Persuasion and Prejudice: Are South Korean Attitudes Toward Immigration Open to Change?

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Abstract

How do framing cues shape immigration attitudes in newer immigration contexts? We examine South Korea, where immigration is increasingly invoked as a response to economic and demographic decline but where public skepticism and entrenched hierarchies of evaluation remain strong. Using a nationally representative survey experiment (n=2,010) that combines framing and conjoint designs, we test whether messages linking immigration to economic growth or low fertility shift policy preferences or reduce discrimination. Results show no evidence of liberalization: growth-related frames reinforce status quo preferences, while fertility frames generate only modest reductions in penalties for some non-ethnic Korean immigrant profiles. Origins-based discrimination, particularly against Chinese immigrants, persists regardless of treatment. These findings extend research on persuasion and backlash by showing that immigration attitudes are highly stable and that framing strategies are more likely to consolidate than transform preferences.

Keywords: immigration, persuasion, public opinion, experiments, South Korea

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1 Introduction

Immigration attitudes in South Korea are marked by a mix of conditional acceptance and underlying skepticism despite the country having one of the world's lowest fertility rates (0.72) and a rapidly aging population. Dramatically negative demographic trends mean that the country is positioned to suffer from increasingly acute labor shortages, particularly in low-skilled sectors, that threaten the long-term sustainability of the national economy (Clemens, 2024). While the share of foreign-born residents in the country continues to climb after a temporary decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic, at less than five percent of the population, it lags considerably behind shares in other advanced industrial economies. This is, in part, because public attitudes toward immigration remain mixed in defiance of the obvious need for policy solutions. Naturally, this ambivalence represents a significant barrier to implementing immigration-based solutions to South Korea's demographic crisis.

In democracies, where immigration policy reforms rely on social support to succeed (Wright & Levy, 2020), understanding how native populations respond to messages promoting immigration is vital for informing the strategies of policymakers, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders. Therefore, it is notable that while existing research on immigration attitudes highlights the role of economic self-interest (Scheve & Slaughter, 2001), cultural considerations (Dustman & Preston, 2007), and in-group favoritism (Ha, Cho & Kang, 2016), little is known about the effectiveness of persuasion cues in shaping attitudes toward immigration as a broader sociotropic good. Research on persuasion indicates that messages framed around high-salience national concerns, such as economic growth and labor shortages, tend to leave immigration preferences largely stable but can increase the perceived importance of immigration among pro-immigration voters and, in some cases, produce modest pro-immigration shifts (Kustov, 2024) However, evidence on the effectiveness of such messages in shifting immigration preferences remains scarce, especially in non-Western contexts like South Korea, where ethnic homogeneity and a limited history of immigration have long shaped public attitudes (Shin, 2006).

Although concerns about voter backlash are common, recent evidence shows that pro-immigration reforms themselves do not generate counterproductive electoral reactions; within countries, policy changes are not associated with increased populist voting or more restrictive attitudes, and in some cases may even legitimize immigration (Kustov, 2023). Other work, however, cautions that immigration can still contribute to populist mobilization under certain conditions. Kapelner (2024) frames this as a "democratic dilemma," in which efforts to uphold immigration justice risk fueling anti-democratic backlash. Similarly, Docquier and Rapoport (2025) describe a "vicious circle" in which immigration inflows reinforce right-wing populism, which in turn restricts immigration and entrenches xenophobia. These debates are particularly salient in South Korea, where immigration is increasingly discussed as part of the response to demographic decline (Song, 2024), but public skepticism and entrenched hierarchies of evaluation continue to constrain reform.

Accordingly, this study examines whether messages framed around salient national issues resonate in South Korea, a country where immigration has been explicitly linked to economic competitiveness and demographic survival but where public ambivalence remains strong. Specifically, we ask whether framing immigration as a solution to the country's critically low fertility rate or as essential for maintaining economic growth alters public opinion. We also assess whether such frames reinforce existing preferences or modestly mitigate bias, rather than assuming they necessarily liberalize attitudes. In addition, we test whether any effects vary with respondents' sociotropic beliefs about the economy and society. Finally, we consider whether frames influence patterns of discrimination, focusing on immigrant origin and ethnicity—dimensions that remain especially salient in South Korea, where co-ethnic preference and origins-based hierarchies continue to shape immigration attitudes (Denney & Green, 2021).

To address these questions, this study employs a two-part empirical strategy with a nationally representative survey (n=2,010) implemented in early January 2024. First, a framing experiment evaluates the impact of persuasion cues on support for immigration

policy. Second, a choice-based conjoint (CBC) analysis assesses whether framing shapes discrimination based on immigrant origin and ethnicity, as well as their interaction.

The findings show little evidence that South Koreans can be persuaded to adopt more favorable attitudes toward immigration, even among predisposed supporters. Immigration attitudes remain largely stable: neither economic growth nor fertility crisis cues increase support for liberalizing immigration policy. Instead, the growth frame reinforces preferences for maintaining the status quo—particularly striking given that economic arguments might be expected to promote support for immigration. Fertility framing yields only modest effects—slightly reducing origin-based discrimination and somewhat lowering resistance to admitting non-ethnic Koreans from more culturally distant origins. Nonetheless, discrimination by origin persists across conditions and remains particularly pronounced against immigrants from China, South Korea's largest source. Co-ethnic preference also remains strong.

These results have implications for both immigration policy and public opinion research. First, they underscore the difficulty of shifting attitudes in contexts where immigration remains relatively new and institutionally underdeveloped. Unlike in many Western democracies, where immigration has become a central axis of partisan competition (Goodman, 2021), opinion in South Korea is structured less by party conflict over immigration than by entrenched social hierarchies and perceived group boundaries. Second, the results highlight the limits of issue framing as tools for persuasion, suggesting that such tools need to be more specific in articulating the benefits of a particular policy (Kustov, 2024). While the effects observed here are modest, they nonetheless advance research on persuasion by demonstrating both the stability of immigration attitudes and the narrow conditions under which framing may mitigate bias.

2 South Korean Immigration in Review

Attempts to frame immigration around national concerns do little to increase support and, in the case of economic growth appeals, may reinforce status quo preferences at the risk of backlash. Before turning to our empirical approach, it is therefore important to situate these findings within South Korea's broader immigration trajectory. This section reviews recent demographic shifts, policy developments, and the institutional legacies that continue to shape how immigration is governed and perceived.

South Korea has experienced a significant increase in its foreign-born population over the past few decades. As of 2023, more than 2 million immigrants reside in the country, reflecting a steady and substantial increase from less than 50,000 in the early 1990s (Figure 1). This growth can be attributed to economic development, labor shortages, and targeted immigration policies (Seol & Skrentny 2009; Park, 2017). Despite this increase, foreign residents still account for less than 5 percent of South Korea's population, a small share compared to many advanced industrial economies. In 2020, foreign-born individuals comprised approximately 21 percent of Canada's population, 19 percent of Germany's, 15 percent of the United States', and 14 percent of the Netherlands' (UN DESA, 2020).

