

American Public Opinion on Immigration Policy

Influence of Race, Education and Political Affiliation.

Harrison Filgate

Department of Political Science & International Affairs, University of New Hampshire



University of
New Hampshire

Introduction

The United States has a longstanding history as a nation shaped by immigration, yet today immigration has become a hot button political issue. There is constant debate around who should be permitted to enter and remain within its borders, or even if the border should be sealed off completely. While current U.S. immigration policy includes a legal pathway to citizenship, the complexity and length of the process poses significant barriers and therefore many potential legal immigrants resort to entering the country illegally. Public opinion is often influenced by partisan rhetoric yet there are other factors that contribute to individual viewpoints. This study analyzes data that captures attitudes toward immigration within the American electorate.

Hypothesis

Individuals who are either White, Republican or have an education level of high school or lower are more likely to oppose immigration policy reforms that would allow current residing undocumented immigrants to become citizens.

Literature Review

Americans' views on immigration are shaped by where they live, their political beliefs, and how much they trust the government. For example, people who live closer to the U.S.–Mexico border and who identify with certain political views are more likely to support stricter border policies like building a wall (Jones-Correa, 2018). However, most Americans still support allowing undocumented immigrants to get emergency medical care—especially for children and pregnant women—even if they're stopped at immigration checkpoints (Rodriguez et al., 2023). Many people also don't believe negative stereotypes about immigrants being criminals, but those who hold strong feelings of racial resentment or white nationalist beliefs are more likely to view immigrants in a negative light (Smith, 2020). People who have more trust in government, regardless of political affiliation, are more likely to support immigration (Nguyen, 2022). Finally, public opinion can influence immigration laws, but this usually happens when immigration becomes a big issue—like when there are a lot of new arrivals in a country (Larsen, 2019). Together, these studies show that attitudes about immigration are influenced by many different factors and can change depending on the political and social climate.

Methods/Variables

For this analysis, I used data from the 2020 American National Elections Studies survey (ANES). This survey is conducted every presidential election year (every 4 years) and seeks to gather information regarding the policy positions of the American electorate. Using the statistical analysis program, R Studio, I conducted a series of cross tabulations to discover if there were any correlations between my independent and dependent variables. I chose this method because it is a useful tool for analyzing categorical data.

The ANES survey collects a large amount of demographic information about each respondent. For this analysis I chose to look at three independent variables:

- Political Party Affiliation
- Level of Education
- Racial Identity

The question I chose for this study is:

Which comes closest to your view about what government policy should be toward unauthorized immigrants now living in the United States?

Respondents could choose one of the following answers:

- Make all unauthorized immigrants felons and send them back to their home country.
- Have a guest worker program that allows unauthorized immigrants to remain in the United States in order to work, but only for a limited amount of time.
- Allow unauthorized immigrants to remain in the United States and eventually qualify for U.S. citizenship, but only if they meet certain requirements like paying back taxes and fines, learning English, and passing background checks.
- Allow unauthorized immigrants to remain in the United States and eventually qualify for U.S. citizenship, without penalties.

