

Executive Summary

*Don't Always Stay on Message:
Using Strategic Framing to Move the
Public Discourse On Immigration*

This experimental survey is part of a larger project, supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, designed to investigate public thinking about immigration and immigration reform and to identify reframing strategies that help people engage thoughtfully with policies designed to improve the system. The FrameWorks Institute has conducted a series of expert interviews to inform this phase of the project. Future reports will identify the cultural models that people bring to the issue of immigration, will investigate the use of metaphors to help concretize the immigration system and will resurvey the public to determine the effects of new frame elements on public thinking. Reports will be posted at: www.frameworksinstitute.org.

Executive Summary

There is little doubt that immigration policy has climbed to the top rungs of the national political agenda. In spite of spirited opposition, the Senate passed S. 744 in late June. The bill is now stalled in the House, where it is receiving intermittent bursts of public attention. Even a casual observer of politics recognizes the rancor and vitriol that characterize much of the public discourse about immigration, driving out reasoned argument and preventing public deliberation.

While politicians may thrive in such an environment, we know that all but the most ideological among the public avoid such freighted issues, which may become tainted with the stain of political rhetoric. The challenge for those seeking comprehensive immigration reform is to find a way to talk productively about immigration in a chaotic message environment where politicians send incendiary and conflicting messages, and media sources typically focus on the most extreme views. In short, is there a way to talk about immigration that gets past the impasse and engages ordinary people in sensible and less rhetorical solutions?

The research presented here forms part of a larger project, supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; its U.S. Immigration Policy Initiative supports 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 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 FrameWorks Institute has pioneered an approach to analyzing communications and developing messages – *Strategic Frame Analysis™* – that empirically evaluates the capacity of frames to enhance public conversations and influence the direction and intensity of public support for social issues. Using this approach, we offer evidence-based insights into how those seeking comprehensive immigration reform can withstand messages from those who oppose such reform and win new supporters.

What we know from the scientific literature is that the way an issue is framed for the public, through the use of narrative, strongly influences the probability that the public will

embrace change. Further, these frames form the foundation for political action, action that often becomes codified in policies and legislation. Knowing how to frame the immigration issue in ways that open up Americans to productively considering comprehensive immigration reform is imperative to winning ground now, and to setting the stage for later activity.

We also know that, absent a value at the top of a communication, people struggle to see the point of engaging with an issue and are left to their own devices when it comes to understanding why an issue matters. In this way, values serve as fundamental organizing principles that people use to evaluate social issues and reach decisions. Not only does an effective value have to be “sticky,” easily communicable, and able to help people reach productive understandings and decisions on the issue in question, but it also has to stand up to competition from opposing messages. Recognizing that the conversation around immigration reform is fluid, dynamic and oppositional, we introduce a precise and novel method to test various values-based frames.

For our research purposes, values were derived from three main sources – values that used by those in the field of immigration reform; values that previous FrameWorks’ research has shown to be effective on similar social issues; and values that were suggested by immigration experts. We identify two categories of values – “immigration reform support” values and “immigration reform opposition” values (full treatment wording is found in Appendix A).

The *Immigration Reform Support Values* we tested are:

Prosperity – this Value emphasizes the economic gains that accrue to the country from such things as “harnessing immigrants’ skills and energy,” immigrants’ “talent and drive,” prospects for “new technologies” and “the taxes they will pay.”

Pragmatism – this Value emphasizes a “common sense” approach to immigration, stating “it wouldn’t make sense to send all the people that are in the country without documentation back to their country of origin.”

Opportunity for All – this Value emphasizes that we are the land of opportunity and everyone should have a chance to be part of “the American Dream.”

Moral Argument – this Value emphasizes that we need to treat everyone with the compassion they deserve as human beings, that immigrants are “entitled to the same rights and respect.”

