

Barbarians at the Gate & Neighbors Next Door:
Policy Knowledge, Anxiety, & Public Opinion
about Immigration in the U.S.

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Democracy is thought to have many potential advantages over rival conceptions of political association. One of the more prominent, the so called ‘epistemic’ advantage of democracy, boils down to the intuition that many minds are better than only a few, or one, at least *ceteris paribus*. If political institutions can leverage individuals’ use of factual information and how that information maps onto reasons for and against policies we should be able to make better political choices (Dewey 1927; Ober 2007). On contentious issues, however, voter’s factual knowledge is often correlated with their material and ideological concerns. The scholarly literature on motivated reasoning would suggest that the relationship between, for example, facts about immigration and policy beliefs about the issue is at best spurious to ideology. Individuals’ policy preferences do suffer from a general lack of information, but even worse, their personal interests and motives bias the little knowledge that they do bring to bear on the problem. For example, individuals who believe immigration is a threat overestimate the number of immigrants in their community, feeding their perception of threat.¹

What is not as well explored in the literature, but crucial for democracy, is the relationship between information dynamics and the *reasons* that people have for supporting or opposing policies (Neblo 2003; Neblo 2004; Neblo 2005; Neblo et. al. 2012). In Dewey’s estimation, democracy is not just capable of experimenting with enacted policy. The availability and treatment of different reasons for and against a given policy in deliberation may open up individuals for information that then informs policy choice down the line. Extant research that analyzes policy preferences such as the appropriate number of visas allocated to immigrants or the preferred strength of border controls misses the effect of information on reasons. Looking at just changes in aggregate support for policy outcomes leads to an overly pessimistic outlook

¹ Such effects are very common. For example, on another contentious issue, the Iraq war, party identification is correlated with respondents’ estimation of Iraq war battle deaths. (Berisky 2007).

about the epistemic advantages of democracy, and occludes the amount of persuasion that occurs, even on contentious issues (Esterling et. al. 2011).

This paper utilizes a survey experiment to ask whether learning relevant factual information affects individual Americans' motivations for their policy attitudes on undocumented immigration. Fitting with prior research on motivated reasoning, we find that individual uptake and recall of factual information differs across groups with different ideological and material concerns and experiences. In concordance with literature studying the effects of information on policy beliefs, we find no systematic, aggregate changes on immigration policy preferences in the short run. Unlike previous efforts, though, we test for and find systematic changes in the reasons behind those policy attitudes. The results of the survey experiment also indicate that even if people are informed about the numbers, increased awareness of the facts of immigration does not change all dimensions of anxiety equally. This finding has normative implications for efforts to create a more informed public on the issue of immigration (Neblo 2007; Neblo 2009a,b; Ramakrishnan et. al. 2010).

Although it is difficult to make generalized inference from an experiment, even modest factual intervention generates movement in the beliefs of individuals on the effects of undocumented immigration. The effect of the intervention of additional knowledge depends on prior beliefs, which may be biased, but the direction of movement fits with normative democratic decision-making. If this modest intervention is indicative of the possibilities of more robust educational efforts, there is the possibility that down stream policy preferences may change may be quite substantial indeed.

Democratic decision-making mutes bias with the collective aggregated information of the participants. Not every individual citizen can recall every fact, just as not every citizen evaluates

her concerns in the light of new information, and there is good reason. Democracy is not about rule by the expert, but rule by a citizenry that understands to some degree their own interests and the interests of others. The laws endorsed by an even slightly more informed public are more legitimate, and more effective, than those created by a population disengaged from the issues of the day.

The paper proceeds as follows. First we review some of the motivations that have been shown to influence attitudes on immigration, along with how individuals who are so motivated respond to factual information. We compare what the literature presents as the two main antecedents of attitudes about immigration policy – anti-Hispanic affect and worries over adverse economic consequences – to develop the reasons that people have for their policy positions. We add public concern about domestic terrorism, loss of culture and a breakdown of law and order alongside concerns about the economy and jobs. Second, we introduce the logic of survey experiment used to get leverage on the theoretical questions of this study, and then present the results.

Treated respondents concerns about undocumented immigration demonstrate policy reasoning. Respondents who initially underestimate the number of undocumented immigrants respond to the factual intervention by increasing their concerns about jobs, criminality and public goods. The information intervention has systematic effects on baseline concerns about undocumented immigration, and indicates that economic issues involve a calculus of population, whereas culture and terrorism have a different logic.