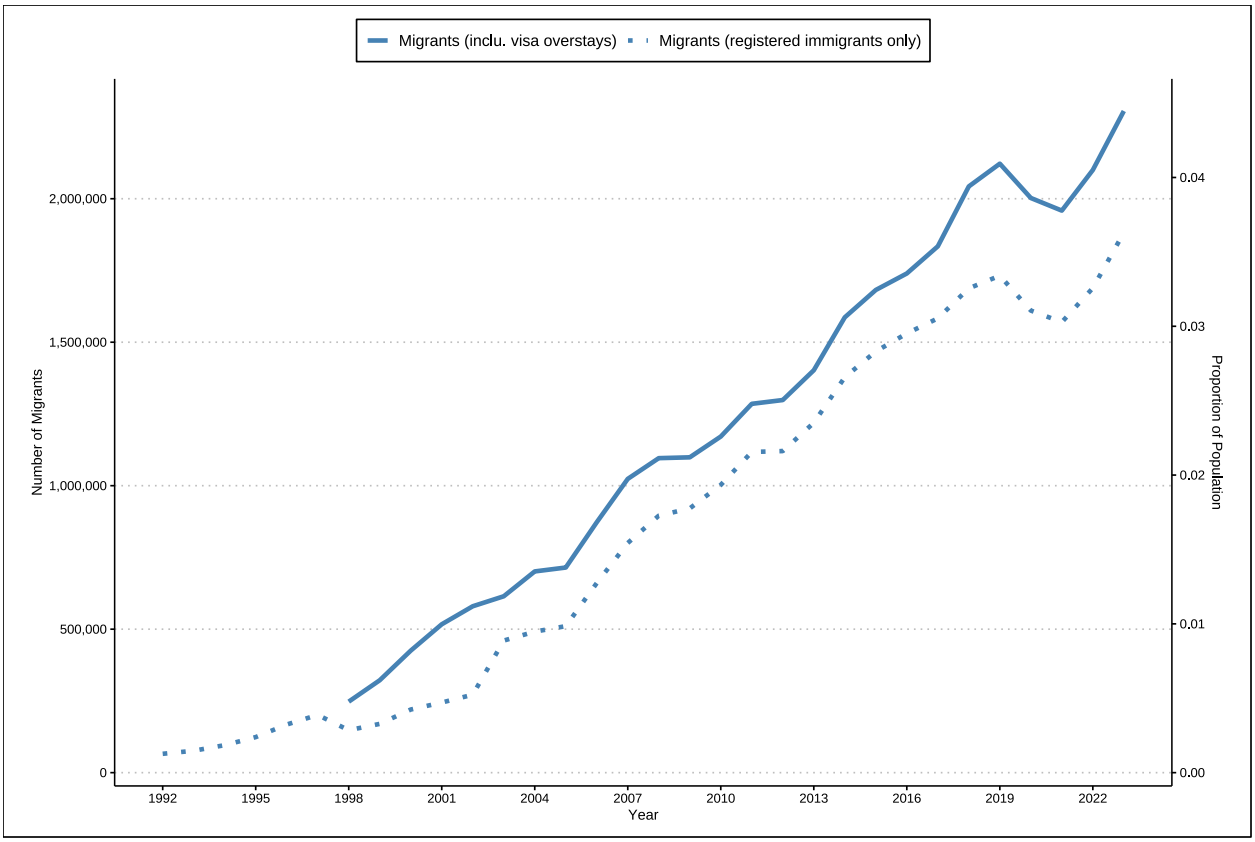

Figure 1: Immigration in South Korea, 1992-2023

Note: Data sourced from the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), representing registered foreigners residing in South Korea. This category includes individuals with official residence status, such as long-term residents, international students, and foreign workers, as defined by the Ministry of Justice. It shows total numbers (y-axis on the left) and proportion of the national population (right), including and excluding visa overstays.

Most but not all foreign residents in South Korea come from neighboring Asian countries, with Chinese nationals, including ethnic Koreans (*Joseonjok*), comprising the largest group at more than 900,000. Following China, the most common origin is Vietnam (approx. 270,000), Thailand (202,000), and the United States (160,000)[1], Uzbekistan (87,000), and the Philippines (64,000) (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

South Korea has implemented several immigration programs to address labor shortfalls and promote economic growth. These efforts have, among other effects, reinforced hierarchies based on origin and financial status. The Employment Permit System (EPS), introduced

[1]American numbers are inclusive of US military personnel (numbering approximately 28,500).

in 2004, allows small and medium-sized enterprises to legally hire foreign workers from 15 designated countries, primarily in the manufacturing, agriculture, and construction sectors. While the EPS provides worker protections and social security benefits, it imposes strict regulations on residency duration and job-switching, limiting long-term integration prospects (International Organization for Migration, 2023).[2]

The Overseas Korean Act (OKA), enacted in 1998, further highlights the institutionalization of origins-based hierarchies. Designed to facilitate immigration for ethnic Koreans with foreign citizenship, the OKA grants F-4 visas that provide extensive rights, including access to the labor market and property ownership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). However, the act selectively benefits high-skilled ethnic Koreans from advanced economies like the United States while excluding many from China or the former Soviet Union due to concerns about their economic value and assimilation potential (Seol & Skrentny, 2009). These policies privilege Korean Americans as "preferred co-ethnics," perpetuating discrimination and stratifying immigrants based on perceived cultural and economic desirability (Chung, 2020).

As a consequence, in part, of South Korea's immigration regime, the country remains one of the most ethnically homogeneous societies in the world, with ethnic Koreans comprising over 96 percent of the population (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Nevertheless, the increasing number of immigrants is gradually transforming South Korea into a more multicultural society, a shift that presents both challenges and opportunities (Lim, 2020; Kim & Park, 2023). The significant population changes raise questions about how South Koreans perceive the growing presence of immigrants and the implications for national cohesion, especially given the demographic crisis looming.

The policy prescriptions of recent South Korean administrations illustrate the country's cautious yet evolving immigration policy trajectory. Under President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022), immigration policy aimed to address demographic challenges while maintaining strict control over integration pathways. The administration introduced measures to attract high-skilled

[2]Earlier, the 1991 Industrial and Technical Training Program (ITTP) sought to fill labor gaps but failed to protect immigrant workers' rights, leaving many vulnerable to exploitation (Park, 2017).

foreign talent, particularly in technology and research, through expanded visa programs and simplified processes for startups. The government launched the "Top-Tier" visa program to attract professionals in high-tech sectors such as artificial intelligence and robotics (Park, 2024). Additionally, efforts were made to support multicultural families by extending education and welfare services to immigrant spouses and their children. The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family also strengthened support for bilingual education for children from multicultural backgrounds (Lee, 2023). However, policies for low-skilled workers under the Employment Permit System (EPS) remained restrictive, offering limited pathways to permanent residency and citizenship. The EPS, introduced to address labor shortages in sectors like manufacturing and agriculture, imposes strict regulations on job mobility and long-term stay (Yi, 2013).

Under the conservative administration of Yoon Seok-yeol (2022–2025), meanwhile, immigration discourse became more explicitly tied to the country's demographic and economic imperatives. Yoon emphasized the need for immigration to counteract labor shortages and population decline, although substantive policy changes were modest (Jung, 2023). His administration proposed reforms to streamline visa access for skilled workers and expand seasonal agricultural and fisheries worker programs.

Following Yoon's impeachment and removal from office, Lee Jae-myung assumed the presidency in June 2025. Thus far, his administration has skirted proactive immigration pledges; media reporting indicates that migrant issues were notably absent from his campaign platform (Korea Times, 2025). Instead, Lee's leadership has focused on pragmatic economic recovery and a recalibrated, security-conscious foreign policy, framing immigration less as a humanitarian or identity issue and more through a technocratic lens of national development (Chatham House, 2025).

These dynamics underscore how immigration in South Korea is filtered less through partisan contestation than through sociotropic concerns about the nation's economic and demographic future. To understand how such national-level considerations shape public opinion, it is necessary to situate immigration trends, policy challenges, and the role of

persuasion cues within a broader sociotropic framework.

2.1 Immigration Trends, Policy Challenges, and Persuasion Cues

Sociotropic explanations emphasize collective social and national concerns, framing immigration as either contributing to or threatening societal cohesion and stability (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Valentino et al., 2017). Such concerns span economic stability, cultural identity, and national cohesion, and strongly shape how citizens evaluate immigrants. In contrast to egocentric considerations, which focus on personal economic impacts, sociotropic considerations capture broader social evaluations. Immigration is often theorized to intensify labor market competition, especially when immigrants have similar skill levels to natives, and to raise concerns about fiscal burdens as welfare expenditures increase (Findor et al., 2021). These economic concerns intersect with cultural biases, as immigrants who are ethnically different or from less-developed countries are frequently perceived as sociotropic threats (Ha, Cho & Kang, 2016).

