

Immigration and Deportation Attitudes in the United States and Brazil

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Abstract

The deportation of undocumented immigrants has been central to the political discourse of many countries. Yet, scholarly work on deportation attitudes is limited. In this article, we ask, what determines deportation attitudes? What conditions successfully contrast support for deportation? We surveyed 2,100 residents in the U.S. and 1,200 residents in Brazil, and embedded two sets of experiments within our original surveys. Despite the differences in immigrant share of the population and baseline support for deportation, we find strikingly consistent results across the two countries. Respondents exposed to personal stories describing immigrants' economic contributions or the risk of violence faced by immigrants if deported are substantially less likely to support the deportation of undocumented immigrants. We also find that undocumented immigrants from both lower-income and high-income countries face stronger opposition to their deportation when they have made significant economic contributions. In the U.S., this is especially true for immigrants from lower-income countries, who are particularly rewarded for their positive characteristics that challenge long-rooted prejudice.

In May 2023, following the end of Title 42 - a program that allows the U.S. government to override immigration law during public health emergencies - the Biden administration announced increased checks at the Southern border and promised quick expulsions of undocumented immigrants. This was hardly a substantive policy change. In the three years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants have been expelled from the U.S. over 2.6 million times under Title 42 (Isacson 2023). But deportations of undocumented immigrants did not start with the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, they have been on the agenda of administrations of different political leanings for quite some time. While Donald Trump made no secret of wanting to cut back on undocumented immigrants - a policy exemplified by the infamous decision to detain migrant children in cages - it was the Obama Administration that long held the record of the number of deportations.

Political attacks against undocumented immigrants have also become increasingly common during election campaigns in several countries, often employed by right-wing media and far-right populists to mobilize their supporters. At the same time, deportations have severe negative consequences for the individuals who are targeted by the decision, their families, and their communities. Deportations can tear families apart, cause economic disruption, and inflict painful mental health consequences. In many cases, immigrants are sent back to countries they have not lived in or seen in many years.

Given the political centrality of the issue and the severity of the consequences, studying the dynamics surrounding deportation attitudes is important. However, public opinion on deportation, widely understood as the expulsion of immigrants from their country of transit or destination back to their home countries, has been underexplored. Although existing scholarship

has extensively examined immigration attitudes regarding admission policies and analyzed the economic, cultural, and identity factors that often drive public opinion, scholarship on deportation attitudes is significantly more limited. And while the literature on immigration preference is a good starting point, we cannot assume that the same factors that drive general immigration attitudes also shape deportation preferences, inasmuch as deportation discourse tends to focus on a subgroup of immigrants, i.e., undocumented immigrants. In this article, we focus on public opinion on undocumented immigrants, and ask: What determines deportation attitudes? What conditions successfully contrast support for deportation?

In the fall of 2022, we conducted two original surveys in the U.S. and Brazil. In both countries, immigration is a key political issue and populist right-wing politicians have been successful in recent years, often campaigning against immigration. Yet, the U.S. and Brazil differ in significant ways with regard to immigration. While both countries have historically received high immigration inflows in comparison to neighboring countries, the percentage of the immigrant population is considerably larger in the U.S. Moreover, public opinion data show that support for deportation is higher and immigration attitudes more negative in the U.S.

The U.S. sample included 2,100 residents and mirrored census quotas for age, gender, race, and education. The Brazilian sample included 1,200 residents and mirrored census quotas for age, gender, and race. In each survey, we embedded two experiments. The first was a framing experiment that randomly presented respondents with personal stories of fictional immigrants focused on either their economic contributions in the destination country or the risk of violence they faced if deported. The second experiment considered how immigrants' economic contributions and country of origin interact, evaluating whether immigrants from both lower-

income and high-income countries benefit from improved attitudes when they have made significant economic contributions in the destination country.

Despite the differences in immigrant share of the population and baseline support for deportation, we find strikingly consistent results in two countries as diverse as the U.S. and Brazil. Respondents exposed to personal stories of immigrants are substantially less likely to support the deportation of undocumented immigrants. In both the U.S. and Brazil, telling stories about immigrants' economic contributions and risk of violence substantially decreased support for deportation, with a stronger treatment effect when the focus was on risk of violence. Furthermore, undocumented immigrants from both lower-income and high-income countries faced stronger opposition to their deportation when they had made significant economic contributions. In the U.S., this was especially true for immigrants from lower-income countries, who often face stronger baseline prejudice and therefore more strongly violated expectations in a positive direction.

This study engages with different streams in the literature. We contribute to the scholarship on public opinion on immigration, adding a focus on deportation attitudes that complements existing work mostly focused on admission and integration policies. Our main theoretical contribution is to explain how immigrants' economic contributions and risk of violence contrast support for deportation. Our study also provides evidence that attitudes toward deportation are separate and distinct from general immigration attitudes. Indeed, we find that the ability of immigrants' economic contributions to counteract support for deportation applies to immigrants from both lower-income countries and higher-income nations. In other words, once economic contributions are taken into account, immigrants from lower-income countries

successfully close the gap with immigrants from higher-income countries with regard to deportation attitudes. This finding deviates significantly from prior scholarship on admission preferences, which consistently showed that native citizens almost invariably prefer high-income country immigrants.

Furthermore, by analyzing attitudes in one of the largest and most economically influential countries in the Global South, we expand the geographical scope of the scholarship on immigration, which has so far predominantly focused on the US and Europe. Our cross-national focus allows us to comparatively assess how different drivers of deportation attitudes apply to the U.S. and Brazil. We also contribute to research on outgroup bias, building on perspective-getting studies that have explored the conditions that reduce negative attitudes toward outgroups. More broadly, we engage in timely policy discussions by shedding light on some of the factors that may reduce support for deportation.

Immigration Attitudes: Admission and Deportation

A growing number of studies have explored immigration attitudes, examining the role of economic and identity factors. Natives' concerns about the impact of immigration on the economy -particularly a focus on immigrants' skill level- help explain opposition to immigration, whereas economic self-interest has a weaker predictive power (Valentino et al. 2019, Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015, Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010). Another body of literature shows that fears of cultural threat are also an important driver of anti-immigrant sentiment (Citrin et al. 1997, Brader et al. 2008, Sniderman et al. 2004, Schildkraut 2011, Wright 2011).