The *Immigration Reform Opposition Values* we tested are:

Rule of Law – this Value emphasizes that “our nation was founded on the rule of law,” and that lawbreakers should pay heavy fines and be required to return to their original country before becoming legal.

Economic Insecurity – this Value emphasizes that we cannot let immigrants take jobs away from Americans who are “trying to earn a living and support a family.” It advises we should “enforce an ‘Americans First’ policy.”

Security – this Value emphasizes taking “steps to strengthen our borders, making them secure and protecting Americans from immigrants who may pose a danger.”

We designed an unusually large-scale experimental survey (N=8000) to weigh the effects of values on people’s attitudes toward immigration and support for specific immigration policies in two issue environments. The first test is to determine the impact of values-based messages in a single-message environment; that is, what is the isolated impact of exposure to one message? The second test is to see how immigration reform support messages fare when confronted with a reform opposition message.

The questions presented to the survey respondents after exposure to one message or to two messages – one value and one counter message – form outcome measures that chart the performance of the values and counter messages. In all, our goal is to identify productive messages and to develop strategic recommendations that can be used by those interested in moving toward a more reasonable discourse around comprehensive reform of the immigration system.

To test the impact of values-based frames, we developed a series of questions designed to probe the public’s attitudes and policy preferences about immigration. The questions presented to the survey respondents after exposure to one or two messages form the outcome measures that assess the effectiveness of the values and counter messages.

Our questions were developed and refined from lists proposed by experts we interviewed and in consultation with project partners. Further, we confirmed the scope of our immigration survey questions in two ways. First, we conducted an analysis of the Congressional Record for various policies under legislative consideration. Second, we scanned selected national media outlets to insure we captured the full range of immigration policies.

The five measures of attitudes and preferences about immigration are (see Appendix B for question wording):

- Path to Citizenship
- Border Security
- Visa System
- Economic Competitiveness
- Government Services

The key feature of this design is its capacity to test messages individually as well as competitively. To accomplish this, we first randomly assigned people to one of the seven individual values treatments. After being exposed to the individual message, people were asked about their views on immigration. Our second test, by contrast, was designed to model a competitive issue environment. For this study, respondents were randomly assigned to conditions where they saw pairs of messages: one featuring one of four reform support values and another articulating one of three reform opposition messages. They, too, were asked a series of follow-up questions about immigration. The net result of these two studies is a precise estimate of the impact of exposure to immigration reform support values and immigration reform opposition values –individually and jointly – on public attitudes and preferences. In all, our goal is to identify productive messages and to develop strategic recommendations that can be used by those interested in moving toward a more reasonable discourse on immigration.