In South Korea, immigration attitudes have historically been shaped by ethno-nationalist ideology emphasizing ethnic homogeneity and cultural distinctiveness (Shin, 2006), a tradition increasingly challenged by demographic change and the social positioning of return migrants (Lee, 2009; Song, 2023), and one tied closely to threat-based notions of national identity (Ha, 2015). Although recent shifts suggest an increasing emphasis on status and class-based hierarchies (Campbell, 2016), whereby immigrants are judged according to their perceived economic contributions and cultural fit, preferences for co-ethnic migrants remain strong (Denney & Green, 2021). This combination has produced what scholars describe as a "dual hierarchy" of evaluation, privileging both ethnic and economic proximity (Seol & Skrentny, 2009).

This combination of enduring ethnic preference and growing economic stratification reflects deeply ingrained sociotropic concerns. Seen as such, co-ethnics are viewed as more culturally compatible with South Korea's national identity, while those from economically advanced

societies are perceived as less threatening to collective prosperity. Consequently, public attitudes and policies often prioritize ethnic Koreans from wealthier countries, reinforcing a dual hierarchy that values both ethnic and economic proximity (Seol & Skrentny, 2009). Although things like language proficiency can facilitate integration, it is treated more as a civic-voluntarist trait (Ha, Kim & Jo, 2016) than as a core criterion of sociotropic acceptability. The emphasis on shared ethnic heritage thus continues to anchor the sociotropic hierarchy structuring immigration preferences in South Korea.

South Korea's demographic challenges, including its very low fertility rate and rapidly aging population, make immigration a pressing policy issue (Clemens, 2024). Public debate frequently centers on sociotropic concerns about national decline, with policymakers framing immigration as a solution to these crises (Cho & Kang, 2014; Woo, 2024). Nevertheless, entrenched origins-based and ascriptive identity biases are likely to limit the effectiveness of such framing strategies.

Theories of framing and persuasion emphasize how public attitudes can be influenced by highlighting specific societal benefits or risks associated with policy change (Druckman, 2022; Coppock, 2022). Although these frameworks are not unique to immigration, they underscore the importance of messaging strategies in shaping opinion. For example, messages that link immigration to social benefits such as stabilizing the workforce or supporting pensions speak directly to sociotropic concerns (Gouda & Song, 2023). Recent research further suggests that messages linking immigration to high-salience national concerns, such as workforce shortages or demographic decline, tend to leave preferences largely stable but can raise the perceived importance of immigration among pro-immigration voters and occasionally nudge attitudes in a more favorable direction (Kustov, 2024). This salience-oriented perspective is particularly relevant in South Korea, where immigration is increasingly invoked in public debate as a response to demographic and economic crises, yet skepticism and entrenched hierarchies of evaluation may constrain the ability of such frames to shift underlying attitudes.

3 Data and Methodology

This study employs a two-part empirical design to examine whether persuasion cues focused on demographic decline and economic growth lead to an increase in public support for more immigration and reduce bias in immigration preferences in South Korea. First, a framing experiment tests persuasion cues, specifically whether messages emphasizing economic growth and demographic challenges influence immigration policy preferences and motivate support for policy liberalization. Second, a choice-based conjoint (CBC) analysis explores how the persuasion cues shape preferences for immigrant attributes—specifically, origins and ethnicity. Both approaches use data from a nationally representative online panel survey of 2,010 South Koreans conducted in January 2024 through Qualtrics. Appendix A in the Supplementary Information section provides more information on the sample.

In the survey flow, participants are randomly assigned to one of three introductory conditions:

- **Control Group:** No framing cue, which serves as a baseline for comparison. Respondents are informed they will answer questions about immigration policy and preferences.
- **Economic Growth Cue:** A message linking immigration to maintaining South Korea's economic competitiveness and high living standards. The framing reads: "Based on scientific research, the government believes that the only way to maintain economic competitiveness and a high standard of living is to accept more immigrants regardless of their origin."
- **Fertility Crisis Cue:** A message emphasizing immigration as a necessary response to the severe social and economic problems caused by the country's low fertility rate. The framing reads: "South Korea has the lowest fertility rate among advanced industrialized countries. Based on scientific research, the government believes that the only way to

solve the economic and social problems caused by the low birth rate is to accept more immigrants regardless of their origin."

After exposure to these messages, participants are asked to consider immigration levels in South Korea and whether they should be *increased*, *decreased*, or *remain the same*, followed by a single-choice question with these options. This setup allows us to assess the effect of the cues in shifting overall immigration attitudes and engaging with public concerns tied to national well-being. To further explore the determinants of immigration preferences, we employed a choice-based conjoint (CBC) analysis, a method widely used in political science to disaggregate the relative importance of attributes in shaping individual decision-making (Hainmueller, Hopkins & Yamamoto, 2014) with application to immigration attitudes studies (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014; Denney & Green, 2021).

Respondents are introduced to the exercise by being asked to carefully review detailed profiles of two hypothetical immigration candidates as if they were an immigration official and select the one they believe should be granted permission to immigrate to South Korea, simulating a decision-making scenario. Each profile is randomized along six attributes with various levels. Each respondent evaluates eight (8) profile tasks. The immigration persuasion cue is reinforced after the fourth profile to mitigate its possible diminishing effect after the initial introduction. Table 1 shows an overview of attributes and levels.

The main quantities of interest here are origin and ethnicity. Previous studies using the CBC design have shown a hierarchy of preferences in South Korea, where co-ethnic immigrants from more economically developed or culturally closer countries are favored over those from less developed or more culturally distant countries, even when skill levels are comparable (Denney & Green, 2021). The CBC analysis evaluates whether exposure to the growth and fertility cues can alter this discriminatory pattern due to positive immigration framing. We analyze the effects on subjective perceptions (e.g., country of origin) and ascription characteristics (e.g., ethnicity). We then consider the interaction between origins and ethnicity. For example, does exposure to pro-growth or fertility messages make respondents more accepting of immigrants

from less developed or culturally distant origins, or of those who are non-ethnic Korean, or do such cues leave entrenched hierarchies unchanged? This method, then, addresses differing dynamics of discrimination in South Korea's immigration context and assesses its potential for mitigation. We report both Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) and marginal means of the conjoint data. Figure 2 shows the experimental design for survey takers.

Attribute	Levels	Rationale for Attribute & Levels
Country of Origin*	United States [high status; high income - *baseline*] China [irreligious; middle income; authoritarian] Philippines [Christian/Catholic majority; middle income; electoral democracy] Indonesia [Muslim majority; middle income; electoral democracy]	The country of origin attribute includes levels to represent a range of cultural, economic, and political contexts. The U.S. serves as a high-status baseline, while other countries capture diverse combinations of religion, governance, and economic development.
Ethnicity*	Ethnic Korean Non-ethnic Korean	This attribute examines ethno-nationalist preferences by comparing ethnic Korean and non-Korean immigrants.
Occupation	Agricultural worker [low skill] Chef [low skill] Computer Engineer [high skill] Research Scientist [high skill]	The occupation attribute reflects both low- and high-skilled labor categories, providing insight into potential skill-based biases in public attitudes.
Application Reason	Study Short-term work Resettlement	This attribute identifies the reason for application, distinguishing between temporary and permanent immigration intentions.
Language Proficiency	Fluent in Korean Speaks broken Korean No Korean language capacity	Language proficiency levels range from full fluency to no capacity, capturing a critical factor in integration perceptions.

