

# Framing Fear: Loss Aversion and Availability in Trump's Immigration Rhetoric

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of the cognitive biases of the availability heuristic and loss aversion in shaping voter preferences and public support for Donald Trump's immigration rhetoric and policies. The study, grounded in behavioral economics, examines how loss-framed narratives, such as those of economic and cultural threats posed by immigration, mobilize voter support by leveraging fears of perceived losses. Simultaneously, Trump's reliance on emotive anecdotes amplifies the salience of isolated events, distorting public perception of immigrants as disproportionately linked to crime and economic strain. Despite empirical evidence highlighting the economic contributions and lower crime rates among immigrant populations, these biases, namely the availability heuristic and loss aversion, drive support for stringent immigration measures, including travel bans and deportations for particular immigrant groups. This paper argues for corrective measures such as embedding anecdotal narratives within public campaigns, policy-making forums, and educational curricula alongside enhancing public data literacy to mitigate these biases in political discourse and voter choices.

## Introduction

Immigration policy has been a defining campaign battleground since at least the 2016 race. On the eve of that election, 79% of Trump supporters called illegal immigration a "very big problem" (Pew Research Center, 2016). The issue's salience endured into 2024, when a Gallup survey found immigration the single most-cited voting concern for roughly one-quarter of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (Brenan, 2024b). Immigration ranks among the electorate's most resonant policy areas, reflecting not only purely economic concerns but also deep-seated cognitive patterns influencing how individuals interpret and decide complex issues. Behavioral economics sets a framework for these processes, challenging the assumption of the full rationality of *homo economicus*<sup>1</sup> in decision-making, brought along with the theory of classical economics. Instead, it emphasizes that heuristics, mental shortcuts in decision-making, are employed for making decisions under uncertainty. While swift, these heuristics generally introduce systematic biases, which distort public views and, consequently, voter preferences towards policies that may actually lead away from both short- and long-term economic

soundness. Experimental and survey evidence confirms that loss-framed or vivid anecdotal cues heighten anti-immigrant sentiment (Alesina, Miano, & Stantcheva, 2018). Building on that literature, this paper traces how those two specific biases, loss aversion and the availability heuristic, interact with Donald Trump's immigration rhetoric, linking micro-level cognitive effects to macro-level shifts in voter support for his agenda.

During the 2024 campaign that returned Donald J. Trump to the White House, observers did not yet know which of his proposed second-term immigration measures would ultimately be implemented to the fullest extent; nevertheless, his campaign's framing merits careful study. Surveys at the time showed Republican voters increasingly anxious about both economic loss and national identity: 93% rated the economy and 82% immigration "very important" to their vote, while only about one-third believed America's openness to newcomers is essential to the national character (Brenan, 2024a; Pew Research Center, 2024). Framed against that backdrop, Trump's proposals in both races were couched almost exclusively in terms of potential costs rather than

gains. This loss-focused framing likely interacted with well-documented biases to shape public evaluations of the policies.

Scholarship in political communication and behavioral economics demonstrates that loss-framed narratives heighten perceived threat (Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008; Alesina & Passarelli, 2015) and that vivid, atypical exemplars prompt people to overestimate immigration-related risks via the availability heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; Hopkins, 2010). The current research explores whether loss aversion and the availability heuristic played a role in shaping public perceptions and support for Trump's proposed immigration measures. In so doing, it also seeks to establish how cognitive biases operate to influence perceived feasibility and economic viability. This paper adopts a descriptive approach: it does not assess the moral intent behind Trump's rhetoric, but rather examines how cognitive biases may have interacted with his messaging to shape public opinion. This research contributes to a better understanding of public opinion formation in politically-salient policy domains by offering insights into theoretical models of decision-making and practical ways of undertaking policy-making.

To lay the groundwork for this analysis, the next section first provides background, reviewing key concepts from behavioral economics and their relevance to immigration policy debates before placing Trump's first- and second-term proposals within the broader literature on public opinion formation. After that, this paper discusses loss aversion and the availability heuristic in an analysis section, leaning on well-identified empirical evidence and applying such findings to the current context of immigration. With these insights as background, the next section considers potential strategies and policy measures that might help reduce heuristics-induced distortions, with a focus on framing and better communication. Concluding remarks point to the need for an empirically grounded, nuanced immigration discussion that engages bona fide security and integration concerns without escalating them, while delineating leading areas for research on reducing heuristic distortions in policy debate.