Strategic Recommendation

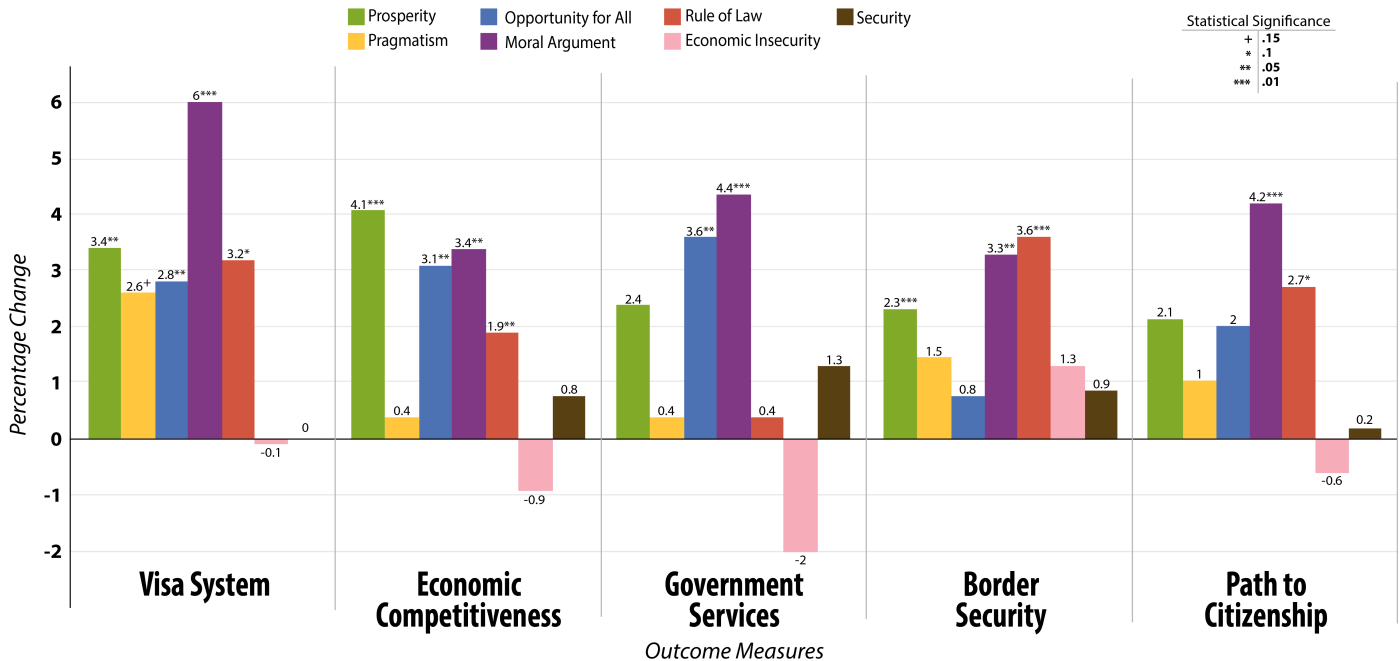
The main finding is that talking effectively about immigration is dependent on the message environment and policy domain. When those seeking comprehensive reform have “the floor” to themselves, it is possible to increase support for immigration reform by invoking a Moral Argument that trades on concepts like compassion, fairness, and basic rights. When the message environment is more contested, however, it is near fatal for reform supporters to “stay on message”. Rather, the strategy is to pivot to a second line of values-based messages such as Pragmatism and Opportunity for All.

Findings

Q1: How do individual values-based frames used by those who support comprehensive immigration reform affect the overall conversation and do they move people toward sensible reforms?

- Immigration reform supporters facing a non-competitive (“friendly”) message environment, or who are in a position to deliver their message first, should use a Moral Argument message. The public is moved by appeals to compassion and basic human rights.
- Secondly, invoking the contribution that immigrants make to the Prosperity of the nation is a productive message; especially when those who support comprehensive reform are involved in a public discussion about the economy.
- The *Moral Argument* frame is the most potent overall value for increasing support for comprehensive immigration reforms. It is most effective when the issue is reforming the Visa System, raising support by six percentage points (+6%) in this area.
- The *Prosperity* frame is the second most effective message in raising support for comprehensive immigration reform. Not surprisingly, it is most effective at moving opinions about the economic impact of immigration.
- Interestingly, exposure to *Rule of Law* actually appears to *increase* support for comprehensive reform policies. Further analysis indicated that this effect was notably larger among the most liberal study participants. Perhaps it represents a violation of their core values and produces a backlash effect—making them *more* supportive of comprehensive reform.
- Although not statistically significant, it is noteworthy that the *Economic Insecurity* frame apparently depressed support for comprehensive reform measures.