MOTIVATED REASONING

Research on the uptake, processing and recall of political facts has long been concerned with the effect of prior beliefs and judgments on current reasoning. One framework of motivated reasoning, 'hot cognition,' argues that previously evaluated political issues, groups and ideas obtain affective characteristics stored in an individual's long-term memory. Future judgments are not governed by 'Bayes' rule' but rather rely on prior beliefs that automatically come with affective response. Lodge and Taber argue new information is assessed by an automatic and instant affective response, called 'hot cognition,' which updates affective associations of previous judgments of related information. The updated affective response then overrides whatever objective features the information signals (Lodge and Taber 2005).

For example, when an individual makes a political judgment, like "Wendell Willkie's tariff policy is unreasonable," and later encounter some new information regarding Willkie, she does not just remember a factual relationship between a presidential candidate and an unreasonable policy, but also automatically re-attributes the negative affective response to Willkie. This negative affect from the previous judgment affects the uptake of the new information. "Feelings become information" (Lodge and Taber 2005 pg. 456). The implication is that most people are biased reasoners; automatic emotive response shuts down receptivity to new information contrary to prior beliefs.

If prior evaluations of political issues and leaders establish baseline emotive responses to new information, we would not expect that information leads to better decisions. David P. Redlawsk finds that individuals with positive prior evaluations of a political candidate (positively motivated reasoners) increase support for the candidate upon learning new negative information. In a mock presidential primary election, subject's affective bias lead to lower quality decision

making and active argument against new information (Redlawsk 2002). Public opinion on policy is then a function not of evaluation of current knowledge, but automatic responses to prior, also biased, political judgments.

Uptake of information, on this theory, will depend on prior political judgments, but which ones? On the issue of undocumented immigration, much of the debate centers on the role of racial attitudes toward non-immigrant minorities as opposed to material economic concerns in generating attitudes toward undocumented immigrants. In addition to racial or ethnically motivated reasoning, concern about undocumented immigration may directly depend on individuals' economic endowment (Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Citrin et al. 1997). Both material and non-material concerns, such as language, assimilation, and national identity have support as important motivations for immigration sentiment (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, Prior 2004). In the following, we discuss the ways that social and economic considerations may play out establishing the individual baselines for judgment.

There are three important differences between economic and ethnic motivations for the individual level attitudes discussed in this paper. First, racially and ethnically motivated policy tends to be socially unacceptable; there are social sanctions to openly admitting bias regarding a minority racial or ethnic group. The same is not true of endowment-based concerns. It is socially acceptable to voice concerns about harm to one's own industry or sector. Because of this, we might expect that the affective bias with regards to economic prospects to be more pronounced in surveys.

Second, individual endowment in education affects preferences toward immigration through a different mechanism when considering the economic and the ethnic aspect of the policy. A highly educated individual will have internalized more of the social tolerance of the

modern liberal society, and would be less likely to openly espouse racially or ethnically based reasons. At the same time, education may not insulate oneself against the economic threat from a larger immigrant worker population. As with the Stolper-Samuelson theory of trade, those who are employed in the labor sector, or who are just particularly exposed to economic risk, will be more sensitive to the effects of immigration. While a higher level of education is associated with more correct estimates of minority size and less racialized attitudes, overall education level may not fit the contours of financial instability that increase concerns about the effect of immigration on jobs.

In addition to socioeconomic status effects, if the same sorts of attitudes on trade were involved in immigration, we would expect to see differences between the genders. Women report disproportionately strong distaste for free trade, and tend to favor protectionism. Gender differences have also been found for political knowledge, with different aspects of policy being salient for men and women. Given this, we would expect to find that women pick up information about undocumented immigration in a different way than men, and that information may effect their beliefs differently.

ANXIETY AND SECURITY CONCERNS

A second source of prior beliefs about undocumented immigration is related to fear about security. The feeling of lack of control, like the feeling of a lack of order, generates anxiety. People exaggerate the prospect of harm when they cannot directly alter the odds (Johnson 1997). In the face of failure to govern the border, individuals may both overestimate the number of undocumented immigrants, and be more anxious about these immigration flows. While these

concerns are often grouped with economic concerns, security concerns need not come from existing threats, anxiety can come from a variety of sources.

