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Bridging the Partisan Divide on Immigration Policy Attitudes through a Bipartisan Issue Area: The Case of Human Trafficking

Tabitha Bonilla* and Cecilia Hyunjung Mo†

Abstract

To date, while there is a rich literature describing the determinants of anti-immigrant sentiment, researchers have not identified a mechanism to reduce antipathy toward immigrants. In fact, extant research has shown that efforts to induce positive attitudes toward immigrants often backfire. What if a bridging frame strategy were employed? Can a bipartisan issue area in which there is general support act as a bridging frame to elicit more positive sentiment toward immigration among those who oppose more open immigration policies? We explore this question by conducting two survey experiments in which we manipulate whether immigration is linked with the bipartisan issue area of human trafficking. We find that in forcing individuals to reconcile the fact that a widely accepted issue position of combating trafficking also requires a reassessment of immigration policies, we can positively shift attitudes on immigration.

Keywords: human trafficking, immigration, framing, bridging frames, survey experiments

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is arguably the most controversial and politically charged facet of globalization. Repeatedly, polls have shown that while the public is open to considering greater international trade and financial integration, there is

*Institute of Policy Research, Northwestern University, 2040 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60202-4100, USA, e-mail: tabitha.bonilla@northwestern.edu
†Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, 210 Barrows Hall #1950, Berkeley, CA 94720-1950, USA, e-mail: cecilia.h.mo@berkeley.edu

skepticism about increasing immigration inflow. Extant research on attitudes toward immigrants has focused on the role of cultural and economic threat to understand these negative attitudes (see Online appendix A for a review of previous literature). But what predicts positive reactions to immigrants and more open immigration policy attitudes? What might attenuate anti-immigrant sentiment such that immigration becomes a less contentious issue area?

Past literature dismisses two potential ways in which immigration attitudes may become more positive (see Online appendix A for more details): (1) intergroup contact; and (2) interventions designed to foster empathy (Batson and Ahmad, 2009). Here, we consider another avenue through which attitudes toward immigration might become more positive: using a bridging frame between immigration and another issue area. Perhaps a widely accepted issue position could be used to persuade individuals to become more receptive to other issues they would otherwise be more hostile toward (Snow et al., 1986).

Human trafficking has promise as a bridging issue area with respect to immigration for three reasons. First, human trafficking is closely connected with immigration (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2013). Second, addressing human trafficking requires more open immigration policies (Feingold, 2005). Finally, and crucially, there is nearly universal opposition to trafficking. In forcing individuals to reconcile the fact that a more widely accepted issue position of combating trafficking also requires a reassessment of immigration policies, anti-immigration attitudes may soften (see Online appendix A for a definition of human trafficking). By introducing strict immigration policies as a contributor to human trafficking, individuals opposed to immigration may be forced to reconcile a cognitive inconsistency, and become more favorable to relaxing exclusionary immigration policies. Here, we present two survey experiments that demonstrate how human trafficking can act as a bridging frame to induce more positive attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy.

CAN BRIDGING FRAMES ALTER IMMIGRATION ATTITUDES?

The bulk of extant research on immigration attitudes has attempted to explain the causes of anti-immigration sentiment. Research examining what might foster more positive immigration attitudes is relatively scant. Triggering empathy has been suggested as one strategy (Batson and Ahmad, 2009). Similarly, fostering humanitarian values that emphasize perspective-taking, which predict support for more permissive immigration policies (Newman et al., 2014), has been raised as another potential strategy. However, humanitarianism is difficult to shift (Findley et al., 2014); humanizing appeals that aim to foster empathy for immigrants have little effect on immigration attitudes. Moreover, those who are anti-immigrant may actually exhibit a backlash to this type of empathy appeal, *increasing* their support for more punitive and restrictive immigration policies (Gubler et al., 2014).

We consider an alternative strategy, examining how antipathy toward immigrants may be softened by bridging immigration to another issue. Frame bridging is a mechanism to link two related, but unconnected aspects of an issue to trigger attitude change (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 624). Bridging frames have been used to align distinct groups on a particular issue (Gerhards and Rucht, 1992), and to bolster more support for movements (McCallion and Maines, 1999).[1] In the context of immigration, we anticipate that bridging frames could also induce attitude change if an open immigration policy is intertwined with a policy position on another issue that universally elicits support.

