Immigration is Difficult?! Informing Voters About Immigration Policy Fosters Pro-immigration Views

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Abstract

The US public significantly lacks knowledge about immigration. While various attempts to correct misperceptions have generally failed to change people's minds about the issue, it is possible that this failure has been the result of not providing relevant information. We argue that informing the public about the difficulty of the legal immigration admission process could be an effective, perspective-changing way to raise support for more open immigration policies. We test and confirm this hypothesis using a national US survey experiment that informs respondents about US immigration's administrative burdens and restrictions through short verifiable narratives. We also provide the first evidence of the widespread ignorance about the immigration process across diverse political and demographic groups. Our results suggest that providing new factual information on the immigration process's difficulty has more promise to change policy preferences than challenging skeptics' existing beliefs about immigration's effects or numbers.

Keywords: Immigration Attitudes | Survey Experiment | Information Provision | Administrative Burden

Introduction

What facts can change people's minds on polarizing issues such as immigration? The American public is not well informed and often misinformed about immigration [1, 2]. Although even experts can disagree on the issue, most Americans staunchly hold factually incorrect beliefs about the immigration process. Americans tend to exaggerate immigrants' population size [3], unfavorable characteristics such as crime rates [4], and socio-cultural differences with the native population [5].

Unfortunately, various attempts to change people's minds on policy by providing information or correcting these misperceptions have generally been unsuccessful [1, 3, 6] (for some exceptions, see [7–9]). It is possible that this has been the result of focusing on beliefs about immigration that are too crystallized [10] or not providing novel relevant information [11]. Additionally, raising support for increasing future immigration flows may be harder than raising support for helping existing immigrants [12, 13]. While successful policy persuasion by providing information is certainly possible even for racialized issues [14, 15], it appears to be much harder for issues that voters perceive as important [16] such as immigration today [17].

Unlike most prior efforts, our study focuses on changing people's perspectives about US immigration admission policy by providing novel information about the difficulties involved in the legal immigration process. Beliefs about the immigration process' difficulty should be relatively malleable to new information because it is an area that receives little attention and thus where beliefs are not crystallized. We argue that informing Americans about the difficulty of legally immigrating, which many are unaware of, could be a perspective-changing and effective way to raise public support for more open immigration admission policies. We then test and confirm this expectation using a large national US survey experiment that informs respondents about the administrative burdens and restrictions of the current US immigration system. We are also among the first to descriptively assess people's (mis)perceptions about the legal US immigration process in a large national US sample. Compared to existing approaches trying to convince skeptics that immigration is or immigrants are good, the results indicate that our approach of giving a new perspective that immigration is difficult has more promise to change people's policy preferences.

The Difficulty of US Legal Immigration Process

US immigration is a complex policy domain defined by numerous laws and controlled by multiple national and local government agencies with overlapping authority [18, 19]. Even if one only considers federal laws governing the admission of legal family and employment-based immigration, the focus of our paper, the immigration process is difficult. The process is both administratively burdensome (the complexity of the process and what it takes to go through it [20, 21]) and restrictive (in terms of who is eligible to go through the process in the first place [21, 22]). While we follow public administration literature and differentiate between these two distinct concepts [23], we are agnostic about which of these elements is more important to people's preferences.

We focus on voters' attitudes toward legal immigration in particular (as opposed to undocumented immigration or immigration in general as it is common in the persuasion literature) because legal pathways remain the primary means by which the US regulates the long-term admission of non-citizens into the country. Although the US government also has distinct policies concerning irregular migrants, these policies are largely contingent on the number of allowed legal immigrants [12, 21].

Given low levels of political knowledge [24, 25], most people likely have a limited understanding of the immigration process or the burdens involved. As a result, voters may form strong preferences on what the government should do about immigration without knowing what the government already does. Americans tend to assume that their immigration system is much more straightforward and open than it is [2, also see Table 1]. One recent poll showed that most voters across parties incorrectly believed that it *would* only take a few years to receive a green card for a Mexican sibling of a US citizen [26]. The correct answer of 20 years was given by only 1% of respondents. Strikingly, the vast majority–including Republicans–believed it *should* only take a few years.