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Table 1 – *Continued from previous page*

Attribute	**Levels**	**Rationale for Levels**
Employment Plans	Contract with a Korean employer Finished job interviews but no contract Planning to job-hunt after arrival No job-hunting plans	Employment plans address future work intentions, assessing their impact on perceptions of immigrant commitment and integration.
Sex	Woman Man	The sex attribute includes ”woman” and ”man” to assess gender-related biases.

Table 1: Conjoint Attributes and Levels

Note: Attributes marked in **bold** with an asterisk (*) denote primary quantity of interest.

	Immigrant A	**Immigrant B**
Country of Origin	United States	China
Ethnicity	Ethnic Korean	Non-Ethnic Korean
Occupation	Research Scientist	Cook
Application Reason	Resettlement	Short-term work
Language Proficiency	Fluent	Speaks broken Korean
Employment Plans	Contract with Korean employer	Planning to job hunt after arrival
Sex	Man	Man
Of the two immigrants, which would you priortize for admitting to South Korean?		
	◯ **Immigrant A**	◯ **Immigrant B**

Table 2: The experimental design

Note: This is an English-language approximation of the experimental design as viewed by respondents.

4 Findings

This section reports the effects of persuasion cues on immigration policy preferences and attitudes toward immigrant attributes, drawing on the three primary figures. Across the analyses, we find limited evidence that pro-growth and fertility frames increase support for immigration liberalization or improve attitudes towards immigration through reduced discrimination. There is some limited evidence that the fertility cue, whilst leaving overall preference basically unchanged, did reduce origins-based discrimination among non-ethnic Korean immigrant profiles. However, overall, the findings show that framing primarily consolidates support for the status quo and leaves entrenched patterns of bias largely intact, raising questions about the potential for governments to meaningfully influence public opinion in this area.

4.1 Policy Preferences

Figure 1 presents predicted probabilities of support for immigration levels across the control, growth, and birthrate prime groups. In the control group, a plurality of respondents (48.7%) favor maintaining the current immigration level, while 35.3% support increases and 15.2% prefer reductions. The growth prime significantly increases support for the status quo by 6.5 percentage points (to 55.2%), drawing primarily from those otherwise inclined toward liberalization. By contrast, the birthrate prime produces no meaningful shifts, with support for the status quo rising only slightly (+1.3pp). These results show that the growth frame strengthens status quo preferences rather than mobilizing support for liberalization, while the fertility frame fails to resonate.

Full treatment coefficients from the policy-preference logits are reported in Table C.1 of the Supplementary Information document. Consistent with Figure 1, the growth cue significantly increases support for maintaining current immigration levels ($p < 0.05$) and marginally reduces support for increases ($p < 0.10$), while the birthrate cue shows no statistically

significant or substantial effects.

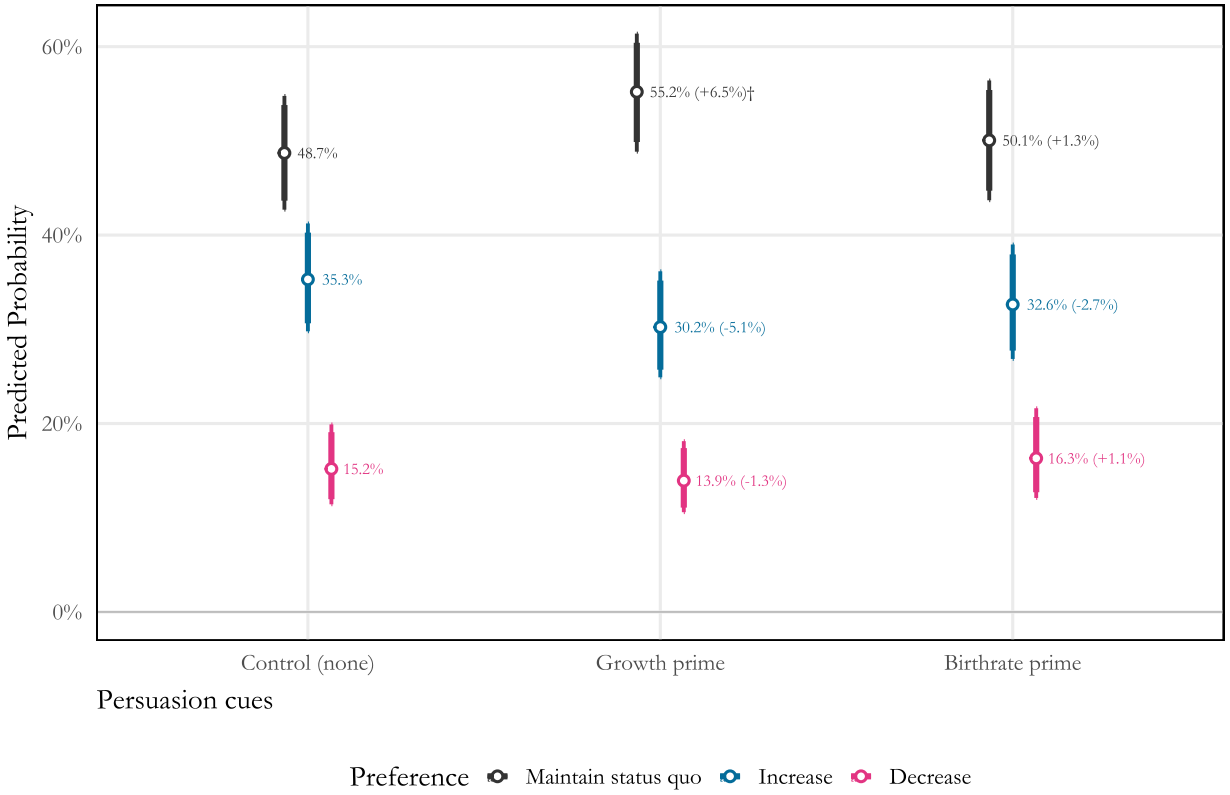

Figure 2: Immigration in South Korea, 1992-2023

Note: Predicted probabilities estimated using logistic regression with controls for age, sex, education, region, and partisanship. Error bars represent 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

For additional analysis, we assessed whether baseline orientations condition responsiveness, distinguishing between sociotropic optimists (pro-immigration) and sociotropic skeptics (anti-immigration). Figure C.1 in the SI summarizes these effects. Optimists predominantly favor increases (56.6%), while skeptics lean toward the status quo (51.6%). In both groups, the growth prime consolidates support for the status quo (by roughly +6pp), while the birthrate prime produces negligible shifts (< 1 pp). These results indicate that baseline orientations shape overall preferences but not susceptibility to persuasion: across groups, the cues reinforce existing regime preferences rather than alter them. This pattern lends further support to the baseline interpretation. Appendix Table C.2 reports the subgroup logits with interaction terms, which show strong main effects of sociotropic orientation but no statistically significant

interactions with the treatments – likely reflecting limited statistical power due to subgroup sample sizes rather than the complete absence of an effect.

The policy-preference analysis shows that persuasion cues exert limited influence. The growth frame consistently reinforces support for maintaining current immigration levels, drawing respondents away from liberalization, while the birthrate frame produces no meaningful change. These effects hold across sociotropic subgroups: optimists and skeptics differ in their baseline preferences but respond similarly to the treatments. Overall, the cues consolidate existing regime preferences rather than shift them in a more liberal direction.

4.2 Conjoint Results: Origins and Ethnicity

Next, we turn to the conjoint experiment, which evaluates how persuasion cues shape preferences for two key immigrant attributes: country of origin and ethnicity. Figures 3 and 4 present the results. Figure 3 reports the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) alongside the corresponding marginal means (MMs) for the attribute values associated with origin and ethnicity. Reporting both perspectives is valuable: AMCEs capture relative penalties or premiums compared to the baseline categories (U.S. immigrants, ethnic Koreans), while MMs provide more intuitive information about the absolute levels of support across attribute values. The interaction plot (Figure 4) then illustrates how origin-based biases are conditioned by ethnic background.