Human trafficking has potential to act as an effective policy domain to bridge with immigration for three reasons. First, human trafficking is intimately linked to immigrant smuggling (Smith, 1997), and impacted by the level of rights and protections afforded to temporary workers (Garrison et al., 2015).[2] A non-trivial number of trafficking victims are asylum seekers or immigrants deceived by third party agents, and many forms of trafficking are inextricably part of the migration process (Thomas, 2002). Second, trafficking experts unanimously agree that more restrictive immigration policies aggravate human trafficking prevalence (Feingold, 2005). Third, whereas immigration issues tend to be controversial and highly partisan, human trafficking is a bipartisan issue. The cornerstone anti-trafficking legislation, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), was enacted in 2000 with broad bipartisan support, passing by a vote of 371-1 in the House and 95-0 in the Senate.[3] Although there are some differences in how Republicans and Democrats legislate against trafficking, "in the end, they come together as a non-partisan force" (Bouche and Wittmer, 2009, p. 7).

Bridging frames "creat[e] a connection between the specific issue and the previously defined issue" to successfully mobilize processes; thus, opinions on one issue help sway opinions on a second (Gerhards and Rucht, 1992, p. 587). If individuals learn that human trafficking levels increase with strict immigration policies, tension can form between opinions on human trafficking and immigration for individuals who have negative attitudes toward immigrants. Highlighting this dissonance between anti-trafficking perspectives and anti-immigration attitudes should induce opinion change for individuals with negative opinions toward immigration for two reasons. First, the linkage highlights inconsistencies in the two policy positions, and we expect individuals to reconcile these inconsistencies by changing one position (Harmon-Jones et al., 2009). Since anti-trafficking efforts are almost universally supported, it is possible that attitudes toward immigration become more positive. However, it is also possible that the bridge could cause individuals who have more negative attitudes toward immigrants and

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[1]Research into how bridging frames persuade individuals (Benford and Snow, 2000) is scant. As such, this paper not only sheds light on how we might understand attitudes toward immigrants, but it also contributes to an examination of how bridging frames could alter opinions.

[2]Temporary workers in the United States are those who hold the H-2A and H-2B guest worker visas.

[3]See Bill Summary and Status for the 106th Congress, H.R. 3244.

Table 1
Experiment Contents

	Study 1	Study 2
Data source	Survey sampling international	Amazon mechanical turk
Sample size	653	912
Randomization	Randomized with no priors	Block randomized by ideology
Experimental conditions		
Control	Yes	Yes
Bridging	Yes	Yes
Learning	No	Yes
Values	No	Yes
Dependent variables		
Concern	Yes	Yes
Scope of problem	Yes	Yes
Immigration rate	Yes	Yes
Mexican border wall	No	Yes
Unaccompanied children	No	Yes
Path to citizenship	No	Yes
Illegal immigration policy	No	Yes
Immigration attitudes index	No	Yes
Mediator variables	No	Yes

open immigration policies to become less supportive of efforts to combat human trafficking. Second, linking the policy issues allows individuals to learn more about immigration. Increased knowledge about immigrants might induce a more positive opinion toward immigrants, particularly, if individuals are learning about how immigrants may by victimized (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Alternatively, we anticipate that individuals that have positive attitudes toward immigrants will not have a significant motivation to alter a previously defined position because the linkage of the immigration issue to the human trafficking issue does not create a tension that needs to be reconciled among individuals with more positive attitudes toward immigrants.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two experimental studies: one on a nationally representative sample (Study 1), and the other on a convenience sample (Study 2). The two studies are not exact replicas. The core differences between them are summarized in Table 1, and additional details regarding each study's data collection procedure, experimental design, and measures are in Online appendix B.