## Background

### *Behavioral Economics Context*

Behavioral economics provides a rigorous framework for analyzing the role of heuristics in decision-making, such as one we see in voter behavior under conditions of complexity and uncertainty. Behavioral economics is the study of how psychological and cognitive factors shape economic decision-making, often leading individuals to deviate from the rational actor model assumed in classical economics. Behavioral

economics research shows that people often depart from the fully rational *homo economicus* assumed in classical models (Simon, 1955; Kahneman, 2011). Such departures arise because decision-makers lean on cognitive shortcuts, i.e., heuristics, that simplify complex judgments but can also yield predictable errors, or cognitive biases (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). Among the most studied heuristics are loss aversion—the tendency to feel losses more intensely than equivalent gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1991)—and the availability heuristic—a bias whereby people judge the likelihood of events based on how easily examples come to mind (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Both have notable cues for understanding behavioral patterns in not only economic decision-making processes but also voter behavior vis-à-vis selective framing of choices, i.e., political preferences of voters in the context of this study.

Loss aversion, a foundational principle formalized in Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory (1979), illuminates the heightened sensitivity of individuals to potential losses compared to equivalent gains. In their foundational "Asian Disease Problem"<sup>2</sup> experiment, participants consistently preferred certain gains (e.g., saving 200 lives) over probabilistic outcomes with equivalent expected value. Yet, when identical scenarios were framed as losses (e.g., 400 certain deaths versus probabilistic deaths of 600), preferences shifted from risk-averse behavior, seen in gain-framed scenarios, toward risk-seeking behavior. By demonstrating how loss-framed contexts elicit fundamentally different decision-making dynamics compared to gain-framed scenarios, these findings accentuated the impact of framing on decision-making processes.

Subsequent research has extended these insights by demonstrating how loss aversion permeates diverse domains, from individual financial behaviors to collective societal preferences. In everyday financial decision-making, for instance, loss aversion manifests in the reluctance of investors to sell underperforming assets, a behavior colloquially described as "throwing good money after bad" (Thaler, 1980). The phenomenon extends to consumer behavior as well, where individuals demonstrate an aversion to paying fees framed as losses, but exhibit far greater willingness to absorb costs presented as foregone discounts (Tversky & Kahneman, 1991).

Whereas loss aversion explains why losses loom large, the availability heuristic clarifies how people gauge risk. People estimate the frequency or probability of an event by the ease with which examples come to mind (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

Because vivid, unusual, or emotionally charged episodes are more memorable, the heuristic routinely inflates the perceived likelihood of low-base-rate hazards. Laboratory replications (Schwarz et al., 1991) and consumer-behaviour research (Wänke, 2009) show that making recall harder or easier directly changes probability judgments. In political communication, sensational crime stories therefore act as an “availability engine,” amplifying perceived risk even when aggregate statistics point the other way, a pattern confirmed for immigration attitudes by Hopkins (2010). Other studies find that emotionally charged stories about crime or terrorism can distort probability judgments even when aggregate data contradict those impressions (Slovic, 1987).

Framing has long been a foundational element in communicating the policy decisions within democratic processes. Framing, as defined by Kuypers (1997), is the strategic selection and emphasis of certain aspects of reality to shape audience perception and prioritization of issues. Kuypers describes frames as “filters” that make specific aspects of reality more noticeable while obscuring others, effectively shaping public perception by amplifying particular themes. This concept aligns closely with Burke’s (1966) idea of “terministic screens,” where language both reflects and directs attention to specific facets of an issue while obscuring some others. Together, these theories suggest that framing is not a passive feature of communication but an active, strategic process that alters how audiences interpret and prioritize information. In the context of this study, the instrumentality of framing lies in understanding how political discourse emphasizes economic loss, security threats, and cultural erosion, which ultimately influences public opinion on immigration policies to a considerable extent. By presenting immigration in loss-framed narratives, political actors can amplify public fears and drive support for restrictive measures.

In this study, framing is not assessed as an intentionally deceptive tool, but rather as a cognitive structure that interacts with heuristics, particularly loss aversion and the availability heuristic, to shape how policy messaging is received and evaluated by the public.

