immigration enforcement policies should focus more attention on employers — and on penalizing those employers who hire unauthorized workers — rather than on immigrants themselves. Experts noted that policies that target employers are also critical to ensuring that immigrant workers are subject to existing labor regulations regarding occupational health and safety and working conditions. Similarly, experts emphasized the need for policies that would strengthen immigrant workers’ right to unionize — a process that would protect both immigrant workers from exploitation and American workers from downward wage pressures.

II. Cultural Models Interviews

“I am for describing what is, not in terms of itself as a final datum, but within a framework of conceptual orientation to a possible line of action that we as social scientists decide is intelligent. This gives us more precise focus and a projective thrust to our data on what is, because it is oriented to something specific other than merely describing what happens to be before us.”

– Robert Lynd, 1939

With the goal of helping people approach this body of knowledge, we can now begin to evaluate what assumptions and beliefs the public brings to this topic. The following section examines how members of the public think about immigration and immigration reform.

When asked to think about immigration, analysis showed that Americans are of two very different minds. On the one hand, Americans evoke a set of models in which immigrants are conceptualized as “them”; at the same time, they are able to access a constellation of assumptions in which immigrants are understood as “us.” Analysis revealed that the same informants toggled back and forth between these two conflicting foundational models — in some cases, in rapid sequence — and did not find to be problematic what appears illogical and contradictory during analysis. This maintenance of multiple, conflicting ways of understanding an issue is by no means exceptional. Rather, conflicting assumptions applied

in understanding the same conceptual domain are a feature of the way that people make sense of information. The presence of these conflicting models demonstrates a basic feature of how humans process information. That is, we apply *existing* categories and conceptual structures to make sense of incoming information. Because sets of understandings come prepackaged and are not tailor-made from the bottom up to fit each new piece of information, two different models may become active at different points in thinking about the same issue. *Which* models become active is often based on very subtle contextual cues. The presence of such contradictory models in how Americans understand immigration, and the role of cues in determining which of these models become active, carries significant framing implications for reformers.

In addition to these *Us* and *Them* models, analysis revealed two other foundational models that were used to think more specifically about how to improve the system: *Fatalism* and *Pragmatism*. While our informants were able to argue that the system is flawed beyond repair in one breath, these same people also asserted, with equal conviction, the need for practical solutions.

Each of these four foundational models (*Immigrants As Them*, *Immigrants As Us*, *Fatalism* and *Pragmatism*) contains a set of more specific understandings — variations of the general model that are used to reason about particular concepts, questions and situations.

In addition to these foundational cultural models and their component assumptions, there was an important finding that involves the *absence of models*. We call this the “black box,” to characterize the ways in which informants across the sample struggled to understand basic operational features and functions of the immigration system. Along with the foundational models, this *Black Box* feature of public thinking has key implications for communicators, and provides direction for future work in reframing immigration and immigration reform.

In the following section, we discuss the four foundational models that emerged from analysis, along with their more specific assumptions, and discuss the implications of these models, as well as the *Black Box* understanding, for those communicating about immigration reform.

I. Immigrants As Them

The most dominant finding across the interviews was a deep cultural model in which immigrants were conceptualized as “the other” — the “them” to the American “us.” This phenomenon of “othering” is well-studied in the social sciences, particularly among post-modern scholars such as Michel Foucault, who write about the way that in- and out-of-group identities are constructed, reinforced and challenged as a tool of social power and mechanism to achieve political goals.³

The implicit mental categorization of “us” and “them” was dominant when informants were asked about immigration, immigrants and immigration reform, and was seen pervasively across all interviews and at multiple points throughout each informant’s interview.

The basis of the assumption is mental categorization of “Americans” as one group and immigrants as a set of individuals who comprise “another” group that exists outside of — and in many cases, in opposition to — the well-being of Americans. In this way, the model is part of an even deeper and powerful us-versus-them cultural model that structures the notion of competition *between groups* for finite resources.⁴

This foundational way of understanding the world shaped a number of more specific assumptions. Below, we describe each of these more specific understandings and discuss their communications implications.

1. *The Law Breaker model.* The most top-of-mind part of the *Them* model was the implicit understanding that “immigrant” is synonymous with “lawbreaker” — in other words, the tacit understanding that discussions of immigration are about people who choose to break the law and enter and reside illegally. The depth of this model is evidenced by the myriad ways in which it informs thinking about immigration — from thinking about immigrants to thinking about how the immigration system should be changed.

Interviewer: When you hear that term, immigration, what do you think of?

Informant: Illegals — that’s what I think of.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Informant: When I say illegals, I mean people from other countries that come here and don’t have the proper documentation to stay here.

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Informant: Today when I see anything involving immigration, it is about illegal aliens. I don’t really see anyone saying, “Damn it, these people from Scotland are coming over in droves and I can’t take it anymore.”

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Interviewer: Do you think that most of the immigration is done officially or unofficially?

Informant: I don’t know if they would be considered immigrants if they have papers.

2. *The Illegal Mexican model.* There was also a dominant pattern in *who* informants imagined as immigrants. Across informants in the sample, and in various places over the course of each individual’s interview, discussion evidenced an implicit understanding that immigrants were “Mexicans.” This pattern was especially apparent when informants were thinking using the *Law Breaker* model (which, due to the model’s dominance, was the majority of time). Closer analysis of these references revealed a set of common features attributed to these prototypic immigrants. Mexican immigrants were assumed to be poor, and to have entered the country illegally by “jumping” the border.

Informant: All I know is what I see on the news or hear about it and as far as illegal immigrants, they are Hispanic. I never hear about illegal immigrants who are Japanese, or European, you never see that.

Informant: Not everybody's a star player, you know what I mean? ... I guess they're just bad people. Not necessarily bad just because they want to be that way but because of where they came from it was necessary to do things that were illegal, to get by ... for survival and the drug trade from Mexico. Those people want to get money so they can have a good life, whether it's illicit or not.