In both experiments, participants were randomly assigned to an experimental condition, which took the form of a newspaper article (see Table 2). The control condition in both studies described human trafficking in general, without adding any explicit note about how solving the human trafficking issue requires more open immigration policies. The "bridging treatment" included the basic human

Table 2
Experimental Conditions

Message	Content
Study 1	
Control	**Human Trafficking: A Major Problem**
	Every year, millions of men, women, and children are trafficked in countries around the world. It is estimated that human trafficking is a $32 billion per year industry. Traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion to lure their victims and force them into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. They look for people who are vulnerable for a variety of reasons, including economic hardship, natural disasters, or political instability.
Bridging treatment	**Human Trafficking: A Major Immigration Issue**
	Every year, millions of men, women, and children are trafficked in countries around the world. It is estimated that human trafficking is a $32 billion per year industry. Traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion to lure their victims and force them into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. They look for people who are vulnerable for a variety of reasons, including economic hardship, natural disasters, or political instability. Some people argue that international human trafficking results from individuals accepting dangerous and often illegal migration arrangements because they are aiming to escape violence, instability, and/or poverty in their home countries. Today, it is thought that many such individuals are vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking.
Study 2	
Control	**Human Trafficking: A Major Problem**
	Every year, millions of men, women, and children are trafficked in countries around the world. It is estimated that human trafficking is a $32 billion per year industry. Traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion to lure their victims and force them into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. They look for people who are vulnerable, including individuals looking to escape violence, instability, and/or poverty.
Bridging treatment	**Human Trafficking: A Major Immigration Problem**
	Every year, millions of men, women, and children are trafficked in countries around the world. It is estimated that human trafficking is a $32 billion per year industry. Traffickers use force, fraud, or coercion to lure their victims and force them into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. They look for people who are vulnerable, including immigrants, who accept risky arrangements to escape violence, instability, and/or poverty in their home countries because strict immigration policy makes migration difficult. For instance, the recent global tightening of asylum admissions has increased trafficking by forcing many desperate people to turn to smugglers.
Learning treatment	**Human Smuggling: A Major Immigration Issue**
	Every year, millions of men, women, and children look to migrate to different countries around the world. It is estimated that smuggling is a $35 billion per year industry. Many smugglers use force, fraud, or coercion to lure their potential victims and force vulnerable migrants into labor or commercial sexual exploitation. They look for people who are vulnerable, including immigrants, who will accept risky arrangements to escape violence, instability, and/or poverty in their home countries because strict immigration policy makes migration difficult. For instance, the recent global tightening of asylum admissions has increased the victimization of the asylum seekers by forcing many desperate people to turn to smugglers.

Table 2
(Continued)

Message	Content
Values treatment	**Pursuing the American Dream: A Major Immigration Issue** Millions of men, women and children have come to America to seek a better life. Immigrants are just like others who came to America in years past. The ancestors of many Americans came to this country to live the American dream. Today immigrants and refugees have chosen to come to America, so they too can live that same American dream. That dream is what this nation was founded on, it is what brought previous generations to this great land, and it is the great success story that these immigrants want to be a part of.

Note. In each study, each subject was randomly assigned one of the newspaper articles. Each article also contained a by-line for S. Johnson after the title in bold above.

trafficking description featured in the control condition and one additional statement about how human trafficking often results from "individuals accepting dangerous and often illegal migration arrangements because they are aiming to escape violence, instability, and/or poverty in their home countries." The title of the article in the treatment condition also made the connection between human trafficking and immigration salient.

Since it is possible that noting human trafficking in a message about immigration could also provide individuals with new information *and/or* elicit more empathy toward immigrants, we introduced two additional treatment conditions in Study 2. In addition to providing information that inexplicably bridges immigration with human trafficking (the "bridging treatment"), we consider the effects of providing (1) the same information about immigrants without bridging immigration with human trafficking (the "learning treatment"); and (2) information that fosters empathy without linking immigration with human trafficking and providing the new information in the other two conditions (the "values treatment").

After receipt of one of the newspaper articles, respondents were presented with questions about human trafficking and immigration. First, respondents were asked how much of a concern the human trafficking issue was to them and how big of a problem they believed human trafficking to be. These questions were included to verify that human trafficking is a bipartisan issue that engenders high levels of concern, and to assess whether enmity toward immigrants leads to greater antipathy toward human trafficking victims when immigration and human trafficking are presented as inter-related issues. Second, we evaluated support for immigration. In both studies, we asked whether the number of immigrants permitted in the United States should increase or decrease. In Study 2, we included four additional measures of attitudes: opinions about a border wall, unaccompanied minors (Nazario, 2007), and paths to citizenship. Finally, in addition to measuring attitudes on immigration policy, in Study 2, we included measures to clarify the mechanism by which the treatments affect support for immigration. We explored the following well-known

predictors of immigration opposition: (1) economic threat and cultural threat; and (2) ingroup-centric beliefs.[4]