This existing fragmented evidence suggests that people's misperceptions about *immigration policy* may be deeper than misperceptions about *immigrant characteristics* or *immigration effects*. Consequently, there may also be more room for information to update people's beliefs about immigration policy to change their preferences than in the case of these other facts. In line with this idea, there is recent evidence that policy-oriented information about administrative difficulties can change minds about non-immigration policies [14] and refugee immigration [27]. It is important to replicate these findings on the broader domain of legal immigration policies using a more representative sample.

Designing Effective Information Treatment. Interventions that make existing knowledge accessible should be less effective and durable than information provision interventions that instead make new knowledge applicable [11, 28]. Information interventions should also be more effective for policy persuasion than perspective-taking approaches that are more suited for reducing group prejudice [8]. Among possible information interventions, non-judgmental and verifiable narratives [29] that can shift people's perspective on immigration should also be preferable to fact-checking approaches that simply attempt to correct people's misperceptions about various, often already crystallized, immigration facts [8].

We argue that informing respondents about the administrative burdens and restrictiveness of the US immigration process is such a perspective-changing intervention. Importantly, to the extent that such information can successfully change people's minds, it should work by generating new knowledge or otherwise updating people's respective empirical beliefs about the difficulty involved in the immigration process. We test the effect of informing the public about the difficulty of immigrating on immigration attitudes using a well-powered, pre-registered survey experiment in a nationwide online YouGov panel designed to reflect the US population (N = 1000) [30]. Specifically, we provide relevant information to our respondents about administrative burdens and restrictions of the current US immigration system to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Receiving relevant information about the difficulty of legal immigration to the United States will increase respondents' awareness of this difficulty.

H2: Receiving relevant information about the difficulty of legal immigration to the United States will increase respondents' support for more open legal immigration policies.

We also descriptively assess the public's (mis)perceptions about the US legal immigration admission process. To do that, we ask our respondents to guess the average waiting time for different categories of foreigners who want to immigrate legally. Since we want to generalize the available evidence about particular idiosyncratic categories [26], we ask about multiple groups based on their skills, availability of job offers, and familial relationship to US citizens. In particular, the respondents are asked to guess how long it takes for an adult sibling of a US citizen, an aunt or uncle of a US citizen, a doctor without a job offer, a famous athlete or artist, or a nanny with a job offer to legally migrate to the United States (see SI for the survey instrument).

Results

Documenting Immigration Policy Knowledge. Our descriptive results confirm that the US public significantly lacks knowledge about the current immigration admission policies, even more so than about immigrant characteristics. Table 1 shows and provides t-tests for subgroup differences in immigration visa policy knowledge across the following dichotomized sociodemographic groups: gender (female vs male), age ($\leq$ 40 vs 40+), race (non-Hispanic white vs non-white), language (Spanish vs non-Spanish speakers), educational attainment (college degree or more vs less than college), income (low vs high), party identification (Republican vs Democrat), and ideology (conservative vs liberal). To make comparisons more general and informative, we test for differences in knowledge about whether the uncles and aunts of a US citizen are eligible for a green card (arguably one of the most straightforward questions in our battery), the average correct across the knowledge battery, and the average correct across the knowledge battery including almost close answers.

Only $8 \pm 1.5\%$ of respondents correctly answered that aunts and uncles of US citizens are not eligible for legal family-based immigration. The average correct response rate across all immigrant admission categories is 25%, just slightly better than what we would expect from random guessing (20%). Even if we include 'almost' correct answers, answers in the same direction as the correct answer, the correct rate only slightly raises to 40% (with the correct guess rate by chance of 20%) .

Importantly, our knowledge battery confirms that this lack of knowledge is equally widespread across all major sociodemographic and political categories. Young and old, white and non-white, rich and poor are all ignorant of current immigration admission policies. There is some evidence that college-educated, liberal, and Democrat respondents are somewhat more knowledgeable but these differences of a few percentage points are arguably not substantively important. There is also only a similarly minor difference in knowledge based on respondents' racial attitudes (see SI). These findings further suggest that providing information about immigration policies should be novel and equally perspective-changing for most respondent groups.

