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Immigration is difficult?! Informing voters about immigration policy fosters pro-immigration views

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Abstract

The US public is mostly ignorant about basic immigration knowledge. 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 is an effective, perspective-changing way to raise support for more open immigration policies. We test and confirm this hypothesis using a nationally representative US survey experiment ($N = 1000$) 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 a better understanding of the immigration process' difficulty has more promise to change public policy preferences than challenging skeptics' crystallized beliefs about immigration's effects or numbers.

Keywords: immigration; information provision; administrative burden

Introduction

The American public is not well informed about immigration (Ekins and Kemp 2021; Lutz and Bitschnau 2023). Although even experts can disagree on the issue, most Americans hold factually incorrect beliefs about the issue. Americans tend to exaggerate immigrants' population size (Hopkins, Sides, and Citrin 2019), unfavorable characteristics such as crime rates (Light, He, and Robey 2020), and socio-cultural differences with the native population (Flores and Azar 2023).

Various attempts to change people's minds on policy by providing information or correcting these misperceptions have been, with few exceptions (Abascal, Huang, and Tran 2021; Allen et al. 2023; Facchini, Margalit, and Nakata 2022; Haaland and Roth 2020), unsuccessful (Hogue Rovelo, Hyde, and Landgrave 2024; Hopkins, Sides, and Citrin 2019; Kustov, Laaker, and Reller 2021; Lutz and Bitschnau 2023). It is possible that this has been the result of focusing on beliefs about immigration that are too crystallized (Tesler 2015) or not providing novel relevant information (Coppock 2023). Additionally, raising support for increasing future immigration flows may be harder than raising support for helping existing immigrants (Margalit and Solodoch 2022; Ruhs 2013).

Unlike most prior efforts, our study focuses on changing people's understanding of US immigration admission policy by providing novel information about the difficulties involved in the legal immigration process. We focus on legal immigration because it is the primary means by which migrants arrive in the United States, though future work can also extend our study to irregular migrants (e.g., undocumented migrants and refugees). Beliefs about the immigration process' difficulty should be relatively malleable to new information because it is a topic 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 an effective way to raise public support for more open immigration admission policies. We then test and confirm this expectation using a large representative 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 representative 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.

US immigration is a complex policy domain defined by numerous laws and controlled by multiple government agencies with overlapping authority (Tichenor 2002; Lee, Landgrave, and Bansak 2023). 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 (Moynihan, Gerzina, and Herd 2022; Bier 2023) – and restrictive – in terms of who is eligible to go through the process in the first place (Bier 2023; Peters 2017). While we follow public administration literature and differentiate between these two distinct concepts (Halling, Herd, and Moynihan 2022), we are agnostic about which of these elements is more important to people's preferences.

Given low levels of political knowledge (Achen and Bartels 2016; Somin 2016), 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 (Ekins and Kemp 2021, 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 (Orth 2022). 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 can change minds about non-immigration policies (Halling, Herd, and Moynihan 2022; Keiser and Miller 2020; Nicholson-Crotty, Miller, Keiser, et al. 2021; Thorson 2024) and irregular immigration (Thorson and Abdelaaty 2022). It is important to replicate these findings on the broader domain of legal immigration policies using a representative sample.

Interventions that make existing knowledge accessible should be less effective and durable than information provision interventions that instead make new knowledge applicable (Coppock 2023; Haaland, Roth, and Wohlfart 2023). Information interventions should also be more effective for policy persuasion than perspective-taking approaches that are more suited for reducing group prejudice (Abascal, Huang, and Tran 2021). Among possible information interventions, non-judgmental and verifiable narratives (Dennison 2021) that can shift people's understanding of immigration should also be preferable to fact-checking approaches that simply attempt to correct people's misperceptions about various, often already crystallized, immigration facts (Abascal, Huang, and Tran 2021).

We argue that telling respondents about the administrative burdens and restrictiveness of the US immigration process can be such an "eye-opening" information 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 nationally representative survey experiment (YouGov, $N = 1000$) (Iyengar, Lelkes, and Westwood 2023) that informs respondents about administrative burdens and restrictions of the current US immigration system. Specifically, we will 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.

In addition to our experimental results, we also descriptively assess the public's (mis)perceptions about the US legal immigration admissions 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 (Orth 2022), 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 appendices for the survey instrument).

Methods

We pre-registered our study on Open Science Framework (OSF)[1] and uploaded replication materials on Harvard Dataverse (Kustov and Landgrave 2024). The sample of $N = 1000$ was collected as a part of a larger omnibus survey by YouGov from May 26 to June 2, 2023 (Iyengar, Lelkes, and Westwood 2023). The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education, constructed by stratified sampling from the 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.