Because of their connection with coyotes (the illegal immigrant smugglers), migrants tend to be lumped together with other criminal enterprises including drug runners and gun smugglers. Once lumped in with a threat, removal of stigma is very difficult, possibly because negative affect precludes the possibility of new, positive or benign information. “Their potential positive contributions to the economy of the destination state and whatever empathy asylum seekers may deserve for their plight can get lost in the perceived urgency of the need to secure national borders.” (Durch 2001). As a result, stopping such threats has “symbolic political value” since, “if the state cannot defend its borders against ragged civilian hordes, what can it defend against?” The use of criminal facilitators, such as coyotes, make migrants as “every bit as much a threat as incoming missiles” (Durch 2001).

During the middle part of the last decade, the economic and security concern about undocumented immigration have been tied into the war on terrorism. 19.6 billion dollars were spent in the '07 appropriations bill along with the deployment of 4,500 National Guardsmen to the border, a major influx of funds.² Justifying the expense in terms of national security Representative Simmons (R-CT) explained, “you know, sleepers commit espionage. Sleepers commit terrorist acts. And we need to be imaginative in how we go about targeting these problems, because if we're not imaginative, we will simply build that Great Wall of China...”³

² Hearing Of The Subcommittee On Homeland Security Of The House Committee On Appropriations Subject: Border Security And Immigration Enforcement July 27, 2006 Thursday

³ Panel III Of A Hearing Of The Subcommittee On Intelligence, Information Sharing, And Terrorism Risk Assessment Of The House Committee On Homeland Security Subject: Department Of Homeland Security Intelligence And Border Security **June** 28, 2006

METHODOLOGY

The surveys used in this paper were conducted in 2006, a period of high public concern about the extent and rate of undocumented immigration. The manipulation of interest for this paper involves an experiment embedded within a short informative document provided to the respondents following a baseline survey, measured by a follow-up survey which asked the same questions months later. After establishing baseline reports from the respondents about their report as to the total number of undocumented immigrants, each respondent is randomly assigned to receive an additional piece of information, the total number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., 12 million. Immigration themed knowledge questions were asked again after the initial survey was conducted, and we recorded their response to the question, with and without the prior aid of the background materials. All of the following results are reported only for white, non-Hispanic respondents.

The measure of information uptake in the model is the correct multiple-choice response to the question, “About how many illegal immigrants do you think currently reside in the United States?” The question arrives in a battery of informational questions, including questions about the current law and the demographics of the incoming population. The raw breakdown of responses in the experiment sample and the whole survey, prior to treatment, follows:

Population:	Responses:				
	100,000	4,000,000	12,000,000	23,000,000	96,000,000
Experiment	8	105	239	131	37
Whole Survey	41	390	810	492	194
	not asked	refused	Don't Know		
Experiment	20	2	81		
Whole Survey	285	6	738		

The experimental population analyzed here was randomly assigned from a larger population to receive a background material survey that then had the further “factoid” manipulation embedded in it (i.e., there were two version of the background materials, one of which deleted the sentence with the 12 million factoid in it).

As we might expect from a motivated reasoning model, we find differences between individual’s uptake of information regarding undocumented immigrants. By dividing up the treated into various categories, we can ask whether different sorts of people responded differently to the manipulation, giving the number of illegal immigrants in the United States at the time of the survey. All of the following asks what baseline characteristics may promote or hinder learning, starting with material concerns, drawing on literature in economics, and then moving to political factors such as ideology.

LEARNING

The results of this survey on the uptake of information about the number of undocumented immigrants fit with theories of the hot cognition. Individual characteristics such as education, gender and state of residence correspond to differences in the successful recall of information, indicating that material interests may influence the receptivity of individuals to information.

While those with a higher education have a higher baseline level of correct reporting of the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. but do not learn more than respondents with lower education levels. The fact that people with higher levels of education successfully report the number of undocumented immigrants more than those with lower levels of education is not surprising. We might expect that those with a college education would also be sensitive to

factual information, however the treatment effect is not different between the two groups. In addition, the following table of the proportion that reports the correct number of undocumented immigrants indicates that the result is not a ‘ceiling effect’.