Consistent with prior research (e.g., Denney & Green, 2021), origins-based discrimination is pronounced. The AMCEs show that, relative to U.S. immigrants, those from Indonesia and the Philippines are substantially less preferred (5.2pp and 8.3pp, respectively), while Chinese immigrants face the steepest penalty (13.4pp). MMs reinforce this pattern, indicating that Chinese immigrants, regardless of ethnicity, are selected at much lower absolute rates compared to other groups. Ethnic Korean immigrants are generally favored over non-ethnic Korean immigrants, although even ethnic Koreans from China encounter negative evaluations relative to U.S. immigrants.

When considering treatment effects across origins, however, neither the growth nor the birthrate cue produces statistically significant changes, as shown in Appendix Table C.3. For the growth cue, all contrasts relative to U.S. immigrants are negligible and far from significance ($p > 0.30$). For the birthrate cue, the contrasts are also non-significant, but they move in a positive direction for Indonesia (+2pp) and especially the Philippines (+4pp), suggesting a modest attenuation of penalties that does not reach conventional levels of significance. By contrast, discrimination against Chinese immigrants persists essentially unchanged. These results, reflected in both AMCEs and marginal means, underscore that while framing may generate small directional shifts for some origins, the effects remain substantively weak and statistically insignificant.

To complement the main attribute results, we also examine the interaction between origin and ethnicity, since ethnic affinity may plausibly condition how persuasion cues shape immigrant evaluations. This exercise allows us to test whether sharing an ethnic background with immigrants mitigates origin-based bias, and whether the treatment cues differentially affect evaluations across respondent subgroups.

Figure 4 shows the results. We see that while ethnic Koreans from outside the U.S. generally enjoy somewhat more favorable evaluations than non-ethnic Koreans of the same origin, discrimination against Chinese immigrants persists regardless of shared ethnicity; this mirrors the entrenched origin-based hierarchies documented elsewhere. Notably, the treatment cues do little to alter these dynamics overall. Appendix Table C.4 confirms that nearly all interaction effects are small and non-significant.

The one clear exception appears among non-ethnic Korean respondents evaluating immigrants from the Philippines: under the birthrate cue, support increases significantly relative to the U.S. baseline (Estimate = 0.08, SE = 0.036, $p < 0.05$). This isolated effect suggests that persuasion cues may gain some traction outside the ethnic in-group, but even here the impact is narrow in scope and does not extend to other origins. Taken together, the interaction analysis indicates that ethnic affinity can modestly mitigate—but not erase—penalties tied to

immigrant origin, and that persuasion cues remain largely ineffective in shifting entrenched preferences.

In sum, the framing interventions produce only modest effects for the conjoint outcomes. The birthrate cue yields small improvements for some non-ethnic Korean immigrants, most clearly for Filipinos and to a lesser extent Indonesians, as evidenced by attenuated AMCE penalties and slightly higher marginal means. Discrimination against Chinese immigrants, whether ethnic Korean or not, persists with little change. The growth cue shows virtually no effect across origins or respondent groups. Overall, persuasion cues do not meaningfully disrupt entrenched hierarchies structured by origin and ethnicity.

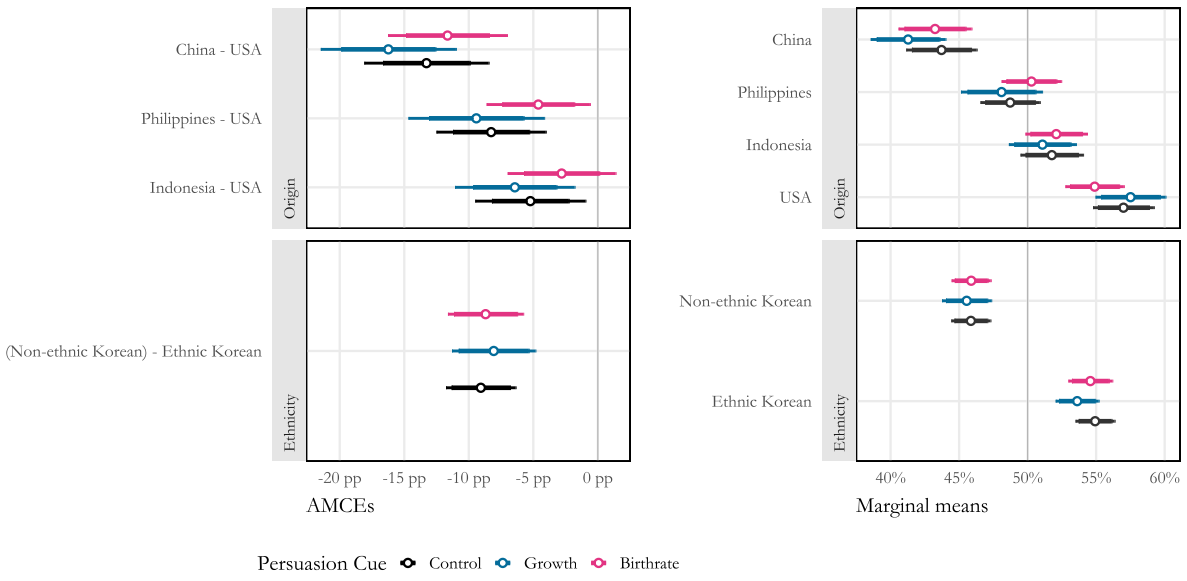

Figure 3: AMCEs and marginal means for immigrant origin and ethnicity

Note: Estimates are based on Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) models with clustered standard errors. The figure reports both average marginal component effects (AMCEs) relative to baseline categories (U.S. origin, ethnic Korean) and marginal means (MMs) showing absolute support levels. For the MMs, 50% represents the break-even point: values above it indicate that the attribute level is favored relative to chance, while values below it indicate disfavor. Error bars represent 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

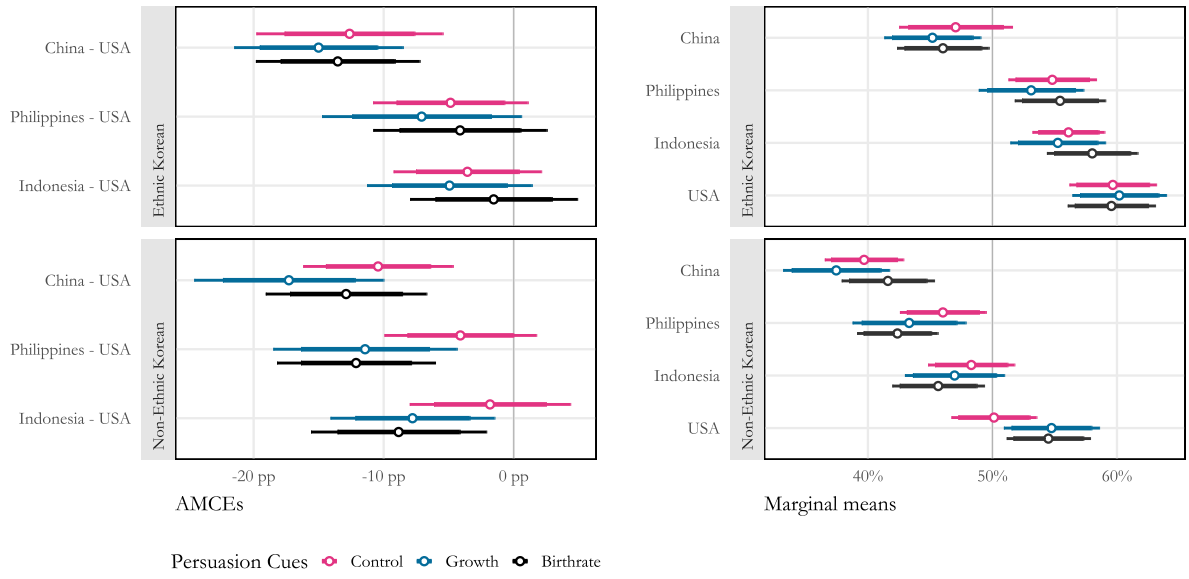

Figure 4: Interaction between immigrant origin and ethnicity

Note: The analysis is based on Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) models with clustered standard errors. The figure shows AMCEs and marginal means for combinations of origin and ethnicity, estimated relative to the baseline categories (U.S. origin, ethnic Korean). For the MMs, 50% represents the break-even point: values above it indicate that the attribute level is favored relative to chance, while values below it indicate disfavor. Error bars represent 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