3. *The High-Skilled Asian model.* Much less dominant than the model of immigrants as illegally-entering Mexicans, was the conceptualization of immigrants as highly skilled Asians. This model usually referenced stereotypic images of Asians working in science and technology fields. Analysis of instances in which informants employed this model revealed that this "type" of immigrant was understood to have entered *legally*, although informants struggled to explain how this legal entry process works. While less derogatory than the dominant understanding of immigrants as illegal Mexicans, this model was still clearly part of the *Immigrants As Them* foundational model, in that informants understood this group as another "other" to the American "us."

Informant: I believe the Asians come here for higher education or work opportunities. I don't see it out of desperation as much as other ethnic groups. You don't find the Asians risking their lives, stowing away, like other ethnic groups.

Informant: India pays lower wages, but they have really smart people. There are a lot of jobs here in the United States that, especially in technology, that companies are trying to fill, but they can't find the right people to do that in the United States. So they find somebody in India who would fit the bill, and then they get that person to the United States to work for that specific purpose.

Informant: The Asians are coming over for opportunities that either they started in the homeland or they see a better opportunity here. And certainly I see the population of Asian Americans and Indian Americans have increased in classification of middle to upper middle class. Because they come over because they've been recruited by companies. Or they're coming over to pursue their education.

4. *The Job Competition model.* Informants employed a common assumption about the effect of immigrants and immigration — that the presence of immigrants in the United States increases job competition and makes it harder for Americans to find jobs. This assumption is clearly part of the more foundational *Immigrants As Them* cultural model, in which the immigrant "them" is threatening the welfare of the American "us" who "deserve" the jobs. According to the *Job Competition* model, informants understood employment opportunities as

fixed, and immigrants as competing for these limited slots. According to this understanding, immigrants get jobs by “taking them away” from Americans.

Informant: Well, the immigrants come in willing to work for less, for very little, and that’s putting the current workers and people who don’t have jobs in compromising positions.

Informant: The problem with immigration is they’re taking all our jobs away from us. So you get all these people from across the border, immigrants from across the border, who are coming over here, stealing our jobs. That’s the problem in the United States right now. We get illegal people and they’re taking all the jobs over here and we have no jobs. You go places and you see all these people being hired illegally, and then we don’t have anything.

5. *The Jobs We Don’t Want model.* Contrasting somewhat with the *Job Competition* understanding, but still very much aligned with the *Immigrants As Them* foundational model, informants assumed that immigration can benefit Americans because immigrants often take jobs that are necessary but that Americans do not want.

Informant: If you take all of the illegal aliens out of California, the economy is going to stagnate. Just think of all of the jobs those people do. How many people that clean hotel rooms in California are illegal? It’s a huge number. So they play a part in our economy.

Interviewer: Just hypothetically, imagine there was no immigration. How would things be different?

Informant: We’d starve! There would be no one to pick our stuff. We’d have to go into the fields and pick our own food. No American wants to do that.

Interviewer: Do you have any idea what kind of jobs immigrants usually pursue?

Informant: I think you see a lot of people taking jobs that we wouldn’t take. You think about the people that pick our crops, and dishwashers — the restaurant industry employs a tremendous amount of Hispanic employees.

6. *The Immigrants As Takers model.* Informants, especially when thinking about immigration through the *Illegal Mexican* model, considered immigrants a drain on public services — “stealing” education and health care resources by using these services without paying taxes back into the system. This talk was often associated with moral judgments of laziness, selfishness and unfair play — for example, that immigrants who take out of the system without putting in “their fair share” are acting immorally.

Informant: You have some people coming here who are committing crimes left and right. “I’m going to pop out five or six kids because I know they will all be citizens. I

know they all get free medical care from the government. I can get food from the government; I get all kinds of stuff from the government. I can get in-state tuition in Maryland when Howard Jones can't."

Informant: Some people come because they know if they are here they get free medical care. We will give it to everyone whether you are legal or not. So if you are living in — I'm just picking a country, Guatemala — you might be better and have a better life as an illegal alien here than living in Guatemala. You can have more opportunity, especially if you want to have children. For instance, I'm trying to take a class at the community college. Now, I own a home in this state, I pay income tax in this state, but my driver's license is from Florida so I can't get a state resident tuition in this college. But if I'm an illegal alien, I get in-state tuition. That's total crap to me.

7. *The Secure And Control model.* When asked questions about the purpose of the immigration system (i.e., why we have an immigration system), discussions focused on (1) threats from foreigners to the *security* and *safety* of Americans, or (2) the need to *control* the flow of outsiders entering the country in order to limit the strain that "they" put on "our" national resources.

Informant: The goal of the system is to track people and find out who is coming in. A lot of people don't like us and we would like to keep them out of the country, so that is the major goal — security. There are certain people we don't want in our country and I don't think it is in our best interest to just keep letting an unlimited amount of people into the country, and this will sound bad, but it's who is coming into the country. It's not thousands of mechanical engineers who are illegally getting into the country ...

Informant: I think it is up to the individual if they want to [become a citizen]. But the laws that we have established in this land are if you come here we need to account for you.

Informant: I just know that there are some people who, there is no record of them here in the states.

Interviewer: And why is that?

Informant: It's a problem because everyone needs to be tracked. There should be a record of every single person.

Drawing on this *Secure And Control* model, informant attention overwhelmingly focused on "securing the border" when asked what should be done to address immigration issues. These discussions were dominated by images of the land border between Mexico and the United States.

Informant: [The president] needs just to put the laws back in place. He needs to seal the border. Patrol. He needs to make sure nobody's hopping the border.

Informant: For me, immigration reform is about securing the border. That's the No. 1 thing that needs to be done before talking about what to do after they are here, but it's opposite ... I mean, first stop the influx. It's just like a medicine, No. 1, stop the problem and then deal with what you got, but you have to stop the bleeding first. And it's the same thing with this. Stop the bleeding first! Like, deal with that! And once you deal with that, then we deal with who we have here.

8. *The Immigration Nostalgia model.* Informants contrasted immigrants and immigration today (primarily using the *Illegal Mexican* model) with the way that “immigrants used to be” — commonly conceptualized as white Europeans who came (in a legal and orderly way) through Ellis Island. According to this model, present-day immigration is chaotic, uncontrolled and illegal compared to the simplicity and above-board nature of the way in which immigrants used to enter the country. There was a strong sense of nostalgia for the simplicity of this imagined past.