We used party identification as a proxy for pretreatment attitudes on immigrants, employing a binary party measure for the two major parties to moderate the sample. Immigration has increasingly become a polarizing issue area central to party conflict (Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). A partisan gap with regard to immigration has emerged where none was evident 20 years ago, where Republicans are more exclusionary with respect to immigrants than Democrats. Today, only 1% of liberals compared to 41% of those who are conservative support deportation of all unauthorized immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2014). Nudging Republicans to reconcile the role that immigration policies play in human trafficking prevalence may shift their ultimate policy preference to be closer to that of Democrats. Alternatively, it may negatively affect attitudes toward human trafficking. In contrast, we expect to see less change on either issue for Democrats because they generally are less opposed to policies that restrict immigration at the outset.

Summary statistics of demographic characteristics and each outcome measure are provided in Table C.1 in Online appendix C and Table E.1 in Online appendix E. We also conduct manipulation checks (see Online appendix B) and balance tests (see Tables C.2 and E.2), and find that the experimental design worked as intended. Finally, we recoded all outcome measures to be between 0 and 1 for our analyses so we can interpret effect sizes in percentage point terms.

RESULTS

Human trafficking is a strong bipartisan issue (see Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests in Online appendices C and E); general concern for human trafficking is high among members of both parties. The average respondent, regardless of party identification, conveyed "a lot of concern" for human trafficking and a sense that human trafficking is a "big problem." We find that linking a polarizing issue like immigration to a bipartisan issue like human trafficking has no negative effect on people's opinions on the importance of the human trafficking problem as measured by levels of concern and perceptions of the scope of the human trafficking problem (see Figure 1). Across both studies, there are no meaningful changes in both measures due to the bridging treatment among Republican participants. There are modest shifts in human trafficking attitudes among Democrats due to the bridging frame in Study 2; however, the shifts are positive ($\beta_{\text{Concern, Democrat}} = 0.07$, $p = 0.02$; $\beta_{\text{Scope, Democrat}} = 0.05$, $p = 0.09$).[5] These results assuage concerns that attitudes on immigration have a negative spillover effect on attitudes toward human trafficking when the two issue areas are bridged.

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[4]These questions were asked after the key outcome measures.
[5]To see the full regression outputs, see Tables D.1 and D.2 in Online appendix D and Table F.1 in Online appendix F.
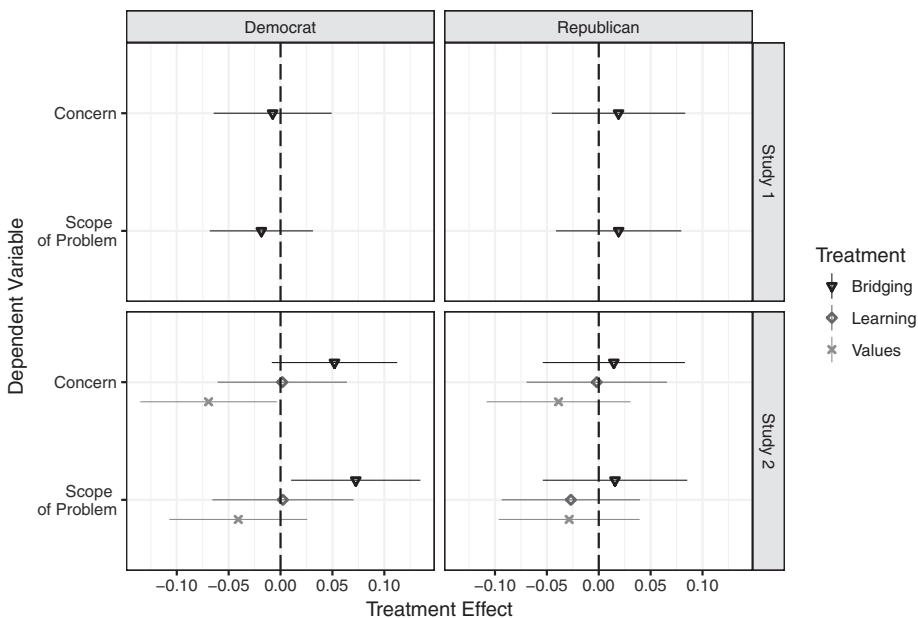
Figure 1
Average Treatment Effect: Human Trafficking Attitudes by Party Identification.

