

# Family History Matters: Immigration Stories Moderate Policy Opinions

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## Abstract

While a majority of Americans are descendants of immigrants, there has been a recent rise in negative sentiments toward open immigration policy due in part to the perceived threat of job loss. Our textual analysis of large-scale survey data containing self-reported family immigration stories and their association with attitudes toward immigrants, demonstrates that economic motivations behind one’s own family’s immigration to the US lead to less favorable attitudes toward open immigration policies. Additionally, we found that closer proximity to the immigrant generation within one’s own family shapes increases positive attitudes toward immigration policy and level of empathy toward immigrants. This reveals the importance of studying differential effects of the content and recency of family immigration histories on attitude formation. Further studies could benefit from investigating whether social projection—the psychological tendency to assume others are like oneself—has a negative effect in the context of immigrant inclusion, given hostility toward economic immigrants.

## 1 Introduction

## 2 Theory and Hypotheses

In this study, we take two types of dependent variable per each model.

$$Y_{H_1} = \text{Support for open immigration policy} \quad (1)$$

$$Y_{H_2} = \text{Level of empathy toward immigrants} \quad (2)$$

For each dependent variable, we analyze the effects of priming one’s own family history, the immigration reasons of their family or ancestors who decided to immigrate to the United States, the immigrant generation of the respondent, and the interaction effects between priming and immigration reason, as well as between priming and immigrant generation.

$$\begin{aligned} Y = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{family history treatment} + \beta_2 \text{family immigration reason} \\ & + \beta_3 \text{immigrant generation} + \beta_4 \text{family history treatment} \times \text{family immigration reason} \\ & + \beta_5 \text{family history treatment} \times \text{immigrant generation} + \epsilon \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

## 3 Data and Method

In their experiment to test the priming effect of remembering one’s own family history of migration, Williamson et. al. (2021) split survey respondents into a treated and untreated groups. After initial demographic questions, the treated group was asked about their family’s migration to the United States and then asked questions about their feelings toward open immigration policy and attitudes toward

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immigrants. The untreated group was asked the same questions, but in the reverse order so that they did not receive the treatment questions until after they had already answered the political attitudes questions. Williamson et. al. found the results of this experiment supported the hypothesis that priming individuals with their own family history increased positive attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy. However, the third survey they administered had a null effect for priming.

Within the data of the third survey, there is a large number of free response answers to the family history question asking why their family (of any generation back) immigrated to the United States. These free responses hold a wealth of information and had yet to be analyzed, so we narrowed our focus on this piece of data. Using the information provided here, we sought to better understand how the content of one’s family history shaped both opinions themselves and moderated the priming effect of the experiment.

First we removed non-answers from the data set, such as string of letters and numbers which provided no information, and recoded those as not knowing the reason for immigration. Using a text analysis model, bart-large-mnli, we classified the text responses into “jobs” to capture Economic histories, “insecurity” to capture Humanitarian histories, “slavery,” to capture stories of forced migration (which were not discussed in the original paper), and “better” to capture a range of other miscellaneous answers.

We are currently working on more robust intercoder reliability checks, but our initial checks suggests that these classifications are sufficiently accurate for analysis.

## 4 Results

**Table 1** Support for Open Immigration Policy by Immigration Reason and Immigrant Generation

Support for Open Immigration Policy (7-point Scale)	
Primed	0.021 (0.089)
Reason - Economic	-0.653*** (0.188)
Reason - Humanitarian	0.071 (0.119)
Reason - Forced	-0.799*** (0.263)
Reason - Other	-0.112 (0.103)
4th Gen	-0.228** (0.109)
3rd Gen	-0.222** (0.110)
2nd Gen	-0.197 (0.132)
1st Gen	0.632*** (0.151)
Primed × Economic	0.435* (0.257)
Primed × Humanitarian	-0.292* (0.170)
Primed × Forced	-0.083 (0.353)
Primed × Other	0.118 (0.144)
Primed × 4th Gen	0.090 (0.156)
Primed × 3rd Gen	0.012 (0.154)
Primed × 2nd Gen	-0.144 (0.181)
Primed × 1st Gen	0.033 (0.204)
intercept	5.172*** (0.063)
N	3,815

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

Table 1 shows that descendants of immigrants who migrated for economic reasons are less likely to support an open immigration policy. The intercept here reflects respondents who either do not know or did not clearly state their family’s reason for immigration. There is also an effect observed for those whose

ancestors experienced forced migration through enslavement, which requires further analysis. These negative coefficients for descendants of economic immigrants and those of forced immigrants indicate the isolated negative effects of having knowledge of these specific family histories, regardless of priming. Thus, these coefficients demonstrate that knowledge alone of one's own family history can affect attitudes toward open immigration without respondents necessarily being primed to recall their family's history.