Informant: Those were the days when the Statue of Liberty was welcoming. Your poor, your downtrodden and everybody was like “Come on in,” and the country was growing and welcoming skilled people with diverse mindsets who were important for the growth of the country.

Informant: You know, it's not like Ellis Island anymore, where you came in and you signed your name and we knew you were here.

Informant: Now it just seems like there's more paperwork and it's much harder. There's not just a big book over in Long Island any more.

Implications:

1. *The Immigrants As Them* foundational model problematically narrows public understanding of the immigration issue, of those involved and of appropriate solutions. The dominance of the public's “them” modeling of immigrants and immigration creates myriad problems in communicating about comprehensive immigration reform. The foundational model and its constituent assumptions create narrow, polarizing ways of thinking about the issue of immigration, structure unproductive and inaccurate ways of thinking about immigrants as invading, lawbreaking “others” who pose threats to Americans in multiple ways, and constrain the public's ability to think about ways of addressing this issue to punitive notions of stricter laws and firmer borders. The essential reframing task is to find ways of inoculating against this foundational “them” perspective while pulling forward the more productive models detailed below and giving these positive models space and time to become more robustly attached to the issue of immigration. Findings from a recent

FrameWorks experimental survey underscore the possibility of orchestrating this deep cultural and cognitive shift.⁵

2. *The Law Breaker and Illegal Mexican models unproductively simplify the issue.* Connecting immigration to illegality and “essentializing” immigrants as lawbreakers (and, more specifically, as lawbreaking Mexicans) supports an oversimplified and unproductive definition of the issue: Immigration is about people who do not respect, and choose to break, “our” laws. The simplicity of this highly personalized depiction blocks thinking about the need to change the **system** in ways that make it *more* flexible and *less* punitive.
3. *The Highly Skilled Asian is the exception that proves the rule.* The public’s view that the immigration system is working as intended for “highly skilled Asians” reinforces notions that, in general, the system is functioning well. This perspective further “other-izes” illegal immigrants and places the blame for their status squarely on their bad decisions, rather than on a system that puts up barriers to legal entry and status. According to this logic, if some immigrants can do it the right way, why can’t they all? In short, this model may reinforce the idea that the problem is less with the system than it is with “those” immigrants who choose not to enter through the appropriate legal channels. While less negative than the *Illegal Mexican* model, the *Highly Skilled Asian* model is equally “essentializing,” “othering” and individualizing, and therefore poses substantial challenges to reform communicators.
4. *The zero-sum aspect of the Job Competition model positions immigrants as threats rather than assets.* By conceptualizing the labor market as a fixed entity, the *Job Competition* model prevents Americans from seeing what experts argue is one of the primary benefits of immigration for American society — the diversification, strengthening and growth of the national economy. The dominance of this model suggests the need for explanations of the economy that inoculate against Americans’ default zero-sum understanding of this domain. With a more dynamic model of the economy that focuses on growth, and an explanation of the past and future role of immigrants in this expansion, Americans will be better able to get past the notion of immigration as a threat to national prosperity.
5. *The Jobs Americans Don’t Want model has mixed implications.* On one hand, the model expands thinking past the notions of competition embedded in the more dominant way of thinking about immigrants as taking jobs away from “more deserving” Americans. On the other hand, and more importantly, this way of thinking contributes to the “essentializing” notions of immigrants as an underclass “them,” and feeds the communication challenges associated with this frame of mind discussed above.
6. *The Immigrants As Takers is especially unproductive.* This particular type of “us vs. them” thinking parallels what FrameWorks has found more generally about the way Americans think about those who receive government assistance⁶ — namely, that certain groups get a disproportionate and “unfair” share of communal resources.

This sense of undeservingness is especially salient with respect to immigration, where immigrants are viewed as particularly undeserving of resources that should be going towards native-born Americans. This cultural model represents a major challenge to those seeking to garner support for *more*, rather than less, provision of, and access to, public goods for immigrant populations. However, FrameWorks' recent experimental work with values frames yields important and encouraging insights about how comprehensive reformers might inoculate against this unproductive way of thinking about public resources and immigration.⁷

7. *The Security And Control and Immigration Nostalgia models focus solutions-thinking narrowly on border security.* When people understand the purpose of the immigration system through the *Security And Control* model, the appropriate solution becomes increasing border security to keep the bad people out. The *Immigration Nostalgia* model has a similar effect: It pushes people towards “simple” solutions, the simplest of which is increasing security at the border to control who is entering the country.

II. Immigrants As Us

In addition to the foundational “them” way of thinking, in which immigration becomes about the threat of “others” to the American “us,” there was another foundational cultural model that was employed by informants in thinking about immigration issues. Using this model, informants reasoned about immigrants and immigration through a set of humanistic understandings that position immigrants as part of the nation, or, alternatively, afford *all* Americans an immigrant identity. Like the more dominant *Them* model described above, this *Immigrants As Us* model consisted of a set of more specific assumptions and understandings, which we outline below.

It is important to note that, while both *Them* and *Us* models were clearly shared and operative in the data, *Them* models were significantly more dominant than *Us* models. This means that the *Them* models were more top-of-mind, more powerful in shaping thinking, and more frequently and pervasively employed. Nonetheless, the *Us* model discussed below is significantly more promising from the perspective of comprehensive reform supporters and is, therefore, vital to understand.

1. *The Immigrants Are People model.* There was a common assumption employed repeatedly by all informants that immigrants are “really just like you and me.” Immigrants (even undocumented immigrants) are assumed to be people who are trying to do the right thing but who face difficult choices and circumstances. A highly empathetic model, this way of thinking frequently led informants to put themselves in the shoes of immigrants and understand — and even justify — the decisions that all immigrants face and make. This essentially humanistic model shaped informant opinions that immigrants deserve to be treated as “one of us” and with dignity, respect and kindness. This model stands in stark contrast to the models described above — especially the implicit understanding of immigrants as lawbreaking resource drainers.