Notes: Each bar graph includes 95% confidence intervals. Questions were coded such that higher values indicate higher levels of concern.

Results look quite different when we consider the effects of the treatment on immigration attitudes, and the effects are moderated by party identification (see Figure 2). In Study 1, as expected, average support for an increase in the immigration rate is 16 percentage points lower among Republicans than Democrats in both conditions ($p < 0.001$). However, among Republicans, treated respondents are 11 percentage points more likely to be favorable to increasing the number of immigrants permitted to enter the United States than untreated respondents ($p = 0.005$). Meanwhile, there is no significant difference between the control and treatment group among Democrats ($\beta_{\text{ImmigrationRate, Democrat}} = 0.01$; $p = 0.87$). When we conduct difference-in-difference analyses (see columns (5) and (6) of Table D.3 in Online appendix D), we see that the treatment effect is driven primarily by Republicans becoming more open to immigration. The interaction between the treatment and party identification is statistically robust ($\beta = 0.10$; $p = 0.04$).

As in Study 1, immigration is highly partisan and party identification moderates treatment effects in Study 2 (see Figure 2).[6] While we analyze each of the five measures separately in Study 2 (see Table F.2 in Online appendix F for the full regression results), we focus on an index we call the immigrations attitude index

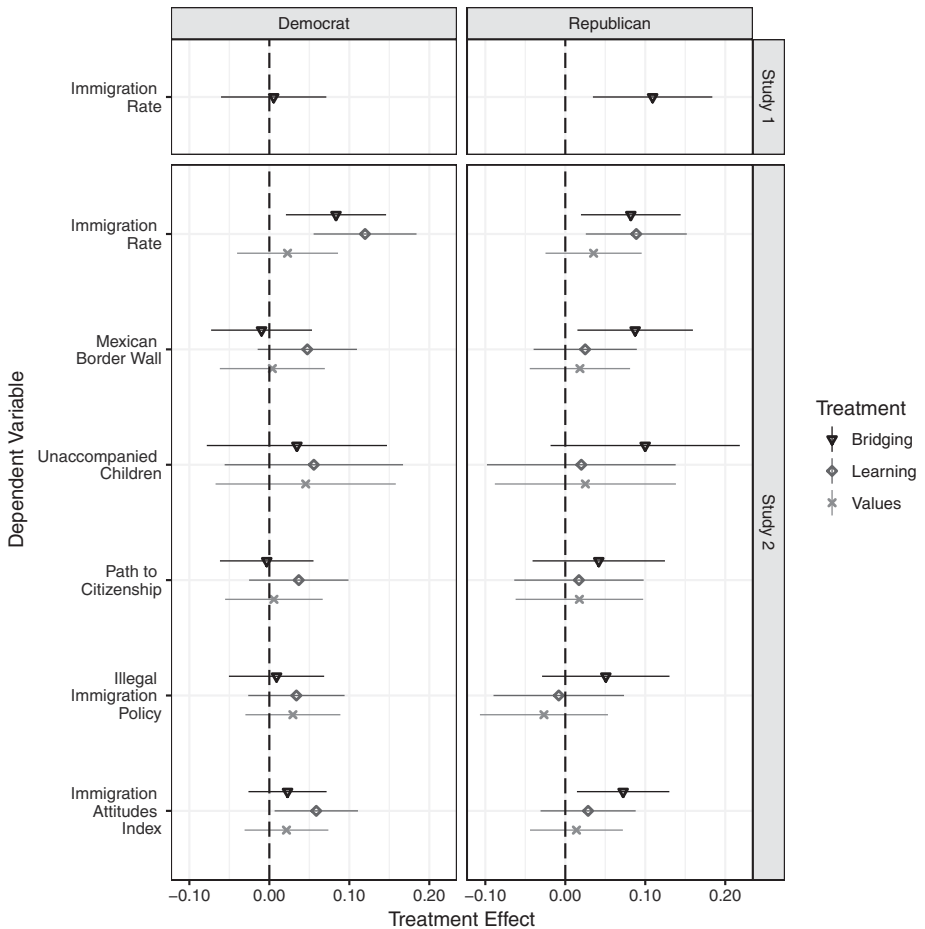[6]See Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests in Online appendices C and E.

