

Understanding anti-immigrant sentiment

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Immigration is a long-simmering issue in the politics of many countries, including the United States. A 2007 Pew poll found that three-quarters of all U.S. citizens want to further restrict immigration. But what's behind such strongly held views?

Conventional wisdom holds that American attitudes toward [immigrants](#) are shaped by both economic and cultural considerations. In trying to explain the [economic concerns](#) of U.S. citizens, social scientists have pointed to two forms of self-interest: Fear over increased competition for jobs, and resentment over having to pay for the social services used by immigrants and their families.

A new public-opinion research experiment by MIT [political scientist](#) Jens Hainmueller and his Harvard colleague Michael Hiscox paints a

very different picture. American citizens, they find, are not necessarily afraid of job competition or supporting public services. Instead, the striking thing about Americans' attitude toward immigration is that they collectively tend to prefer immigrant workers with refined job skills instead of those lacking good training: Citizens will welcome, say, a computer programmer more readily than a manual laborer.

“People seem to be much more in favor of high-skill immigrants because they think they contribute more to society,” says Hainmueller. As a practical matter, that insight could help public officials find some new ways of gaining popular support for new immigration programs. In less predictable ways, the findings could alter public discussion of immigration by suggesting that Americans see immigration even more markedly as a cultural matter than previous thought.

“Policy-makers need to better understand what causes anti-immigrant sentiments because resistant public opinion is the key roadblock for immigration reform in the U.S. and many other countries,” explains Hainmueller. “From this perspective our results are both bad news and good news. They suggest that public opinion should be less of a problem for immigration policies that specifically target high-skilled immigrants. But the results also suggest that a fair amount of the anti-immigration sentiment is driven by deep-seated cultural factors that are difficult to change with policy tools.”

And while in much public opinion research it is normally very difficult to assess issues of cultural perception directly, the results Hainmueller and Hiscox found — that economic concerns over immigration are either less significant or different in nature than previously assumed — thus indirectly reinforce the idea that culture powerfully shapes public perception of the immigration issue.

Survey says

The finding that Americans tend to favor high-skill immigrants regardless of their own economic status upends [conventional wisdom](#). Consider the idea that immigrants take jobs away — the “labor market competition model,” in social-science argot. If true, Americans should be more resistant to immigrants with the same job skills as themselves. But as Hainmueller and Hiscox show, about half of Americans with college degrees “disagree” or “strongly disagree” that the country should allow more low-skilled immigrants into the country — yet only about a quarter say the same thing about highly-skilled immigrants.

Overall, in a study of 2,285 American citizens, conducted in late 2007 and early 2008, Hainmueller and Hiscox found that about 35 percent of all people strongly disagree with the statement that the U.S. should have more low-skilled immigrants, while about 20 percent “agree” or “strongly agree.” The numbers reverse when Americans are asked if more highly skilled immigrants should enter the country: about 20 percent strongly disagree, while about 35 percent agree or strongly agree.

The results appear in a new paper, “Attitudes Toward Highly Skilled and Low Skilled Immigration: Evidence from a Survey Experiment,” which is being published in the February issue of the *American Political Science Review*. The data comes from a survey conducted on behalf of the researchers by the survey firm Knowledge Networks. Hainmueller and Hiscox used what social scientists call a “cross-over” design for the research, randomly asking half the respondents first about either high-skilled or low-skilled immigrants, then reversing the questions two weeks later. This allowed them to see if individuals were providing consistent answers over time (they were).

Hainmueller and Hiscox also found reason to doubt the idea that the affluent resist immigration because they resent footing the bill for the welfare state — the “fiscal burden model,” as social scientists call it. When the researchers analyzed the survey participants by education level

— dividing them into high school dropouts, high school graduates, people with some college, and those with at least one higher-education degree — they found that at all education levels, the number of Americans who “strongly disagree” with allowing low-skilled immigrants into the country was twice the number who share the same degree of opposition to high-skilled immigrants.

If the fiscal burden model were the sole driver of anti-immigrant sentiment among the well-off, then in theory, wealthier, better-educated Americans would oppose immigration more than poorer Americans, and there would be a declining relative tolerance for low-skilled immigrants as education levels rise. In short, neither of the two traditional ideas about economic self-interest is, by itself, a full explanation of people’s views.

“Overall the results suggest that economic self-interest, at least currently theorized, does not explain voter attitudes toward immigration,” write Hainmueller and Hiscox in the article.

An alternate idea Hainmueller would consider exploring in the future is how much attitudes depend on particular types of work. “It could be very industry specific,” he says. “In an industry where there is a lot of competition with immigrants, like the food service industry, there may be a great deal of variation in the support for immigrants.”

‘We don’t know stuff we thought we knew’

But colleagues say the findings of Hainmueller and Hiscox should reopen still larger debates about the core reasons why many Americans want to tighten immigration policy: Do attitudes depend primarily on cultural or economic concerns?

“The wider implication of their work is that we don’t know stuff we

thought we knew about how material interests affect public attitudes toward immigrants,” says Ron Rogowski, a professor of political science at UCLA (and an editor at the APSR.)

If traditional notions of economic self-interest do not shape attitudes as much as previously assumed, Hainmueller acknowledges, we may want to examine more closely how cultural appeals to traditional notions of American values and identity shape public opinion.

“I think there really is something to this idea of culture, in that some people have a deep-seated skepticism of immigration,” says Hainmueller.

As a way of studying the culture-or-economy issue as it shapes attitudes to immigration, Hainmueller is currently engaged in a fine-grained study of immigration in Switzerland, where the admission of individual [immigrants](#) can be determined after debates and votes among local citizens. By studying that process, he says, “We may be more able to get at the relative strength of these cultural and economic factors.” In the long run, Hainmueller thinks, the Swiss study may give him substantive or methodological insights he can apply back to the United States.

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