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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Americans' Perceptions About Immigrants from Different World Regions: Evidence from a Multinomial Conjoint Experiment

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Abstract

The literature in political science considers (sometimes inaccurate) perceptions of immigrants as a factor in anti-immigration attitudes among natives, but much less is known about perceptions regarding immigrants from specific regions. In this paper, I explore Americans' perceptions about immigrants from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. To measure these perceptions, I apply a conjoint experiment with a multinomial outcome, in which respondents are asked to categorize hypothetical immigrants as coming from one of the five regions. Results from a nationally diverse sample demonstrate that immigrants from all regions other than Europe are associated with speaking poor English. Immigrants from Latin America are also associated with welfare dependency and rule-breaking behavior, while the opposite is true for immigrants from Asia. These negative perceptions may at least partly explain opposition to non-European, and specifically Latin American, immigration in the United States.

Keywords: conjoint analysis; immigration; perceptions

One important factor that underlies political conflict around immigration concerns the ways in which natives perceive immigrants, with perceptions not necessarily reflecting the reality. Indeed, immigrants are often seen as poorer, less educated, and more culturally distant than they are (for a review, see Lutz and Bitschnau 2022). Since all these attributes are usually seen by natives as undesirable for potential immigrants (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Valentino et al. 2019), negative perceptions are politically consequential. Existing studies show that variance in perceptions about immigrants – concerning their reasons for migrating, employment, and legality – predicts attitudes toward immigration (Blinder 2015; Zhirkov 2021b).

The same logic should extend onto specific immigrant origins: natives likely form distinct perceptions about immigration from different countries and regions. These origin-specific perceptions have not yet received enough attention in the literature,

This article has earned badges for transparent research practices: Open data and Open materials. For details see the Data Availability Statement.

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but they have important implications for immigration policy opinions and anti-immigrant prejudice. If immigrants from some regions are seen as having desirable characteristics, whereas immigrants from other regions are believed to have undesirable ones, it can explain the presence of systematic discrimination against certain origins (Newman and Malhotra 2018; Zhirkov 2021a). Support for restrictive policies and stricter enforcement can be higher if immigration is seen as coming primarily from regions associated with undesirable attributes.

In the present paper, I address this gap by exploring Americans' perceptions about immigrants from different world regions. In an original conjoint task with a multinomial outcome, I present respondents with profiles of hypothetical immigrants and ask them to guess whether each immigrant came from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, or the Middle East. Results of the experiment demonstrate that immigrants from all world regions other than Europe are associated with poor English skills. Perceptions about immigrants from Latin America are particularly negative: they include welfare dependency and rule-breaking behavior. Immigrants from Asia, on the contrary, are seen as self-sufficient and law-abiding. Positive perceptions about European immigrants are exhibited by both white and nonwhite respondents, although they are somewhat weaker among the latter. Overall, these results show that Americans' opposition to non-European immigration, and Latin American immigration in particular, may stem from negative perceptions. Methodologically, my analysis demonstrates how conjoint experiments with multinomial outcomes can help to answer important questions in political science.

Measuring perceptions about immigrant origins

Influential experimental studies suggest that Americans, as well as citizens of other industrial democracies, have broadly meritocratic preferences on immigration: they are ready to admit immigrants who have valuable skills, speak good English, and follow the rules – whereas country of origin has little effect (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Valentino et al. 2019). At the same time, there is no agreement in the literature regarding both absolute and relative role of origin in attitudes toward immigration. Indeed, Americans seem to differentiate between more and less desirable immigrant groups (Zhirkov 2021a). Most prominently, attitudes toward Hispanics impact whites' opinions on immigration, and featuring immigrants from Latin America in the media boosts nativism (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Branton et al. 2011; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina 2013). According to more recent evidence, immigrants from the Middle East can be another group that provokes particularly strong opposition (Konitzer et al. 2019).

While there exists research on perceptions about immigrants vs. natives (Blinder 2015; Lutz and Bitschnau 2022; Zhirkov 2021b), perceptions about immigrants from specific countries or regions are usually not directly measured. Existing literature offers only suggestive evidence that mostly concerns perceptions about Hispanic immigration. For instance, white Americans think that immigrants from Latin American countries are more likely to not have legal status in the United States (Flores and Schachter 2018). Evaluations of Hispanic immigrants also more strongly depend on their skills and perceived transgressions (Newman and Malhotra 2018;

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Hartman, Newman, and Bell 2014), but these findings provide only indirect evidence for the presence of the corresponding negative perceptions. In addition, there is almost no research on perceptions about Asian immigrants, another group that is important for Americans' opinions on immigration (Citrin et al. 1997; Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013), as well as about immigrants from Africa and the Middle East.