Looking into which immigrants are favored for admission into the country, several studies have confirmed the importance of economic and cultural concerns. Immigrants who are less educated, lack work experience, do not have plans to work, and lack language skills, as well as those who entered the country without proper authorization, are less favored to be admitted into the US (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). Prejudice against Latino immigrants is also important to understanding which immigrants are preferred for admission into the US, as a larger “skill premium” (i.e. preference for high-skilled immigrants) is attached to Latino immigrants in comparison to white European immigrants (Newman and Malhotra 2019). Meanwhile, in Europe, asylum seekers who apply because of fear of political or ethnic persecution, as well as those who have been victims of torture, tend to be favored. In contrast, Muslim asylum seekers face stronger opposition (Bansak et al. 2016). In several high-income countries, immigrants considered to be high-skilled are preferred, while immigrants from Muslim-majority countries are penalized (Valentino et al. 2019).

Certain interventions can counter anti-immigrant attitudes. Research shows that sharing narratives discussing immigrant stories reduce Americans’ exclusionary attitudes toward unauthorized immigrants, increasing support for inclusive policy and reducing negative attitudes (Kalla and Broockman 2020, 2023). Moreover, prompting survey respondents to think about a hard-working immigrant can make them perceive immigrants more positively. Respondents become less likely to say that lack of effort is the reason why poor immigrants are poor and more prone to support welfare policies benefiting immigrants (Alesina et al. 2018). Meanwhile, being exposed to media messages discussing humanitarian concerns decreases support for restricting the amount of authorized immigration into the U.S. (Newman et al. 2015).

While several studies show the importance of economic contributions in shaping general immigration attitudes in high-income countries, evidence on whether the same mechanisms travel to medium and low-income countries is limited. Moreover, we know little about how economic contributions can determine natives' support for the deportation of undocumented immigrants, despite the political centrality of the issue. As deportation discourse often focuses on a specific subset of immigrants - that is, undocumented immigrants rather than naturalized, authorized or prospective immigrants - we cannot assume that the same factors that influence general immigration preferences necessarily shape deportation attitudes. This is also because the act of deportation is meaningfully different from the refusal of admission or the negation of welfare benefits.

The deportation of immigrants can have severe negative implications for those who are the target of the policy, as well as their families and communities. Deportations generate heightened anxiety (Jones et al. 2019), create problems finding jobs (Becerra 2016), and negatively affect the health of the targeted individuals (Gómez Cervantes and Menjívar 2020). Yet, relatively few studies focus on attitudes specifically toward deportation, and they are generally single-case studies. In the US, immigrants perceived as less assimilated to mainstream American culture face greater calls for deportation (Ostfeld 2017). Legal status is also an important driver of support for deportation in the U.S., with respondents being more likely to support the deportation of immigrants that lack legal documentation (Whitaker and Doces 2021). In the Ivory Coast, the immigrant's legal status, level of savings, and religious faith shape support for deportation (Cogley et al. 2019).

Regarding the drivers of native citizens' support for deportation, Lee et al. (2001) find that respondents' ethnicity, prejudice against Mexicans, economic concerns, and commitment to legal obedience act as important predictors in the U.S. Focusing specifically on Hispanic immigrants in the U.S., Cosby et al. (2013) find that ethnic prejudice against this group and perceiving them as an economic threat are significant predictors of support for their deportation. In an analysis of the connection between elite cues and public opinion on deportation, Jones and Martin (2017) show that Republicans in new destination states (with large increases in the size of the Hispanic population) have a very high probability of supporting deportation when Republican Congressional candidates heavily prioritize immigration and relate it to deportation.

Most of the studies on deportation have therefore explored natives' characteristics. Only a few have examined immigrants' characteristics, mainly focusing on their degree of assimilation and their legal status. In this article, we explore how deportation attitudes vary when the traits of immigrants who *lack* legal status vary, given that such immigrants are usually the primary targets of deportation.

Theory and Hypotheses: What Reduces Support for Deportation?

Reducing prejudice and changing people's minds is no easy task, especially because immigration attitudes tend to be highly durable (Kustov, Laaker, and Reller 2021). Research that has examined the impact of providing information on immigration on changes in immigration attitudes has produced at best mixed results. While several studies found little to no impact on policy preferences (Hopkins et al. 2019, Adida et al. 2018, Alesina et al. 2019), others have

argued that information has the potential to affect feelings toward immigrants (Grigorieff, Roth and Ubfal 2020).

In particular, recent interventions have shown that sharing personal stories about individual immigrants, rather than providing general information on the topic, can have substantial effects. For instance, when canvassers described the experience of an immigrant in the U.S., participants were more likely to support unauthorized immigrants' access to welfare benefits and less likely to show prejudice against this group (Kalla and Broockman 2020, 2023).

It is not fully clear, however, whether the *content* of the stories shapes the effect of narratives on the immigrant experience on immigration attitudes. Some experimental studies did not distinguish among a wide range of stories discussing immigrant experiences (Kalla and Broockman 2020, 2023). Others have found narratives focused on “hard work” (Alesina et al. 2019) or humanitarian risks that immigrants face in their country of origin (Newman et al. 2015) to be at least in part effective in reducing general prejudice and exclusionary welfare attitudes. This work, however, focuses on immigration attitudes in general. As a result, we do not know whether sharing immigrant narratives affects attitudes toward the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

We pose that perspective-getting interventions can also affect attitudes regarding the deportation of undocumented immigrants. In particular, we expect personal stories about immigrants' economic contributions as well as personal stories about the risk of violence that immigrants face in their home country to reduce support for the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

Stories highlighting the risk of violence that immigrants face if deported make immigrants appear vulnerable and in need of protection. Prior work shows that natives are more willing to support the admission of migrants who are experiencing vulnerability and facing violence, compared to immigrants who face less dangerous conditions (Bansak et al. 2016). Research has also found that exposure to media messages discussing humanitarian concerns (i.e., the hardship immigrants endure in their countries of origin) can increase support for authorized immigration (Newman et al. 2015). Along these lines, refugees sharing stories about the situation they face in their home countries can reduce anti-immigration attitudes (Steinmayr 2016). Since narratives focused on the risk of violence highlight the many dangers linked to deportation, we expect these narratives to make native citizens more willing to offer protection to immigrants.