Proportion Correct	Treat	Control	Treatment Effect
At most high school	0.446	0.364	0.083
At least some college	0.581	0.510	0.071
At most high school:			
Women	.409	.347	.062
Men	.524	.400	.124
At least some college:			
Women	.518	.442	.076
Men	.664	.612	.052

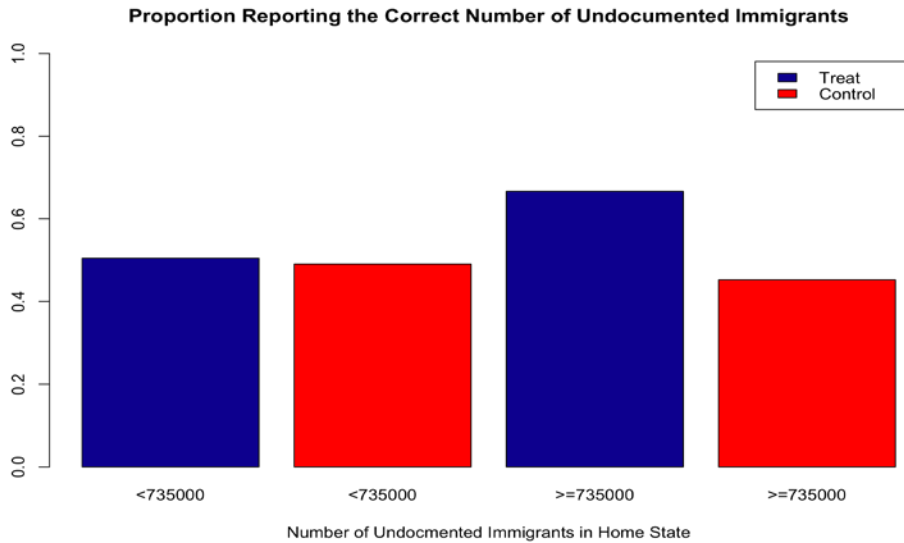
This lack of a difference may be because of two conflicting forces, those with less education are thought to be more exposed to the economic effect of immigration, legal or otherwise, and so may have a higher attention to immigration information. In the trade literature, attitudes toward openness are a function of position in the job market (Scheve and Slaughter 2001, 2004; Mayda & Rodrik, 2005). In the sample, respondent education is negatively correlated with reporting that the illegal immigration situation is a serious problem in the United States today, with a correlation of $-.209$ ($n=1660$ $t=-10.04$).

Further evidence that the exposure to the economic influence of immigration affects the uptake of information is evinced when we break down the numbers by gender. The expectation that women get the number of undocumented immigrants at a lower level than males fits with prior work on trade and other political knowledge questions. Unlike education, male and female respondents do not respond differently to whether illegal immigration is a serious problem facing the United States today. Previous survey work has shown convincingly that women are less free

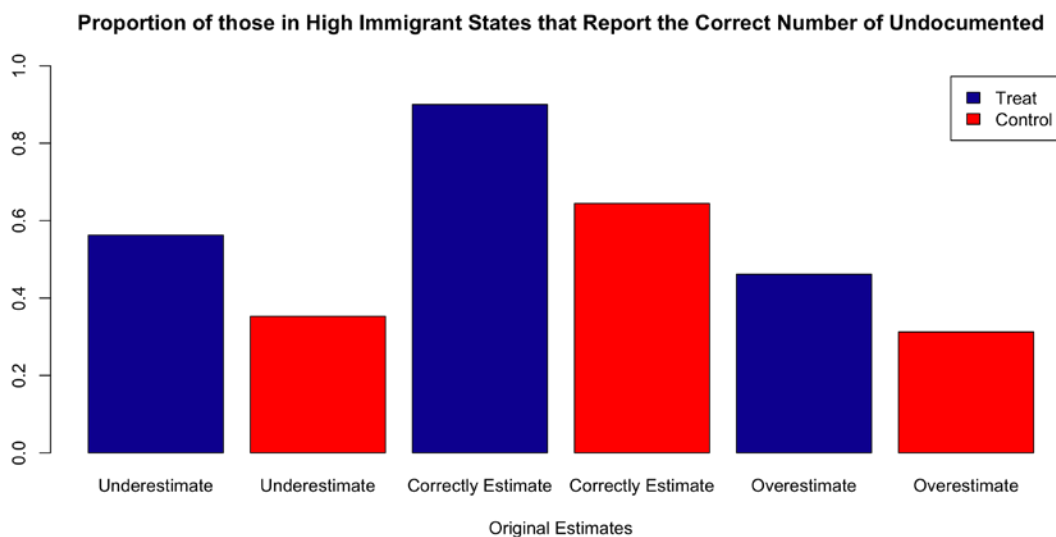
trade oriented than are men, even when controlling for key demographics (Burgoon and Hiscox, 2003, Eckel and Grossman 2002).