Informant: I think [the folks in charge] need to realize they need to be more considerate of people because we're all human beings. You can't just say, well, they're bad people because they're Mexican or they're Columbian or whatever.

Interviewer: So what pops into your head when you hear about "immigration"?

Informant: I think about trying to figure out what we can do for the people who currently live here and the people who would like to live here and how to make all of that work for everybody. Not people from here and from there, but just treat all people in a fair manner. In general, people are just people.

When thinking through the humanistic *Immigrants Are People* model, informants — regardless of their ideological stance — focused their attention on changing the system to improve outcomes for immigrants. When informants were asked about changing the system while the *Immigrants Are People* model was active, they emphasized the need to provide a way for immigrants without legal status to gain citizenship and, more generally, for a more compassionate and, as several informants said, "friendly" system. The fact that this definitional model ("immigrants are people like you and me") can powerfully structure solutions-thinking is critically important to communicators, as it suggests that cuing specific definitional models of immigrants can shape the solutions and reforms that people see as effective, and thus choose to support. The fact that many of the *Them* models described earlier similarly shape solutions-thinking (albeit towards very different ends) points to the main strategic implication of this research: that the way in which people think about immigrants — as "them" or as "us" — is vitally important and predictive of how they think about, and support, various proposals for reform. The following quotes illustrate the type of solutions-thinking that comes to the surface when the *Immigrants Are People* model is operative.

Interviewer: What is your opinion about what we can do to address or improve this issue of immigration?

Informant: They should not be put in a situation of being — what is the word? Sent back?

Interviewer: Deported?

Informant: Yeah, deported. I wouldn't want to see that happen to anybody. They are here already so we have to deal with it. So I would go along with proposals to make more citizens.

Informant: Maybe, initially at least, they need some resource as to where to get food. "Here's where your local food bank is. Here's how you sign up." You know, just that extra push that they need. "Here's where you can get some education. Here's a map of where you're going to be living. Here's facts about where you're going to be living. Here's how you access transportation." So that it's easier for them to do what they need to do to start to contribute to society.

2. *The Nation Of Immigrants model.* Informants frequently drew on an understanding that the United States is a nation where being an immigrant is a criterion for being part of the “us” — where we are, as the informant below puts it, “a united nation of immigrants.” This model was often evoked using the common language of “we are a nation of immigrants.” Behind this phrase was a deep belief that what defines the American “us” is our shared status as immigrants.

Informant: We’re supposed to welcome everyone. It shouldn’t matter: the race, creed or color, sex, religion ... none of that should matter if you come to this country, because we are all like that. That’s what we’re supposed to be, a united nation of immigrants. And I think that’s why our country was set up. That’s exactly what the United States is.

Interviewer: So, what do you think are the main reasons that immigration happens in the United States?

Informant: Because it’s a free country. It’s the land of opportunity. It’s a place where you can start a business. Because it has had more open borders than other countries around the world, and it’s a free democratic society. It’s a land of immigrants. It’s a country that is *based* on immigration.

3. *The Value Of Diversity model.* Informants shared an implicit understanding that immigrants bring a diversity of skills, experiences and cultures, and that such diversity benefits the United States and its population. According to this model, when immigrants add to the country’s diversity, the lives and experiences of all Americans are enriched. Informants focused specifically on how a variety of perspectives contributes to innovation and problem-solving, widens people’s perspectives, and creates new learning experiences.

Informant: Well, I think there are always benefits when you are exposed to different cultures and different ways of living. I’ve been fortunate, I’ve been able to travel a lot and I know that’s expanded my knowledge and my intelligence because I’ve learned so much. But there are a lot of people who are not able to travel and would have less exposure to different ways of living and different cultures. Immigration improves this and has a positive affect on racist mindsets — we are seeing more integration than ever before as far as relationships, marriages, and I think that [immigration] helps.

Informant: I think the effects of immigration are great! This country has never been a country of one type of people. We’ve had bad situations and good situations that have allowed people from various places to come and help build this country. There have been people who’ve come from other countries that have been a key component to all the things that we enjoy today. I think that it is great to have people come and share the richness of their culture and their language. Come to this land and be a part of it. People bring a different perspective. People have different priorities. People have different tastes. I think the idea of having policies that allow

people to come from different lands is a wonderful thing. And that is what makes this country a good country. It makes it an innovative country. It makes it a country that is perceived as powerful and generous.

Informant: It wouldn't be the worst thing if people learned about other cultures in the world. We might not hate people for no reason. If you are going to hate someone, have a reason for hating them, don't hate them just because of where they come from or what they look like. Let them do something nasty to you first, and then hate them. People come to this country and they build stuff, they add to society, they add to community.

Implications:

1. *The Immigrants Are People model is promising for reform supporters.* When members of the public consider immigrants as “people like us” rather than as lawbreaking “thems,” a dramatically different set of solutions and reforms presents itself as appropriate and effective. Thinking from the “us” perspective, people are able to appreciate and support the need for a system that is both more functional and more humane for those involved.
2. *The Nation Of Immigrants model is potentially promising.* The collective identity embedded in this model appears promising as a tool for those seeking to generate support for comprehensive reform. The idea that “we are all immigrants” offers a way of increasing support for policies that provide support and public services to immigrants. In fact, this is exactly what FrameWorks’ experimental work has shown.⁸
3. *The Value Of Diversity model sets up an “immigrant as resource” way of thinking that is dramatically different from the “immigrant as threat” understanding structured by the Immigrants As Them model.* When diversity is seen as an asset rather than a threat, a wide range of messages and policies become “thinkable.” The notion that immigrants *bring* value, rather than take it, is a promising understanding for reform supporters to leverage in their work to garner support for comprehensive immigrant reform. Future research should explore the best framing strategies for activating this model and helping Americans apply it in reasoning about immigration issues.

