

September 2014

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Jeff Sanchez

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Recommended Citation

Sanchez, Jeff (2014) "The Perception of the Economy Influencing Public Opinion on Immigration Policy," *e-Research: A Journal of Undergraduate Work*: Vol. 2: No. 3, Article 6.

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e-Research: A Journal of Undergraduate Work, Vol 2, No 3 (2011)[HOME](#)[ABOUT](#)[USER HOME](#)[SEARCH](#)[CURRENT](#)[ARCHIVES](#)[Home](#) > [Vol 2, No 3 \(2011\)](#) > [Sanchez](#)**The Perception of the Economy Influencing Public Opinion on Immigration Policy**

Jeff Sanchez

Key words, terms, concepts, names: Immigration Policy, Public Opinion, Economy, Perception, Security, United States**ABSTRACT**

Does the majority express interest concerning immigration on the basis of perceived personal economic circumstance and security, or on the basis of its perception of the state of the national economy? This study explains how perception of the state of the economy influences opinion on immigration policy. This study finds that an individual's preferences for varying immigration policies are rooted in his or her perception of the state of the national economy, rather than being narrowly determined by his or her perception of their own economic circumstance and security.

INTRODUCTION

Immigration has been an important factor in the increase in population and for the cultural evolution of the United States. The political, economic, and social features of immigration have prompted voluminous discussions regarding what our immigration levels should be, whether it increases unemployment for native-born citizens, and what importance and priority of place it should have in our nation's agenda. We argue that there are both benefits and disadvantages of immigration, regardless of the undeniable scope and influence that immigration has had in this country. Take these statistics as an example of the huge factor immigration plays in the United States: as of 2006 the United States accepts more legal immigrants as permanent residents than all other countries in the world combined; with the removal of ethnic quotas in immigration the number of first-generation immigrants living in the United States has quadrupled, from 9.6 million in 1970 to about 38 million in 2007.^[1] It is clear to see that this is an extensive area for discussion and that that is difficult to summarize the scope of the issue. Similarly, any eventual national policy regarding immigration will always be controversial. Immigration policies range from allowing no immigration at all, to allowing a more open, free flow of immigration, and everything in between. In this study we examine how economic factors provide indicators as to immigration policy and attitudes; particularly when it comes to determining protectionist or "open" policies, by increasing or decreasing immigration levels in the United States. This study will also examine whether one's income and employment status are indicators in determining immigration policy and attitudes. We suspect that public opinion towards immigration can shift a lot more than previously expected because it is not something based merely on rigid social factors, but is affected by changes in the economy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on this topic is extensive and discusses various economic and social factors as considerable areas that influence opinions on immigration policy and attitudes. The linkage between all these factors can be used as justification for protectionist, restrictionist, and even prejudice policies. Several scholars have noted that concerns about an immigrants work ethic and intellectual capacity can be valid indicators that help determine attitudes towards immigration. Therefore, a factor that plays an important role in analyzing attitudes stem from what type of worker immigrants are perceived to be. Are they a skilled workforce or are they lazy contributors that reap the benefits or everyone's else's hard work? It is critical to include these social factors as important indicators because,