5 Conclusion

This study examined whether pro-immigration messages framed around economic growth and demographic decline could shift South Korean attitudes toward immigration policy and immigrant groups. The results show that such attitudes are remarkably resistant to persuasion. In the policy-preference experiment, neither the growth nor fertility cues increased support for liberalization. Instead, the growth frame reinforced a preference for maintaining the status quo, while the fertility frame produced only narrow and modest effects, most clearly among non-ethnic Korean profiles. In the conjoint experiment, discrimination by origin, particularly against Chinese immigrants, remained deeply entrenched with little change across treatments. These findings echo evidence that immigration attitudes are highly stable and that persuasion effects tend to be limited (Druckman, 2022; Coppock, 2022; Kustov, 2024).

The persistence of discrimination in the conjoint experiment underscores the power of sociotropic hierarchies to shape immigration attitudes. Consistent with research on South Korea's dual hierarchy of evaluation, in which co-ethnic migrants and those from higher-status countries are favored (Seol & Skrentny, 2009; Denney & Green, 2021), our findings show that ascriptive qualities, like origin, remain powerful determinants of immigrant acceptability (Ha, Cho & Kang, 2016).

These results contribute to ongoing debates about persuasion and backlash that extend well beyond Korea. Although concerns about unintended consequences are widespread, comparative research finds that pro-immigration reforms do not systematically generate populist backlash and may even legitimize immigration (Kustov, 2023). At the same time, other studies warn that immigration can feed populist mobilization when combined with status threat and political framing, posing a "Democratic Dilemma" for policymakers (Kapelner, 2024; Docquier & Rapoport, 2025). Our findings speak to this debate by showing that in South Korea, demographic and economic frames consolidate existing preferences rather than triggering wholesale shifts in opinion, thereby reinforcing stability rather than producing liberalizing change.

These findings have implications for both immigration policy and comparative research. In South Korea, where immigration remains relatively new and under-institutionalized, attitudes are structured less by partisan conflict than by enduring national identity hierarchies (Goodman, 2021; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). As such, broad-based framing strategies are unlikely to overcome entrenched biases. Policymakers may need to pursue more targeted communication or institutional reforms—such as anti-discrimination laws and integration policies—that address structural barriers directly. More broadly, the study highlights the importance of context in persuasion research, showing how sociotropic concerns, normative biases, and political institutions shape the effectiveness of framing strategies.

An additional avenue for future research concerns the intersection of demographic decline, national security, and immigration. In South Korea, population aging and low fertility are not only economic and social challenges but also security concerns in a state that maintains compulsory military service under the persistent threat from North Korea. These conditions raise the possibility that demographic decline could be framed not only as a labor market or welfare issue but also as a matter of national survival. Understanding whether security-oriented cues, linking immigration to sustaining national defense capacity or mitigating existential vulnerability, affect public opinion represents an important extension of this research agenda. While our study focused on economic and demographic frames, exploring how security frames operate may clarify the conditions under which immigration can be legitimized in highly securitized contexts (Bigo, 2002).

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Supplementary Information for "Persuasion and Prejudice: Are South Korean Attitudes Toward Immigration Open to Change?"

Appendix A Additional Survey Information

From May to June 2024, native-born responses from 2,010 South Koreans were recorded. The recruitment process used Qualtrics' online panel. To ensure (semi-)representativeness, quotas were established in alignment with the most up-to-date demographic parameters. Multiple quality assurance steps were included, incorporating Qualtrics' inbuilt quality control systems, manual attention checks, and specific questions designed to detect inattentiveness and validate manipulation and survey completion. Responses that failed our quality criteria were replaced following a thorough review and consultation with the Qualtrics project manager. We are confident that the final dataset comprises legitimate and valid survey responses. To correct for notable over/under-sampling, especially for education, we added post-stratification weights using the raking method in the 'survey' package in R based on population parameters (age, sex, education, region[1]) as of January 31, 2024 as per Statistics Korea[2]. Table A.1 reviews the sample.

[1]For weighting, aggregated regional groupings were used to account for some small sample sizes.
[2]See: https://kostat.go.kr

Variable	Count	Proportion	Weighted Prop.
Age			
18-29	361	18%	17.5%
30-39	355	17.7%	15.7%
40-49	396	19.7%	16.6%
50-59	529	26.3%	21.5%
60+	369	18.4%	28.6%
Sex			
Man	1015	50.5%	50.0%
Woman	995	49.5%	50.0%
Education			
No University	383	19.1%	45.5%
University (including technical colleges)	1627	80.9%	54.5%
Location			
Seoul	873	43.4%	29.5%
Busan	38	1.9%	2.8%
Daegu	28	1.4%	2.0%
Incheon	27	1.3%	0.9%
Gwangju	21	1.0%	2.2%
Daejeon	15	0.7%	0.8%
Ulsan	5	0.2%	0.6%
Sejong	5	0.2%	0.2%
Gyeonggi Province	527	26.2%	20.0%
Gangwon Province	61	3.0%	4.5%
North Chungcheong Province	51	2.5%	2.9%
South Chungcheong Province	77	3.8%	4.3%
North Jeolla Province	45	2.2%	5.3%
South Jeolla Province	40	2.0%	4.2%
North Gyeongsang Province	89	4.4%	8.8%
South Gyeongsang Province	105	5.2%	10.9%
Jeju	3	0.1%	0.4%

Table A.1: Summary counts, proportions, and weighted proportions: South Korea

Appendix B Survey Questions

This section provides the text used for the background questions and subgroups (pro- and anti-immigration, as explained in the manuscript).

Background questions:

- What was your assigned sex at birth?
  - Male
  - Female
- Where do you currently reside?
  - Seoul
  - Busan
  - Daegu
  - Incheon
  - Gwangju
  - Daejeon
  - Ulsan
  - Sejong
  - Gyeonggi Province
  - Kangwon Province
  - Chungbuk Province
  - Chungnam Province
  - Cheonbuk Province
  - Cheonnam Province
  - Gyeongbuk Province
  - Gyeongnam Province
  - Jeju Province
- Please specify your age.
  - (validated input line)
- What is the highest level of education you have achieved?
  - No Formal Education
  - Elementary school or lower

  - Middle school
  - High school
  - Some college (including technical school)
  - University
  - Graduate school and above
  - Other (e.g., Seodang)

- When distinguishing between progressives and conservatives in our society, where do you belong? (10-point sliding scale)
  - Very progressive (coded 1-2)
  - Somewhat progressive (coded 3-4)
  - Centrist (coded 5-6)
  - Somewhat conservative (coded 7-8)
  - Very conservative (coded 9-10)

- Which party would you vote for if there was a national election tomorrow?
  - People's Power Party
  - Minjoo Party
  - Green-Justice Party
  - Other Party
  - I don't know

Sociotropic attitudes:

- Please rate how much you agree with the following items: (1 means strongly disagree, 4 means can't do anything about it (neutral), and 7 means strongly agree.)
  - The influx of foreign workers increases the competitiveness of the domestic agricultural industry.
  - The influx of foreign workers financially secures pensions, stabilizes the population, and increases birth rates.
  - The influx of foreign workers increases the competitiveness of the domestic financial sector.
  - The influx of foreign workers is beneficial to Korea.
  - The influx of foreign workers increases the competitiveness of domestic manufacturing.
  - The influx of foreign workers is essential to domestic economic growth.