If it is the negative affective response to the prospect of losing ones job that is driving successful recall, we would expect those who lack capital investments, such as those who rent their home, to be more sensitive to information about immigration. In addition, respondents who report that they are member of dual household income have almost double the treatment effect of those without dual income. The same pattern occurs in the trade literature, where it is argued that having a spouse on the labor market expands number of channels that wage pressures can affect attitudes, and according to ‘hot’ cognition models, these attitudes will alter the pickup of information.

While personal economic attributes may condition receptivity to information, being exposed to Hispanic immigrants in the community, in the workplace and in the local news may prime sensitivity to more information on undocumented immigrants. While we do not have individual level reports of the number of Hispanic people encountered neither in daily life, nor in the everyday interactions people may have with immigrants, undocumented or otherwise, it is possible to make some headway on the issue. Jeffrey Passel, the Senior Demographer of the Pew Hispanic Center, has estimated the number of ‘unauthorized immigrants’ in each state. Sorting respondents by whether they reside in a state with a relatively high number of unauthorized immigrants against those who live in a low unauthorized population state, we see that those with more exposure to undocumented immigrants are significantly more sensitive to the treatment, though their control group is indistinguishable from those that reside in low unauthorized population states.

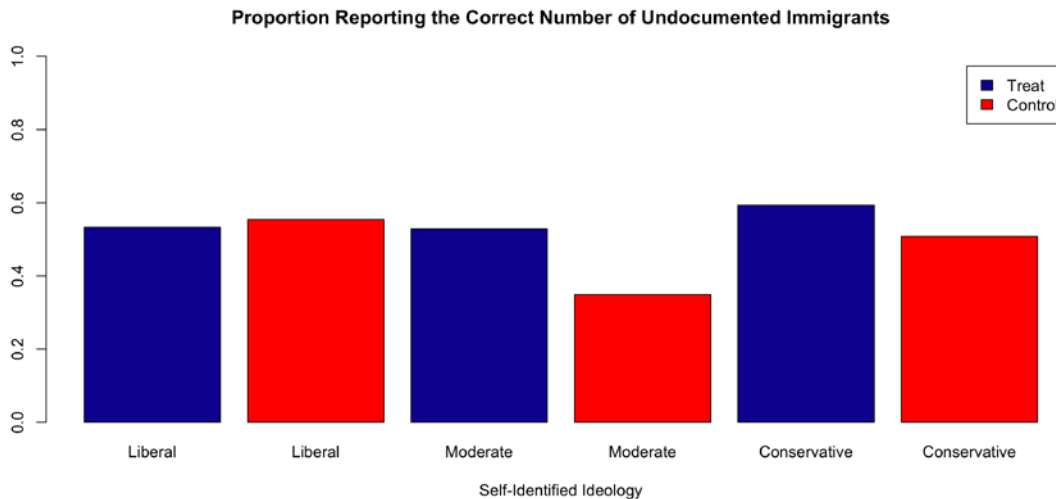


To break down this effect further, we examine the treatment effect of just those in high population states by whether respondents initially over or underestimate the number of undocumented immigrants in the country. The graph indicates that those that the effect of the extra information on recall is relatively well spread across those that under and overestimate the number of illegal immigrants, indicating that it is not the direction of the estimate relative to their expectations that establishes the higher treatment effect.



TESTING IDEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

It is not just physical encounters with undocumented immigrants, or raw economic variables that determine receptivity to information on undocumented immigration. We might think that ideology represents a variety of affectively charged political judgments, and that ones ideological commitments will affect the likelihood that individuals are going to receive and update information that support or oppose ones worldview. Being conservative or liberal doesn't just change ones interpretation of information, but the salience and uptake of information in the first place. Different cues are available to people with different ideological commitments, and depending on the issue, different levels of attention.