III. Fatalism

In addition to the oppositional *Them* and *Us* models, there was a deep sense of fatalism that ran through informant discussion of immigration. This assumption, that “there isn't really anything we can do,” was particularly prevalent and powerful in shaping discussions of current immigration problems and in thinking about addressing these issues. Informants shared a common, but implicit, understanding that immigration issues are out of control and beyond solution. FrameWorks has found similar fatalistic assumptions applied to a wide range of issues — from budgets and taxes,⁹ to child mental health¹⁰ and education,¹¹ to criminal justice¹² — suggesting the foundational status of the *Fatalism* cultural model.

As with the *Immigrants As Them* and *Immigrants As Us* models, the general *Fatalism* model was comprised of several more-specific implicit understandings. We detail these models below.

1. *The Immigration Surge model.* Informants shared the understanding that rates of immigration in the United States are dramatically increasing. Analysis showed that informants assumed that both the number of immigrants living in the United States and the number of people (mainly from Mexico) who want to immigrate to the United States are rising dramatically. This cultural model has been well documented by others who study American culture.¹³

Informant: We have gotten in over our heads because of the volume of people that want to come into the country. And years ago it [the immigration system] was just fine but the system needs to be updated and changed to meet the demand. The number of people that are coming into the country is absolutely huge.

Informant: Immigration has changed because the landscape of the country has changed because of the influx of people from various countries. And what used to be the majority group here has seen this huge influx and, statistically, they are outnumbered. Because we have always allowed so many people to come into this country.

2. *The Money Talks model.* Informant discussion of immigration also evidenced a common assumption that the system is not fair or equal for all of those who are trying to enter the country. Informants frequently told stories and gave examples of people who are able to leverage resources to shortcut the system and “cut the line.” The operative assumption in these cases was that the immigration system is (and will always be) unfair in that those with resources are able to garner special treatment and advantages that the rest of us are not able to finagle.

Informant: You got money? You can just come on in. But if you don’t have anything and you’re poor, you’re on the long list.

Informant: If you’ve got more money and you can buy legal representation, you’re going to get pushed quicker through the line.

3. *The Politics As Usual model.* Related to the *Money Talks* model, and clearly part of the deeper *Fatalism* foundational cultural model, informants drew upon cultural models from the domains of party politics, and national government more generally, when thinking and talking about reforming the immigration system. These models are imbued with strong notions of vitriol, endemic ineffectiveness, rampant corruption and hopelessness. This way of thinking about government and government systems has been widely documented in previous FrameWorks research on a range of issues.¹⁴

Informant: It's [immigration reform] all because the people who are arguing about this want to get re-elected so they try to appease different groups. You've got the people that say, "They are here, legalize them, let them stay here, they are part of the community." Other people say, "Hell no, they came here illegally, my parents and grandparents came here legally, they worked, they struggled, they took English classes, all of this stuff, it's not fair, it's not right." So it's a question of whose ass are you going to kiss this week? Who's going to be a bigger voting block?

Informant: I don't think they are really trying to fix it ... Congress critters, the only thing they do anymore is think of the next election.

Implications:

1. *The foundational Fatalism model is problematic for communicating about the importance of, and potential for, meaningful immigration reform.* Reasoning from the *Fatalism* model, Americans are strongly suspicious about whether serious change and improvement can "really" be made to the immigration system. This cynicism represents a serious impediment to those communicating about the need for immigration reform, and the potential for change in this system to create real improvements for Americans. While *FrameWorks'* initial values experiment provides a set of tools that reform supporters can begin to use, the powerful sense of fatalism that attaches to this issue represents a challenge that future reframing research must address in order to increase public support for comprehensive immigration reform. An improved understanding of how the system works and how reforms would affect its functionality, as discussed in the Gaps section below, will be important in creating senses of efficacy that can inoculate against the deep fatalism that Americans use to think about this issue.
2. *The Immigration Surge model reinforces the sense that immigrants are a "threat" that needs to be kept out.* The notion that the number of immigrants is dramatically rising, and that the line at the border is growing ever longer, focuses people's attention on keeping immigrants *out* — invigorating the perspective that our focus needs to be on creating firm and impermeable borders. This focus diverts attention from many of the ideas that comprehensive reformers want to be able to bring into the public discussion — for example, the need to address the status of immigrants who are currently in the country without legal documentation. The symbolism of a rising tide also invigorates Americans' understandings of immigrants as threatening "others," bringing with it the negative implications associated with the foundational *Immigrants As Them* model above.
3. *The Immigration Surge model has a strong sense of inevitability, which is unproductive in engaging in policy reform discussions.* In addition to focusing attention on the threat that immigrants entail, the *Immigrant Surge* model carries with it a strong sense of naturalism — that immigrants just "keep coming in" and will "always find a way." This sense of inevitability, and the fatalism that it taps into, is highly

problematic for those attempting to engage Americans in conversations about the potential to change the immigration system and the outcomes that it shapes.

4. *The Money Talks model foments unproductive notions of corruption and pessimism about the ability to create a fair and effective system.* Employing the *Money Talks* model, people are pushed toward cynical assumptions about the unfairness of the system (and “systems” more generally), and the inability to enact meaningful change.
5. *The Politics As Usual model is highly disengaging and unproductive in efforts to create support for systemic changes.* When people attach their thinking about national party politics, and “the government” more generally, to reasoning about immigration reform, public support for reform is likely to be torpedoed. Avoiding this dominant model is therefore critical for those seeking to increase public support for comprehensive immigration reform.

IV. Pragmatism

Alongside the deep and powerful *Fatalism* model, informants applied an understanding that current immigration problems *can* be addressed and improved by taking a problem-solving approach and pragmatically putting differences aside to come up with real solutions to immigration issues. As with the *Us* and *Them* conflicting models, this sense of *Pragmatism* was expressed by the same informants who, at other points in their interviews, employed *Fatalism* models.

Employing the *Pragmatism* model, informants understood the immigration system as one that serves a vital function for the country. Moreover, they viewed this system as something which *could* and *should* be improved through a “step by step” process focused on solving current problems. This deep understanding of the importance and power of “rolling up our sleeves” to solve problems is a foundational model which FrameWorks research has found Americans can apply in thinking about a range of social issues.¹⁵ This deep foundational model was composed of two more-specific understandings.