H1: Narratives about the risk of violence that unauthorized immigrants face in their home country will reduce support for the deportation of unauthorized immigrants.

On the other hand, priming people to think about immigrants' positive contributions to the economy can lead individuals to see immigrants as more deserving of support. Existing scholarship on immigration and welfare shows that immigrants' economic contributions increase immigrants' perceived deservingness (Kootstra 2016). More broadly, by providing evidence of reciprocity and signaling commitment to the community, immigrants' economic contributions improve natives' attitudes toward immigrants (Magni 2022).

While this work focuses on attitudes toward welfare for immigrants, we believe that economic contributions can also influence attitudes toward deportation. In general, immigration provides an "encompassing distinction" between those who are citizens of the state and those who are non-citizens (Reeskens and Van Oorschot 2012: 122). The welfare state has historically

developed as a form of solidarity for members of the nation-state. Hence, attitudes toward welfare for immigrants are closely linked to the concepts of boundaries and national community, as well as to considerations regarding who deserves to be a member of the (welfare) state (Miller 2000, Kymlicka 2001, Magni 2022). Similarly, attitudes toward deportation center on issues of boundaries and belonging, where the underlying concern regards who is a legitimate member of the national community and should be allowed to remain in the country. For these reasons, we expect support for deportation to be lower when immigrants have made positive economic contributions through their hard work.

H2: Narratives about unauthorized immigrants' economic contributions in the destination country will reduce support for the deportation of unauthorized immigrants.

Existing scholarship also shows that economic contributions improve attitudes toward immigrants from very different countries. In particular, immigrants who come from countries that often face more negative stereotypes are more successful in contrasting negative public opinion when they offer evidence of economic contributions (Magni 2022).

Building on this scholarship, we expect that economic contributions will be especially effective to contrast deportation attitudes for immigrants from countries facing more negative stereotypes, which tend to be lower-income, culturally, and ethnically more distant countries. A general psychological mechanism helps us understand why this is the case. Expectancy violation theory explains that individuals who violate stereotype-based characteristics tend to elicit more extreme evaluations in the direction of the violation. Hence, individuals who have characteristics more positive than expected (thereby violating negative stereotypes) tend to receive more positive evaluations than individuals who have similarly positive – but not surprising –

characteristics (Jussim et al. 1987: 537, Burgoon 1978, Burgoon 2015). The attributional mechanism of augmentation accounts for why this may happen. This is because the perceived impact of a particular factor on an observed outcome augments when other factors that may lead to the opposite outcome are present (Kelley 1971).

More specifically, people may think that immigrants who come from lower-income countries or are non-white face greater challenges on the road to economic success because they have to overcome greater prejudice. As a result, when immigrants with such a background are economically successful, people will likely attribute that success to exceptional personal qualities, which have allowed those immigrants to overcome great obstacles. In other words, the presence of obstacles augments the perceived role of immigrants' positive personal characteristics in shaping individual success. Thus, building on expectancy violation theory, we argue:

H3: An immigrant who has made economic contributions and who comes from a country facing more negative stereotypes will more successfully contrast support for deportation than an immigrant who has made economic contributions but comes from a country benefiting from more positive attitudes.

We also expect the impact of economic contributions to emerge in different countries. As a general psychological mechanism, expectancy violation effects work across contexts and cultures (Burgoon and Blumler 1992, Burgoon and Hubbard 2005). Consistently, deservingness considerations explain why economic contributions similarly influence welfare attitudes in countries with very different welfare systems (Aaroe and Petersen 2014). Existing scholarship on immigration also shows that economic contributions positively influence attitudes toward

immigrants in countries with different histories and experiences with immigration (Magni 2022). Along these lines, scholars find that high-skilled immigrants are preferred in both high-income countries (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015) and medium-income ones (Lawrence 2015). Expanding on these findings, we anticipate that economic contributions will affect deportation attitudes across countries. Specifically:

H4: The positive impact of immigrants' economic contributions on deportation attitudes will emerge in countries holding more stigma against immigrants and thus high levels of support for deportation as well as in countries with less stigma and lower support for deportation.

Case Selection: The United States and Brazil

We conduct our study in two countries where immigration has been a key political issue and where populist right-wing politicians have been successful in recent years: the U.S. and Brazil. These two countries share important similarities yet contrast in significant ways, making their comparison highly relevant. First, both countries have historically received high immigration inflows in comparison to neighboring countries. Yet, the percentage of the immigrant population is much larger in the U.S. than in Brazil. Second, a high number of immigrants in the U.S. and Brazil are at risk of deportation as they lack legal authorization to be in the country. Third, although debates about deportation have been part of the public and political discourse in both countries, deportation levels and support for the policy in public opinion are higher in the U.S. As international migration is expected to increase in the U.S. and Brazil in the coming years, studying attitudes in two countries that represent contexts of relatively high vs low support for

deportation is especially urgent. We expand on the conditions of immigration and deportation in the two countries below.

More than 11 million undocumented immigrants currently live in the United States (MPI 2023). Public opinion is sharply divided on the fate of these immigrants, often along partisan lines. While some Americans support a path to citizenship and other programs such as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) that would allow some undocumented immigrants to stay in the country, others loudly call for deportation. A 2022 PRRI public opinion report showed that, although a majority of Americans were in favor of a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, support was much lower among Republicans, white Evangelicals, and respondents who see immigrants as economic and cultural threats. Yet, a Pew Research Center (2022) study found that 57% of Americans believed that increasing the deportation of undocumented immigrants should be an important goal of immigration policy, with that position being more prominent among Republicans.