Where loss aversion magnifies the sting of prospective losses, the availability heuristic shapes which risks feel most urgent. Because vivid, media-amplified episodes are easier to recall, people overestimate the prevalence of dramatic but low-base-rate events, especially crime committed by out-groups (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; Schwarz et al., 1991). In immigration debates this shortcut primes audiences to fear rare, sensational incidents more than

aggregate data, setting the stage for the analysis that follows.

While other heuristics such as confirmation bias or in-group preference are also relevant, this study focuses on loss aversion and the availability heuristic due to their robust empirical documentation and their particular salience in contexts involving fear, risk, and emotionally-charged messaging. Media and political narratives portraying immigrants as economic burdens or public safety threats have been shown to shape public opinion especially among voters facing economic precarity (Flores & Schachter, 2018; Hopkins, 2010).

### *Immigration Policy Context*

In the United States, the discourse revolving around immigration policy is infused with economic imperatives and cultural anxieties. Spanning both his 2016 platform and his 2024 campaign, Donald Trump’s signature immigration proposals, including merit-based entry systems (Chishti & Bolter, 2019), border wall expansions (Super, 2019), and stringent public charge rules (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2024) provide a case study in the role of cognitive biases. Under the merit-based entry proposal, designed to prioritise high-skill applicants deemed unlikely to displace U.S. domestic workers (Chishti & Bolter, 2019), and the expanded public-charge rule, which denies green cards to immigrants judged likely to rely on safety-net programmes (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2024), immigration is framed as a looming economic loss that these policies are meant to avert. These policies leverage loss-aversion framing to present immigration as a direct threat to national security, economic stability, and cultural cohesion, all of which deliver a political message that connects with voters in the midst of public fears for economy and border security. Messaging such as “Protect American jobs” and “Stop the invasion” (Shaw, 2024) coincided with a sharp rise in salience: Pew surveys show the share of Republicans rating immigration a “very important” voting issue jumped from 47% in 2015 to 82% by 2019 (Pew Research Center, 2016; Brennan, 2024b), and Super (2019) documents a parallel surge in congressional floor speeches invoking “border security.”

Economic misperceptions also form the foundation on which Trump’s immigration rhetoric stood. Research by Alesina et al. (2018) illustrates how native-born populations frequently overestimate the fiscal costs of immigration, perceiving immigrants as disproportionately reliant on public welfare systems. These misperceptions, when compounded by loss-framed narratives, facilitated opposition to fiscal redistribution policies and strengthened support for restrictive immigration measures. The strategic alignment of economic misperceptions with cognitive

biases delineates the potency of framing in steering public opinion and policy outcomes.

## Analysis

In public policy, the effects of loss aversion are amplified by strategic framing. Policy-makers and political actors frequently leverage loss-framed messaging to galvanize public opinion by drawing attention to potential harms over prospective benefits. Immigration debates in particular exemplify this strategy, with rhetoric often focusing on how it poses threats to jobs, security, or cultural identity, rather than potential economic contributions. Cognitive heuristics and framing together explain why the public sometimes endorses politically expedient yet economically flawed measures. Kahneman's incisive maxim, "What you see is all there is," (Kahneman, 2011) crystallizes this phenomenon by exposing the cognitive blind spots that constrain the rationality of collective decision-making. This part of the paper applies loss aversion and the availability heuristic to Trump's immigration rhetoric to show how these biases shaped public perception and policy support.

### *Loss Aversion*

Restriction-oriented politicians and sympathetic media outlets have long portrayed immigration as a zero-sum contest with native-born Americans for scarce jobs and public resources (Hopkins, 2010; Flores & Schachter, 2018). This depiction portrays immigrants as competitors with native-born workers vying for limited resources, employment opportunities, and cultural dominance. This framing particularly resonates among economically vulnerable, loss-averse groups. A case in point are voter groups across deindustrialized regions such as the Rust Belt, where economic woes and job insecurity sensitize voters to loss-framed delivery of political messages. Invoking fears of economic displacement, Trump's campaign rhetoric epitomized this approach; statements such as "Your jobs are being taken away" and "Protect American workers" (Roll Call, 2024; Rev, 2024; Associated Press, 2024) further cemented the way in which such narratives framed immigrants as jeopardizing the financial stability of native-born Americans. Borjas (2014) and Alesina et al. (2018) draw attention to how inflated perceptions of immigrants' reliance on welfare systems increase the efficacy of loss-framed political appeals. Though effective in gaining political traction, this rhetorical approach occludes a documented economic reality. Extensive empirical work shows immigrants boost productivity; fiscal effects vary by level of government and generation; long-run federal impacts are generally positive, state/local impacts can be negative for first-generation

