



CÉCD  
CSDC

CENTRE POUR L'ÉTUDE  
DE LA CITOYENNETÉ DÉMOCRATIQUE  
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY  
OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

## WHY PEOPLE DO (AND DO NOT) SUPPORT IMMIGRATION IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

### KEYWORDS

Immigration; Canada; United States,  
ethnic cues, economic cues;  
multiculturalism

### WHAT'S THE STORY?

In recent years, public sentiment about immigration in many countries throughout the Western world has become less favorable. The two most popular explanations for the upswing in immigration phobia are 1) economic threat and 2) cultural threat arguments. The former suggests that more immigrants will take away jobs from natives and/or drain the welfare system. The latter warns that more immigrants pose a threat to our (i.e. the dominant group's) values.

Drawing on a unique survey experiment, this article examines whether **economic** or **cultural** concerns best characterize objections that many Canadians and Americans have about immigration. In general, results show that economic objections trump cultural objections in both countries. The job skills that prospective immigrants bring to the country are significantly more important determinants of attitudes toward a candidate's application than either ethnicity or skin complexion.

Though Americans and Canadians share quite similar attitudes about immigrant applicants overall, the study did uncover subtle areas of

difference. For instance, Americans showed a slight preference for Hispanic applicants compared to Middle Eastern applicants, whereas Canadians did not clearly distinguish between the ethnicities tested. Within Canada, however, results did show that Francophone respondents were significantly less supportive

### Are Canadians Pro-Immigrant?

Results show that Canadians are slightly more pro-immigrant than Americans. But most citizens in both countries think their country is accepting too many immigrants in general.

### It's the Economy, Stupid!

Canadians and Americans strongly prefer high skilled immigrants (doctors, engineers, computer programmers, etc.) to low skilled (construction workers, landscapers, etc.).

### Cultural Threat Overblown

Skin tone and ethnicity have only a marginal effect on the attitudes of Canadians and Americans toward immigration.

of Middle Eastern applicants than the comparison ethnic group used in this study (South Asian).

## HOW WE DID IT?

Results presented in this study are from a unique experimental design embedded within a representative online survey of about 1,000 Canadians and Americans. Each participant in the study was invited to read a short story (vignette) about a prospective immigrant, which also included a picture of the applicant. They were then asked a series of questions about whether citizenship or a work permit should be granted in each case.

The vignettes created for the experiment varied in terms of the depiction of economic skills and family background of prospective immigrants. The pictures associated with each vignette also varied in terms ethnicity and skin complexion. Face-morphing software was used to hold the attractiveness of each candidate constant – meaning that facial features remained consistent and only skin complexion and ethnicity varied.

## FOR PUBLIC DEBATE

In many (probably most) countries immigration and immigration policy is a hotly contested and recurring theme of public debate. And in many countries policy-makers react to mainstream debates with proposals ranging from policy tweaks to radical overhauls of the system.

Above all, this study demonstrates that economic factors trump cultural concerns in the calculations that people in Canada and the

United States make about prospective immigrants. What matters most for average citizens is the socio-economic skills package that a prospective immigrant arrives with. This suggests that public support for immigration regimes, in general, hinges in no small part on the degree of emphasis placed on the training and educational background characteristics of its applicants.

“What the experiment makes most clear is that economic factors make a significant difference in citizens’ evaluation of potential immigrants in both countries.”

## LEARN MORE

Allison Harell, Stuart Soroka, Shanto Iyengar, and Nicholas Valentino. 2012. “The Impact of Economic Cues on Support for Immigration in Canada and the United States.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 43(3): 499-530. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0008423912000698>

CSDC research capsules are designed to increase public awareness about research conducted by members of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship.

To find out more about the Centre for the Study of Democratic Citizenship check us out online at:

<http://csdc-cecd.mcgill.ca>  
<http://www.facebook.com/groups/CSDC.CECD/>

This research has benefited from the financial assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) International Opportunities Fund and by the National Research Foundation of Korea.