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Subgroup	Uncle Eligibility	*P* val.	Average Correct	P val.	Almost Correct	*P* val.
Sample Average	**6.5-10%**		**24-27%**		**38-41%**	
Female	(-0.02,0.05)	0.482	(0.01,0.05)	0.007	(0.02,0.05)	0.001
Old (40+)	(-0.05,0.03)	0.596	(-0.02,0.03)	0.704	(-0.01,0.03)	0.313
White Non-Hisp.	(-0.08,0.00)	0.035	(-0.01,0.03)	0.454	(-0.01,0.03)	0.429
Spanish-speaking	(-0.01,0.11)	0.109	(-0.01,0.06)	0.182	(-0.01,0.05)	0.153
College-educated	(-0.01,0.07)	0.127	(-0.01,0.04)	0.314	(0.00,0.04)	0.046
High-income	(0.00,0.10)	0.053	(-0.02,0.03)	0.700	(-0.02,0.03)	0.527
Republican	(-0.1,-0.01)	0.01	(-0.05,0.01)	0.224	(-0.05,0.00)	0.052
Conservative	(-0.09,0.00)	0.066	(-0.05,0.01)	0.263	(-0.06,-0.01)	0.015

Table 1 (No) Subgroup Differences in Immigration Policy Knowledge. The table shows 95% CI and *p* values from survey-weighted t-tests for binary subgroup differences. For details, see SI.

Effects of Proving Immigration Policy Information. In line with our pre-registered hypotheses and empirical specifications, our main results show that providing novel information about immigration difficulty is effective (see Figure 1). After reading about the current restrictions or their administrative burden, respondents were significantly more likely to believe that immigration is difficult (0.062 on a 0-1 scale or Cohen's d of 0.27) and report pro-immigration policy preferences (0.066 on a 0-1 scale or Cohen's $d = 0.25$). Substantively, this amounts to 11 ± 6 percentage-point (28%) more respondents believing that legal immigration is burdensome or restrictive (given the baseline of 40%) and 13 ± 6 percentage-point (35%) more respondents preferring to increase legal immigration or make it easier (given the baseline of 35%).
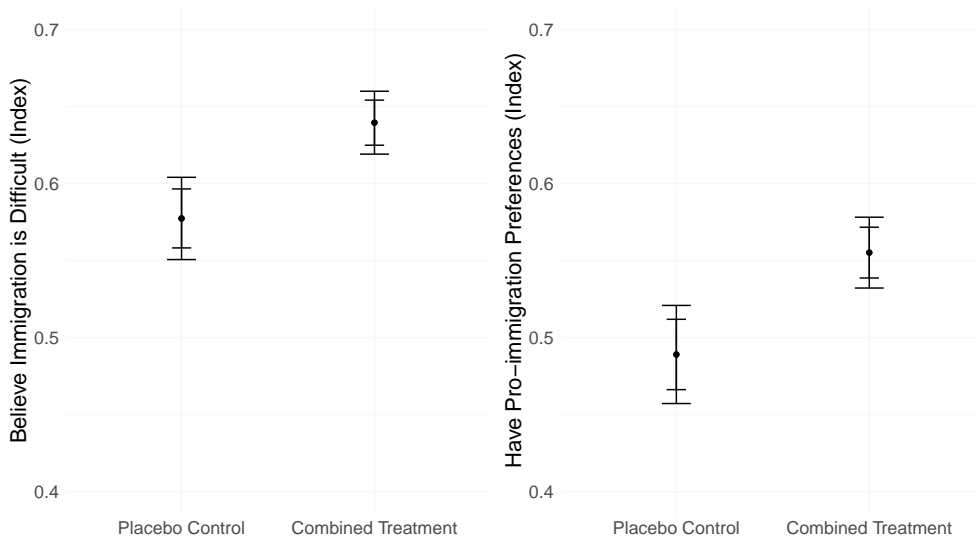
Fig. 1 (Positive) Effects of Immigration Policy Information on Beliefs and Preferences. This figure depicts the pre-registered hypotheses tests. Bars indicate 95%/84% confidence intervals.

Our additional exploratory analysis suggests that both treatments had a statistically similar positive effect across distinct immigration preference and belief outcomes (see Supplementary Figure A1). The results of our pilot sample (Prolific, N = 912) using a nationally diverse online sample also show treatment effects of similar size for a combined 250-word text with information on both burden and restrictions and an illustrative "immigration maze" graphic (see SI). Although our sample size was not large enough to detect small between-treatment differences or interaction effects, the exploratory analysis indicates that the treatment effects were similarly positive for both Democrats and Republicans alike alongside other demographic subgroups.

Discussion

Many individuals and organizations advocate for more open immigration admission policies, driven by the beliefs and evidence that immigration generally benefits all parties involved and thus should be less restricted. Yet, despite these well-intentioned efforts, many voters remain skeptical. While there has been much research on how one can change minds, it is still unclear whether it is possible to persuade voters to support liberalizing legal immigration policies.