J. Sanchez

although this study will focus on economic foundations as being the primary factor influencing immigration policy and attitudes, perhaps there are social factors that are influencing the data and the conclusions reached. Also, it is important to examine how immigration policy can be influenced by what is occurring during that time period. For example, research conducted during 2001 through 2003 would have had take into account the shift in public opinion towards immigration during as result from the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001[2]. September 11 caused a great distrust of foreigners and were seen as negative aspects in society. This created strong movements of nationalism and racism throughout this period. These types of attitudes haven't subsided and are shared towards countless other ethnic minority groups in the United States. Interestingly, research conducted by way of survey will inevitably ask people thermometer style questions that can show negative feelings toward foreigners and minority groups. This will reveal if people have a predisposed view of foreigners and minority groups. These predisposed views can then take precedent over economic factors in determining somebodies attitudes and stance of immigration policy. These people will be more likely to favor greater restrictions and protectionist view points regardless of the economic circumstances they are experiencing. According to Peter Burns and James G. Gimbel in their paper, "Economic Insecurity, Prejudicial Stereotypes and Public Opinion on Immigration Policy, ones prejudice is the best indicator in influencing ones views on immigration policy. However, because their research done in 1992 through 1996, this could be as a result of immigration being synonymous with foreigners, ethnic minorities and "outsiders". This research can be used to explain why public attitudes during economic prosperity won't necessarily result in positive outcomes towards immigration policies, and of course their views on immigrants for that matter.[3] However, other research would seem to indicate that countries, excluding the United States, experiencing economic downturns do experience a rise in negative attitudes towards immigration. That is to say, even if the main factor influencing attitudes towards immigration is prejudicial foundations, and that economic prosperity won't result in an increase of positive attitudes, opinions and attitudes concerning immigration are not immune to being fueled by the economic situation of the state or person. This is once again reaffirmed by Giovanni Facchini and Anna Maria Mayda in "From Individual Attitudes Towards Migrants to Migration Policy Outcomes: Theory and Evidence" where they indicate the importance of social factors influencing views on immigration policy and immigrants. After September, 11, 2001, prejudicial foundations have overtaken economic foundations in determining ones views and attitudes on immigration. However, this study doesn't solely focus on social factors in determining immigration policy and attitudes, but they also look at economic factors. As it turns out, economic drivers, on either national scale or personal scale, play an important role. Although purely economic frameworks are not well suited to explain the policies and attitudes in itself, it is likely that they are key determinants. Although past literature and research does not provide sole evidence on the link between individual attitudes and actual policies implemented, we cannot deny their importance revealed by current voting patterns. Given the extent of opposition to immigration revealed by voters' attitudes, it is a wonder why migration is allowed to take place in the first place.[4] If non-economic considerations such as prejudice and foreigner anxiety are not the only or best indicators, than neither can be self interest a better indicator than economical factors. Research done by University of Berkeley professors Jack Citrin, Donald Green, Christopher Muste and Cara Wong in "Public Opinion Toward Immigration Reform: Economic Motivations" have concluded that "self interest is not a significant influence on preference formation"; preference formation in this case means attitudes and opinions concerning immigration. Researchers also found a strong relationship between immigrant attitudes and particularly pessimism about the current state of the national economy. Perceived harmful effects on job opportunity were connected with protectionist and restrictionist attitudes. Researchers concluded that this economic factor could serve as explaining a lot of the social outlook and social foundations towards immigration; particularly from racial, educational, and occupational groups[5]. People with a more pessimistic view of the national economy will not have favorable views of immigration. Furthermore, anxiety towards immigrants and the belief that their inclusion into the economy will result in a worsening of overall unemployment, and just general anxiety resulting from more competitors in market economy. Likewise, optimist views of the economy will result in more favorable views towards immigration. This is because whether people perceive things to be better off either in their personal lives or in the national economy, they simply become preoccupied with other things and don't place much attention on this issue at all. Another issue that will be looked at in this study is examining income as and indicator that can explain someone's opinions and beliefs toward immigration. Special attention will be placed towards finding out if ones economic level will perhaps result in anti-immigration attitudes. This is based off the premise that older, more established and conservative people will want to hold on to their wealth and will not be interested in helping other people, particularly immigrants. However, it could have the opposite effect where ones