1. *The Economic Fit model.* Informants shared the implicit understanding that the government can, and should, use the immigration system to maintain a functional balance between the size of the U.S. population and the number of jobs available. Using this assumption, informants adopted a pragmatic perspective on the immigration system — seeing the system as one that serves a purpose and can, and should, be changed to better achieve its important function. The key difference between this model and the *Fatalism* models described above is that, in the *Economic Fit* model, the system can (and should) be improved, and reform is understood as necessary.

Interviewer: What do you think about when you think about reforming or changing the immigration system?

Informant: If you’re letting X number of people in, in all fairness, you need to be able to have opportunities for employment for all those people. The system needs to achieve this balance.

2. *The Focus on a Solution model.* When informants were asked to consider what should be done about the millions of undocumented immigrants living in the United States today, they largely fell back on the understanding that this problem requires us to “put differences aside” and focus our attention on “just solving the problem.” Informants explained that “what makes sense” is to figure out a way to allow undocumented individuals to become citizens, such that they can become part of American society and fully contribute to its well-being.

Informant: I think the people that are already here — we need to do our best to solve this problem and make them legal citizens so they could have self-respect and start paying taxes. Because they’re already here. I mean for some of these people, this is all they know. And it would be horrible for them to go back. It’s far easier to help them get a job and become a citizen.

Implications:

1. *The Pragmatism model is a valuable communications tool for reformers.* The ability of the *Pragmatism* model to help Americans think productively about the need and possibility of reforming the immigration system is a promising finding for comprehensive reformers. The existence of this model explains the power of messages about pragmatic approaches to immigration reform, as documented in FrameWorks’ recent experimental research,¹⁶ to counter reform opposition messages. Such invocations — in this case, through the use of values — appear to tap into deep sets of public understandings that allow people to then reason more productively about comprehensive reforms. Reform supporters should attempt to craft messages in ways that invoke the *Pragmatism* foundational model.
2. *The Economic Fit model clarifies a role for the immigration system and is solutions-based.* Thinking about the system as fulfilling an important and positive function allows people to become problem solvers and productively engage in thinking about how to change the system to improve its ability to achieve this function. Activating this model, while also improving the public’s ability to see the economy as expandable rather than limited, is a promising strategy for comprehensive reformers.
3. *The Focus On Solutions model inoculates against more punitive ways of thinking about reform.* When thinking pragmatically about the number of undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States, the assumption that we need to focus on *realistic* solutions is highly productive, as it counters people’s proclivity to see mass deportation as a solution. The power of this *Focus On Solutions* way of thinking is evidenced in FrameWorks’ experimental finding of the power of the value of *Pragmatism* to counter rule-of-law perspectives on how to deal with the country’s current immigration issues.¹⁷

V. The Black Box

The final cultural models finding that we report here is an observed *absence* of a way of understanding immigration. Interviews showed that informants across the sample struggled to think about *how the immigrations system works*. We refer to this as a “black box” to denote the fact that, when asked to explain how the system works, informants drew a blank and were unable to meaningfully engage in thinking or talking. Informants were able to mention key words and parts of the system — for example, they recognized that there was an “an immigration department”; they knew that “visas” were part of the system; and they knew that “controlling the border” was part of the discussion. But they did not know how any of these functions or parts *worked*.

Interviewer: I mean presumably there is a [legal] way to go about it, right?

Informant: I’m sure there is. Probably involves a lot of red tape too, I’m sure.

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Informant: How does that process take place? I don’t know. I guess I should know that though, I’ll admit.

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Interviewer: How would you describe the current system?

Informant: How would I describe what our system is, like the process?

Interviewer: Yeah. The immigration system, the different parts of it and how they work.

Informant: Oh gosh, I have no idea. I mean I know we have a department that handles it and, like I said, I think that that department handles not only just people immigrating here for citizenship but they also deal with like visas and stuff like that. I could be wrong. Maybe it’s the state department that does that, I’m not sure ... I’m sure that there are fees involved, but I really have no idea. I have no idea!

Based on the *Black Box* nature of their understanding of the system, informants had little basis with which to think about what reforms to the system would do and how they might change the outcomes. Most informants had heard the term “immigration reform,” but had very limited understanding of what such reforms would be and of the effects that they would have for either immigrants or American society more broadly. For the most part, informants understood immigration reform to be either (1) granting amnesty to immigrants already here, or (2) building walls to better secure the border.

Interviewer: Have you heard much about the immigration reform policies that have been proposed?

Informant: No. I guess I have a certain amount of apathy and I don’t follow those policies too closely because of all of the hypocrisy and disappointment. I just know with the general proposals that, you know, proposals that immigrants that are here already would be offered citizenship and I guess increasing diligence as far as allowing illegal immigrants to come here in the future. So that’s all the policies I’m aware of.

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Interviewer: So when you hear about immigration reform, what does that mean?

Informant: It's a funny term, because I think it can mean anything. I mean, reform it to whatever you want, right? So right now when we talk about immigration reform, it basically means amnesty, because both of these bills are granting amnesty, but when I think of immigration reform before these bills, I would not think of it as amnesty, I would think of it like, okay, let's do something about the border. Like actually tighten up our border and solve this problem that we have.

Implication:

*The Black Box model impedes the ability of Americans to understand the effects of proposed reforms and limits public support. If Americans don't understand the fundamental workings of the system, it is difficult for them to evaluate and reason productively about the reform of this system and the effects of various proposals. As such, opening up the *Black Box* and helping Americans understand certain functions and operations of the immigration system should be a priority for communicators. Past work has shown that people's ability to think about how things work shapes and constrains their ability to evaluate solutions and policy proposals.¹⁸*

Mapping the Gaps and Overlaps in Understanding

The goals of this analysis have been to: (1) document the way experts who support reforms talk about and understand immigration reform; (2) establish the ways that the American public understands these same issues; and (3) compare and “map” these understandings to reveal the gaps and overlaps between the perspectives of these two groups. We now turn to this third task.

Comparing the expert and public views of immigration and immigration reform reveals significant gaps in understanding, as well as areas of overlap.