Next, regarding the association between immigrant generation and respondents' attitudes toward an open immigration policy, only 1st-generation immigrants show a positive effect on policy attitudes. The reference group indicated by the intercept consists of descendants of immigrants who came to the United States five or more generations ago. Second-generation immigrants did not show any statistically significant association. Meanwhile, the results indicate that being part of the 3rd or 4th generation has a negative, albeit small, effect on support for an open immigration policy. This suggests that while the positive effect of generational proximity to the immigrant generation applies to the 1st generation, such a positive effect not only loses its power but reverses for the 3rd and 4th generations.

The interaction effect of priming with each type of family immigration reason is significant only for descendants of economic and humanitarian immigrants. For descendants of economic immigrants, priming one's family history has a positive effect, which contrasts with the observed negative isolated effect of having an economic immigration family background on support for open immigration policy. For descendants of humanitarian immigrants, priming has a negative effect, whereas the isolated effect of a humanitarian immigration family background did not show any statistically significant association with policy attitude. These interaction effects are relatively less significant than the isolated effects of immigration reason alone. Additionally, the original authors reported a disappearance of the priming effect in this specific survey, suggesting that priming might not have been effective due to the extensive list of questions asked between the priming prompt and the policy attitude question. Consequently, these somewhat conflicting results from the interaction effects might not be as meaningful as they appear. Additionally, the interaction effect of priming with immigration generation was not significant for any group.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the intercept is 5.172 on a 7-point scale, and none of the statistically significant coefficients exceed 1. This indicates that any increase or decrease in effect by each group does not significantly alter the overall support for an open immigration policy across groups.

**Table 2** Empathy toward Immigrants by Immigration Reason and Immigrant Generation

	Level of Empathy toward Immigrants
Primed	0.166 (0.553)
Reason - Economic	-0.592 (1.173)
Reason - Humanitarian	-0.538 (0.740)
Reason - Forced	-1.458 (1.629)
Reason - Other	0.868 (0.642)
4th Gen	-0.148 (0.680)
3rd Gen	-0.180 (0.685)
2nd Gen	1.754** (0.817)
1st Gen	10.444*** (0.942)
Primed × Economic	1.383 (1.604)
Primed × Humanitarian	0.129 (1.055)
Primed × Forced	1.785 (2.189)
Primed × Other	-1.042 (0.895)
Primed × 4th Gen	0.013 (0.968)
Primed × 3rd Gen	-0.185 (0.955)
Primed × 2nd Gen	-0.129 (1.125)
Primed × 1st Gen	-0.479 (1.280)
intercept	69.708*** (0.391)
N	3,799

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

Table 2 shows the effects of priming, immigration reason, and immigrant generation on the level of empathy toward immigrants. Only immigrant generation, specifically being 1st or 2nd generation, demonstrated a meaningful association with empathy. Being 1st generation has the highest positive effect on empathy toward immigrants, which aligns with our intuition—those who are immigrants themselves empathize with other immigrants the most. When holding immigration reason and immigrant generation constant, priming family history does not have any statistically meaningful effect on fostering empathy toward immigrants. Considered together with the findings from Table 1, knowledge of specific family immigration history generally shows broader associations with policy attitudes than with empathy. Empathy, however, is more specifically related to immigrant generation, with no significant associations found within groups divided by family immigration reason. These differing patterns between policy attitude and empathy suggest that distinguishing empathy from policy attitude could lead to more accurate and sophisticated insights into the mechanisms that shape immigrant politics in the US. Priming also does not show any significant effect when controlled for family immigration reason and immigrant generation, indicating that priming people simply to recall their family immigration history may not be effective in promoting inclusion. What appears to be an effect of priming might instead reflect the impact of specific family immigration history or generational proximity to immigration. However, this needs further testing through more sophisticated survey experiments.

## 5 Discussion

### *Initial Thoughts*

- Our results suggest that asking about immigration history alone is a weak intervention, instead it matters what the content of the actual family history is.
- Empathy and policy opinion are two separate measures, and we see differing effects. While people may feel empathy based on remembering these stories, actually overcoming aversions to open immigration policy requires greater intervention. Remembering a family history of economic motivations, may predispose individuals to fear competition for jobs, and thereby negatively impact policy attitudes.
- As for the effect of generation, it is likely that Americans who are not immigrants or do not have an immigrant parent or grandparent, are less directly exposed to immigration stories and subsequently may feel less moved to support open immigration policy.
- The findings of negative policy views within descendants of enslaved peoples certainly merits further study in order to understand this effect. One possible explanation for these results could be that people whose family was forcibly brought to the US through slavery have been in America for many generations. As discussed in the point above, our results show that those who do not have a recent immigrant ancestor have more negative attitudes, which may be confounding these results for black Americans with a history of enslavement.

## 6 Conclusion

## 7 References

Williamson, Scott, Claire L. Adida, Adeline Lo, Melina R. Platas, Lauren Prather, and Seth H. Werfel. 2021. "Family Matters: How Immigrant Histories Can Promote Inclusion." *American Political Science Review* 115(2): 686–93