increase in economic security will result in people wanting to give back and give the chance for people to succeed and experience the same opportunities. Research from the past indicates that my first hypotheses will have merit as it has been pointed out in past research done by Charles R. Chadler and Yung-mei Tsai in their report titled "Social Factors Influencing Immigration Attitudes: An Analysis of Data from the General Social Survey". They conclude that there is no statistically significant relationship with income being an explanation for one's attitudes and views of immigration and immigration policy; I hope to disprove this in this study. Lastly, examining race, gender, and fear of crime can no doubt hold relevant data, but I do not believe they explain the greater "across-the-board" relationship. A lot of this research will depend on the perceived economic vitality of immigration. People need to believe that immigration is more of a utility than a hindrance or interference. If people see immigrants as being a contribution to the economics of the greater society, then they will be most likely to allow it. Assuming people are aware of the benefits of immigration, people will see immigration as a factor that influences either their own economic situation or the greater national economy. It is important to note that during the national election of 2004 in the United States immigration reform was brought up once again and put before the people. Both candidates had their conservative and liberal viewpoints concerning immigration. Since the conservative view point prevailed, it is safe to assume that the nation's views and attitudes were still being shaped by a mistrust of voters. The National Election Study for 2004 therefore could already have been shaped to largely by social prejudice on the issue of immigration. Since this study uses data taken from the 2008 National Election, there is an equal level playing field in terms of social factors and economic factors influencing immigration views and attitudes than ever before.

DATA AND METHODS

The analysis carried out in this paper is based upon a series of survey response questions taken from the time series National Election Study 2008 survey, a report by the American National Election Studies. This report and survey compiled data on voting, public opinion, and political participation before and after the 2008 National Election. Previous researchers have deployed similar methods using the National Election Study. Referenced in this study are also reports from the 1992, 1994, 1996, 2002 studies. Various set of tables and bar charts are used throughout the results section to illustrate cross-tabulations, regression and correlation summaries. Data for these figures are taken from pre-election to post-elections questions, including:

- Have you had a job in the last six months;
- One's own personal income;
- When you think about the future of the United States as a whole, are you generally optimistic, pessimistic, or neither optimistic nor pessimistic;
- What are your feelings concerning controlling and reducing illegal immigration;
- Do you think the number of immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live should be increased or decreased;
- Now thinking about the economy in the country as a whole, would you say that over the past year the nation's economy has gotten better or worse.

The first two hypotheses and figures present an individual's own personal economic security or insecurity as potential indicators to explain what immigration levels should be. The last two examine perceptions of the state's overall economy as potential indicators in explaining what levels of immigration should be.

RESULTS

H 1: Individuals with higher income will favor less restrictionist immigration policy.

Cross-tabulation conducted for H1 indicate the potential relationship between an individual's income and their opinion on what immigration levels should be; should they be increased, left the same, or decreased.

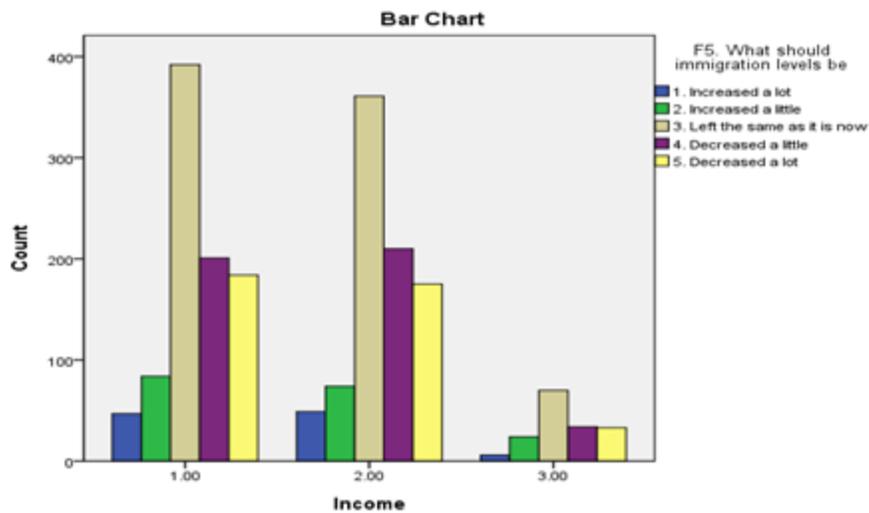
J. Sanchez

Figure 1a:

Income/What should immigration levels be Cross-tabulation							
Count							
		F5. What should immigration levels be					Total
		1. Increased a lot	2. Increased a little	3. Left the same as it is now	4. Decreased a little	5. Decreased a lot	
Income	1.00	47	84	392	201	184	908
	2.00	49	74	361	210	175	869
	3.00	6	24	70	34	33	167
Total		102	182	823	445	392	1944

The table above shows the distribution of respondent's opinion into 5 different columns with totals on the last column indicating a sample of 1944 respondents.