The above graph indicates that there are significant differences between those who self-identify as liberal, moderate and conservative on the uptake of the experimental manipulation. Self-identified moderates have the largest treatment effect, while conservatives have a smaller, but still pronounced treatment effect. Those who identify as liberal did no better with the treatment than without the number of undocumented immigrants.

If the ‘hot cognition theory’ is correct, liberals fail to recall information about the number of undocumented workers because their prior evaluations of immigration overrode the new information. Conservatives may have been more sensitive to the information because of a similar mechanism. Within conservative respondents, the largest treatment effect was among those who either under or overestimated the number of undocumented immigrants. The confirmation of a correct report did not alter the rate of successful recall as much as correction.

RACIAL AFFECT

To try to get at racial affect, we have taken the difference of ‘feeling thermometers,’ which prompt the respondent to pick a number between 0 and 100, 0 being ‘cold’ and 100 being ‘warm’ when prompted for two groups, in this case Whites and Hispanics. All respondents in this sample are white, so by setting up the difference, we can get some measure of racial affect. Those who responded with a below average difference (that is relatively positive affect for Hispanics) had an overall higher success rate and a larger treatment effect. Differences between the treatment effects on the two groups are not statistically significant. The same analysis holds for ‘feeling thermometer’ report for ‘illegal immigrants.’

	Treat	Control
Therm. Diff.<10 (Pos-Hispanic)	0.58	0.51
Therm. Diff.>10 (Neg-Hispanic)	0.50	0.44
Therm. Diff.<46 (Pos-Undocumented)	0.57	0.51
Therm. Diff.>46 (Neg-Undocumented)	0.53	0.47

EFFECT OF INFORMATION ON POLICY BELIEFS AND PREFERENCES

The average citizen did not move on their preference for a particular policy response to undocumented immigration (or most movement netted out to a modest aggregate change). In the treated population who successfully report the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States, 36 individuals changed their preferences against a path to citizenship (P.T.C.), and 38 individuals responded more in favor of P.T.C. than they initially reported. Net, the mean support does not change. The following chart compares the movement between the two groups by prior preferences. The differences are not statistically different than 0.

Treatment		Posterior Preference	
		Against P.T.C.	For P.T.C.
Prior Preference	Against P.T.C.	62	11
	For P.T.C.	13	78
Control		Posterior Preference	
		Against P.T.C.	For P.T.C.
Prior Preference	Against P.T.C.	44	18
	For P.T.C.	7	65

However, while systematic effects were not discerned among policy preferences, we can see a corrective effect, particularly among those that initially underestimate the number of undocumented workers on a number of motivations or policy reasons. The following chart identifies the proportion that agrees with some concern about undocumented immigration in the treatment and control groups. The percentage is the percentage of those voicing at least slight agreement on a seven point Likert scale. The treatment and control responses are then separated by initial estimates of the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States.

By dividing up the population into those who underestimate, correctly estimate, and overestimate, the difference between treatment and control is not just the effect of information,

but also the effect of correction. Those that underestimate the number of undocumented immigrants may be biased against thinking that undocumented immigration can have economic or cultural consequences. Those that overestimate the number of undocumented immigrants may exaggerate the threat posed by undocumented immigration. As we can see from the control group, those who overestimate undocumented immigration are much more likely to find undocumented immigration a threat to American culture, law and order and jobs. They are more likely to argue that undocumented immigrants should be restricted from hospitals, and more likely to associate undocumented immigration with terrorism.

	Underestimate	Correct	Overestimate
Law (-) :			
Treatment	66.7%	64.8%	69.0%
Control	46.8%	62.6%	69.2%
Culture (-) :			
Treatment	53.6%	56.1%	58.62%
Control	62.9%	62.6%	74.0%
Jobs (-) :			
Treatment	71.4%	53.9%	62.1%
Control	66.1%	57.2%	65.4%
Taxes (-) :			
Treatment	76.9%	73.6%	86.2%
Control	62.9%	74.6%	82.7%
Terrorism (-):			
Treatment	82.1%	83.1%	82.8%
Control	79.0%	76.3%	84.5%

Sides and Citrin use an experiment involving correction of the number of undocumented immigrants and find no systematic effect for information on attitudes (Sides and Citrin 2007). Sides and Citrin ask the percentage of the American population that came to the United States illegally (3 in 100), and then correct with a follow-up statement. By contrast, the experiment reported here does not explicitly correct individuals, but rather embeds the information in longer

background materials. Using a more modest instrument, we have established that people do pick up the information provided, and this information prompts different responses on policy concerns.

