

# Polarization or Consensus? Examining Immigration Policy Preferences

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## Introduction

Immigration is becoming one of the most salient and divisive topics in American politics. Despite its prominence in the current political debate, we do not completely understand Americans' preference on immigration policy. Building on extensive literature examining multidimensional preferences on immigrants, this study applies conjoint analysis to understand Americans' multidimensional preferences on immigration policy.

### Objectives

- What form of immigration reform policies do Americans support?
- Which issues do Americans care the most about?
- Do policy preferences and issue salience vary by respondent characteristics?

## Survey and Methodology

The conjoint experiment was fielded on Qualtrics Panels between Feb 13 to Mar 21, 2019 ( $N = 1,406$ ) to U.S. adults. Quotas were imposed on partisanship and education. Since there is no standard description of undocumented immigrants, respondents are randomly assigned into treatment groups for “unauthorized immigrants,” “undocumented immigrants,” and “illegal aliens.”

Respondents were given ten conjoint tasks and asked to select one of the two profiles (i.e., policy sets) they would prefer the U.S. government to implement, and provided a rating for each profile. The policies (i.e., attributes in this experiment) are selected based on proposed legislation, current events, and traditional debate topics.

Given the lack of theoretically-justified baselines, we measure marginal means (Clayton, Ferwerda, and Horiuchi 2019; Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2019), the likelihood of choosing a particular profile given the presence of an attribute-level.

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## Immigration Policy Preferences

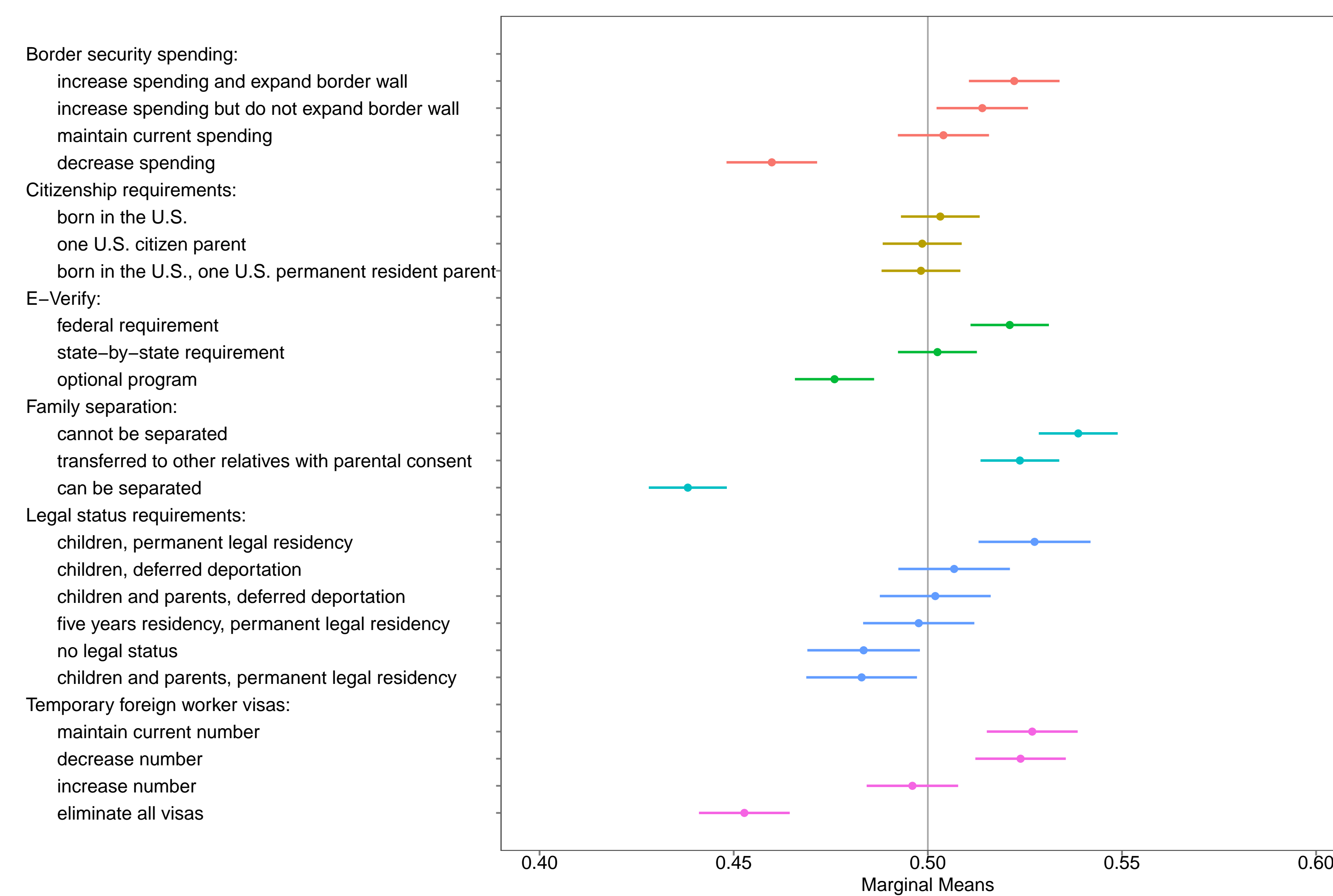


Fig. 1: Policy preferences, all respondents. The estimates represent marginal means, or the probability of choosing a profile with a given attribute level. Horizontal range represents the 95% confidence interval.