There is no doubt that former President Donald Trump's anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric re-shaped discussions about immigration policy in the U.S. American right-wing politicians benefit from immigration concerns among the population (Jones and Martin 2017); most appeal to natives' fears about immigration's economic impact as well as security concerns, and many clearly signal their support for the deportation of undocumented immigrants. Yet, despite the centrality of the issue of the deportation of undocumented immigrants in the American political discourse, most of the research on immigration attitudes in the U.S. has focused on immigrants' admission and integration.

Furthermore, while a vast literature has examined public opinion on immigration in the Global North, this discussion is extremely limited for the Global South. This is particularly surprising considering that the Global South has experienced the fastest rate of growth of international immigration (UN 2013, Abel and Sander 2014). Additionally, economic and demographic trends indicate that South-to-South migration will continue to grow in importance in the coming decades (Boucher and Gest 2018). For instance, Latin American countries, traditionally studied as “senders” rather than “receivers” of immigration, have seen immigration numbers almost double in the last decade, from 8.3 million in 2010 to 15.3 in 2022 (Selee et al. 2023). Particularly, the Venezuelan migration crisis that started in 2015 has meant that millions of people have been forced to seek a home (mostly) in neighboring countries, including Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Argentina.

The large increase in migration in Latin America has produced an eruption of anti-immigration political discourse targeting different groups. Immigration is now a key issue for politicians and the public in these countries. In Brazil, where the number of immigrants has nearly doubled between 2010 and 2022, 67% agree that the government needs to tighten control of immigrants’ entry into the country (DW 2018). Yet, Brazilians are actually among the most welcoming of refugees according to an IPSOS public opinion study (Calliari 2022).

In Brazil, right-wing political forces have also capitalized on concerns around immigration. Former president Jair Bolsonaro has described immigrants as a threat to Brazil’s economic stability and public order (Filomeno and Vicino 2021), and has gone as far as calling immigrants from countries like Haiti, Bolivia, and Senegal the “scum of the world.” This discriminatory elite rhetoric has contributed to the rise of xenophobic attitudes among the public,

which led to attacks on an encampment of Venezuelan immigrants, burnings of their belongings, and demands for deportation.¹

Empirical Approach

We conducted two online surveys in the United States and Brazil with the survey research company Cint between September 19 and October 10, 2022. For both surveys, the samples come from opt-in panels. The U.S. sample included 2,100 US residents aged 18 or older and mirrored census quotas for age, gender, race, and education. The Brazilian sample included 1,200 residents aged 18 or older and mirrored census quotas for age, gender, and race.²

Each survey included two experiments to measure deportation attitudes, which we describe below. We included an attention check in each survey, which asked respondents to select specific answer options regardless of their true preferences.³ The attention check allows us to conduct a robustness test to verify that the findings hold in the subset of respondents who paid close attention to the survey questions. The surveys also collected socio-demographic and political controls.

Before we present the experiments and their findings, we provide evidence that deportation attitudes are separate from general anti-immigration attitudes. Our data reveal that

¹ <https://g1.globo.com/rr/roraima/noticia/2018/08/18/cidade-de-rr-na-fronteira-com-a-venezuela-tem-tumulto-apos-assalto-a-comerciante.ghtml>

² Regarding respondents' levels of education, our sample under-represents individuals with lower education, a hard-to-reach population in Brazil. However, the education composition of our sample closely matches that of the sample of the LAPOP AmericasBarometer 2021 Survey, widely considered one of the highest-quality surveys regularly conducted in the region.

³ The attention check asked: "Some people do not read survey questions carefully. To show that you have read carefully, please do not answer the question below. That's right, do not answer and skip to the next question. How interested are you in taking surveys?"

while the two sets of preferences are (moderately) positively correlated, there are individuals who hold generally positive immigration attitudes but support deportation when it comes to undocumented immigrants (and the other way around). Table 1 presents relative frequencies for attitudes toward the deportation of undocumented immigrants⁴ and three other variables that measure more general anti-immigration attitudes, including the beliefs that the number of immigrants is too high, that immigrants are an economic threat, and that immigrants are a cultural threat.⁵ Greater numbers indicate stronger anti-immigration attitudes.

The table shows, for instance, that in the U.S., about 8% of the respondents who strongly disagree and about 11% of the respondents who disagree that there are too many immigrants in the country actually support the deportation of undocumented immigrants. In contrast, 41% of American respondents who strongly agree that there are too many immigrants actually oppose deportations. Similarly, about 40% of American respondents who think that immigrants are an economic threat and about 40% of respondents who see immigrants as a cultural threat still oppose the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

Even more strikingly, over 91% of respondents in Brazil who believe that there are too many immigrants in the country nevertheless oppose the deportation of undocumented immigrants. And about 85% of Brazilian respondents who see immigrants as an economic or

⁴ “Some immigrants in the United States are in the country illegally. Which comes closer to your opinion? (a) They should be able to stay if they can fulfill the requirements; (b) They should be deported.”

⁵ “Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements about immigration. (1) There are too many immigrants in the United States [Brazil]. (2) Immigrants limit the possibilities of finding work for people who were born in the United States [Brazil]. (3) Immigrants are a threat to American [Brazilian] culture and traditions.”

cultural threat oppose deportations. These numbers suggest that deportation attitudes are distinct from general anti-immigration attitudes, and therefore deserve to be explored separately.