Figure 1b:



The chart above shows the clear distinction between levels 1 and 2 compared to level 3

H 2: Individuals that experience job insecurity will favor restrictionist policies.

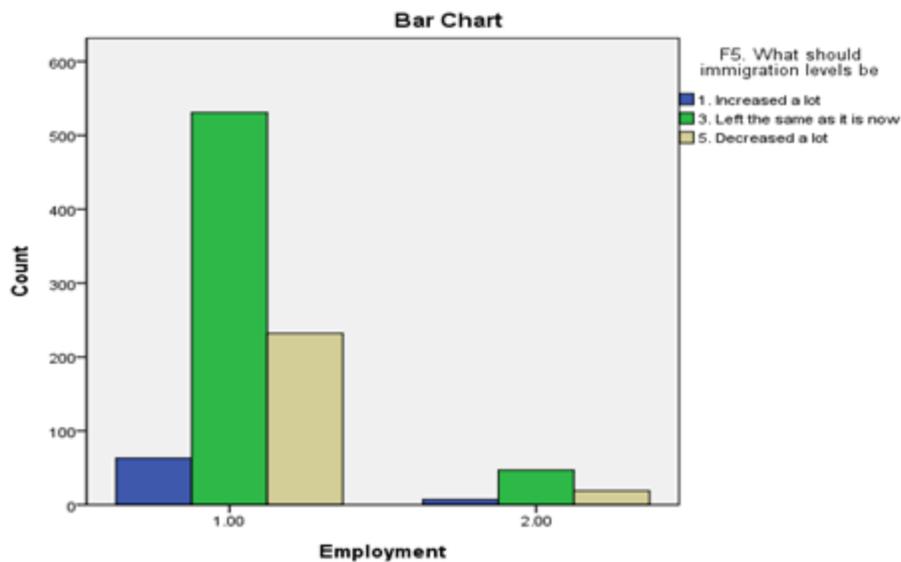
Cross-tabulation conducted for H2 shows the potential relationship between respondent's employment status and what should the level of immigration be; should they increase, stay the same or decrease.

Figure 2a:

Employment /What should immigration levels be							
		F5. What should immigration levels be					Total
		1. Increased a lot	2. Increased a little	3. Left the same as it is now	4. Decreased a little	5. Decreased a lot	
Employment	1.00	63	118	531	268	232	1212
	2.00	7	9	47	31	19	113
Total		70	127	578	299	251	1325

The table above shows the distribution of respondent's opinion into 5 different columns with totals on the last column indicating a sample of 1325 respondents.

Figure 2b:



The chart above shows the clear distinction between levels 1 and 2

H 3: Individuals who believe the economy is doing worse than previously will favor tighter immigration policies.

Cross-tabulation conducted for H2 shows the potential relationship between respondent's pessimistic and optimistic feelings and what should the level of immigration be; should they increase, stay the same or decrease as a result.