Findings

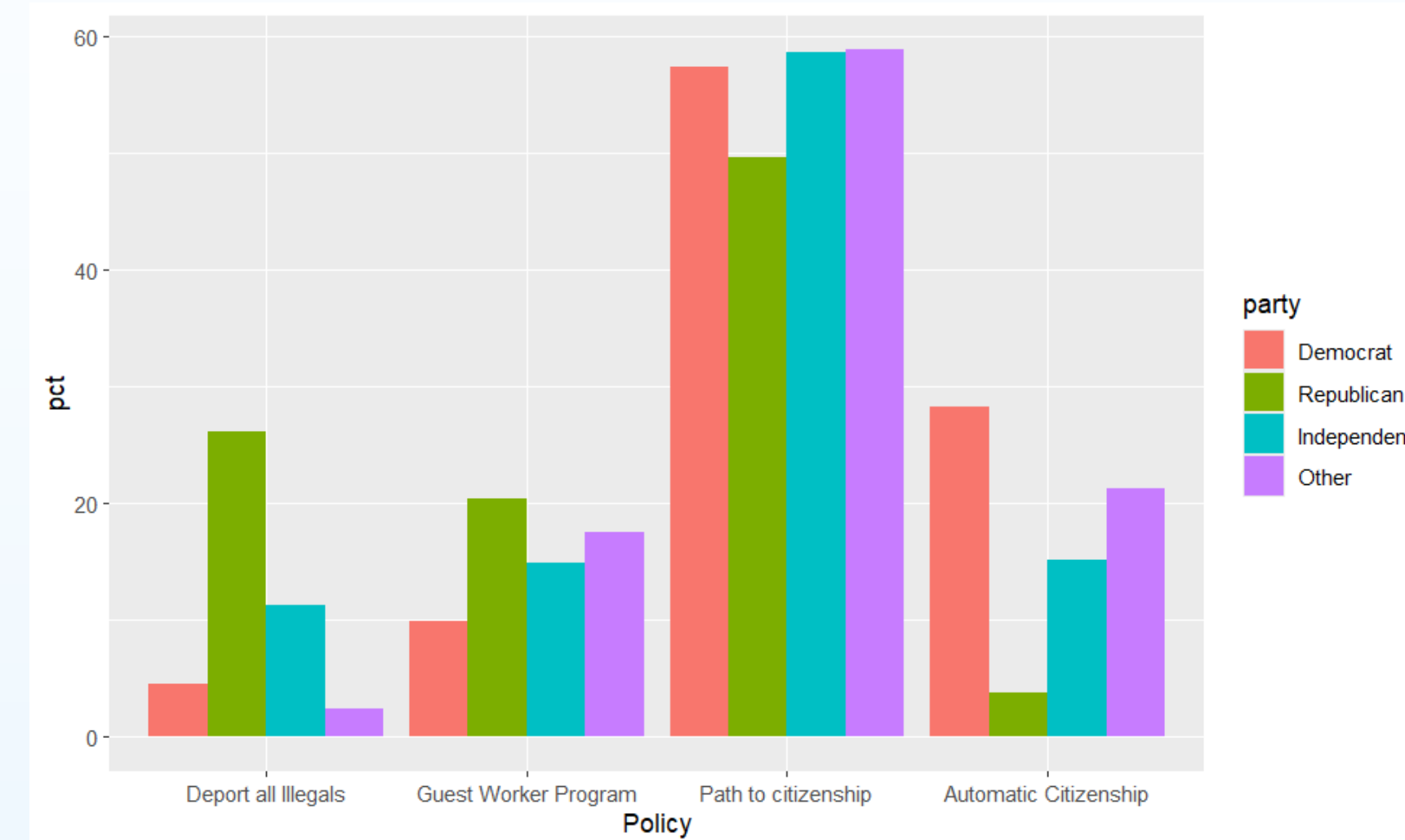


Figure 1- Public Opinion on Immigration Policy Based on Party Affiliation.

Standouts:

- At least 50% of the respondents from each party were in favor of option three over all other choices.
- The majority in favor of option one (deport all illegals) are Republicans.
- Democrats are the largest supporters for option 4 (automatic citizenship).