Nevertheless, going beyond perceptions about immigrants at large and studying Americans' beliefs about specific immigrant origins is important. Public support for policies and, ultimately, outcomes of the policy process depend on what members of the public think about populations targeted by the policies in question (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Even though immigration policies are usually formulated in legally neutral terms, they often target specific immigrant origins. For instance, some of the strictest immigration enforcement policies enacted by the first Trump administration – such as family separation – have been seen as predominantly targeting immigrants from Latin America (Wallace and Zepeda-Millan 2020). Similarly, Trump's Executive Order 13769 that suspended entry from six Muslim-majority countries located in the Greater Middle East was almost universally known as the "Muslim ban" (Collingwood, Lajevardi, and Oskooii 2018). Studying perceptions about immigrants from specific world regions can provide insights into why such policies are enacted and why they are supported by non-trivial shares of the U.S. public.

The goal of this paper is to understand whether there exist systematic differences in perceptions about immigrants from various world regions in the American public. To answer this question, I rely on an increasingly popular application of conjoint survey experiments that measure perceptions rather than preferences (Flores and Schachter 2018; Goggin, Henderson, and Theodoridis 2020; Myers, Zhirkov, and Lunz Trujillo 2024). In such conjoint designs, respondents are shown profiles of hypothetical individuals with several randomized attributes – but asked to categorize them rather than choose the preferred option. As observed choices in standard conjoint analysis are used to infer preferences, observed guesses about group memberships in classification conjoint experiments allow researchers to measure respondents' perceptions about the social groups that profiles are categorized into.

Since I simultaneously measure perceptions about immigrants from multiple regions – Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East – my design deviates from standard conjoint experiments in one important respect. It uses a multinomial rather than binary outcome, and I use multinomial logistic regression to analyze data from the conjoint task.[1] This estimation strategy involves parametric assumptions about the error structure, but it does not interfere with the main benefit of conjoint experiments: the causal interpretation of estimated effects. Multinomial conjoint design has not been used in the literature before, but it is useful for

[1]I use the term "multinomial" to refer to polytomous nominal (unordered categorical) outcomes: ones with more than two potential outcome values that do not have a meaningful rank order. This usage is imprecise because it refers to a specific (single-trial) case of the more general multinomial distribution. I use this terminology to keep the parallel between the outcome and the estimation method (multinomial logistic regression).

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experiments that measure perceptions.[2] Since perceptions are group specific, conjoint experiments that measure them must employ real-world group labels in categorization tasks – and the numbers of theoretically relevant groups in such applications are often greater than two. I make a methodological contribution by demonstrating how researchers can estimate and present the quantities of interest in conjoint experiments with multinomial outcomes – and how such experiments can be used to address substantively important questions in political science.

Data and method

Respondents for the online survey-experimental study were U.S. adults recruited in August 2022 on the Lucid Theorem platform.[3] It has been shown to yield samples comparable to national probability benchmarks, such as the American National Election Studies, in terms of the key demographics (Coppock and McClellan 2019). The final sample in my experiment consisted of 1,979 respondents. Its characteristics were the following. The mean age was 45.1 years. The gender ratio was 48.5 male to 51.5 female. College education was reported by 45.1% of respondents. Median income was $40,000 to $44,999. In terms of race and ethnicity, 68.6% of respondents identified as non-Hispanic whites. Finally, 36.3% of the sample were Democrats, 30.7% were Republicans, and 33% were independents (Zhirkov 2025).

In the conjoint experiment, respondents were presented with profiles of hypothetical immigrants and asked to guess which world region each immigrant came from.[4] There were five categorization options for each profile: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. Each respondent was asked to categorize the total of 20 profiles, and only one profile was shown per a separate survey page. Each profile was described in terms of seven attributes that according to prior studies matter for public attitudes toward immigration: age and gender (Ward 2019), education as a proxy for skill (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010), English proficiency (Hopkins 2015; Newman, Hartman, and Taber 2012), receipt of government benefits (Garand, Xu, and Davis 2017),[5] prior trips to the United States as a proxy for a history of status violations (Wright, Levy, and Citrin 2016), and police record (Hartman, Newman, and Bell 2014). All these attributes were included in the seminal conjoint studies on either perceptions about unauthorized immigrants or preferences for immigrant admission (Flores and Schachter 2018; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). See Table 1 for the full list of profile attributes and their potential values.