Table 1. Relative frequencies of deportation attitudes and general anti-immigration attitudes in the United States and Brazil

| United States | | | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Immigration levels | | | | |
| Deportation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| No | 91.7% | 88.8% | 81.6% | 69.8% | 41% |
| Yes | 8.3% | 11.2% | 18.4% | 30.2% | 59% |
| | Immigration: jobs (sociotropic) | | | | |
| Deportation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| No | 92.8% | 85.9% | 78.4% | 63.7% | 39.9% |
| Yes | 7.2% | 14.1% | 21.6% | 36.3% | 60.1% |
| | Immigration: culture | | | | |
| Deportation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| No | 91.5% | 81.4% | 71.4% | 52% | 39.8% |
| Yes | 8.5% | 18.6% | 28.6% | 48% | 60.2% |
| Brazil | | | | | |
| | Immigration levels | | | | |
| Deportation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| No | 92.5% | 95.9% | 93.3% | 93.3% | 91.5% |
| Yes | 7.5% | 4.1% | 6.7% | 6.7% | 8.5% |
| | Immigration: jobs (sociotropic) | | | | |
| Deportation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| No | 95.9% | 91.8% | 94.9% | 90.4% | 84.5% |
| Yes | 4.1% | 8.2% | 5.1% | 9.6% | 15.5% |
| | Immigration: culture | | | | |
| Deportation | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| No | 95.2% | 91.6% | 88.3% | 84.7% | 84.2% |
| Yes | 4.8% | 8.4% | 11.7% | 15.3% | 15.8% |

Experiment 1 Design

Our first experiment is a framing experiment, which randomly assigned respondents in each country to one of three groups, the control group, treatment 1, or treatment 2. We presented

respondents in the treatment groups with the personal story of a fictional immigrant. The first three sentences of the treatments are the same. They introduce Maria as someone who came to the United States (or Brazil) at age 25, lives with her husband and her two children in a one-bedroom apartment, and has been working in a retail store. We then varied the framing of Maria's story. Treatment 1 focuses on Maria's hard-work disposition and economic contributions. It explains that Maria has two jobs, takes care of her children, and takes online classes at night hoping to find a job where she can apply her newly learned skills.⁶ Treatment 2 focuses on the risk of violence faced by Maria if deported. It explains that Maria left her country because she faced persecution and torture and has no family members left in her country of origin. We did not present any information to respondents in the control group.

Treatment 1: Narrative on Immigrants' Economic Contributions

Please read the story of an immigrant in the US.

Maria came to the US at age 25. She lives with her husband - a construction worker - and two small children in a one-bedroom apartment. For the past 5 years, she has been working in a retail store. She starts work at 5 am every day. When her shift ends, Maria starts her second job as a cleaning lady. She then makes dinner for her family and helps the children with their homework. After that, Maria takes online courses until midnight. Maria and her husband have no free time and have not taken any holidays since arriving in the US. She hopes to be able to find a job one day where she can apply the skills she's acquiring through her online classes. Please answer the following questions.

⁶ We modeled this treatment after the treatment adopted by Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva (2018) in their study of immigration and welfare attitudes in six countries.

Treatment 2: Narrative on Immigrants' Risk of Violence

Please read the story of an immigrant in the US.

Maria came to the US at age 25. She lives with her husband - a construction worker - and two small children in a one-bedroom apartment. For the past 5 years, she has been working in a retail store. She left her country because she faced persecution due to her political views as well as her ethnicity. She has been a victim of torture and has no surviving family members. If she was to return to her country of origin, she would face a high risk of violence. Please answer the following questions.

All respondents then answered the following question: “Some immigrants in the United States [Brazil] are in the country illegally. Which comes closer to your opinion?” They could select either of the two following answer options: “They should be able to stay if they can fulfill the requirements” or “They should be deported.”⁷

Experiment 2 Design

Our second experiment further examines the link between immigrants' economic contributions and deportation attitudes by considering how immigrants' economic contributions and country of origin interact. We analyze whether immigrants from different countries can equally benefit from improved attitudes when they have made significant economic contributions.⁸ In particular, we ask respondents to evaluate immigrants from both lower-income and high-income countries. Immigrants from lower-income countries often face stronger stereotypes and more negative

⁷ We modeled these options after the question asked by Pew Research to measure immigration attitudes in 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/24/what-americans-want-to-do-about-illegal-immigration/>

⁸ In the second experiment, we focus our further investigation on economic contributions, rather than risk of persecution, because the risk of persecution if deported is less relevant for immigrants from certain countries such as for Canada and Portugal.

baseline attitudes, and their (lack of) economic contributions may challenge (confirm) respondents' expectations.

To test whether economic contributions decrease support for deportation for immigrants from both high-income and lower-income countries, we measured respondents' attitudes toward deportation in two steps. First, we randomized the country of origin of an immigrant described as living in the destination country without documentation. In the United States, the immigrant could come from Mexico or Canada. In Brazil, the immigrant could come from Venezuela or Portugal.

We chose these countries to increase the realism of the experiment, as these are countries of origin with substantial immigrant presence. In the U.S., almost half of undocumented immigrants are from Mexico,⁹ while undocumented Canadians are the largest group among Western immigrants, with their number estimated to be between 60,000 and 80,000.¹⁰ In Brazil, as of 2020, Venezuela was the main country of origin for immigrants, many of whom remain undocumented, while immigrants from Portugal were the second largest community.¹¹ Since 2018, the fastest-growing migration into Brazil is from Venezuela (Cavalcanti, Oliveira, and Silva 2022).

These countries of origin also vary with regard to natives' attitudes. In the U.S., citizens have mixed views of Mexican immigrants but warmer feelings toward Canadians.¹² Comparably,

⁹ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/US>

¹⁰ <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2021/oct/04/cori-bush/fact-check-how-many-undocumented-canadians-live-us/>

¹¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1272910/leading-countries-origin-migrants-brazil/>

¹² <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/08/28/americans-have-mixed-views-of-mexico-warmer-feelings-toward-canada/>

in Brazil, a preference for European immigrants (such as those from Portugal) considered to be less of a political and economic risk has been well documented (Filomeno and Vicino 2021). These differences in attitudes stem, in part, from the commonalities present between the U.S. and Canada, as well as between Brazil and Portugal in terms of language, economic strength, and ethnic makeup.

We then asked respondents a question that measured their degree of support or opposition to the deportation of these immigrants on a five-point scale ranging from “Strongly support deportation” to “Strongly oppose deportation.” In the U.S., respondents were randomly assigned with equal probability to answer either of these questions:

Do you support or oppose deporting immigrants like Jose who immigrated from Mexico to the US and is currently in the U.S. illegally?

Do you support or oppose deporting immigrants like Jason who immigrated from Canada to the US and is currently in the U.S. illegally?