Based on best ethical practices in experimental political science (Costa et al. 2023; Desposato 2015; Landgrave 2020), ethical concerns regarding our study are minimal. Respondents provided informed, voluntary, and affirmative consent to participate in the research study and no deception was used. Respondents were never placed in any danger or risk beyond those experienced in routine clerical work. Per YouGov terms, respondents did not receive monetary compensation. YouGov respondents agree to participate in surveys without compensation although they may receive gifts at YouGov's discretion. Our survey was fielded as part of a larger omnibus survey, the Polarization Research Lab's America's Political Pulse Survey, and we did not have control over what compensation respondents did or did not receive.

Pre-treatment, respondents were asked about their factual knowledge of immigration visa policies. Respondents were then randomly exposed to one of the informational[2] 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 (Bier 2023) about various aspects of the immigration process in a form of an accessible, verifiable, and non-judgmental narrative (Dennison 2021). 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 was exposed to each of the two treatments plus a further 1/3 of respondents were exposed to a placebo condition – a

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[1]See https://osf.io/xvh8q and appendix section 4.

[2]Arguably, the treatments contain phrases which may trigger negative valence. Future studies should use stimuli sampling (Gigerenzer 2022) to minimize concerns about specific phrasing.

Table 1. Information treatment conditions

Condition	Treatment Text
Placebo Control	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 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 make it impractical for many.
Treatment 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 the 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.

text mentioning policy-neutral facts about immigration.[3] 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.

Results

Documenting immigration policy knowledge. Our descriptive results confirm that the US public significantly lacks knowledge about current immigration admission policies, even more so than about immigrant characteristics. Table 2 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. We believed the aunt/uncle question would be the easiest question to answer, but as the data show relatively few respondents guessed correctly. 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 pilot study appendix). These findings further suggest that providing information about immigration policies should be novel for most respondent groups.

Effects of providing immigration policy information. In line with our preregistered hypotheses and empirical specifications, our main results show that

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[3]We included a placebo instead of a pure control to ensure all participants engaged with migration-related content, thus isolating the effects of specific policy information while controlling for general topic engagement. This approach arguably allows for a more conservative test of treatment effects.

Table 2. (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 supplementary material

| 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
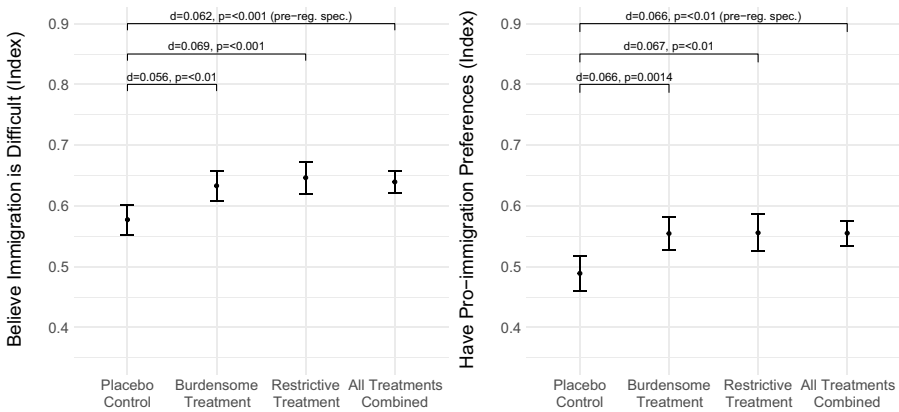
Figure 1. (Positive) effects of immigration policy information on beliefs and preferences. May–June 2023 Main Study (YouGov, $N = 1000$). This figure depicts the pre-registered hypotheses tests. Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

providing novel information about immigration difficulty is effective (see Figure 1 and Table A1, Supplementary material). 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 $d = 0.25$).[4] Substantively, this amounts to 11 ± 6 percentage-point (28%) more respondents believing that legal immigration is burdensome or restrictive (given the baseline of