adults, and strongly positive for their U.S.-born children (National Academies, 2017). Immigration raises total GDP mainly by enlarging the workforce; most of that extra output accrues to immigrants as wages, while the net gain to natives (the immigration surplus) is small but positive (on the order of a few-tenths of 1% of GDP at recent immigrant shares), with dynamic channels (innovation/specialization) likely adding more (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017; Borjas, 2013). A simple accounting then clarifies why raw GDP can rise by the trillions even when the native "surplus" is modest: when immigrant labor raises total employment substantially, gross output moves up proportionally, but almost all of that increase is paid as labor income to immigrants; natives capture only the surplus (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017). These findings counteract claims of fiscal burden, which shows instead that immigration is a net positive for the economic dynamism and the fiscal sustainability of the United States. While macro-level studies emphasize immigrants' positive contributions, it is also important to acknowledge that short-term, localized costs may arise, such as displacement in low-skill labor markets or temporary strains on education and housing infrastructures, particularly in areas experiencing sudden population influxes (Borjas, 2014; National Academies, 2017).

The interaction between framing and loss aversion further magnifies the impact of immigration narratives. When electoral issues are framed in terms of potential losses, voters exhibit stronger emotional reactions and greater support for measures in defense of the status quo. Alesina and Passarelli (2015) shows that loss aversion aggravates status quo bias, which makes voters relatively unreceptive to policies framed as reformist, or disruptive with a more negative connotation, unless the said framing emphasizes the potential to avert seemingly significant losses.

Another central theme in Trump's rhetoric regarding immigration was the fear of losing social and cultural dominance. Lines such as "The Democrats don't care what their extremist immigration agenda will do to your neighborhoods, to your hospitals, or to your schools... [and] mass illegal immigration will totally bankrupt our country" (Trump, 2018), and "The Biden agenda would collapse our economy and destroy your country... He's gonna drain your Medicare by giving away our healthcare to illegal immigrants" (Trump, 2020), buttressed the framing of immigration as an existential threat to the status quo. This rhetoric capitalises on group-based loss aversion, wherein out-group gains are read as in-group losses. As Osmundsen and Petersen (2019) note, group-based loss aversion intensifies resistance



to policies seen as redistributive, particularly when they appear to benefit marginalized groups at the perceived expense of the dominant majority. Trump's sustained and repeated use of phrases like "America First" reinforced these fears, resulting in the presentation of restrictive immigration policies as necessary to protect, maintain, and conserve cultural and societal integrity. Concrete policy references such as the January 2017 "Muslim ban" (Exec. Order 13769, 2017), and invocations of MS-13 gang violence (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020) further anchored this effect.

Loss aversion was sharpened by Trump's deployment of crisis narratives, especially by portraying immigration as an escalating and existential peril. Invoking imagery of a "border invasion" and recounting anecdotes about crimes committed by undocumented immigrants served to heighten the emotional salience of these issues. For example, at a 2018 rally in Houston Trump warned of "vicious MS-13 killers... crossing our border," and at a 2024 rally in Wilmington, he claimed that "illegal aliens are murdering innocent Americans every single day" (Trump, 2018; Roll Call, 2024). The framing cast perceived losses as both immediate and cataclysmic in scale. Alesina and Passarelli (2015) provide theoretical grounding for this approach by illustrating how crisis framing amplifies loss aversion by cultivating an acute sense of jeopardy, which thereby prompts defensive instincts to prevail over measured, evidence-based policy deliberations.

The fear of status loss provides a further layer of complexity in understanding Trump's appeal. As The Economist (2018) notes, many Trump voters were motivated by a sense of declining socio-economic and cultural dominance. This fear of status loss, particularly among white, working-class Americans, tapped into both economic and cultural anxieties, which complemented these voters' view of immigration not only as an economic threat but also as a symbolic signalling of broader societal changes that potentially undermined their historical position of privilege. Trump's framing of immigration as a zero-sum competition allowed these fears to coalesce into support for policies that promised to restore what supporters viewed as a prior social equilibrium.