Thus, these questions were identical except for immigrants’ country of origin and names. In each case, we chose a common first male name in the immigrants’ country of origin. Respondents in Brazil answered the same question in Portuguese, but immigrants had different names (i.e. José or João), were described as currently present illegally in Brazil, and could be from either Venezuela or Portugal.

A second question then allows us to explore how providing additional information about immigrants’ economic contributions changes attitudes toward deportation. Respondents were randomly assigned with equal probability to answer either of these questions (in the U.S.):

Do you support or oppose deporting immigrants like Carlos who immigrated from Mexico to the U.S. and is currently in the U.S. illegally, but started a business that created over 500 jobs in the U.S.?

Do you support or oppose deporting immigrants like Carter who immigrated from Canada to the U.S. and is currently in the U.S. illegally, but started a business that created over 500 jobs in the U.S.?

Respondents expressed support or opposition to deportation on a five-point scale ranging from “Strongly support deportation” to “Strongly oppose deportation.” Respondents in Brazil received the same questions, but immigrants had different names (i.e. Luis or Lourenço) and were described as coming from either Venezuela or Portugal.

This question reflects the reality that many undocumented immigrants are entrepreneurs and business owners. For instance, in the U.S., not only does immigration law not explicitly bar undocumented immigrants from forming and owning businesses. But the economic importance of undocumented business owners has grown in recent years. Immigrants Rising, a San Francisco Bay-Area non-profit organization, estimated the number of undocumented entrepreneurs in the country to be 770,000 in 2016 (which would grow to over 815,000 by 2020). That year, nearly a third of Latino millennial entrepreneurs were undocumented and undocumented entrepreneurs cumulatively earned \$15.2 billion in business income. In 20 states, the rates of entrepreneurship were higher among undocumented immigrants than among naturalized immigrants and native-born citizens.

This is because entrepreneurship is often a path for undocumented immigrants to thrive in the workforce in the U.S. As the research director for Immigrant Rising explained:

“The federal government doesn’t require undocumented immigrants to have work authorization or a social security number in order to be an independent contractor or start a business. Anyone, regardless of immigration status, can get an Individual Tax ID Number to open bank accounts, build credit, incorporate as a business, provide employee benefits and pay taxes. All of this makes entrepreneurship a more lucrative option for an undocumented person. They can charge higher hourly rates or have large business contracts, compared to working under the table for cash or using fake documentation.”¹³

In Brazil, similarly, immigrants can access an Individual Taxpayer Registration (*Cadastro de Pessoa Física, CPF*), regardless of their documentation status, which allows them to pay taxes and join the labor force. Entrepreneurship among undocumented immigrants is common in the country because it is harder to access other jobs in the formal economy.

Results

Experiment 1 Results

Before presenting the treatment effects, we report the results of randomization checks. To verify the even distribution of socio-demographic groups across the treatments, we conducted Tukey’s Honestly Significant Difference tests for respondents’ gender, age, citizenship, income, education, political ideology, party ID, religiosity, and support for Donald Trump (in the U.S.) and Jair Bolsonaro (in Brazil). The tests did not find any significant differences across treatments. Figure A1 in the appendix presents plots with the results of the Tukey’s Honestly

¹³ <https://calmatters.org/economy/2020/04/your-next-boss-could-be-an-undocumented-immigrant-as-a-growing-number-of-founders-lack-legal-status/>

Significant Difference tests with 95% confidence intervals for the United States. Figure A2 presents the same plots for Brazil.

The results show the power of sharing personal stories to counter support for deportation. Being exposed to a story narrating an immigrant’s economic contributions in the host country and a story about the risk of violence the immigrant faces if deported substantially increases opposition to deportation in both the United States and Brazil. Despite the significant differences between these two countries, results are notably consistent.

In the U.S., compared to the control group, the percentage of respondents who support deportation is 11.7 percentage points lower in the economic contribution treatment and 18.9 percentage points lower in the risk of violence treatment, as shown in Table 2. These differences are statistically significantly different.

Table 2. Support for Deportation in the U.S. in Experiment 1

| | They should be able to stay if they can fulfill the requirements | They should be deported |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| Control group | 65% [61.4%, 68.6%]* | 35% [31.4%, 38.6%]* |
| Treatment 1: Immigrant’s economic contribution | 76.7% [73.6%, 79.8%]* | 23.3% [20.2%, 26.4%]* |
| Treatment 2: Immigrant’s risk of violence | 83.9% [81.2%, 86.6%]* | 16.1% [13.4%, 18.8%]* |

**95% confidence intervals*

We also present results from an OLS model in which the dependent variable equals 0 if respondents believe that undocumented immigrants should be able to stay if they regularize their position, and 1 if they believe undocumented immigrants should be deported (Table 3). The main

explanatory variable is the treatment condition with the control group as the baseline. The model includes controls for respondents' age, gender, education, income, party ID, ideology, religiosity, support for Trump, and race. Negative coefficients indicate reduced support for deportation. The results show that the treatment focused on immigrants' stories about economic contribution significantly reduced support for deportation by about 13 percentage points, while the treatment focused on the risk of violence by about 20 percentage points.

Table 3 – Priming Experiment: Support for Deportation in the United States (OLS model)

| <i>Dependent variable:</i> | |
|--|---------------------------|
| Support for deportation | |
| Treatment: economic contributions | -0.13*** (0.02) |
| Treatment: risk of violence | -0.20*** (0.02) |
| Age | 0.005*** (0.001) |
| Gender: men | 0.05** (0.02) |
| Education | -0.01+ (0.01) |
| Income | 0.0003 (0.01) |
| Party: Independent | 0.06* (0.02) |
| Party: Republican | 0.07* (0.03) |
| Ideology | 0.02** (0.01) |

| | |
|--------------|--------------------|
| Religiosity | -0.01 (0.01) |
| Liking Trump | 0.03*** (0.003) |
| Race: Black | -0.04 (0.03) |
| Race: Latinx | -0.10*** (0.03) |
| Race: Asian | -0.03 (0.04) |
| Race: Native | -0.005 (0.06) |
| Race: other | -0.03 (0.05) |
| Constant | 0.96*** (0.04) |

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Observations | 1,987 |
| R ² | 0.21 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.20 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.39 (df = 1970) |
| F Statistic | 32.23*** (df = 16; 1970) |

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

In Brazil, opposition to deportation has a very strong baseline, which can create the challenge of ceiling effects in our experiment. Nonetheless, exposing respondents to a story about immigrants' economic contributions or risk of violence still decreases support for deportation by 5.1 and 8.6 percentage points, respectively, compared to the control group (Table 4). These results are confirmed by the OLS analysis that includes the socio-demographic controls detailed above (Table 5).