Isolated Message Results

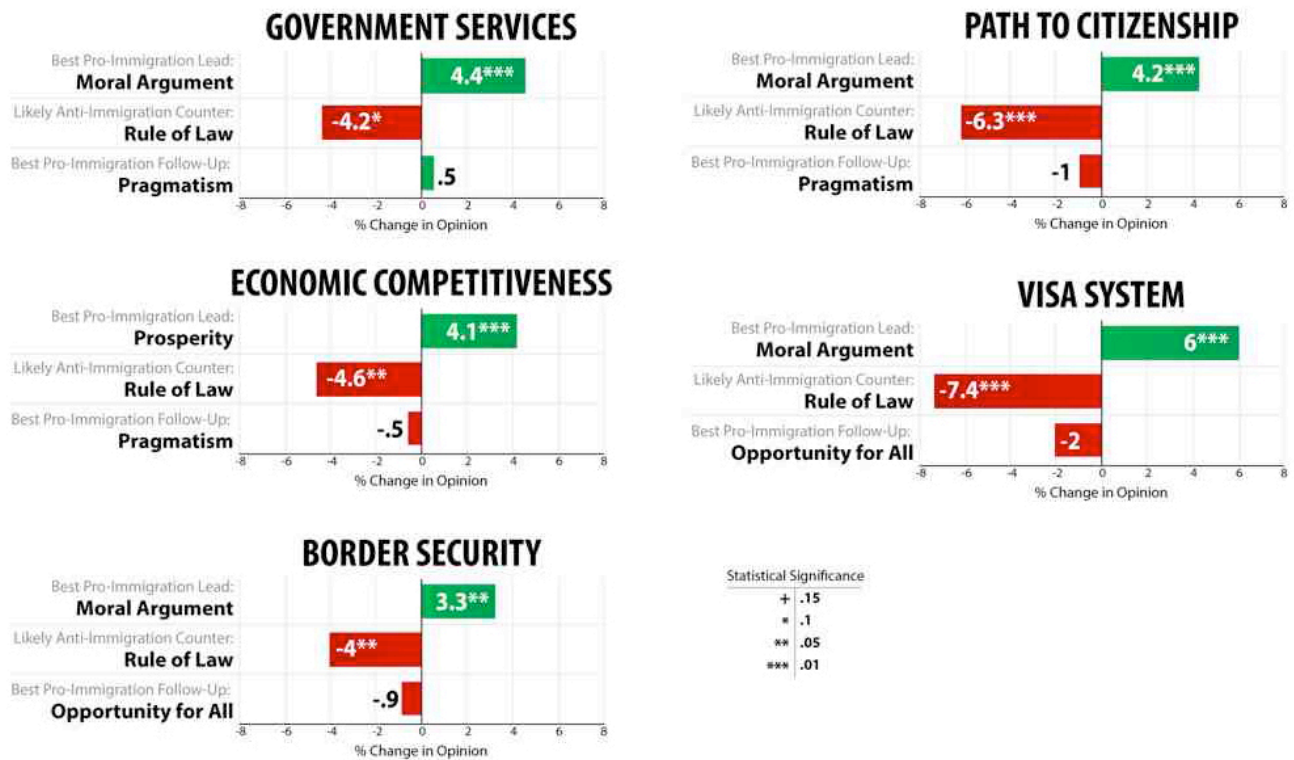


Q2: How should immigration reform supporters respond when they encounter opposing messages?