Appendix C Additional Figures & Tables

This section presents supplementary figures and tables with additional analyses referenced in the manuscript.

Figure C.1 reports subgroup results by sociotropic orientation (optimists vs. skeptics). While the main text emphasizes overall treatment effects, this figure considers whether persuasion cues work differently depending on respondents' baseline orientations toward immigration. Subgroups are defined using a composite sociotropy index (six items listed in Appendix B), recoded so higher values indicate more positive views of immigration's sociotropic impact. Respondents at or above the 75th percentile are coded as optimists, the rest as skeptics. This cut-off provides a clear contrast between those most and least inclined to see immigration as socially beneficial. Results show modest framing effects consistent with the main models: the growth cue reinforces support for the status quo, while the birthrate cue has little impact. Conclusions are robust to alternative splits of the index.

Figure C.2 presents marginal means for all conjoint attributes. Unlike the main text, which highlights origin and ethnicity, this figure includes every attribute in the design (e.g., occupation, language, employment plan), providing a complete view of average selection probabilities.

Tables C.1–C.4 report the treatment × origin interaction results from the conjoint experiment. These tables provide the numerical estimates underlying Figures 3 and 4. Tables C.1 and C.2 focus on immigration policy preferences: Table C.1 reports main treatment effects, and Table C.2 extends the models with interactions by sociotropic orientation. Both confirm that the growth cue consolidates support for maintaining current levels, while the birthrate cue has little effect; no consistent subgroup interactions emerge.

Tables C.3 and C.4 turn to the conjoint estimates. Because marginal means are directly derived from AMCEs, we report only AMCE contrasts here. This is sufficient for evaluating framing effects, since the marginal means shown in the figures re-express the same underlying estimates. Table C.3 presents treatment × origin contrasts for the pooled sample;

Table C.4 stratifies the same specification by respondent ethnicity. Results show that nearly all interaction effects are small and insignificant, with one exception: a positive, statistically significant birthrate effect for Filipino immigrants among non-ethnic Korean respondents. This isolated finding aside, the tables reinforce the conclusion that persuasion cues do little to shift entrenched origin-based hierarchies.

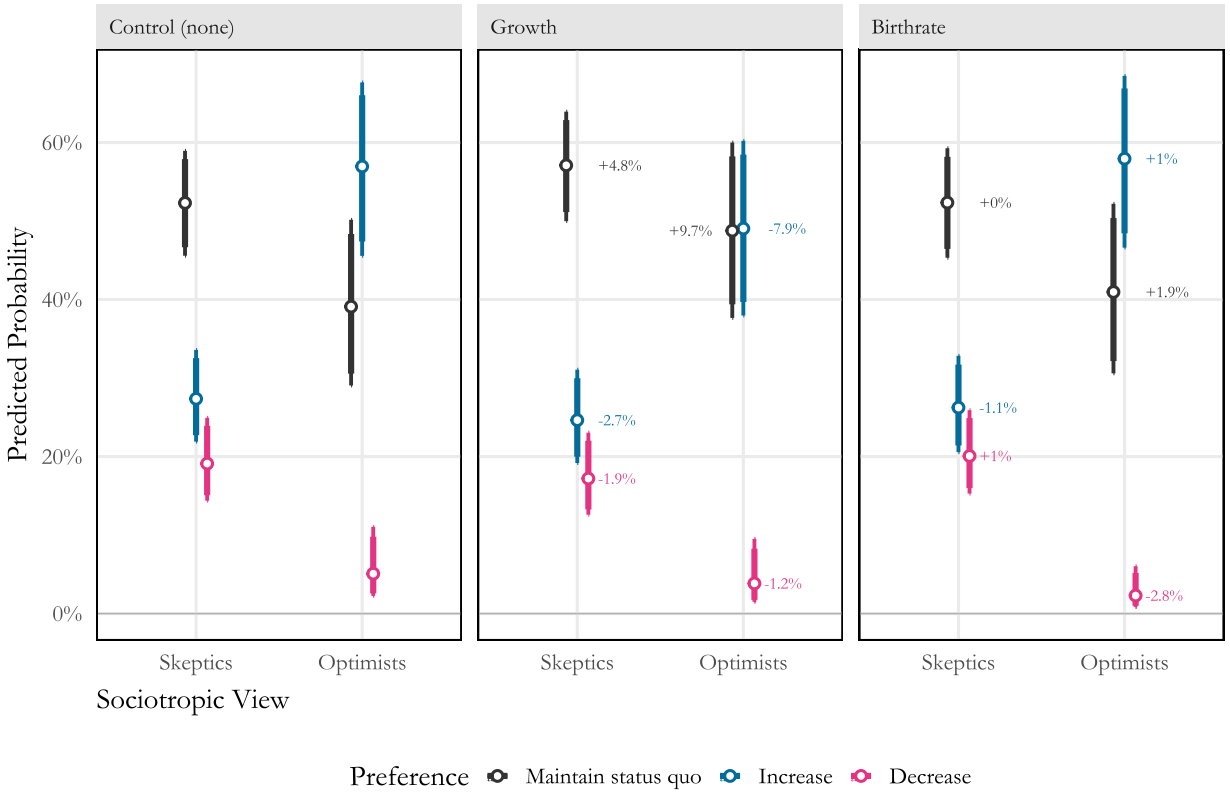

Figure C.1: Persuasion Cues and Immigration Policy Preferences by Sociotropic Subgroups

Note: Based on logistic regression models with controls for demographics and political orientation, this figure reports predicted probabilities of support for immigration policy across treatment groups (control group and growth and birthrate cues) separately for sociotropic optimists and skeptics. Error bars represent 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