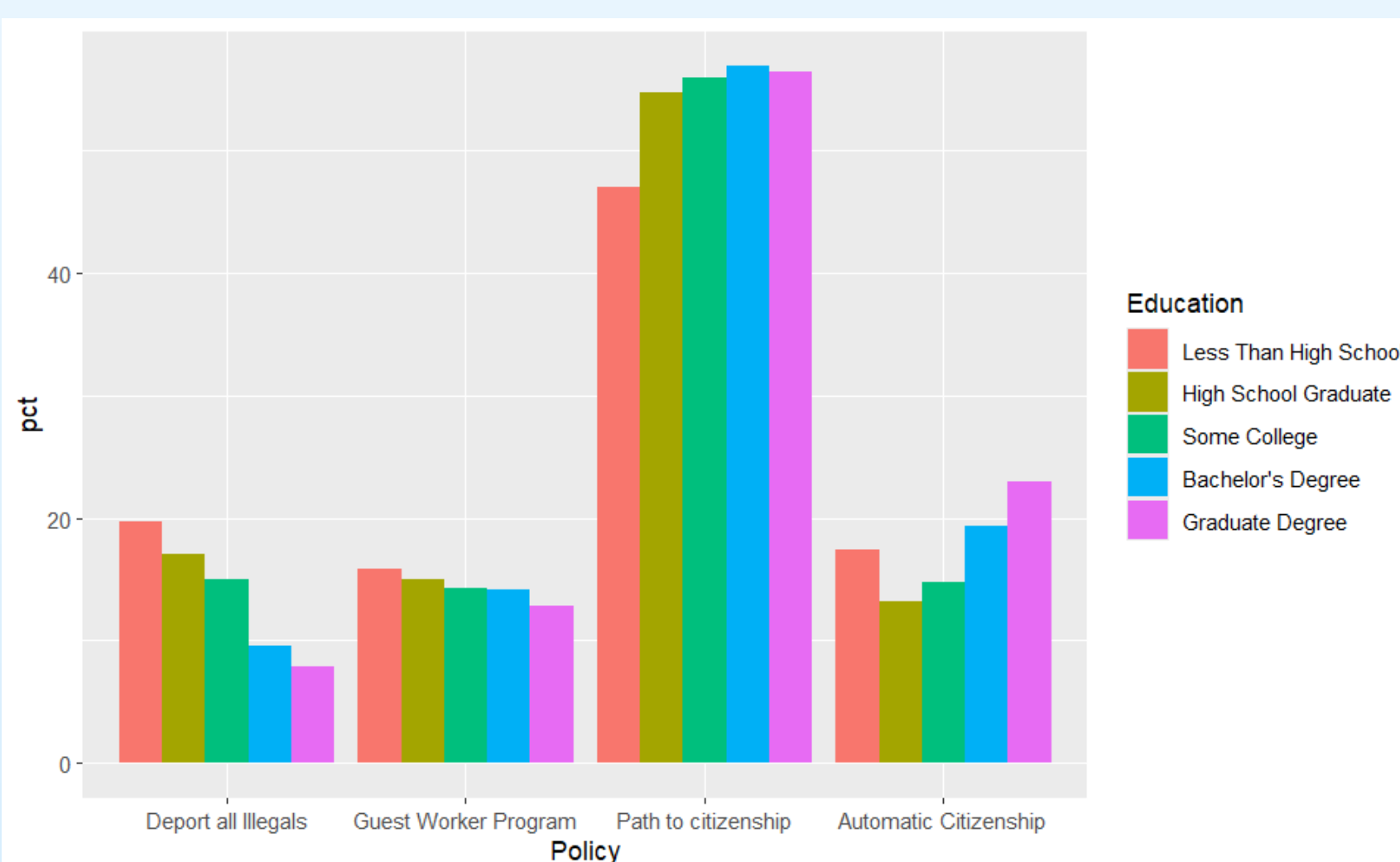


Figure 2- Public Opinion on Immigration Policy Based on Level of Education.

Standouts:

- Over 40% of respondents from each level of education are in support of option three (providing a path to citizenship)
- Option one shows a steep downward trend, the higher the education level the lower the support.
- Option four (grant automatic citizenship to all immigrants) has the most significant support rate from the highest educated individuals while the lowest educated individuals are third.