Figure 2
Average Treatment Effect: Immigration Attitudes by Party Identification.

Notes: Each bar graph includes 95% confidence intervals. Questions were coded such that higher values indicate positive immigration attitudes and lower values indicate negative immigration attitudes.

(IAI) constructed by averaging across all of the measures in order to reduce any error associated with any single measure (Ansolabehere et al., 2008). This index has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86, well above the recommended level of internal consistency. Republican attitudes are positively and significantly impacted by the bridging treatment ($\beta_{\text{Bridging, Republican, IAI}} = 0.07$, $p = 0.02$). The learning and values treatments make very little difference ($\beta_{\text{Learning, Republican, IAI}} = 0.03$, $p = 0.35$; and $\beta_{\text{Values, Republican, IAI}} = 0.01$, $p = 0.64$).[7] As in Study 1, when we conduct a

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[7]When we look at each measure separately, we see that the learning treatment and the bridging treatment ($\beta_{\text{Learning, Republican, ImmigrationRate}} = 0.09$, $p = 0.01$; $\beta_{\text{Bridging, Republican, ImmigrationRate}} = 0.08$, $p = 0.01$) similarly increase support for expanding the immigration rate. The learning treatment has no effect on
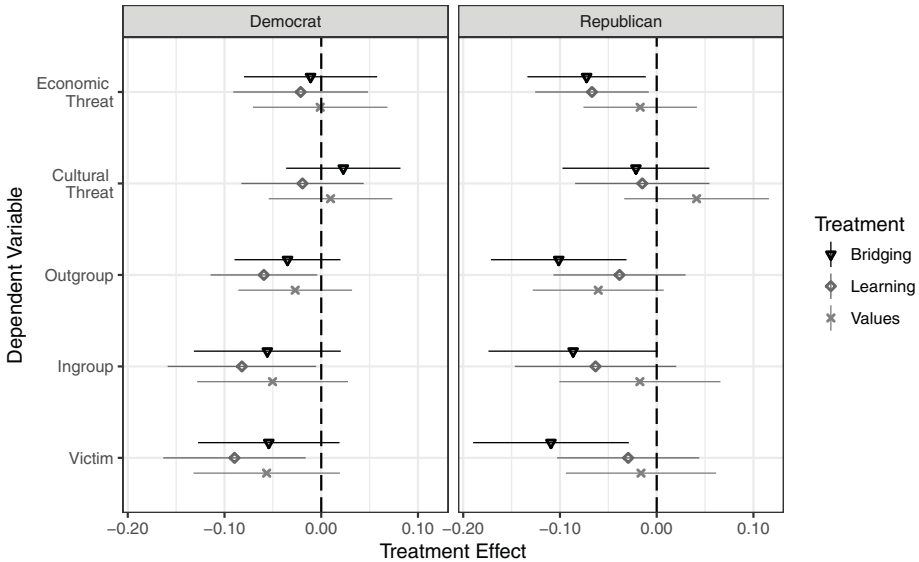
Figure 3

Average Treatment Effect: Explanations of Immigration Attitudes by Party Identification.

Notes: Each bar graph includes 95% confidence intervals. Higher values indicate higher levels of threat and ingroup-centric beliefs.

difference-in-difference analyses (see Table F.4), we see that the treatment effect is driven primarily by Republicans becoming more open to immigration. However, as Democrats also become marginally more open to immigration due to the bridging frame, the interaction between the treatment and party identification is not statistically robust ($\beta = 0.05$, $p = 0.23$). On the whole, we see very little effect of the bridging treatment on Democrats' attitudes toward immigration policy. However, there is one exception. When we look at the immigration rate question, which was the outcome of interest in Study 1, Democrats, like Republicans, are more supportive of expanding immigration ($\beta_{\text{Bridging, Democrats, ImmigrationRate}} = 0.08$, $p = 0.01$)

Finally, we examine potential explanations for how the bridging frame influences Republicans' attitudes.[8] The average treatment effects for threat and ingroup-centric belief measures among Republicans are visualized in the right panel of Figure 3 (see Tables F.5 and F.6 for the full regression tables). We find that both economic threat and each ingroup-centric beliefs significantly decrease upon receipt of the bridging frame. Moreover, when we conduct mediation analyses following

the other four measures, and the bridging treatment has an effect among two other measures—attitudes about the Mexican border wall and unaccompanied children.