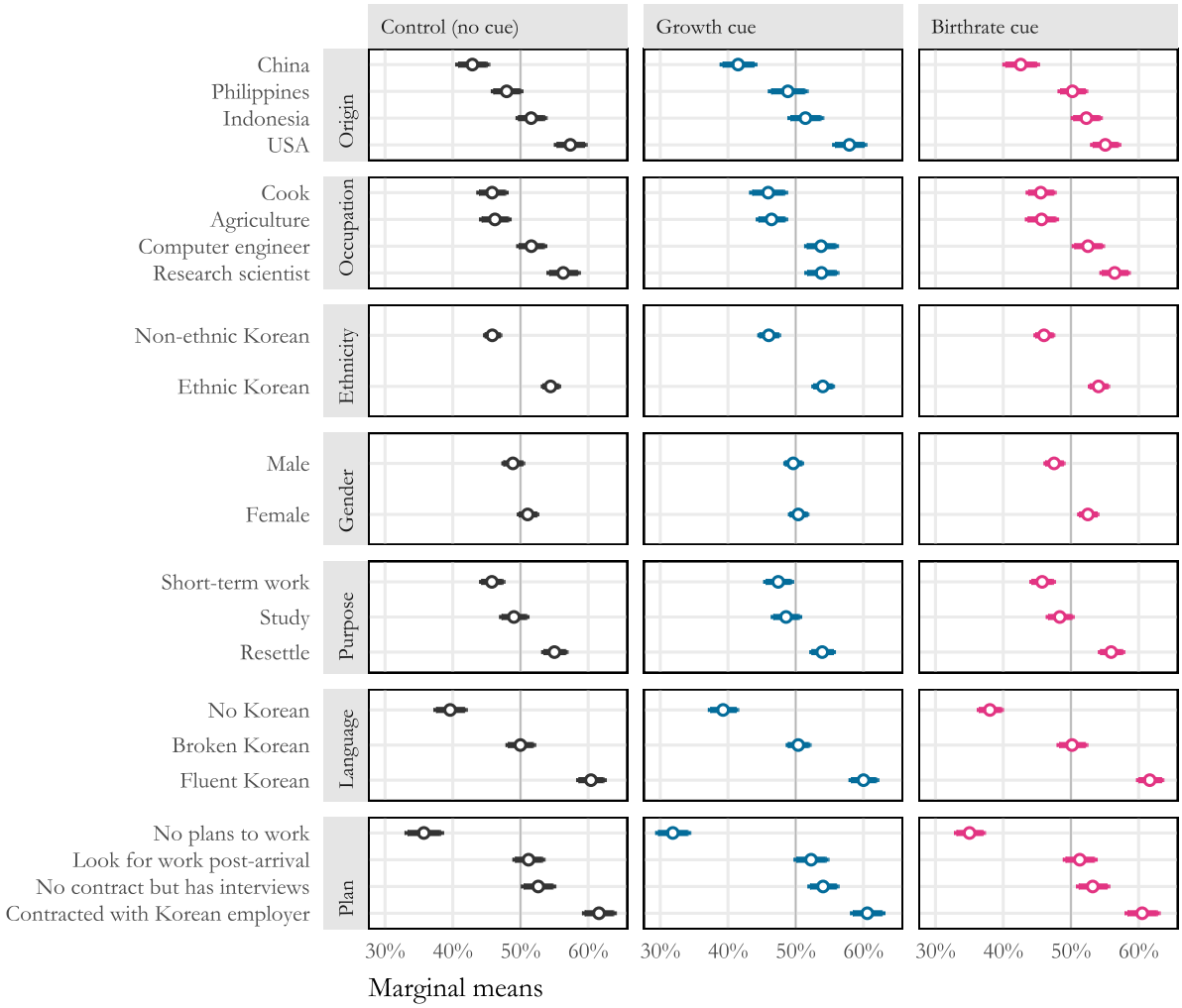

Figure C.2: Marginal Means of All Immigrant Attribute Levels

Note: Based on the benchmark OLS conjoint model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean probability of selection for each attribute level, averaged across the distribution of all others. Because the design is a forced-choice two-profile conjoint, 0.50 marks the break-even point: values above indicate relative favorability, while values below indicate relative disfavor. Error bars represent 90 and 95 percent confidence intervals.

Variable	Estimate	SE	z-statistic	p-value
Support Increase				
Birthrate Prime	-0.1188	0.1177	-1.009	0.3127
Growth Prime	-0.2303	0.1203	-1.914	0.0556
Support Decrease				
Birthrate Prime	0.0845	0.1436	0.588	0.5563
Growth Prime	-0.1006	0.1489	-0.676	0.4992
Support Maintain				
Birthrate Prime	0.0536	0.1114	0.481	0.6305
Growth Prime	0.2602	0.1128	2.307	0.0210

Table C.1: Logistic Regression Models: Treatment Effects on Immigration Policy Preferences

Note: The table shows key treatment coefficients from logistic regression models examining treatment effects on immigration policy preferences. Standard errors are robust. All models use survey weights and include controls for demographics, region, and political orientation. Reference category: Control treatment. Coefficients represent log-odds.

Variable	Estimate	SE	z-statistic	p-value
Support Increase				
Birthrate Prime	-0.0569	0.1484	-0.383	0.7015
Growth Prime	-0.1413	0.1533	-0.922	0.3566
Sociotropic Optimists	1.2567	0.1845	6.811	< 0.0001
Growth Prime × Sociotropic Optimists	-0.1769	0.2612	-0.677	0.4983
Birthrate Prime × Sociotropic Optimists	0.0972	0.2651	0.367	0.7139
Support Decrease				
Birthrate Prime	0.0615	0.1542	0.399	0.6900
Growth Prime	-0.1285	0.1610	-0.798	0.4248
Sociotropic Optimists	-1.4836	0.3140	-4.726	< 0.0001
Growth Prime × Sociotropic Optimists	-0.1637	0.4810	-0.340	0.7337
Birthrate Prime × Sociotropic Optimists	-0.8832	0.5782	-1.528	0.1265
Support Maintain				
Birthrate Prime	0.0017	0.1300	0.013	0.9896
Growth Prime	0.1936	0.1332	1.453	0.1463
Sociotropic Optimists	-0.5354	0.1804	-2.967	0.0030
Growth Prime × Sociotropic Optimists	0.2004	0.2519	0.796	0.4262
Birthrate Prime × Sociotropic Optimists	0.0760	0.2581	0.294	0.7686

Table C.2: Logistic Regression Models with Interaction Terms: Treatment Effects × Sociotropic Orientation

Note: The table shows coefficients from logistic regression models examining treatment effects on immigration policy preferences, including interactions with sociotropic orientation. Standard errors are robust. All models use survey weights and include controls for demographics, region, and political orientation. Reference categories: Control treatment, Sociotropic Skeptics. Coefficients represent log-odds.

Treatment Contrast	Origin Contrast	Estimate	SE	t-statistic	p-value
Growth − Control					
Growth − Control	China − USA	-0.0295	0.0302	-0.979	0.3277
Growth − Control	Philippines − USA	-0.0115	0.0285	-0.402	0.6876
Growth − Control	Indonesia − USA	-0.0120	0.0267	-0.450	0.6527
Birthrate − Control					
Birthrate − Control	China − USA	0.0163	0.0283	0.577	0.5640
Birthrate − Control	Philippines − USA	0.0365	0.0247	1.480	0.1390
Birthrate − Control	Indonesia − USA	0.0243	0.0253	0.958	0.3379

Table C.3: Treatment × Origin Effects (Prime − Control).

Note: Estimates are treatment effects for each origin relative to USA (Prime − Control). Weighted OLS with standard errors clustered by respondent. Models adjust for occupation, ethnicity, gender, purpose of immigration, language skills, and employment plans.

Ethnicity Group	Treatment Contrast	Origin Contrast	Estimate	SE	t-statistic	p-value
Ethnic Korean						
Ethnic Korean	Growth − Control	China − USA	-0.0143	0.0384	-0.372	0.7102
Ethnic Korean	Growth − Control	Philippines − USA	-0.0295	0.0430	-0.686	0.4925
Ethnic Korean	Growth − Control	Indonesia − USA	-0.0340	0.0364	-0.934	0.3561
Ethnic Korean	Birthrate − Control	China − USA	0.0091	0.0404	0.225	0.8229
Ethnic Korean	Birthrate − Control	Philippines − USA	-0.0072	0.0379	-0.190	0.8463
Ethnic Korean	Birthrate − Control	Indonesia − USA	-0.0202	0.0363	-0.556	0.5782
Non-ethnic Korean						
Non-ethnic Korean	Growth − Control	China − USA	0.0078	0.0387	0.202	0.6695
Non-ethnic Korean	Growth − Control	Philippines − USA	-0.0449	0.0446	-1.007	0.2782
Non-ethnic Korean	Growth − Control	Indonesia − USA	0.0186	0.0392	0.474	0.7886
Non-ethnic Korean	Birthrate − Control	China − USA	0.0069	0.0395	0.175	0.8606
Non-ethnic Korean	Birthrate − Control	Philippines − USA	0.0802	0.0356	2.252	0.0243
Non-ethnic Korean	Birthrate − Control	Indonesia − USA	0.0216	0.0357	0.605	0.4912

Table C.4: Treatment × Origin Effects by Ethnicity Group (Prime − Control).

Note: Estimates compare origins to USA within each treatment contrast (Prime − Control), stratified by respondent ethnicity. Weighted OLS with standard errors clustered by respondent. Models adjust for occupation, gender, purpose of immigration, language skills, and employment plans.