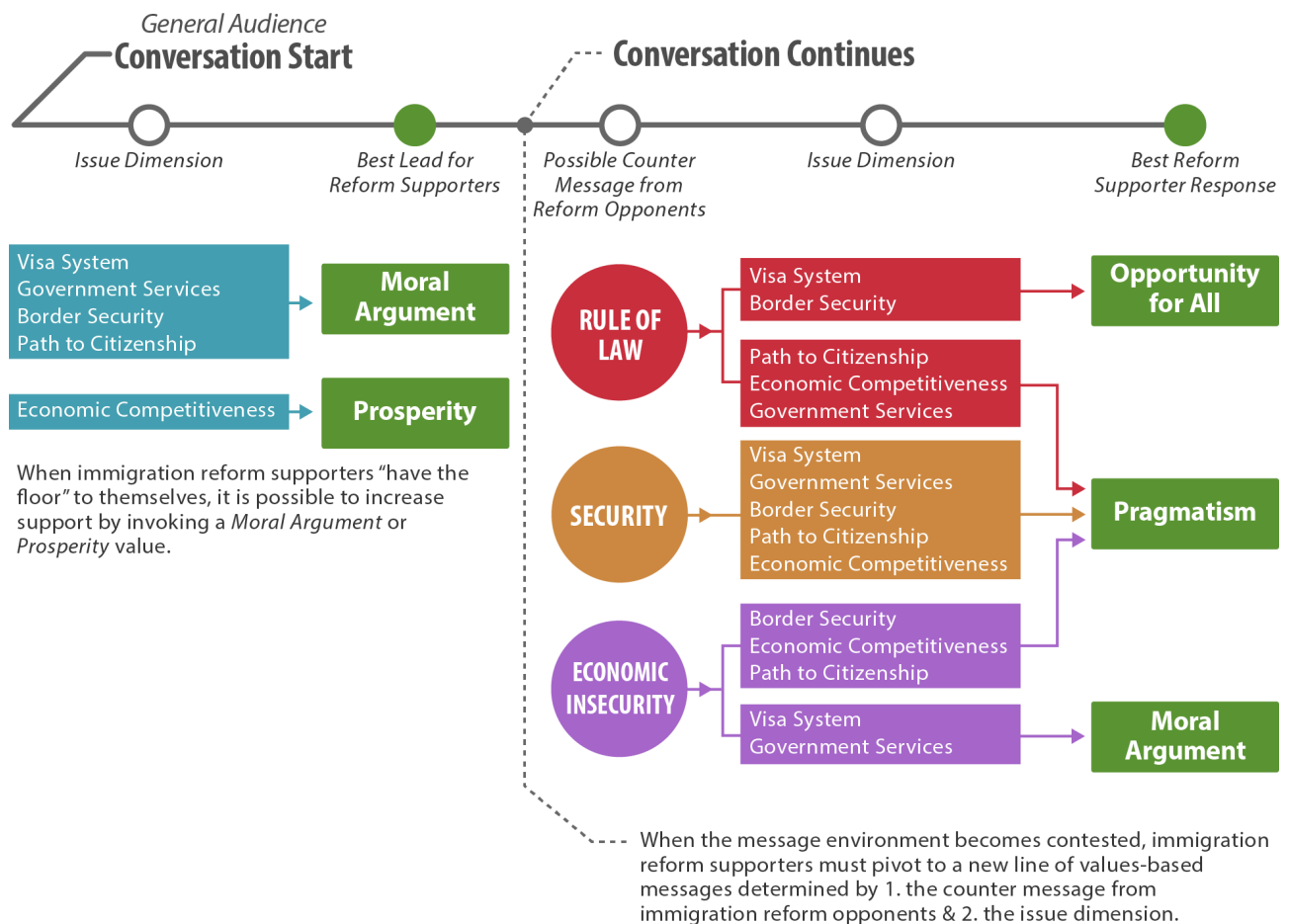
- Don't stay on message in a competitive message environment.
- Public preferences appear to be shallow; everyone can be moved from their starting position. Take framing seriously and hang in past the first round of argument.
- As a result, staying on message when your opponent challenges you will likely result in a significant loss of support.
- Pivot to other values-based frames that are more effective as counter-framing messages. In particular, when confronted with a Rule of Law message, rejoin with Pragmatism and Opportunity for All.
- Support for the two best reform support messages (*Moral Argument and Prosperity*) diminishes significantly when confronted with *Rule of Law* as the counter-message.
- The relative net swing (pro-immigration message v. anti-immigration message) ranges from about -7% (Border Security) to -13% (Visa System).

- The best reform support follow-up to *Rule of Law* is *Pragmatism* (Government Services, Path to Citizenship, Economic Competitiveness) and then *Opportunity for All* (Border Security, Visa System).