J. Sanchez

Figure 3a:

The chart below shows the clear distinction between levels 2 and 3 compared to 1

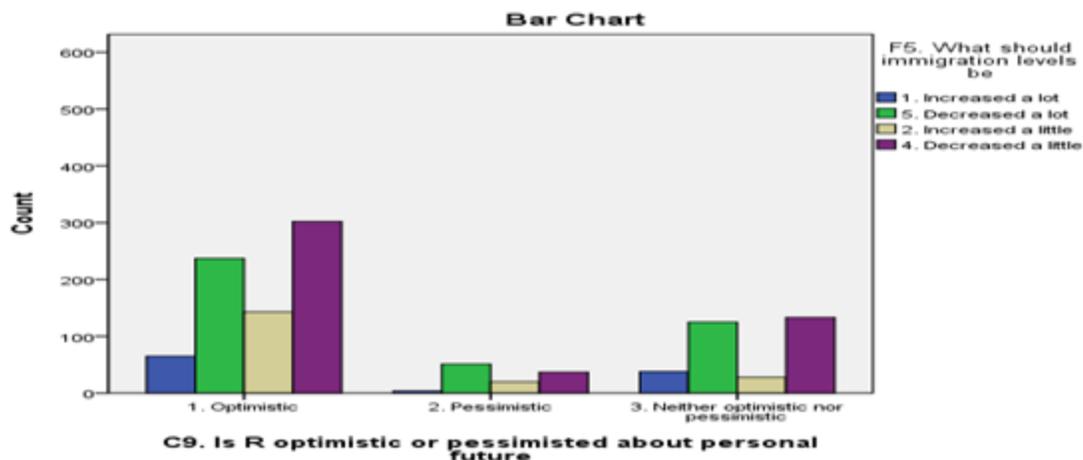


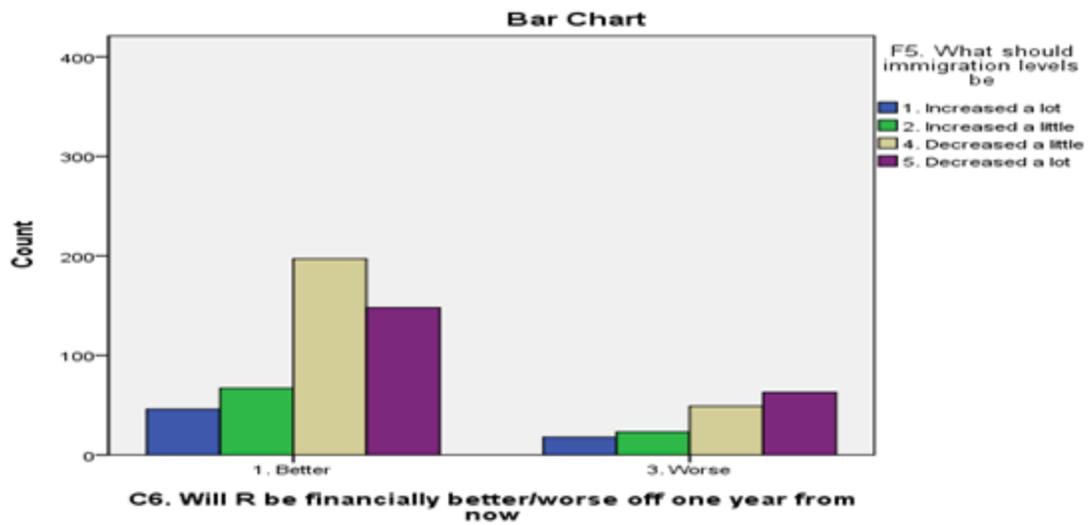
Figure 3b:

Will be financially better/worse off one year from now/What should immigration levels be							
Figure 1a:							
Count		F5. What should immigration levels be					Total
		1. Increased a lot	2. Increased a little	3. Left the same as it is now	4. Decreased a little	5. Decreased a lot	
C6. Will R be financially better/worse off one year from now	1. Better	46	67	352	197	148	810
	3. Worse	18	23	78	49	63	231
	5. The same	40	99	394	217	179	929
Total		104	189	824	463	390	1970

H 4: Individuals who are pessimistic about the economy and believe it will do worse in the next year will rank the importance of dealing with immigration with higher importance.

Cross-tabulation conducted for H4 shows the potential relationship between respondent's pessimistic and optimistic feelings about how the economy will be and what should the level of immigration be; should they increase, stay the same or decrease as a result.

