

# Democrats' perceptions of immigrants largely favorable while Republicans hold positive and negative views: Study

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Views of immigrants vary by political party affiliation, with Republicans holding both negative and positive perceptions of immigrants and

Democrats expressing uniformly positive ones, finds a new study that sheds additional light on the complexities of immigration polarization.

"While there has been a lot of research on immigration, not much is known about what people think about immigrants themselves," says Victoria Asbury-Kimmel, a New York University sociologist, who conducted the research. "By focusing on attitudes Americans hold towards immigrants rather than immigration, this study adds depth and nuance to our understanding of public opinion on immigration issues—and how they vary by political party."

The paper, which appears in the journal *Social Psychology Quarterly*, also revealed differences in how Democrats and Republicans respond to messages about immigrants. Specifically, Republicans tend to interpret anti-[immigrant](#) political rhetoric as commentary about unauthorized immigrants and pro-immigrant discourse as messaging about immigrants in general—and about legal immigrants in particular. Democrats, however, interpret both anti-immigrant and pro-immigrant narratives to be about immigrants in general—rejecting the former type of messaging while embracing the latter.

To gauge Americans' views of immigrants specifically, Asbury-Kimmel surveyed, as a doctoral student at Harvard University, more than 2,000 participants in 2021 using NORC's AmeriSpeak Panel, which is composed of a representative sample of the US population and deployed by researchers for tailored studies.

To measure attitudes toward immigrants, Asbury-Kimmel posed both pro- and anti-immigrant messages. These messages were informed by text analyses of nearly 28,000 press releases and "issues" web pages from both Republicans and Democrats in the US House of Representatives, as well as from the Trump and Obama White House websites. The messages themselves were drawn from actual political

speeches from Democratic and Republican lawmakers.

Participants read either a pro- or an anti-immigrant message, then provided, on a 7-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," their response to the message.

To get a better understanding of what drove the participants' responses, Asbury-Kimmel also asked subsets of those surveyed specific follow-up questions, such as: Was the message "mostly fact" or "mostly opinion"? Others were asked to provide an open-ended, one-sentence summary of the message they read.

The text of these summaries was coded for the inclusion or exclusion of legal status-related (e.g. "legal," "illegal," "undocumented," and "unauthorized") and immigration-related (e.g. "immigrant," "immigration," "migrant," and "refugee") terms.

In addition to accounting for [political party](#), the study also considered self-identified Independents.

Overall, Republicans agreed with the anti-immigrant narrative while Democrats rejected this characterization, with Independents also disagreeing with this message—though only narrowly so.

By contrast, there was alignment between the parties when it came to positive messaging about immigrants in general (i.e., the "worthy immigrant" narrative). Democrats, Republicans, and Independents all tended to agree to some extent with the pro-immigrant narrative, even if Republicans agreed with the message less strongly than did Democrats and Independents.

These findings raised an obvious question: How is it possible to agree with both anti- and worthy-immigrant narratives, as was the case with

Republicans? To address this question, Asbury-Kimmel turned to the responses in her follow-up questions, which offered some clarity on these seemingly conflicting responses.

Overall, one-third of the respondents believed the anti-immigrant narrative is mostly factual; in contrast, a greater number—half of those surveyed—believed the worthy-immigrant narrative as mostly factual.

Second, a majority of Democrats and Independents believed the anti-immigrant narrative to be mostly opinion, while most Republicans believed it to be mostly factual. Conversely, a majority of Democrats believed the worthy-immigrant narrative was factual, while most Republicans saw it as opinion. Notably, Independents were split 50-50, with the majority of those who lean Democratic indicating the message was fact and a majority of those who lean Republican indicating the worthy-immigrant narrative was mostly opinion.

Third, Republicans were significantly more likely to include immigration status in their written summaries of the anti-immigrant narrative than were Democrats. By contrast, Democrats were significantly more likely to mention immigrants without including legal status than were Republicans and Independents.

"In other words, Republicans were more likely to state that the anti-immigrant message was about unauthorized immigrants and Democrats were more likely to state that the message was about immigrants in general," explains Asbury-Kimmel.

"Democrats and Republicans have different interpretations of the same [messages](#)," she adds. "These interpretative differences can help us understand why Republicans agree with negative and positive characterizations of immigrants and why Democrats strongly embrace positive and firmly reject negative characterizations."

**More information:** Victoria S. Asbury-Kimmel, Attitudes toward Immigrants and Partisan Differences in Information Evaluation, *Social Psychology Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/01902725231184201](https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725231184201)

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