The order of attributes was randomized between respondents but kept constant for each individual respondent. All attribute values were randomized independently with uniform distributions. Attributes for government benefits and police records each had one value where only one label was present, whereas the other value

[2]Multinomial conjoint designs may not be as relevant for measuring preferences, as it can usually be achieved by using binary-choice or rating outcomes.

[3]The study was preregistered: https://osf.io/d43zm.

[4]See Section A of Online Appendix for the design description that follows the APSA Organized Section on Experimental Research reporting standards.

[5]Not getting benefits from the government can also be seen as a proxy for self-reliance and adherence to the American ethos of individualism (Levy and Wright 2020).

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Table 1. Attributes for immigrant profiles in conjoint experiment

Attribute	Values
Age	*Young:* 20–39
	Older: 40–59
Gender	Male
	Female
Education	*Less than college:* Elementary school, Middle school, High school
	Some college or higher: 2-year college, 4-year college, Graduate degree
English proficiency	Fluent English
	Broken English
Government benefits	*Receives benefits:* Food stamps, Medicaid, Supplemental income, Housing assistance
	No benefits
Prior trips to U.S.	*Has a violation:* Overstayed visa, Unauthorized
	No violation: No, On a visa
Police record	*Has a record:* Assault, Drug possession, Theft
	No record

Note. Age values (in years) were randomly chosen from the specified intervals.

included multiple labels. Therefore, each profile had a 50% probability of being described as having no benefits or no record. The specific labels for profiles described as having government benefits and police records had equal probabilities of being presented. See Fig. 1 for a sample profile.

The survey also included a battery of items that measured respondents' level of ethnocentrism (Bizumic and Duckitt 2012). See Section B of Online Appendix for the questions.

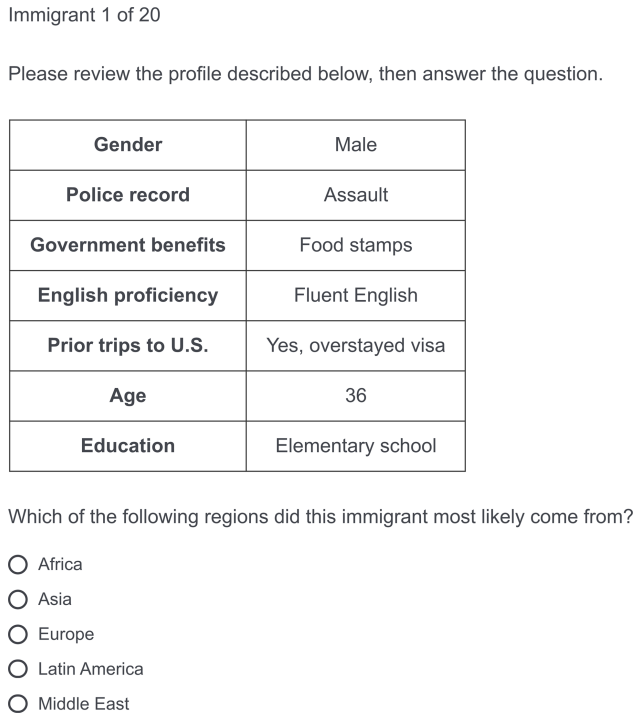
Results

Respondents in the conjoint experiment categorized the total of 39,568 hypothetical immigrant profiles.[6] Of them, 16.2% were guessed as coming from Africa, 15.8% from Asia, 25.0% from Europe, 28.2% from Latin America, and 14.8% from the Middle East.[7] I analyze the data using a multinomial logistic regression that predicts profile categorizations based on specific attribute values. I also aggregate some attribute values to keep the reasonable number of estimated effects. Following the

[6]Eight respondents categorized fewer than 20 profiles (but no fewer than 17). They were kept in the analysis.

[7]These numbers suggest that, even though Africa has been listed first in the list of regions to choose from, primacy bias is not a big concern.

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Immigrant 1 of 20

Please review the profile described below, then answer the question.

Gender	Male
Police record	Assault
Government benefits	Food stamps
English proficiency	Fluent English
Prior trips to U.S.	Yes, overstayed visa
Age	36
Education	Elementary school

Which of the following regions did this immigrant most likely come from?