We argued that informing Americans about the difficulty of legally immigrating–which many are simply not aware of–could be such an effective, perspective-changing way to raise public support for more open immigration admission policies. We then showed that a short factual narrative about immigration policy burdens and restrictions convinced as many as 6-19% of current skeptics to reconsider their position on the issue. Importantly, the intervention has successfully changed peoples' minds by generating new knowledge or otherwise updating their respective empirical beliefs about the difficulty involved in the immigration process. These results are encouraging given that many previous immigration information experiments find that respondents update their empirical beliefs but not policy preferences.

Of course, our findings are not without limitations and there are several extensions worth pursuing. Future research can explore whether the effects observed here are long-lasting or can withstand counter-information or -framing. Our results suggest that providing information about current immigration policies and their difficulty can affect a few percent of voters in the short run, but it is important to acknowledge that immigration attitudes are generally stable in the long run [6]. Although it is possible that the effects displayed here would be damped in real-world campaigns [31], we are optimistic that an effect would persevere given the relative novelty of the information presented. Ultimately, any robust positive change in policy would also require compromising with those voters who oppose immigration regardless of available information [32, 33].

Future research could explore the relative effect strength of various treatment variations and possible subgroup effects in larger representative samples in the United States or other countries. There is suggestive evidence that informational treatments may have differing effects among conservatives, and other demographic subgroups [34]. There is also evidence that, depending on the policy environment itself, voters in some

countries and contexts can be systematically more knowledgeable about immigration and its benefits than others [35, 36].

Our focus in this manuscript was on changing attitudes toward legal immigration policies. We did not compare (the effects of information about) administrative burdens in immigration to other policies [23] or test whether our informational treatment might also work differently on related outcomes based on immigrants' legal status, skill level, or humanitarian needs [27, 32, 37]. We also did not consider how voters' or migrants' inter-sectional identities (e.g., based on gender, religion, race, or ethnicity [38]) may moderate our findings. For example, one can imagine that even conservative voters may become less hostile toward undocumented immigrants from certain regions after they realize how difficult it is to immigrate legally. Exploring these and other heterogeneous effects is beyond the scope of our manuscript. Still, given that the attitudes toward future immigrants may generally be harder to change than toward present migrants [13], our findings carry the potential for wider applicability. Our approach also provides the foundation for a robust research program exploring policy persuasion on immigration and other complex, polarizing issues.

Methods

We preregistered our study at OSF. The sample of N = 1000 was collected as a part of a larger omnibus survey by YouGov from May 26 to June 2, 2023 [30]. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education, constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2019 American Community Survey (ACS). While all our analyses employed the standard post-stratification weights provided by YouGov, removing these weights does not impact our results. Our research was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the University of Missouri.

Pre-treatment, respondents were asked about their factual knowledge of immigration visa policies. Respondents were then randomly exposed to one of the informational treatments with encouragement to read it carefully. Post-treatment, respondents completed a set of survey items measuring their immigration preferences (main outcomes) and beliefs about immigration difficulty (secondary outcomes which also acted as manipulation checks).

Our two "burdensome" and "restrictive" 150-word treatments built on the publicly available information [21] about various aspects of the immigration process in a form of an accessible, verifiable, and non-judgmental narrative [29]. The burdensome treatment conveyed that immigration application and legal fees amount to thousands of dollars and going through the right process takes many years. The restrictive treatment conveyed that there is a limited number of immigrant visas available each year and that, depending on one's origin country, some immigrants may not be able to obtain permanent residency for which they are otherwise eligible.

Using simple randomization 1/3 of respondents were exposed to each of the two treatments plus a further 1/3 of respondents will be exposed to a placebo condition– a text mentioning policy-neutral facts about immigration. To minimize measurement error, the survey included multiple previously validated immigration preference items

($\alpha = 0.76$) and novel immigration belief items summarized as 0-1 indices. Given the random assignment, to test our two hypotheses we simply compared the mean values for relevant indices between the combined experimental and the control groups using a standard difference-in-means estimator.

Data and Code Availability

Data and analysis code files (in R) will be available on Open Science Framework (OSF) upon publication. All other study materials are included in the article or SI.