Framing Strategy



Below we present a strategic decision tree that details the critical decisions reform supporters should make depending on the issue domain at hand, and whether or not the message is in an uncontested or contested message environment. The left-hand portion of the figure shows the decision calculus when reform supporters are working in an uncontested message environment. The right hand portion of the schematic leads reform supporters through the strategic decisions they should make when the opposition uses one of the three reform opposition values tested in this study. Importantly, it shows what values are effective responses to particular opposition counter messages.



Conclusion

A conventional wisdom of political communications is to stay on message. This study shows that this bromide does not hold in all circumstances. Thus in order for reform supporters to be strategic in their communications, they must to assess the level of frame contestation before being seduced by the lure of traditional messaging strategies. On the other hand, we have found that there is a “second line” of values that can level the playing field when the opposition mounts a strong counter attack.

In all, the core findings of this study are:

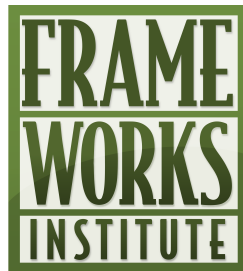
- Values-based messages are effective for increasing support for comprehensive immigration reform.
- Staying on message is appropriate in a “friendly” or non-competitive issue environment. Values such as the Moral Argument and Prosperity are effective messages for increasing for immigration reform support.
- Don’t always stay on message! When confronted with an effective counter-message – particularly *Rule of Law* - failure to move from the initial message can potentially turn an advantage into a double-digit loss in public support. On the other hand, reminding the public about the economic contribution of immigrants (Prosperity) and America’s commitment to Opportunity for All are effective come backs when opponents talk about immigrants violating the law.

About 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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Appendix A: Values

Pro-Immigration

Prosperity

Immigration has become an important topic in the U.S. To address this issue, we need to think about what we can do to create a prosperous country. America's prosperity comes from harnessing each individual's skills and energy to grow our country. When immigrants come to the US, they bring talent and potential. Foreign-born inventors pioneer new technologies, generating high-paying jobs and other skilled professionals and workers are critical to our national well-being. We need immigrants in order for our country to continue to grow and to thrive. Immigration reform is vital to our country's prosperity, both now and in the future, and this should be the goal of immigration reform.

Pragmatism

Immigration has become an important topic in the U.S. To address this issue, we need a common sense, practical approach. Solutions should come from carefully considering all possible ideas and then moving forward with the ones that have the best chance of improving our country. Right now, it wouldn't make sense to send all the people that are in the country without documentation back to their country of origin—this would be impractical and wouldn't improve the situation. We need to focus on taking reasonable steps toward solutions rather than adopting extreme and impractical measures that can never actually work. Taking a practical approach to solving problems should be the goal of immigration reform.

Opportunity for all

Immigration has become an important topic in the U.S. To address this issue, we need to ensure that newcomers to America have every opportunity to succeed. This will result in a better quality of life and future opportunities for the nation as a whole. When people face barriers to opportunity, it prevents them from realizing a better life and diminishes the contributions they can make to the society. The American Dream has always relied on creating a society where everyone has an opportunity to achieve; we need to receive immigrants today in this same spirit. Giving everyone an opportunity to succeed and contribute should be the goal of immigration reform.

Moral Argument

Immigration has become an important topic in the U.S. To address this issue, we need to treat everyone with the compassion they deserve as human beings. No matter where we were born, we are all people and are all entitled to the same basic rights and respect. We need to treat everyone decently. For example, our country should not separate immigrant

parents from their children and should not put up barriers to college for immigrant students who have good grades. We are all people with the same basic human needs and rights. Treating all people with compassion should be the goal of immigration reform.

Anti-Immigration

Rule of Law

When making changes to our immigration system, we must recognize that our nation was founded on the rule of law. We cannot let people who break the law escape the consequences of their actions; that would be unfair to those of us who obey the law. This means that we should make it much harder for people who enter the country illegally to become citizens. Lawbreakers should pay heavy fines and be required to return to their original country before becoming legal. Businesses who break the law by hiring undocumented workers should also be punished and face heavy fines. The only way to have a fair and just country is to make sure everyone obeys the law.