- ○ Africa
- ○ Asia
- ○ Europe
- ○ Latin America
- ○ Middle East

Figure 1. Sample conjoint profile as shown to respondents.

standard practice of conjoint analysis (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014), standard errors are clustered on the level of respondents.

Results of the analysis are presented in Fig. 2 using marginal means (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020). Marginal means represent categorization probabilities for a profile with a certain attribute value while keeping all other attributes constant at their average values. To account for different average probabilities, results are grouped by the region. The most consistent finding is that speaking broken (as opposed to fluent) English strongly decreases hypothetical immigrant's probability of being categorized as European and significantly increases classification probabilities for all non-European origins.[8] Probabilities of being classified as European are also higher for profiles described as having no police record and no immigration status violations. Surprisingly, respondents do not really use education levels (a proxy for skill) when categorizing immigrant origins. Still, European immigrants are associated with desirable attributes like knowing English and being law-abiding.

There are other interesting origin-specific perceptions. For instance, immigrants from Africa and the Middle East are gendered: being described as male increases a profile's probabilities of being categorized as coming from these two regions. Not

[8]To test for the stability of effects, I estimate marginal means independently for the first 10 and the last 10 profiles. The results are presented in Section C of Online Appendix. They show almost no differences in substantive effects, although profiles presented later in the conjoint task are slightly more likely to be classified as Asian and slightly less likely to be classified as Latin American.

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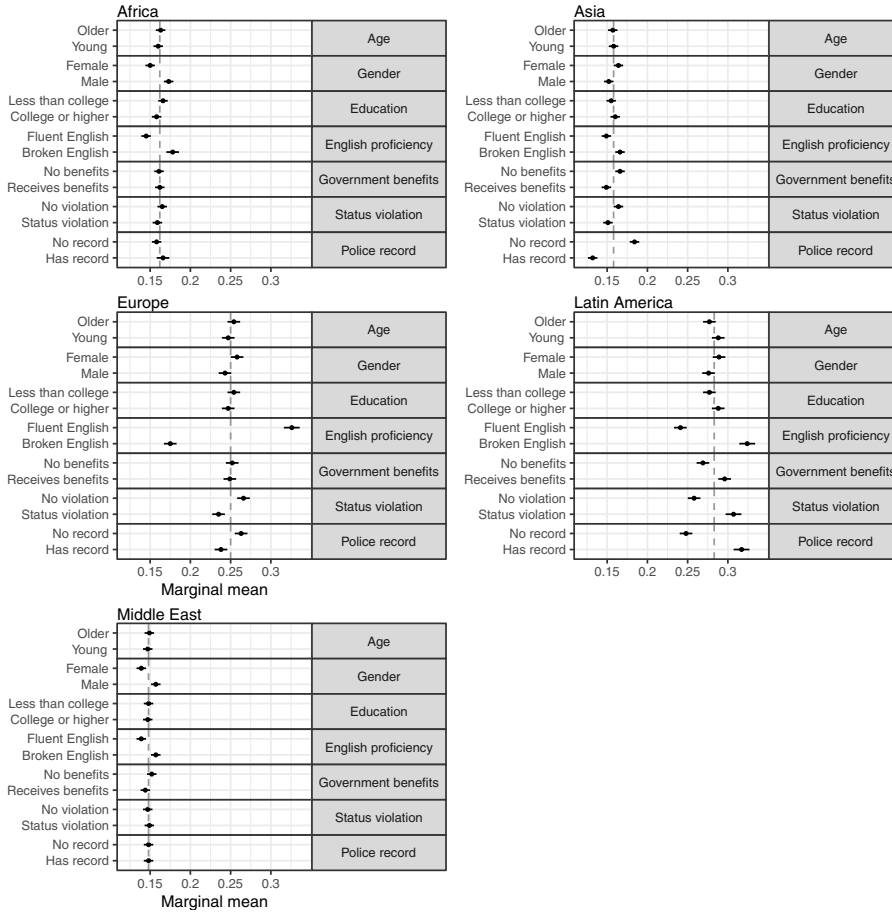


Figure 2. Conjoint results: marginal means.
Note. Dashed lines are region-specific average probabilities.

having government benefits, police records, and immigration status violations all positively impact guesses that hypothetical profiles belong to immigrants from Asia, indicating that the latter are seen as self-sufficient and law-abiding. Perceptions about immigrants from Latin America are the opposite: the categorization probability increases for profiles described as having government benefits, police record, and immigration status violations. Taken together, non-European immigrants are seen less positively than European ones, but this difference in perceptions is almost nonexistent for immigrants from Asia, while immigrants from Latin America are seen particularly negatively.