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Supplementary Information
Immigration is Difficult?! Informing Voters About Immigration Policy Fosters Pro-immigration Views

Appendix A   Figures
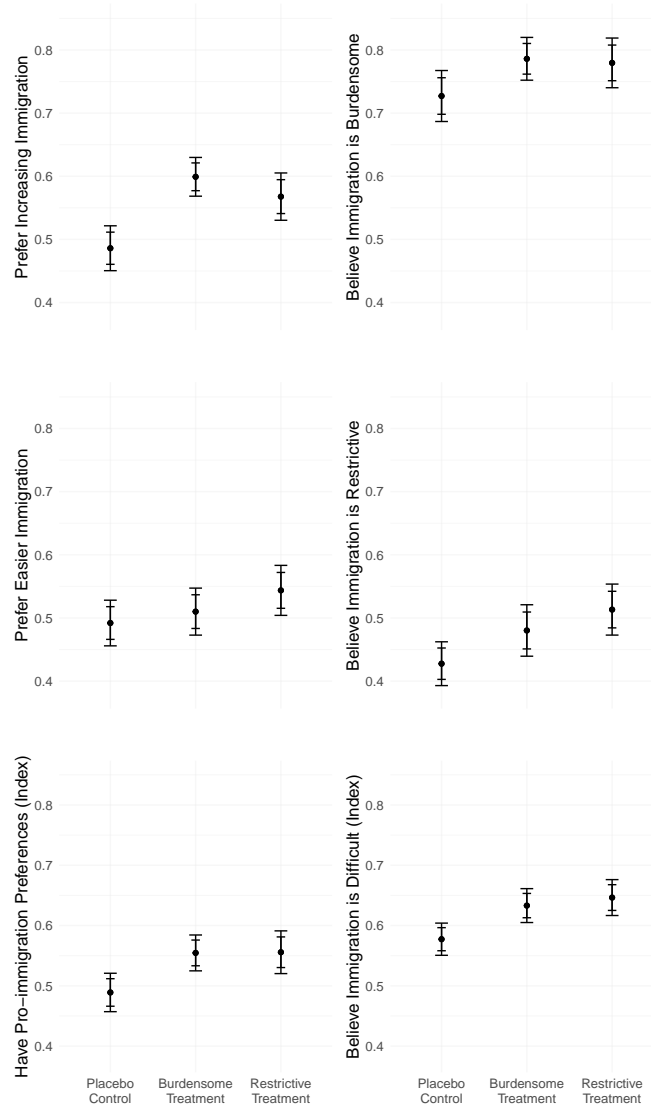
Fig. A1 (Positive) Effects of Immigration Policy Information on Beliefs and Preferences.
This figure depicts the additional exploratory hypotheses tests for separate treatments and outcome measures. Bars indicate 95%/84% confidence intervals.

Appendix B Survey instrument

Policy knowledge (pre-treatment) [Random ordering of categories, matrix question]

"If the below person applied to legally immigrate to the US to become a permanent resident, how long do you think it would take on average for their application to be approved? Even if you don't know, please take a guess. For reference, it currently takes spouses of US citizens approximately 12-18 months."

Categories:

- Adult Sibling of US Citizen [Correct answer: 3 to 10 years]
- Aunt or Uncle of US Citizen [Correct answer: not eligible]
- Doctor without a Job Offer [Correct answer: not eligible]
- Famous Athlete or Artist [Correct answer: less than 1 year]
- Nanny with a Job Offer [Correct answer: 1 to 3 years]

Answer options:

- Less than 1 year
- 1 to 3 years
- 3 to 10 years
- More than 10 years
- Not eligible

[The answer is considered "Almost correct" if it is adjacent to the correct answer]

Information provision experiment

"You are about to be presented with information. Please take your time and read it carefully. You will be asked questions related to the information afterward. The "Next" button will appear shortly." [This text is shown before any of the experimental conditions. All treatments have an equal 1/3 chance of being presented.]