[8] Among Democrats, we see that all of the treatments have no effect on economic or cultural threat (see the left panel of Figure 3). However, we see that the learning treatment decreases each of the ingroup-centric beliefs. It is unclear why the learning frame, and not the bridging frame, induces change among Democrats. Future exploration of Democrats' attitudes are necessary.

Imai et al. (2011), we find that economic threat and ingroup-centric beliefs partially mediate the effect of the bridging frame (see Table F.7).

We also conduct a test of whether any effects we see are due to a "rational" reassessment of the number of immigrants that are trafficked. Respondents were asked to guess the percentage of U.S. immigrants who are victims and asylum seekers. There is no change in people's understanding of the number of immigrants that are victims or asylum seekers due to any of the treatment conditions. This suggests that the bridging effects we find are due to a sense that *some* immigrants are victims, as opposed to a sense that *more* immigrants are victims than previously thought (see Table F.8).

Overall, this data provides initial evidence that by pairing the bipartisan issue area of human trafficking with the partisan issue area of immigration, opposition to immigration among Republicans is softened without having any consequences on attitudes toward human trafficking. The learning frame also alters attitudes for Republicans, but does so less consistently, and effects are weaker than that of the bridging frame. This suggests that while bridging human trafficking with immigration changes attitudes because bridging, in part, allows individuals to learn more about immigration, an important driver of attitude change stems from the specific mention of a bipartisan issue that garners strong levels of concern. Finally, we find that the bridging treatment has an effect on immigration attitudes for Republicans largely because the bridging frame decreases a sense of economic threat and ingroup-centric beliefs, and not due to any shifts in cultural threat.

DISCUSSION

How can anti-immigrant attitudes be nudged in a positive direction? Perhaps antagonism toward immigration could be countered when immigration is placed in the context of a less contentious issue area. We find that when human trafficking is linked to immigration, anti-immigrant sentiment softens among Republicans, the party most vehemently against open immigration policies. Additionally, we find that the bridging effect alters attitudes about immigration without inducing a change to human trafficking attitudes. With very few studies finding methods to foster more positive sentiment toward immigration and immigration being so controversial, this is a particularly interesting finding.[9]

The study results also suggest several fruitful avenues for future research. First, we concentrate on how dissonance produces attitude change, but perhaps voters could use other strategies to deal with dissonance, including decreasing the importance of the issues or downplaying how the issues are related (Valkenburg

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[9]Facchini et al. (2016) has shown that information campaigns that explicitly inform citizens of the social and economic benefits of immigration also have some promise as a tool to reduce enmity toward immigrants.

et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2007; Donsbach, 2009). Second, while we show that Democrats have not reached a ceiling in terms of immigration support, we are unable to explain why Democrats' attitudes toward immigrants and trafficking become slightly more positive in one study and not the other.[10] Third, future work should explore how bridging frame effects may be heterogeneous across individuals. For instance, bridging effects should be stronger among those who follow the logic of the linkage.[11] Fourth, additional research is necessary to determine the conditions under which human trafficking attitudes remain stable and immigration attitudes move, and conditions under which immigration attitudes remain stable and human trafficking attitudes move. Finally, the strength and durability of our effects should be assessed, including the strength of the effect in presence of a counter-frame (Druckman, 2004). These assessments should also consider that human trafficking is a complex issue involving various forms of exploitation. Victims might be children or adults, men or women, native or foreign-born (UNODC, 2006), and these variations may alter the magnitude of the bridging effect. Nonetheless, the data presented here progresses inquiry into how public opposition to immigration may be countered.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

For supplementary material for this article, please visit Cambridge Journals Online: https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2018.3

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[10]Study 1 took place before the election, and Study 2 took place afterwards. Perhaps the political climate of 2017 caused Democrats to be more sensitive to information about the negative consequences of stricter immigration policies.

[11]College education, a proxy for cognitive sophistication, modestly moderates the effect we see among Republicans (see Table F.9).

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