Overlaps in Understanding

Research identified a set of overlaps between the ways that the general public and immigration experts understand issues related to immigration. While these overlaps suggest ripe areas to explore in future prescriptive communications research, communicators should keep in mind that many of these high-level overlaps reveal, upon closer inspection, deeper conceptual gaps. That is, without careful attention to strategies for maneuvering through public understanding, many of these overlaps can backfire and morph into conceptual gaps.

- 1. Immigration enriches social and cultural life by making society more diverse.** Both experts and members of the public express support for the idea that a more diverse country enriches everyone’s quality of life. Both point to a national history of immigration and to the contributions immigrants have made to the prosperity of the nation. However, experts have a clearer sense of the ways in which immigrants contribute to U.S. society, and focus primarily on economic benefits. Members of the public focus more attention on the non-financial benefits of cultural diversity.
- 2. Enforcement policies are costly and ineffective.** Both experts and members of the public share the general understanding that current enforcement policies are costly and ineffective. Experts discuss specifics of enforcement policies, and the changes that are necessary to improve these policies, whereas members of the public are largely unable to offer specifics about *how* the system’s enforcement function is carried out or *how* it might be improved. In fact, given the *Black Box* understanding about how the system works, enforcement mechanisms are largely invisible to the public.
- 3. Immigration used to be primarily from Europe but now is from Latin America and Asia.** Although members of the public take the narrative about shifts in immigration too far, they do overlap with the basic immigration trends that experts identify.
- 4. The system should be attuned to the economic and employment needs of the nation.** Both experts and members of the public argue that the immigration system

should work to align levels and types of immigration to match the employment needs of the country. That said, the public is more concerned about overall numbers — whether there are enough jobs to go around — while experts are attuned to the demands of specific employment sectors and view the economy as an expandable, rather than fixed, domain.

5. **Pathways to citizenship should be available and non-punitive in nature.** When asked directly to consider what a pathway to citizenship should look like, members of the public suggest criteria that include linguistic competence, historical knowledge, and some demonstration of a means to work and productively contribute to society. This understanding is largely merit- and incentive-based rather than punitive. In this respect, public thinking about pathways to citizenship is consistent with expert notions.
6. **Immigrants take jobs from Americans.** Although experts focus on the net overall gains of immigration — particularly in economic terms — they also note that large numbers of immigrants can make job prospects more difficult for U.S. workers with low levels of education and training. This perspective overlaps with the public's sense that immigrants are a threat to employment opportunities for Americans. While this is the public's *dominant* way of thinking about immigration and employment, experts emphasize that this dynamic exists *only* in limited contexts, and that the broader picture is one in which immigrants constitute a net gain for the economy and can help “grow the economic pie.” This is therefore a parietal overlap — a confluence between a dominant public understanding and small part of the expert story.

Gaps in Understanding

In addition to the overlaps described above, analysis revealed a clear set of gaps between expert and public understandings. These gaps are likely to impede the public's ability to consider new and wider perspectives on immigration reform.

1. **Who are Immigrants: Us vs. Them.** Perhaps the most significant gap between experts and members of the public stretches between experts' overarching view of immigrants as a part of the country — as “us” — and the public's dominant default view of immigrants as an illegal “them.” While this gap looms large when the public employs its most dominant way of understanding immigration, it also has the potential to morph into a productive overlap if the public is able to apply extant, but more recessive, *Us* models to think about immigration and immigrants. It is this cognitive maneuver — foregrounding understandings of *Immigrants As Us* and backgrounding *Immigrants As Them* models — that constitutes the central task in efforts to reframe this issue in ways that allow members of the public to appreciate the importance of, and need for, comprehensive reform. FrameWorks research has shown that values are a potent tool in this work.¹⁹

2. **Roles of Immigrants: Assets vs. Threats.** Related to the more fundamental gap around “us vs. them” thinking, experts have a clear view about the potential contributions that immigrants make to society and the economy — viewing immigrants as national *assets*. Members of the public, while able to adopt other views by employing *Us* models, most dominantly view immigrants as *threats* — endangering the country’s security by breaking the law, and stressing its economy by taking jobs and public services that Americans need.
3. **The Economy: Expandable vs. Finite.** The gap around immigrants as assets vs. threats rests on a deeper difference between the ways that experts and members of the general public understand the economy. Experts understand the economy as expandable, and see immigrants — opening small businesses, helping U.S. companies be more successful in the global marketplace — as an important source of economic growth and expansion. Members of the public model the economy as a limited entity with a set amount of resources and jobs to go around. According to this zero-sum understanding, immigrants are seen as taking a piece of the pie away from Americans rather than contributing resources that can help grow the pie for everyone.
4. **Population: Low Density vs. Overcrowded.** Experts hold the view that the U.S. population is of relatively low density compared to other major world economies, and cite falling national birthrates in explaining that the country is unlikely to grow significantly in coming decades. The public conceptualizes the population as growing “exponentially” and immigration numbers as “surging” as the country is becoming “overpopulated.”
5. **Immigrants and Labor: The Full Range of Skills and Skill Levels vs. Two Skill Levels.** Experts talk about immigrants as working in jobs of all skill levels. They recognize that immigrants occupy the full spectrum of the U.S. economy, from day laborers to small business owners to university professors. Public thinking about immigrant labor is characterized by extremes and nothing in between. Immigrants are understood as either unskilled migrant day laborers who take jobs that Americans do not want, or highly skilled technology and engineering professionals who fill jobs Americans cannot.
6. **Southern Border: A Small Part of the Story vs. The Whole Story.** Experts explain that immigration from Mexico has been declining. As such, experts view securing the southern border as a diversion from thinking about other immigration issues that must be solved. The public, on the other hand, views illegal Mexican immigration as dramatically increasing and, from this perspective, reasons that securing the border is the central task in improving the system. Likewise, the public understands illegal immigration to arise exclusively from people breaching the southern border, while experts explain that the majority of illegal immigration is the result of people who have entered legally with visas that have since expired.
7. **How the Immigration System Works: Complex System vs. Black Box.** Members of the public have trouble describing policies, agencies and actors that make up the

system, and the processes through which the system operates. Experts, not surprisingly, understand the system and its complexities in great detail. For experts, the system has clear functions to fulfill, and mechanisms for accomplishing those functions — many of which they describe as currently not working. In short, while experts are able to draw on a concrete understanding of the system and its mechanisms to reason about reform, the public is left to use its generalized and vague notions of how the system works to reason about ways to improve the system.