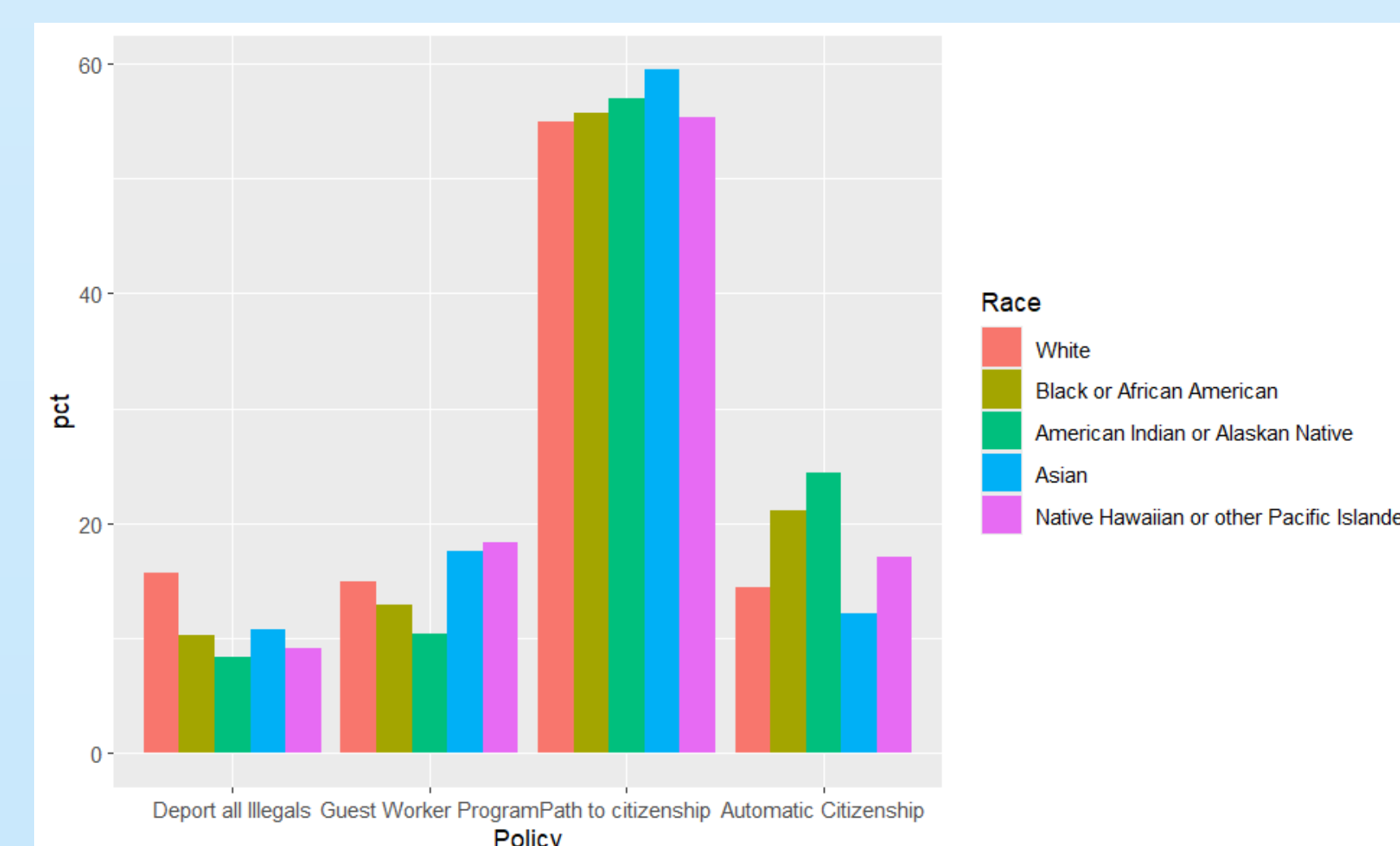


Figure 3- Public Opinion on Immigration Policy Based on Racial Identity.

Standouts:

- Over 50% of respondents from each race are in support of option three.
- White people show highest support rate for option one.
- American Indians were the majority lead in support for option four.

Conclusion

I hypothesized that individuals who are White, identify as Republican, or have a high school education or less would be more likely to oppose immigration policy reforms that allow undocumented immigrants to become citizens. The results **partially supported this hypothesis**:

- Across all three independent variables (Race, Education, and Party ID), **roughly 45% or more** of respondents — regardless of demographic — supported **Option 3: allowing undocumented immigrants to qualify for citizenship if they meet certain criteria**.
 - This suggests broader public support for pathways to citizenship than is usually reported by the media. However, patterns consistent with the original hypothesis emerged when looking at support for more **punitive immigration policies**:

- Option 1: Deportation and felony charges** for undocumented immigrants received:

- **26.2% support among Republicans** compared to:

- + **4.49% of Democrats**
- + **11.2% of Independents**
- + **2.35% of respondents from Other parties**

- This indicates higher support for punitive measures among Republicans.

- Education level** also correlated with support for punitive immigration policy, with support for **Option 1 steadily decreasing as education increased**:

- Less than high school: 19.7%
- High school diploma: 17%
- Some college: 15%
- Bachelor's degree: 9.59%
- Graduate degree: 7.86%

- This suggests higher education levels are associated with **lower support for harsh immigration measures**.

Regarding support for more lenient policies:

- Option 4: Automatic citizenship** for undocumented immigrants showed a **strong partisan divide**:

- Only **3.77% of Republicans** supported it compared to:

- + **28.3% of Democrats**
- + **15.1% of Independents**
- + **21.3% of Other affiliations**

- This highlights deep ideological differences along party lines.

Race showed a weaker pattern:

- While White respondents showed **slightly higher support for restrictive immigration policies**, the differences compared to non-White respondents were smaller and less consistent indicating that **race was a weaker predictor** than party affiliation.

Overall Summary:

- While race and education had some influence, political party affiliation was the strongest predictor of immigration policy attitudes with regards to the most restrictive and lenient options. However, most respondents, across demographics, preferred Option 3—a middle-ground path to citizenship—over the other options. This shows that a sizable majority of Americans are in support of allowing immigrants to enter and become citizens of the United States.

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