Figure 4a:



The chart above shows the clear distinction between levels 1 and 3

Figure 4b:

Optimistic or pessimistic about economies future/ What should immigration levels be							
		F5. What should immigration levels be					Total
		1. Increased a lot	2. Increased a little	3. Left the same as it is now	4. Decreased a little	5. Decreased a lot	
C9. Is R optimistic or pessimistic about Economies future	1. Optimistic	65	143	572	302	237	1319
	2. Pessimistic	4	20	60	37	51	172
	3. Neither optimistic nor pessimistic	38	28	235	133	125	559
Total		107	191	867	472	413	2050

Regression and Correlations

Statistical regressions were conducted based on the information from H3 and H4

H3: Individuals determine what immigration levels should be whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the economy

J. Sanchez

Figure 5a:

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	1.67 ^a	.013	.013	1.142
a. Predictors: (Constant), Optimism/ Pessimism				

Figure 5b:

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.221	0.383		26.661	0.300
	Optimism	1.67	0.551	-0.415	-5.285	0.320
a. Dependent Variable: What Should immigration levels be						

The regression above shows that there is a considerable relationship between optimism and pessimism and determining how a person will feel about immigration levels.

H4: Correlation between individuals who are pessimistic about the economy and believe it will do worse in the next year will rank the importance of dealing with immigration with higher importance.

Figure 6a:

Correlations			
		Income	F1d.What level of immigration should be
Pessimism/ Optimism	Pearson Correlation	1	.171**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	2172	1975
F1d.What level of immigration should be	Pearson Correlation	.171**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1975	2099
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

The table above shows that correlation between pessimism and the level of immigration should be is slight but still considerable, and the correlation is statistically significant.

Also, a statistical regression was run which showed that of the three independent variables, the one with the strongest effect in determining how immigration level opinions is the perceptions (pessimism and optimism) of the state economy. While the R^2 is small, all relationships are significant.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study finds evidence suggesting that through analyzing employment, income, pessimistic and optimistic attitudes, and one's perceptions of the state of the greater national economy are statistically considerable and in this study provided the best indicators influencing immigration policy and attitudes. Contrary to belief, one's own personal economical situation is not the primary factor influencing immigration policy and attitudes. The 'understanding' of the state of the economy can be an indicator for attitudes of protectionism and restrictions. In H1 it was determined that one's income was not relevant in determining one's views on immigration levels. In fact, low and medium brackets of income believed that immigration levels should stay the same. Only 15% of respondents thought restrictions on immigration, via increasing levels of immigrations, should be lifted. Since only 15% of the highest bracket of income thought restrictions on immigration should be lifted, H1 appears to be false. In H2 it was determined that employment was also not an indicator for explaining immigration policy and attitudes. Along the same lines of H1, leaving immigration levels the same was the most popular choice whether you were employed or unemployed. In H3 it was finally determined that your status as employed or unemployed influenced immigration levels. It was the first time keeping immigration levels the same was the lowest respondent choice to increasing and decreasing immigration levels. A full 60 % of respondents were either swayed to increase or decrease immigration levels whether they were optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the economy. Finally, in H4 it was determined that respondents who are pessimistic about the economy and believe it will do worse in the next year ranked the importance of dealing with immigration higher than not doing anything at all. Further implications asserted by this study are that public opinion towards immigration can be volatile because

J. Sanchez

they are increasingly rooted in economic circumstances, not social factors. In this study a person is more influenced by their perception of the greater national economy, than by their own economic circumstances. However, we must offer this one caveat: because this data was taken in 2008, at the height of an economic crisis, a lot of the data can be predisposed to favor economic factors over social factors when it comes to deterring immigration policy and attitudes. Previous researchers have already deployed similar methods as used here, using the National Election Study from 1992 through 2004, and further studies after 2008 should be examined. Also, it is important to further examine how hostility towards immigrants because they are labeled ethnic minorities, and the increasing competitive forces between natives and immigrants, can be considerable indicators of immigration policy and attitudes.

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