

Why do white Americans support both strict immigration policies and dream act?

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A new Rutgers study examines why white Americans support both punitive immigration policies and the DREAM Act. Credit: Rutgers University

White Americans support strict immigration policies while at the same time favor the DREAM Act that would grant legal status to some immigrants who were brought to the United States as children, a contradiction linked to racial resentment and the belief that equality already exists, according to a Rutgers-led study.

"White Americans' support for punitive immigration policies hurt the very same group for which they support a pathway to legalization," said author Yalidy Matos, an assistant professor of political science at Rutgers' School of Arts and Sciences. "Racial resentment and the belief that equal opportunity is already available to all, known as anti-egalitarianism, are predispositions that underscore American values such as work ethic, meritocracy and individualism. The same values that lead people to support restrictive immigration policies also lead them to support the DREAM Act."

The study, published in the journal *Perspective on Politics*, found that in 2012, more than 48 percent

of white Americans who supported the DREAM Act also supported police enforcement of immigration. Of these 48 percent, approximately 19 percent were Democrats, 40 percent were Independents and 41 percent were Republicans.

White Democrats' support for the DREAM Act and local immigration enforcement by the police is influenced by racial resentment and the belief that opportunity and equality already exists. White Republicans are only influenced by racial resentment.

Matos says white Americans' political behavior demonstrates that predispositions to these opposing beliefs can override partisanship for Democrats, leaving some to defect from party-aligned immigration [policy](#) preferences.

According to the data, Democrats (0.58), Independents (0.69) and Republicans (0.75) who support the DREAM Act and oppose sanctuary cities, a term applied to jurisdictions with policies designed to limit involvement in federal immigration enforcement actions, have higher levels of [racial resentment](#) than Democrats (0.24), Independents (0.34) and Republicans (0.59) who support the DREAM Act and support sanctuary cities.

Matos recommends Americans think broadly about supporting restrictive immigration policies, especially local level immigration enforcement programs that can nullify their own support towards the DREAM Act.

"Support for the DREAM Act is a great start but ultimately not enough to diminish the indirect effects of other immigration policies," Matos said. "Immigration reform at-large will continue to struggle in Congress if white Americans continue to be driven by the values of meritocracy and work ethic and define equality as equality of opportunity without regard to structural barriers. This is especially the case for Democrats and

Independents."

More information: Yalidy Matos, The "American DREAM": Understanding White Americans' Support for the DREAM Act and Punitive Immigration Policies, *Perspectives on Politics* (2020). DOI: [10.1017/S1537592720002492](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592720002492)

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