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[4]The arguably more precise estimates, calculated after adjusting for pre-treatment covariates were almost identical: 0.058 and 0.067 on 0-1 scale, respectively (see Table A1).
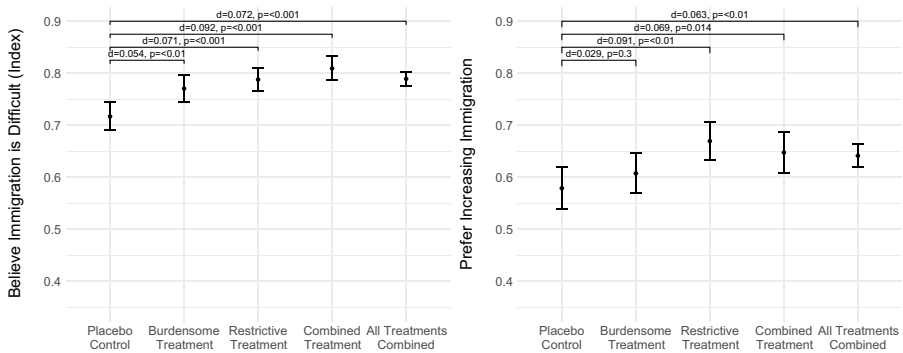
Figure 2. (Positive) effects of immigration policy information on beliefs and preferences. November 2022 Pilot (Prolific, $N = 912$). Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

40%) and 13 ± 6 percentage-point (35%) more respondents preferring to increase legal immigration or make it easier (given the baseline of 35%).

Our additional exploratory analysis suggests that both treatments had a statistically similar positive effect across distinct immigration preference and belief outcomes (see appendices section 2 – additional figures and tables). At the same time, the treatment effects remain the same when we include controls for major pre-treatment covariates (see Table A1 in Supplementary material). 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 most major political and socioeconomic groupings, including both Democrats and Republicans and across the ideological spectrum (see Tables A2–A5 and Figures A2–A5 in Supplementary material).

Additional pilot results To ensure the project's feasibility and pretest original items, we also conducted a pilot survey experiment in November 2022 using a large, diverse online sample (US Prolific, $N = 912$). The pilot study was near-identical in both design and results of the main study. Notably, the Prolific study had a single, shorter preference outcome (preferring increasing immigration) and included a political cartoon of a nondescript person lost in an 'immigration maze' with the information treatment conditions (see appendices for further details about the pilot study design). The image was intended to emphasize the difficulty inherent in the US immigration system. Despite the exclusion of the image in the follow-up study, the same general results (see Figure 2) are present in the pilot and main studies. That is, after reading about the current restrictions or their administrative burden, respondents were similarly more likely to believe that immigration is difficult (0.072 on a 0–1 scale) and report preferring increasing immigration levels (0.062 on a 0–1 scale). This increases our confidence that our results are not being driven by specific wording and/or imagery alone.

The pilot results also suggested that, even in the relatively liberal and educated Prolific sample, few people were knowledgeable about immigration policy.[5]

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[5]49% and 16% of our pilot respondents identified as Democrat and Republican, respectively, and 52% reported completing a college degree.

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).

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 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 could convince at least some of the current skeptics to reconsider their position on the issue, with about 13 percentage points (or 35%) more respondents displaying pro-immigration attitudes. 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 counter-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 (Kustov, Laaker, and Reller 2021). Although it is possible that the effects displayed here would be damped in real-world campaigns (Broockman and Kalla 2022), 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 (Helbling, Maxwell, and Traunmüller 2023; Kustov 2025).

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. Stimuli and placebo sampling, using multiple treatments, would be especially helpful in addressing concerns that specific phrases are driving the observed effects. There is suggestive evidence that informational treatments may have differing effects among conservatives, and other demographic subgroups (Chan, Raychaudhuri, and Valenzuela 2023). 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 (Donnelly 2017; Liao, Malhotra, and Newman 2020).

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 or test whether our informational treatment might also work with other types of immigration or immigrant groups like undocumented migrants or refugees (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2017; Thorson and Abdelaaty 2022). 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 (Bier 2023; Ruhs 2013) We also did not consider how voters' or migrants' inter-sectional identities (e.g., based on gender, religion, race, or ethnicity, see Choi, Poertner, and Sambanis (2023)) may moderate our findings. Exploring these and other heterogeneous effects is beyond the scope of the present manuscript.

Finally, several plausible mechanisms could explain our results, even considering the manipulation check evidence of increased awareness of immigration difficulty. The information treatments may alert people to perceived injustices in the current system, leading to support for reform as a means of empathizing with immigrants' plight (Williamson et al. 2021) or creating a more equitable system aligned with American values (Levy and Wright 2020). Alternatively, the treatments might highlight systemic inefficiencies, prompting support for reform to improve functionality and better serve American interests (Kustov 2021).

We intend to explore these and other extensions in future work. Still, given that the attitudes toward future immigrants may be generally harder to change than toward present migrants (Margalit and Solodoch 2022), 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 issues.

Ethics statement. This research complies with all relevant ethical regulations and with APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research. The study was approved by IRB at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the University of Missouri. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. YouGov compensates participants with reward points that can be redeemed for cash.

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