Table 4. Support for Deportation in Brazil in Experiment 1

| | They should be able to stay if they can fulfill the requirements | They should be deported |
|--|--|-------------------------|
| Control group | 88.2% [85%, 91.4%]* | 11.8% [8.6%, 15%]* |
| Treatment 1: Immigrant's economic contribution | 93.3% [90.8%, 95.8%]* | 6.7% [4.2%, 9.2%]* |
| Treatment 2: Immigrant's risk of violence | 96.8% [95.1%, 98.5%]* | 3.2% [1.5%, 4.9%]* |

*95% confidence intervals

Table 5 – Priming Experiment: Support for Deportation in Brazil (OLS model)

| <i>Dependent variable:</i> | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| Support for deportation | |
| Treatment: economic contributions | -0.04* (0.02) |
| Treatment: risk of violence | -0.09*** (0.02) |
| Age | 0.00 (0.00) |
| Gender: men | 0.03+ (0.02) |
| Education | -0.002 (0.01) |
| Income | -0.003 (0.002) |
| Party ID | -0.01* (0.01) |
| Ideology | 0.01 (0.01) |

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Religiosity | 0.001 (0.01) |
| Liking Bolsonaro | -0.003 (0.003) |
| Race: Black | -0.03 (0.03) |
| Race: Parda | 0.002 (0.02) |
| Race: Amarela | -0.01 (0.07) |
| Race: Indigena | 0.05 (0.10) |
| Race: other | -0.04 (0.10) |
| Constant | 0.16** (0.05) |
| <hr/> | |
| Observations | 1,077 |
| R ² | 0.03 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.02 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.25 (df = 1061) |
| F Statistic | 2.45** (df = 15; 1061) |
| <hr/> | |
| <i>Note:</i> | +p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 |

Experiment 2 Results

We now look at the results of the second experiment. Randomization checks to verify the even distribution of socio-demographic groups across treatments reveal that mean differences are not statistically significant (see Table A1 and Table A2 in the appendix).

The findings in the second experiment confirm the role of economic contributions as a factor that contrasts support for deportation. As Table 6 reveals, this is true for immigrants from both lower-income and high-income countries. The share of respondents who oppose deportation increases significantly for all immigrant profiles when undocumented immigrants are presented as individuals who have created jobs in the destination country.

In the United States, 30% of respondents oppose the deportation of undocumented Mexican immigrants,¹⁴ but the number grows to 48.9% if undocumented Mexican immigrants have made significant economic contributions.¹⁵ For Canadian immigrants, opposition to deportation increases from 29.8% to 43.7% if they have made economic contributions.

In Brazil, 55.6% of respondents oppose the deportation of undocumented Venezuelan immigrants, but the number grows to 72.6% if they have made important economic contributions. Opposition to the deportation of Portuguese immigrants increases from 48.2% to 70.8% if they have made economic contributions.

These results show that in both the United States and Brazil, a significantly larger share of respondents oppose the deportation of immigrants who have made substantial economic contributions in the destination countries, even if such immigrants have not regulated their status and remain undocumented.

¹⁴ Table 6 presents 95% confidence intervals.

¹⁵ These numbers include respondents who “oppose” and “strongly oppose” deportation on the 5-point scale.

Table 6. Opposition to Deportation in the United States and Brazil Randomizing Immigrants’ Country of Origin and Economic Contributions

| United States | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|--|
| | Undocumented Mexican immigrants | Undocumented Mexican immigrants with economic contributions | Undocumented Canadian immigrants | Undocumented Canadian immigrants with economic contributions |
| Opposition to deportation** | 30% [27.2%, 32.8%]* | 48.9% [45.9%, 51.9%]* | 29.8% [27%, 32.6%]* | 43.7% [40.7%, 46.7%]* |

**95% confidence intervals*

*** Respondents who oppose and strongly oppose deportation*

| Brazil | | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|--|
| | Undocumented Venezuelan immigrants | Undocumented Venezuelan immigrants with economic contributions | Undocumented Portuguese immigrants | Undocumented Portuguese immigrants with economic contributions |
| Opposition to deportation** | 55.6% [51.6%, 59.6%]* | 72.6% [69%, 76.2%]* | 48.2% [44.2%, 52.2%]* | 70.8% [67.2%, 74.4%]* |

**95% confidence intervals*

*** Respondents who oppose and strongly oppose deportation*

Discussion of Findings

Our study contributes to the rich literature on immigration attitudes by highlighting key drivers behind public opinion on deportation. Thus, it complements prior scholarship that has mainly studied immigrant admission and integration, with a focus on the role of economic factors (Valentino et al. 2019, Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015, Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010) as well as

cultural (Citrin et al. 1997, Brader et al. 2008, Sniderman et al. 2004, Schildkraut 2011, Wright 2011) and humanitarian concerns (Bansak et al. 2016). We contribute to the underexplored area of deportation attitudes, where most of the work has looked into natives' characteristics (Lee et al. 2001, Cosby et al. 2013, Jones and Martin 2017), with a few exceptions that explored immigrants' legal status and degree of assimilation (Ostfeld 2017, Whitaker and Doces 2021, Cogley et al. 2019). In our study, we focus on deportation attitudes towards immigrants who lack legal status (undocumented), who are usually the main targets of deportation, and investigate differences within this group.

