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Framing the Case for Supporting Immigrants

To build support for a cause, activists frame issues in ways they think will resonate with the public. UC Berkeley researchers find that one of the primary tactics for activists—using a civil rights framework to frame an issue—can actually decrease public support. Particularly in the case of immigrant rights and legalization, activists should reevaluate their strategies in order to successfully persuade the public to adopt change.

Overview

When trying to gain public support for a cause, activists frame issues by invoking values and beliefs in an attempt to resonate with the public. In the 1960s, activists constructed a language of civil rights to frame the claims of African Americans. Since the civil rights movement, it has been popular to frame many social movement causes as civil rights or human rights issues. However, it has been unclear whether this framing still resonates with the American public. In particular, there is little research on what frameworks build public support for undocumented immigrants who cannot claim the rights of citizenship.

In three recent studies, IRLE faculty affiliates and UC Berkeley sociologists Kim Voss and Irene Bloemraad, alongside Fabiana Silva, a former UC Berkeley graduate student now on faculty at the University of Michigan, examine whether civil or human rights frameworks move public support for legalization, immigrants' access to public benefits, and government action to address hardships faced by citizens and noncitizens.

This brief reviews research by UC Berkeley sociologists Kim Voss, Irene Bloemraad, and Fabiana Silva. Written by Lisa McCorkell of the Goldman School of Public Policy, and Sara Hinkley of IRLE.

Rights, Economics, or Family Framing



Photo: Chris Boese, "Whatever you did to the least of these." Elizabeth, NJ Immigrant Holding Camp

In a 2016 paper entitled, "Rights, Economics, or Family?: Frame Resonance, Political Ideology, and the Immigrant Rights Movement," Voss, Bloemraad, and Silva surveyed a random subsample of registered California voters in May 2013. Each participant was randomly assigned into either a control condition or one of three frames. Those assigned to frames were exposed to a phrase that offered both a "pro" and a "con" argument that focused on either human rights, economics, or family. The survey asked if the respondents believed that undocumented immigrants who passed a background check should be offered permanent legal status with a path to citizenship, permanent legal status without a path to citizenship, or no change in legal status. The next ques-



Chris Boese "It is Wrong," Elizabeth, NJ Immigrant Holding Camp, 2019

tions asked respondents whether US citizens, legal immigrants, or all residents regardless of legal status should have access to seven different publicly provided benefits.

The authors find that the majority of California voters (between 53.5% and 58.5% depending on the treatment) support permanent residency and a path to citizenship, although a sizeable minority (26.3%-35.1%) support no change in legal status. When distinguishing respondents by political ideology, the authors find that there is a wide range of support. For example, 78% of liberals support a path to citizenship, while 57% of moderates and only 32% of conservatives agree.

Ideological groups also respond differently to the three frames. Framing questions with language pitting human rights against citizen rights leads to a backlash among moderates: they become less likely to support a path to citizenship and more likely to support the status quo. The family values frame does increase support for a path to citizenship among conservatives, particularly among conservative women. The economic frame does not have a significant effect on any ideological group, despite how prevalent claims about the economic effects of immigration are in public discourse.

In looking at how frames influence views on benefits, the authors find little effect for the overall sample. The only significant effect that they find when analyzing subgroups is that a rights frame increases support among liberals for immigrant access to public benefits.

These findings suggest that a human rights frame will not increase support for legalization and may in fact make moderates less likely to support legalization. The only

frame that increased support for immigrants among conservatives is an emphasis on keeping families together.

