"Illegal" vs. "Undocumented" and the Perceived Criminality of Unauthorized Border Crossings

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QUESTIONS & HYPOTHESES

Does what people are told about unauthorized immigrants affect their perceptions of and attitudes towards that group?

- Terminology (Hypothesis 1)
  - "Illegal" → less favorable views
  - "Undocumented" → more favorable views
- Criminality (Hypothesis 2)
  - Prime criminality → less favorable views
  - Prime no criminality → more favorable views

RESEARCH DESIGN

Part I: Vignette

412 respondents (UIUC political science undergraduates) were randomly assigned to one of six vignettes

	Control	Criminality	No criminality
Illegal	69	69	68
Undocumented	69	68	69

Control

Although the exact number is difficult to determine, experts believe there are approximately 11 million **[illegal/undocumented]** immigrants in the United States. There has been tremendous debate, and a great deal of research, regarding the impact of these **[illegal/undocumented]** immigrants on the American economy and society.* We are interested in your views.

Criminality

*One argument advanced by critics of such immigrants is to note that because **[illegal/undocumented]** immigrants are in the United States without legal authorization, they are breaking the law, which makes them all criminals.*

No Criminality

*One argument advanced by defenders of such immigrants is to note that just because **[illegal/undocumented]** immigrants are in the United States without legal authorization, that does not make them criminals. This is because violation of U.S. immigration laws is a civil offense, not a criminal offense. No one can be arrested and sent to jail for being an **[illegal/undocumented]** immigrant.*
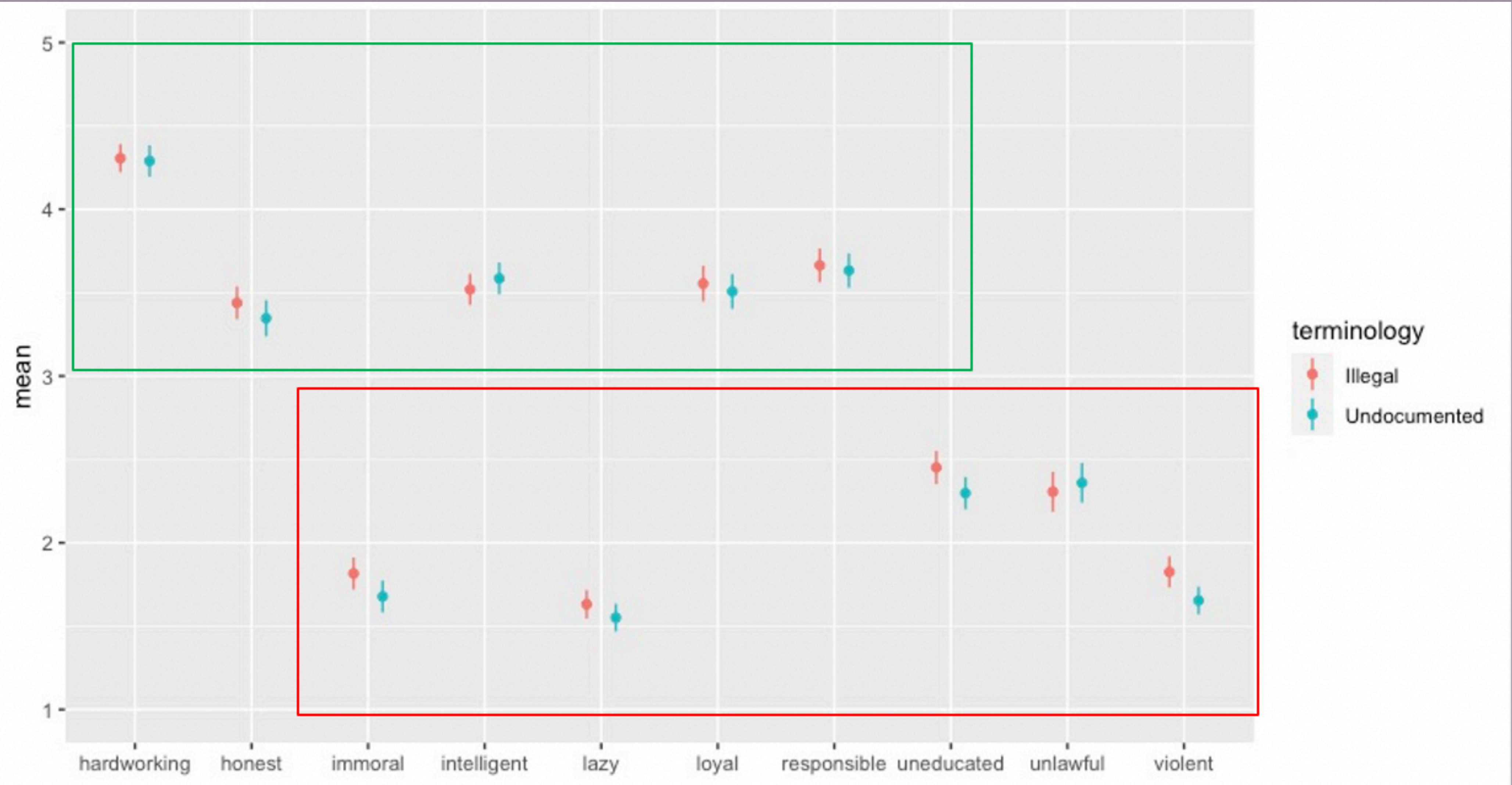
Part II: Word Ratings

Please tell us how well each of the following words applies to **[illegal/undocumented]** immigrants from 1 (not very well) to 5 (very well).

Perceived applicability of traits for unauthorized immigrants based on terminology

Perceived applicability of traits for unauthorized immigrants based on criminality

RESULTS

- The treatments did not seem to have an effect on respondents' ratings of individual words.
- If we combine positive and negative words, there is some evidence that suggests terminology has an effect on respondents' negative affect towards unauthorized immigrants.

	Diff in means	95 pct CI	p-value
Positive	0.03	(-0.07, 0.12)	0.59
Negative	0.1	(0.01, 0.19)	0.04

- Students, at least at UIUC, have overall positive views of unauthorized immigrants.
  - **Mean positive rating: 3.66**
  - **Mean negative rating: 1.96**

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

- Past research has shown "illegal immigrant" is a negative term preferred by conservatives and "undocumented immigrant" is a positive term preferred by liberals. [1]
  - Gap: How do these terms differ? What comes to mind when someone hears "illegal" versus "undocumented?"
- Explain how partisans think differently, which could help people understand where the other side is coming from, even if they do not agree.
- Consequential effects on public opinion and immigration policy.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Analyze open-ended responses and demographics from this survey
- New survey with a more diverse sample
- Measure external (language/what people are told) & internal factors (values) affecting attitudes towards unauthorized immigrants

[1] Paspalanova 2007, Knoll et al. 2011, Merolla et al. 2013, Ommundsen et al. 2014, Hoops & Braitman 2018, Nelson & Davis-Wiley 2018