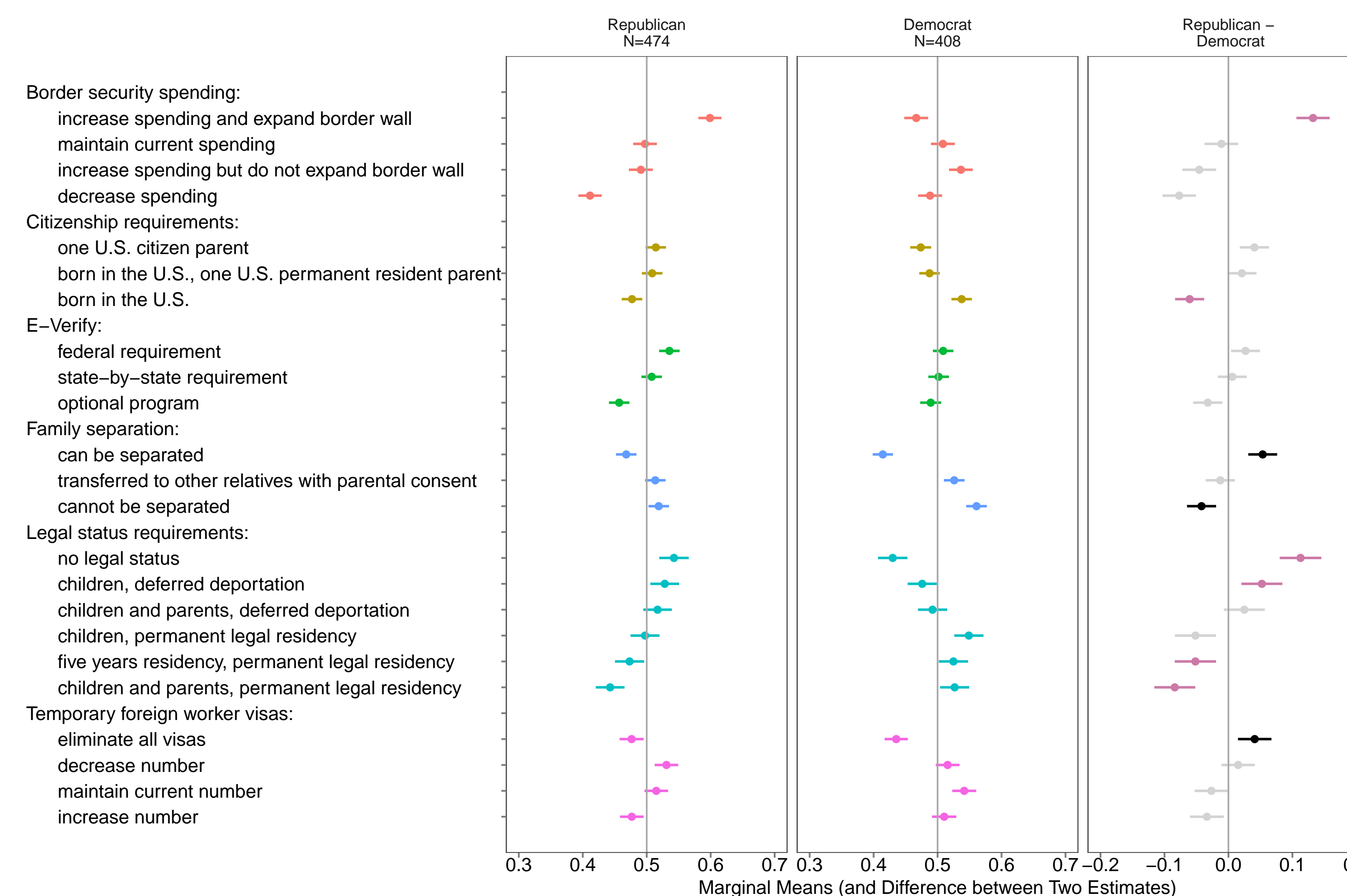


Fig. 2: Difference in policy preferences, by partisanship. Purple represents polarization and black represents weak consensus.

## Main Results

### General preferences (Fig. 1)

- Americans generally prefer increased border security spending, a stricter E-Verify requirement, preventing family separation, a path to citizenship for Dreamers, and maintaining the number of temporary foreign worker visas.

### Preference heterogeneity (Fig. 2)

- Though Americans' immigration policy preferences vary little with their education, gender, immigrant status, and race, they are polarized with respondents' partisanship, ideology, and views on Trump and current economic conditions.
- There is partisan disagreement over legal status and border security spending, the hallmark immigration policies of the Democratic and Republican parties.

### Issue salience

- Family separation is the most salient issue that respondents consider when deciding immigration policy preferences, followed by temporary foreign worker visas and border security spending.
- Citizenship requirement is the least salient issue, followed by legal status requirements and E-Verify.

## Implications

- When it comes to immigration policies, rather than individual immigrants, there is no “hidden immigration consensus” (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015).  
→ a divergence exists between individuals' views about tangible objects compared to abstract concepts.
- Although the survey was conducted immediately following the government shutdown, which centered its debate around border security spending, the issue was not of the highest importance to respondents.  
→ a divergence exists in issue salience between politicians and constituents.