#### *Availability Heuristic*

In the context of immigration, the availability heuristic skews the public's understanding of the broader picture by privileging exceptional yet isolated incidents over broader statistical realities, which is inextricably linked to the framing of immigrants as disproportionately linked to crime, economic strain, or cultural erosion.

The border wall proposal exemplifies this strategy.

Framed as a defensive measure to prevent economic displacement and criminal activity, it relied heavily on the availability heuristic. Political punditry brought to the forefront highly salient cases of immigrant-related crimes, such as incidents involving MS-13 gang members (McNeill, 2019). While statistically rare, these examples were disproportionately emphasized, leading public perceptions of immigrant criminality to be distorted. Administrative data from Texas show undocumented immigrants are convicted of violent and property crimes at lower rates than native-born Texans (Nowrasteh, 2018). Hopkins (2010), combining week-to-week TV-news counts with county-level survey panels, found that anti-immigrant sentiment spikes after crime-focused coverage only in counties with few immigrants, while attitudes in high-immigrant counties barely change, proving that limited direct contact leaves residents more vulnerable to availability-driven media cues.

Trump's immigration rhetoric exemplifies the use of the availability heuristic in steering public opinion. Trump encouraged voters to view sensational incidents as broadly representative anecdotes, bearing more heavily on voters than nuanced, data-driven narratives about immigration's overall societal and economic contributions. For example, Trump called the verdict of the case regarding the murder of Kate Steinle<sup>3</sup> "disgraceful," which shows Trump's tendency to choose publicized cases, such as tragedies, as rhetorical anchors to bolster his agenda for stricter immigration controls and border measures (Financial Times, 2017). Thus, the Kate Steinle shooting and later acquittal of the suspect (Associated Press, 2017) served as an example for the availability heuristic, making such events feel more widespread in perception and therefore threatening.

Trump's use of incendiary language intensified his emotion-laden speech with his message to his base that he is the one who can save the country from a group of people he branded "animals," "stone cold killers," the "worst people," and the "enemy from within." (Ward, 2024). These descriptors, while inflammatory, were instrumental in forging an association between immigrants and criminality, as such labels are likely to play into voters' emotive sides in a relatively permanent way. It is also important to note that Trump's rhetoric often distinguishes between legal and illegal immigration, invoking examples involving MS-13 gang members, undocumented border crossings, and sanctuary jurisdictions (e.g., California's 2017 SB-54; see also U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). This framing may resonate with audiences who see unauthorized immigration mainly as a breakdown of legal order, even if they do not regard immigration in general as inherently threatening.

The repeated themes kept these narratives fresh in voters' minds, and sensationalist coverage by major outlets further amplified them. Media coverage during Trump's first term disproportionately emphasized criminality among immigrants, despite data indicating a decline in violent crime rates associated with immigrant populations (Flores & Schachter, 2018). Hopkins (2010) shows that such coverage disproportionately shapes public attitudes, particularly in communities with limited direct exposure to immigrants.

Studies by Nowrasteh (2018) and Light and Miller (2018) consistently find that immigrants, both documented and undocumented, commit crimes at lower rates than native-born citizens. Further corroboration comes from the data published by the Cato Institute (2017), which reveals that states with higher proportions of immigrant populations often experience significantly lower rates of violent crime. Longitudinal analyses by Abramitzky et al. (2023) similarly demonstrate a lack of meaningful correlations between increased immigration and crime rates over extended periods. Through its reliance on emotive anecdotes and easily recalled events, the availability heuristic results in a skewed perception of risk and reality, which leads to an overemphasis on unrepresentative, even rare, events. By elevating sensational cases above aggregate data, this bias reshapes public attitudes, often at the expense of evidence-based policy discourse.