Economic Insecurity

When making changes to our immigration system, we must recognize that too many Americans are out of work. We cannot let immigrants take jobs away from Americans who are trying to earn a living and support a family. This means we should enforce an "Americans First" policy designed to save the limited number of jobs that we have in the U.S. for those of us who are actually U.S. citizens. Only after companies have tried as hard as possible to hire U.S. citizens should they be able to hire immigrants. We also need to have laws that keep immigrants from coming into our country during times when jobs are especially scarce. The only way to have a fair and prosperous country is to make sure Americans get first priority for jobs.

Security

When making changes to our immigration system, we must recognize the need to keep Americans safe and secure. Letting people cross our borders whenever they want, without any control, threatens our lives and property. This means we should take steps to strengthen our borders, making them secure and protecting Americans from immigrants who may pose a danger. Only after the border is secure, should we consider allowing additional legal immigration into our country. This also means that we need to deport suspected criminals who are already here, before they can commit more crimes. The only way to have a safe and secure country is to make sure defending America's borders is our top priority.

Appendix B: Outcome Measures

Insert in all: “The following are a number of statements about immigration. Please indicate whether you agree strongly, agree, disagree or disagree strongly with the following statements:”

Note: Question order randomized for each respondent.

A. Economic Competitiveness

1. We need to create an immigration system that is able to respond quickly and flexibly to the changing labor needs of our country.
2. Every business should be required to use systems like eVerify to investigate a person's immigration status before hiring them. (*Reverse code*).
3. North America should move towards a labor system in which workers can more freely move across borders to where they are needed.
4. Our country needs to admit more immigrants with skills and talent in order to remain competitive with other countries.
5. Immigrants are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care. (*Reverse Code*)

B. Pathways to Citizenship

1. We need to provide a way for those who are already in the United States without documentation to legalize their status.
2. Immigrants should not have to wait for the border to be secured before becoming United States citizens.
3. We should increase funding to the immigration service so people who entered the country legally do not have to wait too long before becoming citizens.
4. We should allow the children of parents who entered our country illegally to become citizens.
5. Before becoming citizens, immigrants who have entered the country illegally should be forced to pay fines of at least \$2000 as well as the back taxes that they owe. (*Reverse code*)

C. Visa System

1. We need to improve the family reunification system so that family members do not have to wait for long periods of time before getting visas.
2. We need make changes to the immigration system that allow temporary workers to more easily gain permanent status.
3. Immigration reform should give temporary visas to immigration workers and ensure that they have the same basic rights as other American workers.
4. We need to ensure that people who fear persecution in their home countries are able to remain in the United States.
5. We should make it easier for people who enter the country legally on an authorized visa to extend their stay when needed.

D. Border Security

1. We need to make sure immigrants who are arrested by immigration officials are treated humanely.
2. We should reduce the amount of time and money we are putting into building fences, hiring more border patrol agents and other aspects of our current approach to border security.
3. We need to focus on making life harder for immigrants who have entered the country illegally (*Reverse Code*)
4. We should not let the state of border security decide whether or not immigrants can become citizens.
5. Any person entering the country illegally should be immediately deported regardless of their circumstances (*Reverse code*).

E. Government Services

1. We need to provide more funding to programs that teach immigrants the English language
2. Immigrants should be allowed to participate in the Affordable Care Act, U.S.'s new health care plan
3. So long as immigrants pay taxes, they should be able to receive all the government services, like Medicare, that they are entitled to.

4. We need to make sure that children of immigrants receive the same tuition support opportunities open to U.S. citizens.
5. We should make sure that immigrant workers and U.S. citizens who perform the same work receive the same pay.



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