To explore the role of respondents' racial identity and racial attitudes in perceptions about different immigrant origins, I estimate marginal means independently for whites and nonwhites and, then, for whites with high and low levels of ethnocentrism. These results are presented in Sections D and E of Online Appendix. They show that whites and nonwhites generally have the same

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associations between immigrant origins and the attributes of interest. At the same time, nonwhites are slightly less likely to classify profiles as European and slightly more likely to classify them as African and Asian. There is almost no variation in perceptions across the levels of ethnocentrism among non-Hispanic whites.

Conclusion

In this paper, I report on results of an original conjoint experiment that measures Americans' perceptions about immigrants from five world regions: Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. I find that Americans think of immigrants from regions other than Europe as speaking poor English. In addition, immigrants from Latin America are seen as welfare-dependent and law-breaking, whereas perceptions about immigrants from Asia are the opposite. Fluent English and respect for laws can signal integration into the American society (Levy and Wright 2020; Ostfeld 2017), whereas violation of immigration laws is known to provoke strong opposition among natives (Wright, Levy, and Citrin 2016). Independently of the specific mechanism, perceptions linking immigrants from outside Europe to undesirable attributes can lead Americans to oppose non-European immigration.

At the same time, my results do not show notable perceptions that connect different immigrant origins with higher or lower education levels. This is an important finding since education can be seen as a close proxy for skill that is known to strongly impact immigration preferences (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Valentino et al. 2019). However, this is just one possible interpretation of this result. For instance, respondents can see language as a more important cue for economic contribution than education or discount the value of non-Western education. Future experiments can try manipulating immigrants' occupations as a different proxy for skill or including an attribute representing work ethic, such as employment status and/or effort to find employment.

Another interesting finding concerns the association between immigrant origins and reliance on government benefits. I demonstrate that the corresponding perceptions are not uniform: immigrants from Latin America are seen as more reliant on benefits than Europeans whereas immigrants from Asia are less so. This result can explain a recent controversy in the literature that concern "immigrationization" of welfare in the United States (Garand, Xu, and Davis 2017; Levy 2021). Do Americans increasingly see immigrants as welfare recipients? My results suggest that these perceptions vary across origins: some immigrant groups are seen as being more likely to receive government benefits than others.

When interpreting these findings, some limitations of the chosen conjoint design should be considered.[9] First, while classification-based conjoint analysis allows isolating the causal effects of the target's attributes on guesses about its category membership, the task ultimately measures perceptions or mental associations (Goggin, Henderson, and Theodoridis 2020). These associations themselves are not causal in the sense of the Neyman–Rubin model, which is the standard way of thinking about causality in the modern social sciences. Second, forced-choice conjoint designs, like the one used in this study, produce estimated effects that are

[9]I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for highlighting these limitations.

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relative rather than absolute. For instance, the finding that immigrants from Europe are seen as speaking better English than those from the Global South does not necessarily imply that all Europeans are seen as speaking objectively fluent English. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that these limitations apply to any categorization-based conjoint experiment with a forced-choice outcome.

A separate question deals with the role of race in Americans' perceptions about immigrant origins. Since the importance of ethnocentrism in U.S. public opinion is well documented (Kinder and Kam 2009), do positive perceptions about European immigrants indicate the presence of racial prejudice? My results do not provide a definite answer. Some perceptions indeed follow the "white vs. nonwhite" dichotomy: for instance, all non-European immigrant groups are believed to speak worse English. Others do not, however, since Asian immigrants are seen as more law-abiding than Europeans. These perceptions also show little variation across respondents' ethnic and racial identities as well as across levels of ethnocentrism among non-Hispanic white respondents. Future studies can address this question more in-depth by collecting oversamples of Asian, Black, and Hispanic respondents and analyzing perceptions within those groups separately.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2025.5

Data availability. The data, code, and any additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available at the Journal of Experimental Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PTX4RU

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Competing interests. I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Ethics statements. This study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Virginia (protocol number 4964). This study adheres to APSA's Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research. See Section F of Online Appendix for further details.

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