The media's role in the availability heuristic cannot be overlooked. Sensationalist reporting of crimes linked to undocumented immigrants not only stokes public anxieties but also entrenches these incidents in collective memory, which makes voters more receptive to Trump's amplification of similar anecdotes. Cable news and algorithm-driven social-media feeds further magnify such stories, ensuring their widespread reach. As Iyengar (1991) notes, episodic framing that spotlights discrete events rather than systemic trends shapes public understanding by privileging immediate, emotionally charged narratives over structural explanations. Trump used social media (first Twitter and, after 2021, Truth Social) to highlight specific cases, creating a feedback loop in which amplified coverage reinforced public biases and, in turn, lent legitimacy to calls for more stringent immigration policies.

Policies such as Trump's 2017 executive order restricting entry from several Muslim-majority countries, colloquially referred to as the "Muslim ban," and the increased focus on deportation proposals by Trump's 2024 campaign can be seen as direct outcomes of availability-driven framing (Exec. Order No. 13,769, 2017; Ward, 2024). Spotlighting emotive cases, these policies were framed as pressing threats

that required immediate action. In doing so, such policies sidelined empirical evidence documenting the economic and social benefits of immigration, favoring perceptions rooted in anecdotal fear. Research from the Migration Policy Institute (2020) highlights that these narratives overlooked the contributions of immigrants to sectors such as healthcare and agriculture, where their complementary roles are critical to the sustenance of growth and stability.

This bias extends beyond policy into the erosion of public trust in evidence-based reasoning, which jeopardizes the democratic system's ability to function with election outcomes that reflect most pressing problems and needs.

## Policy and Potential Solutions

When cognitive biases dominate discourse, they can distort public judgment by prioritizing emotionally charged anecdotes over broader empirical realities. Counteracting this cognitive distortion necessitates an intentional, deliberate integration of such compelling narratives into the broader framework of empirical evidence to ensure the said narratives are contextualized rather than allowed to dominate. Policy-makers and media organizations can situate isolated events within statistical realities, ensuring that dramatic episodes do not unduly shape public perception. In addition, initiatives with the aim of improving public data literacy and holding media platforms accountable for sensationalism could temper the weight afforded to amplified incidents. The availability heuristic, without such corrective efforts, runs the risk of perpetuating cycles of misrepresentation by allowing the onus of vivid emotions to weigh more heavily than the facts when it comes to informing both discourse and decision-making.

The following approaches, drawn from behavioral economics, can help realign public opinion with empirical realities while respecting legitimate concerns about border control and social cohesion.

First, reframing immigration as a net economic gain can mitigate the public's heightened sensitivity to perceived losses. In the immigration domain, it is often stressed that newcomers "take native jobs," even though macro-level data from Peri (2016) and the National Academies of Sciences (2017) consistently indicate wage complementarities and a net boost to GDP. By elevating real figures such as the fact that nearly 45% of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children, policy-makers can offset zero-sum messaging with positive-sum frameworks (American Immigration Council, 2024). Demonstrating concrete contributions (e.g., revitalized local businesses or higher tax revenues) speaks to both national-level economic gains and

neighborhood-level improvements, which, in the long run, has the potential to overcome the notion that all immigration represents unmitigated loss.

Second, harnessing data visualization and debiasing interventions offers a means to counter the availability heuristic. Tversky and Kahneman (1973) demonstrate that individuals estimate frequency by the ease of recall. Providing regularly updated, visually compelling dashboards that depict immigrant crime rates, workforce participation, and tax revenues offers a data-driven corrective to sensationalized stories. Simultaneously, “inoculation” or “pre-bunking” campaigns—short videos or interactive graphics warning that political figures may recycle outlier events—can reduce the persuasiveness of emotive yet unrepresentative anecdotes (van der Linden, 2023).

Third, learning from other policy reforms reveals how reframing can shift entrenched biases. Environmental policy, for instance, has seen success by highlighting local, immediate gains, like reduced energy bills, rather than emphasizing distant, uncertain climate benefits (Weber, 2010). Adapting this model, local governments could highlight immigrants’ role in sustaining essential services or addressing specific labor shortages, especially in healthcare or agriculture. Parallel successes can be observed in public health, where positive social norm campaigns have improved vaccine uptake by spotlighting the high percentage of community members who vaccinate (Hallsworth et al., 2017). In immigration discourse, a similar tactic might emphasize the widespread reliance of local businesses on immigrant labor, presenting collaboration and inclusion as the norm rather than the exception.