- *Placebo Control Condition:* An "immigrant" is a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence. An "emigrant" is someone who leaves their place of residence or country to live elsewhere. A "migrant" can refer to either an immigrant or an emigrant. "Immigrate" refers to entering a new place; "emigrate" refers to leaving the original place. Migration is defined as a change in a person's permanent residence from one geographical area to another. International migration consists of people changing residence across countries. Net migration flows to a country are calculated as the difference between (1) immigration to that country and (2) emigration from that country during a particular period of time. If a country has negative net migration flows, it means that more people are leaving than entering that country. If a country has positive net migration flows, it means that more people are entering than leaving that country.
- *Treatment Condition 1 (Burdensome):* The US immigration system is complex and burdensome. There are nearly two hundred different visa types, which makes it difficult to know which visa a potential immigrant can apply for, if any. Applying for a visa is also burdensome in terms of money and waiting time. Application fees and

legal consultation costs thousands of dollars. The application fee to become a permanent resident is $1,140 without legal fees. Legal fees for petitioning a spouse of a US citizen to obtain permanent residency, one of the simplest processes, costs around $3,000. Additionally, the average wait time for a visa appointment is 244 days, and some wait over two years. This doesn't include the time it takes to become eligible for a visa, or for application processing (which can take more than a year depending on the visa type). The difficulty, costs, and long wait times of the immigration process makes it impractical for many.

- *Treatment Condition 2 (Restrictive):* The US immigration system is restrictive. There is a yearly numerical cap of about 220,000 for family-based visa categories and 140,000 for employment-based visas. This means that, if someone received a job offer from a willing employer after the employment-based visa cap was already filled, they would have to wait until at least the next year before being allowed to try immigrating again. Additional restrictions may apply based on immigrant's country of origin. For example, family members of US citizens from certain countries wait for decades before they can immigrate to become permanent residents. Some foreign workers may also have to wait for decades to obtain permanent residency for which they are otherwise eligible. As of 2022, applicants from the most impacted countries are only now processing applications from the early to mid-2000s because of how restrictive the immigration system is.

Immigration policy preferences (post-treatment) [0-1 index calculated as the average of three items recorded to vary from 0 (the most anti-immigration) to 1 (the most pro-immigration option)]

- "Do you think it should be easier or harder for foreigners to legally immigrate to the United States than it is currently?" [Much harder / Harder / Neither harder nor easier / Easier / Much easier]
- "Do you think the number of legal immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States should be increased a lot, increased a little, decreased a little, or decreased a lot?" [Increased a lot / Increased a little / Neither increased nor decreased / Decreased a little / Decreased a lot]

Immigration difficulty beliefs / manipulation checks (post-treatment) [0-1 index calculated as the average of three items recorded to vary from 0 (immigration is easy) to 1 (immigration is difficult)]

- "How burdensome do you think it is to legally immigrate to the US (in terms of time or money spent on the application process)?" [Very burdensome / A little burdensome / Not very burdensome / Not burdensome at all]
- "Do you think the annual limit on the number of people who can legally immigrate to the US is high or low?" [Very high / A little high / A little low / Very low]

Appendix C Pilot sample results

To ensure the project's feasibility and pretest original items, a pilot survey experiment was conducted in November 2022 using a large, diverse online sample (US Prolific, N = 912). The pilot study was near-identical in both design and results to the experiment presented in the main manuscript. Notably the pilot study included a political cartoon of a nondescript person lost in an 'immigration maze' with the treatment conditions. This was done to emphasize the difficulty inherent in the US immigration system. Despite the exclusion of the image in the follow-up study, the same general effect was found. This increases our confidence that our results are not being driven by specific wording and/or imagery alone.

Fig. C2 Immigration Maze Political Cartoon
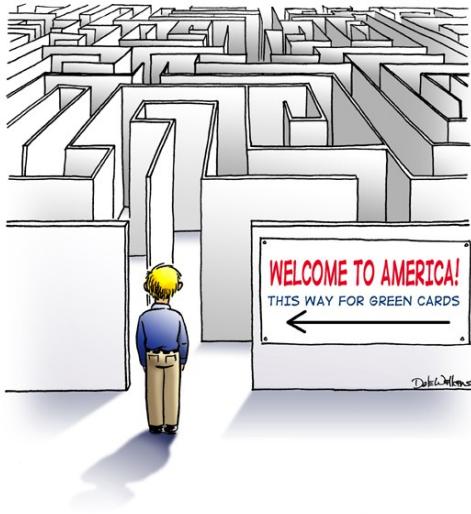
The pilot results also suggested that, even in the relatively liberal and educated Prolific sample, few people were knowledgeable about immigration policy.[1] On average, respondents provided correct answers 32% of the time, slightly above the 20% expected by guessing alone (and above the 25% estimate from our nationally representative sample). Furthermore, similar to our main results, none of the major socioeconomic or political covariates were significantly predictive of immigration policy knowledge (including education, partisanship, and even racial resentment measures).