Because individuals who report some belief about the number of undocumented immigrants do in the context of their other beliefs and preferences regarding immigration, it is appropriate to consider those who underestimate undocumented immigrants separately from those who overestimate the number. In four of five instances, the respondents that underestimate the number of undocumented immigrants report higher agreement with negatively phrased concerns about the law, jobs, taxes and terrorism, which would indicate that information led to more negative response to immigration. This effect is most pronounced for the law, jobs and taxes questions, which indicates that issues of material concern may be responsive to the number of undocumented immigrants. Along with the previously discussed correlation between information uptake and material concerns and experiences, it seems that those who underestimate the number of undocumented immigrants are concerned when corrected about a number of social and economic issues. The lower effect for terrorism and the opposite result for culture may indicate that these issue dimensions are not as available to information shifting, and may involve more emotional override from prior judgments than taxes and problems about crime.

Those that overestimate the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States have a less homogenous response to the information intervention. In three of the five cases, those that overestimated the number of undocumented workers report lower agreement with concerns regarding undocumented immigration. ‘Overestimators’ exhibit information response on the dimension of culture, jobs and terrorism. In general, those who overestimate have smaller

treatment effects than those that initially underestimate, perhaps because ‘overestimators’ have internalized negative affect regarding undocumented immigrants, and are therefore more resistant to corrective information.⁴ The background beliefs and preferences do condition the response to the information manipulation, but the manipulation is not completely overridden. We find that individuals respond to the dimensions of undocumented immigration policy concern, and that the response depends on the relationship between those dimensions and the context of respondent beliefs and concerns.

While respondents’ ability to recall a fact does depend on their motivations and prior judgments, the experiment indicates that when prompted with a number that does not fit prior expectations, respondents update their policy concerns. Taking a side on a policy dispute, such as the path to citizenship, or on making undocumented immigration a felony, is a downstream judgment that depends crucially on these prior policy concerns, the respondents’ perceptions of the effect of undocumented immigration on their lives.

Average treatment effects on aggregate measures would yield misleading conclusions. The corrective effect of information depends strongly on the direction of the correction, as well as the dimension of the policy concern used to measure the respondent’s posterior beliefs. By setting up baseline estimates, randomly administering information, and then re-interviewing, we find support for the influence of material concerns on learning, but also that once learning has occurred, information does change the beliefs of individuals on materially pressing concerns, including jobs and government resources.

⁴ The variable on culture is more difficult to interpret, as it invokes language and balkanization. It reads: “If illegal immigration trends continue, English will no longer be our common language. Without a common language, the U.S. will break into separate cultures.” It may be that the threat of losing English as a common language involved a particularly low informational state, and those with an official number become reassured that the likelihood is lower.

CONCLUSION

Though learning is constrained by individual concerns, once internalized, information intervention has systematic effects on baseline concerns about undocumented immigration. While we find null effects for a small information manipulation on support for immigration policy, treated respondents' concerns demonstrate to information. The issue dimensions most responsive to intervention are those that involve reasoning about population and a calculation of the costs to the state. Even in a complex policy area, such as immigration, we can expect that informed individuals are making judgments in light of facts, not just restating their ideological commitments. The differences between policy areas on immigration clearly indicate possibilities and limits of a large-scale educational campaign on immigration. What we do not yet know is to what extent the particular issue areas that indicated learning in this study generalize across policy concerns. Individuals are capable of reasoning beyond what theories of 'hot cognition' would predict. To discover in what ways people are capable of moving beyond their ideological commitments and prior judgments, researchers should identify the dimensions of policy concern.

Question Wording

Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statement.

Law:

Allowing any illegal immigrants to become citizens sets a bad precedent by rewarding people for breaking the law.

Jobs:

The government should not make things worse for those struggling economically by allowing millions of illegal immigrants to compete for jobs. '

Taxes:

We cannot afford the taxes necessary to provide services like education and health care for illegal immigrants.

Culture:

If illegal immigration trends continue, English will no longer be our common language. Without a common language, the U.S. will break into separate cultures.

Terrorism:

The large flow of illegal immigrants into the U.S. makes it easy for terrorists to enter the country unchallenged.

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