8. **The Purpose of the Immigration System: Improve Functioning of Society vs. Security and Control.** Experts clearly see the immigration system as a potential means to improve the functioning and prosperity of the country and the quality of life for all those living in it. Members of the public lack the view of the immigration system as a way of *improving* the country and, instead, view the system as a way to keep bad things from happening. Members of the public focus on the immigration system as a way to keep out people who wish to harm Americans, and as a way to prevent high rates of American unemployment.
9. **Problems with the Immigration System: Outdated and Ineffective Policies vs. Leaky Border.** Experts explain that current immigration issues are the result of outdated and ineffective policies — in particular, a system that does not reflect the current economic context. For members of the public, the system’s most identifiable problem is that it does not successfully control the border, allowing what members of the public see as large numbers of Mexicans to enter the country illegally. Much of this focus stems from the public’s lack of understanding of how the immigration system does, and should, work.
10. **Who Is Suffering? Undocumented Immigrants vs. U.S. Citizens.** A considerable amount of expert attention focuses on the difficulties faced by illegal immigrants living in the United States. Undocumented immigrants frequently do not have access to basic services, cannot integrate into communities, face limited job prospects and live lives stigmatized as outsiders. The public’s dominant *Immigrants As Them* model sets up a very different way of looking at the situation — one in which it is Americans who suffer from the country’s immigration issues by being made to feel like strangers in their own land, losing their jobs, and paying taxes to support those who do not. While the shift to the *Immigrants As Us* model closes this gap by focusing attention on the struggles of illegal immigrants, the dominance of the *Them* model structures a strong default focus on *Americans* as those disadvantaged by the country’s current immigration issues.
11. **Employment Visas: Not enough vs. Not on the Radar.** One of the clearest calls for reform for experts is around the issue of employment visas. The public, on the other hand, does not focus on this aspect of the system and, therefore, does not consider employment visas to be an important issue for immigration reform.
12. **Border Security: Dial It Back vs. Ramp It Up.** While both experts and members of the public agree that U.S. borders are currently not completely secured, experts argue that because of declining illegal immigration across the border, increasing

border security is a waste of resources and that the system's current focus on border security should instead be dialed back. The public, on the other hand, sees the current lack of security as a failure, and argues for increased border security to limit entry.

13. **Solution to Immigration Issues: Reform System to Make it More Flexible and Functional vs. Keep 'Em Out or Nothing We Can Do.** Overall, there is a major gap between the remedial focus of experts as opposed to members of the public. The former see more flexible, humane, pragmatic and responsive policies as the key to addressing current immigration issues, while, working from their dominant *Immigrants As Them* and *Fatalism* models, and limited by their *Black Box* understanding of how the system works, members of the public either focus on border security or disengage from what they see as a problem that can't be fixed.

Conclusion: Pushing, Pulling and Filling In

This report lays out the deep challenges inherent in communicating about immigration reform. The overarching challenge is that the most dominant ways of thinking about immigration — deep assumptions of immigrants as lawbreaking and threatening “others,” and fatalistic views of the chances of enacting meaningful changes — are highly unproductive for those wishing to increase support for comprehensive immigration reform. This challenge is exacerbated by a general lack of understanding of how the immigration system does, and could, work, which, in turn, makes reasoning about reforms difficult. While these features of public understanding present serious challenges for reform communicators, other areas of public understanding hold the key to more productive consideration of reform proposals. Alongside the *Immigrants As Them* and *Fatalism* models, this research shows that Americans have ways of thinking about immigrants and immigration which allow people to see the need for, and importance of, comprehensive reform. When thinking about immigration using *Immigrants As Us* and *Pragmatism* models, Americans are likely to be receptive to, and able to more productively evaluate, calls for reform.

The existence of conversation-closing models alongside those that open up productive consideration suggests the first of two major framing strategies that emerge from this research. Communicators can be successful in giving the public access to new ways of thinking about immigration by employing strategies that *push* unproductive models to the cognitive background, while activating and *pulling* more productive perspectives to the forefront, where they can be used to process information, form opinions and reach decisions about policy and solutions. Recent research on the effect of values in framing immigration reform is highly instructive in *how* to execute this cognitive pushing-and-pulling strategy. Experimental work has shown that, by making a moral argument, communicators can increase public support for comprehensive reform measures.²⁰ The investigation of cultural models described here explains why this value is so effective: It pushes *Immigrants As Them* models back, while activating and bringing *Immigrants As Us* models to the cognitive forefront. The experiment also demonstrates the power of using the value of *Pragmatism* for those seeking to increase public support for immigration reform. The cultural models findings presented here suggest that the effectiveness of this value is due to its ability to activate and leverage the foundational model of *Pragmatism* and pull it forward as the lens through which people can then productively consider proposals. In addition to these values, and their productive pushing-and-pulling power, researchers should experiment with other frame elements as ways of effectively and efficiently orchestrating these foreground-to-background and background-to-foreground maneuvers. The strategic use of messengers, for example, seems particularly promising as part of a larger strategy to forward *Us* thinking and *Pragmatic* ways of looking at the system and its remediation.

The second meta strategy that emerges from this work relates to the finding that Americans are largely unaware of many aspects of the immigration system and, more generally, of how the system works. No amount of pushing and pulling is going to fill this

black box — instead, communicators will need to focus on explanation and give Americans better understandings of the system and its functions, from which they can evaluate reform proposals. A key part of this explanation strategy will likely be developing tools to help Americans see the economy as a pie that can be grown, rather than as a limited entity from which more and more people get smaller and smaller pieces. This explanation work must be a priority for future prescriptive reframing research.

About The FrameWorks Institute

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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