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[1] 49% and 16% of our pilot respondents identified as Democrat and Republican, respectively, and 52% reported completing a college degree.
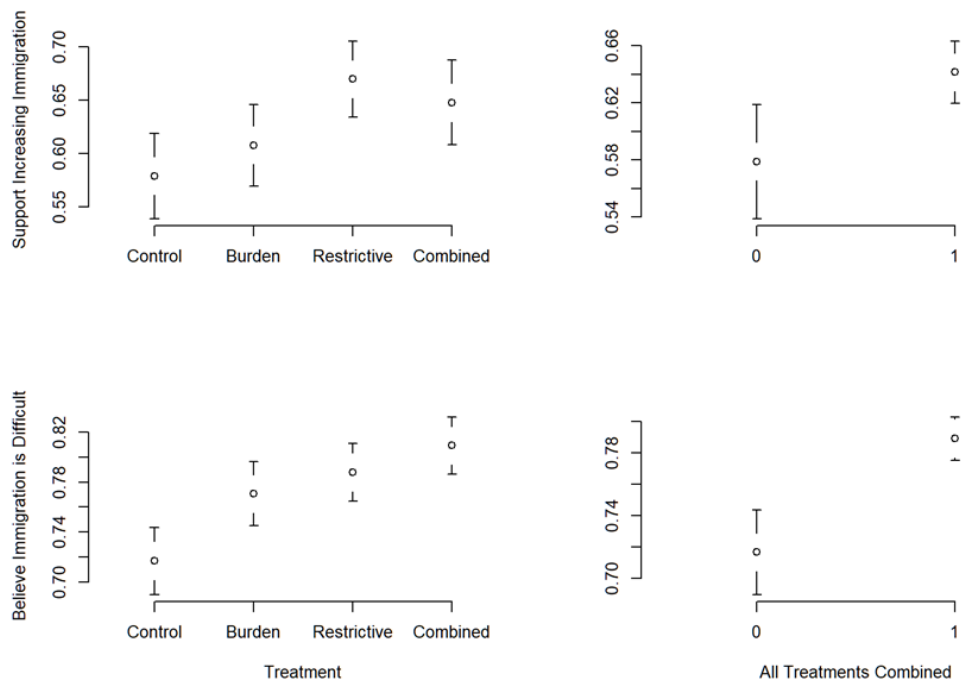
Fig. C3 (Positive) Effects of Immigration Policy Information on Beliefs and Preferences, November 2022 Pilot (Prolific, N = 912). Figure 2's bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Appendix D Additional pilot survey instrument

Combined Information Treatment [includes the maze graphic from Figure above]:
The US immigration system is complex, burdensome, and restrictive.

There are nearly two hundred different visa types, which makes it difficult to know which visa a potential immigrant can apply for, if any. Applying for a visa is also burdensome in terms of money and waiting time. Application fees and legal consultation costs thousands of dollars. The application fee to become a permanent resident is $1,140 without legal fees. Legal fees for petitioning a spouse of a US citizen to obtain permanent residency, one of the simplest processes, costs around $3,000.

Additionally, the average wait time for a visa appointment is 244 days, and some wait over two years. This doesn't include the time it takes to become eligible for a visa, or for application processing (which can take more than a year depending on the visa type). The difficulty, cost, and long wait times of the immigration process makes it impractical for many.

There is also a yearly numerical cap of about 220,000 for family-based visa categories and 140,000 for employment-based visas. This means that, if someone received a job offer from a willing employer after the employment-based visa cap was already filled, they would have to wait until at least the next year before being allowed to try immigrating again.

Additional restrictions may apply based on immigrant's country of origin. For example, family members of US citizens from certain countries wait for decades before they can immigrate to become permanent residents. Some foreign workers may also have to wait for decades to obtain permanent residency for which they are otherwise eligible. As of 2022, applicants from the most impacted countries are only now processing applications from the early to mid-2000s because of how restrictive the immigration system is.

Racial resentment [0-1 index calculated as the average of the following four items, considered high in racial resentment if scored ≥ 0.5]

- Irish, Italian, and Jewish ethnicities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
- Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
- It's really a matter of some people just not trying hard enough: if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

[Strongly agree / Somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / Somewhat disagree / Strongly disagree]