Further Evidence of the Limits of Rights

Voss, Bloemraad, and Silva continue their research in "The Limits of Rights: Claims-making on Behalf of Immigrants" (2019). In a 2016 survey, a sample of registered California voters were randomly assigned to the control condition or one of three frames: civil rights, human rights, or American values. The researchers chose these specific frames to a) see if claims of civil rights are still salient when applied to both citizens and noncitizens, b) learn if human rights appeals resonate for domestic issues, and c) determine whether the idea of "Americanness" is more exclusionary or inclusive. Respondents were presented with vignettes that involved food insecurity, serious illness without access to health care, and sexual harassment at work. The researchers varied the characteristics of the woman who was portrayed in each vignette; this paper analyzes the scenarios featuring Mexican-American citizens and Mexican undocumented immigrants. Respondents were asked whether they agreed that the situation violated American values, human rights, or civil rights based on the frame they were assigned to, and were also asked whether they supported government action in each situation.

Respondents more readily agreed that a scenario constituted a violation of rights or values when it featured a citizen than when it featured an undocumented migrant. This difference is referred to as the "undocumented penalty," and it holds in frames of civil rights and American values,

as well as when asked if government action should be taken. None of the frames significantly increase support for government action, although relative to the American values frame, the civil rights frame actually significantly decreases support for government action for both undocumented immigrants and Mexican-American citizens. This backlash is seen most prominently among white respondents and those identifying as liberal.

In a forthcoming study, Voss, Bloemraad, and Silva expand the analysis of the survey to include a hardship based on workplace discrimination and examine the effect of presenting vignettes with women of different ethno-racial backgrounds. The authors again find that scenarios that are framed as being about civil rights make respondents less generous in identifying scenarios as problems or as justifying government assistance than when framed with American values or having no frame at all. This is despite respondents expressing much more positive sentiment towards civil and human rights than American values. The negative impact of a civil rights framing holds for scenarios with either a Black, white, or Latinx woman; in cases of lacking access to health care, going hungry, and facing discrimination at work; and before and after Donald Trump became president.

Respondents might, however, see sexual harassment as distinct from other hardships. In the 2016 survey, respondents were more likely to agree that the sexual harassment scenario is a violation of rights and values and that government action is warranted as compared to the food insecurity and healthcare scenarios. In addition, the sexual harassment scenario did not result in an undocumented penalty, perhaps because citizenship is not seen as a

barrier to making a sexual harassment claim while access to food and healthcare are seen as entitlements of American citizenship.

The findings suggest that the pro-immigrant movement may gain more support by moving away from the civil rights frame and moving toward a frame that emphasizes American values.

Conclusions



Photo: Charles Versaggi

Voss, Bloemraad, and Silva’s research has far-reaching implications for those studying and supporting social movements. In the fight for immigrant rights and legalization, the predominant strategy of using a civil rights frame is not only ineffective in increasing support, but could actually be decreasing support among California voters for policies that advance immigrant, social, or workplace rights for any demographic.

FRAME LANGUAGE

The survey in the 2016 paper included the following language based on the frame assigned to the respondent:

- *Rights*: “Some say we need to protect everyone’s human rights, even illegal immigrants, while others say we need to protect the rights of US citizens first and foremost.”
- *Economics*: “Some say such immigrants contribute to economic growth, while others say that illegal immigrants take American jobs.”
- *Family*: “Some say illegal immigrant parents should be deported to their homeland, while others say that we should keep families together.”

The survey in the 2019 papers used the following language to introduce the vignettes based on frame assignment:

- “Some people argue that we have not done enough to uphold {American values/human rights/civil rights} in the United States. They believe that the situations in the following three screens violate {American values/human rights/civil rights}.”

The civil rights movement was powerful and productive; sixty years have passed, though, and those same civil rights arguments are not resonating with California voters today. Perhaps the right strategy is to play on American values and family unity. One thing is clear: activists need to reevaluate their current language if they want to make progress in garnering support for their issues.

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Series editor: Sara Hinkley, Associate Director of IRLE.

FEATURED RESEARCH

Bloemraad, I., Silva, F., & Voss, K. (2016). Rights, economics, or family? Frame resonance, political ideology, and the immigrant rights movement. *Social Forces* 94(4): 1647-1674.

Voss, K., Silva, F., & Bloemraad, I. (2019). The limits of rights: claims-making on behalf of immigrants. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

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