Our first experiment shows that narratives that highlight humanitarian concerns reduce support for the deportation of undocumented immigrants. Our results are in line with existing scholarship showing that highlighting the vulnerability of immigrants due to the risks they would face if deported generates more support for their admission (Bansak et al. 2016, Newman et al. 2015, Steinmayr 2016). Our first and second experiments also provide evidence that sharing personal stories about immigrants' economic contributions reduce support for deportation, aligning with scholarship that shows that immigrants' contributions to the economy can make them be perceived as more deserving (Kootstra 2016, Magni 2022).

Thus, our study contributes to new research on perspective-getting exercises and their impact on the reduction of anti-immigrant attitudes and support for access to welfare benefits (Kalla and Broockman 2020, 2023; Alesina et al. 2018; Newman et al. 2015). Specifically, the fact that both narratives focused on humanitarian concerns and stories on economic contributions significantly decrease support for deportation suggest that deportation attitudes can be moved for a diverse range of undocumented immigrants. Indeed, for some immigrants, risk of violence may

be especially relevant, while such a risk may be less central for others. Similarly, the ability to provide substantial economic contributions in the destination country may be more realistic for some undocumented immigrants than others.

Furthermore, our results suggest that immigrants' economic contributions make people less likely to support the deportation of undocumented immigrants in a variety of contexts. In particular, our expansion of the geographical scope of the immigration attitudes literature -so far mainly focused on Europe and the U.S.- to Brazil allows us to evaluate the impact of economic contributions in these two different settings. First, the results of both of our experiments show that the percentage of respondents who support deportation significantly declines when respondents are presented with immigrants who have made economic contributions in countries as different as the U.S. as well as Brazil. People are willing to be more lenient when they perceive immigrants to have a positive contribution to the economy in countries with strong as well as weak baseline levels of support for deportation.

Second, the results of our second experiment show that sharing stories about immigrants' economic contributions counteracts support for deportation of immigrants from very different backgrounds. The impact emerges for immigrants from lower-income countries such as Venezuela (in Brazil) and Mexico (in the US) as well as higher-income nations such as Portugal (in Brazil) and Canada (in the US). Importantly, these findings signal that economic contributions play a key role beyond a specific migration context, considering the diversity of the contexts of Mexico-to-US versus Venezuela-to-Brazil migration. This finding also partially deviates from prior scholarship on admission preferences, which showed that native citizens almost invariably prefer high-income country immigrants. When economic contributions are

highlighted, natives are much less likely to support the deportation of undocumented immigrants regardless of their nationality. This is a particularly remarkable finding, as economic contributions seem to take priority in shaping deportation attitudes over other characteristics of undocumented immigrants such as their country of origin. This finding, therefore, suggests that economic contributions have the promising potential to mitigate negative perceptions of immigrants.

As we discussed above, expectancy violation theory (Jussim et al. 1987: 537, Burgoon 1978, Burgoon 2015) helps explain why immigrants from lower-income countries who have made economic contributions can significantly close the gap. By violating expectations in a positive direction, immigrants who initially faced more negative stereotypes can benefit from especially improved attitudes. This finding, therefore, suggests that the general mechanism proposed by the expectancy violation theory is at work also in the case of deportation attitudes. This is especially true in the U.S. compared to Brazil. One factor that likely accounts for the difference between the two countries is that baseline immigration attitudes are more negative in the U.S.. Where baseline attitudes are more negative, the violation of expectations becomes stronger, and changes in attitudes are magnified in the positive direction of the violation. Moreover, scholars have shown that, in the U.S., a preference for high-skilled immigrants (so-called “skill premium”) is much stronger when it involves immigrants from stigmatized groups such as Latinos (Newman and Malhotra 2019). In a similar vein, our results -although not focused on skill level- show that the impact of economic contributions is amplified for undocumented immigrants from countries facing more stigma.

Conclusion

Millions of immigrants across the globe face a risk of deportation. Calls for the removal of immigrants who lack legal authorization are not uncommon. From the United States to France, from Brazil to Mexico, the deportation of undocumented immigrants has taken a relevant position in the discourse of politicians and the public, and has already led to the deportation of countless people. Importantly, the risk of deportation can pose serious negative consequences to the physical and mental health of immigrants and their families (Jones et al. 2019, Becerra 2016, Gómez Cervantes and Menjívar 2020). Although the issue of deportation is a real concern for immigrants as well as native citizens, the immigration preferences literature studying deportation remains limited.

Research on immigration attitudes has shown that providing correct information about immigration can lead to mixed results on individual preferences. Anecdotal narratives describing immigrants' experiences in the receiving countries, however, have the potential to reduce prejudice against immigrants and make people more willing to support immigrants' access to welfare benefits. In our study, we show that anecdotal narratives can also shape deportation attitudes, leading to an important increase in opposition to the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

Unlike previous studies, in our first experiment, we include and explore the different impact of personal stories focusing on two different issues: economic contributions and risk of violence. We show that both a story narrating an immigrant's economic contributions to the receiving country as well as a story about the risk of violence the immigrant faces if deported substantially increase opposition to deportation. We also find that the narrative describing the

risk of violence that immigrants face has a stronger impact on decreasing support for the deportation of undocumented immigrants.

In order to further explore the influence of economic contributions on deportation attitudes, in a second experiment we assess how the country of origin of undocumented immigrants interacts with their economic contributions. Our results show that respondents' support for the deportation of undocumented immigrants significantly decreases when they are presented with immigrants from both lower-income and high-income countries who have contributed to the receiving country. Moreover, the impact of narratives about immigrants' economic contributions on deportation attitudes emerges in both countries where stigma against undocumented immigrants is high, such as the U.S., and in countries where such stigma is less pronounced, such as Brazil.

Our findings, which shed light on the factors that drive public opinion on deportation, have important policy implications. As immigration flows continue to increase rapidly and governments struggle to keep up with efforts to guarantee legal paths for newcomers, deportation can be a popular policy measure and a major risk for many immigrants. Understanding public support for and opposition to this measure is critical. Those seeking to foster a more humanitarian approach to immigration that deters deportation enforcement could benefit from highlighting the risk of violence that immigrants face if deported as well as the ways through which immigrants contribute to the economy of the countries that receive them.

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