Fourth, enhancing media accountability and public education can structurally reduce heuristic-driven distortions. The framing of rare crimes without proportional context distorts public understanding, especially in regions with minimal direct contact with immigrant communities (Hopkins, 2010). Requiring journalists to contextualize sensational incidents with broader statistics would temper fear-based narratives and promote more data-oriented coverage. In tandem, fact-checking organizations could rapidly counter misrepresentations of immigrant fiscal impacts by citing research from sources like Alesina et al. (2018), which found that citizens typically overestimate immigrants’ welfare usage. Over the longer term, integrating “bias literacy” into civics curricula (introducing high school or college students to basic concepts like loss aversion and the availability heuristic) could cultivate a new generation less prone to alarmist rhetoric. Bartels (2002) notes that individuals aware of these systematic biases are more likely to scrutinize political claims rather than accept emotive framing at face value. Implementation

could include statutory guidelines for contextualizing crime reports in broadcast media, federal grants for fact-based civic education materials, and partnerships with public broadcasters to disseminate bias-awareness campaigns.

Collectively, these measures do not eliminate hardwired heuristics but redirect them toward more balanced judgments. By reframing immigration in gain terms, presenting salient quantitative evidence, adapting best practices from other policy areas, and building structural support for rigorous journalism and civic education, policymakers and citizens can better align immigration discourse with empirical insights. In turn, fewer resources might be squandered on demonstrably inefficient border measures or exclusionary regulations, and more attention could be devoted to policies that capitalize on immigrants’ demonstrated potential to bolster economic vitality. This approach does not dismiss legitimate border or cultural concerns; rather, it ensures that decisions are informed by robust evidence rather than short-term political imperatives fueled by cognitive distortions. Only by acknowledging and harnessing behavioral insights can policy debates move closer to the measured, long-term interests of both native-born populations and aspiring newcomers.

## Conclusion

Acknowledging legitimate concerns about border security and civic integration without full concession to overwrought portrayals remains crucial, given that not all apprehensions about immigration or violence are without merit. A nuanced approach would neither dismiss these anxieties outright nor amplify them to existential proportions. Instead, it would draw on measured data, carefully situate exceptions within overall trends, and strive to disentangle policy deliberation from misleading rhetorical devices. Robust policy deliberation depends on moving beyond the initial emotional weight to evidence-based perspectives. Ultimately, such an approach upholds the democratic principle of informed choice: only when voters are given comprehensive information, clearly stated and thoroughly contextualized, can they support policies that advance economic vitality, social harmony, and broader national interests.

Future research could shed light on how to mitigate these biases by identifying the most effective actions and strategies, whether by contrasting different framing techniques in shifting immigration attitudes or by an examination of how diverse demographic groups respond to appeals emphasizing either gains or losses. Thus, with insights from behavioral economics, policymakers and researchers may work toward a more reasoned, empirically grounded approach to immigration. Such efforts have

implications not only for the design of immigration policy, but also for the preservation of the integrity of democratic discourse. By engaging these mechanisms of bias rather than ignoring them, future immigration debates may proceed with greater fidelity to empirical evidence so as to support more informed decision-making and more effective policy outcomes.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to express my thanks to Professor Edoardo Gallo of the Faculty of Economics, University of Cambridge, for his guidance and constructive observations, which enhanced the paper's intellectual rigor.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Homo economicus refers to the presumption that humans act fully rationally to maximize self-interest. For a detailed discussion, see Smith (1776) and Mill (1836).

<sup>2</sup> The “Asian Disease Problem” is a classic framing experiment from Tversky and Kahneman (1981). Participants choose between two health-policy options to combat a hypothetical outbreak that will kill 600 people. When outcomes are gain-framed (lives saved), most choose the certain option; when mathematically identical outcomes are loss-framed (lives lost), preferences flip toward the risky option. The result demonstrates how simply reframing equivalent payoffs as gains or losses systematically shifts risk attitudes.

<sup>3</sup> On July 1, 2015, Kate Steinle, a 32-year-old tourist, was fatally shot while walking on San Francisco’s Pier 14. The shooter, José Inez García Zárate, an undocumented Mexican national who had been deported five times, was acquitted of murder and manslaughter charges in November 2017 but convicted on a federal firearms count in 2022. The case became a national flashpoint in debates over “sanctuary cities” and strengthened calls for stricter immigration enforcement (Associated Press, 2017).

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