Whose American Dream?
Intergenerational Mobility of Immigrants and Natives' Policy Preferences

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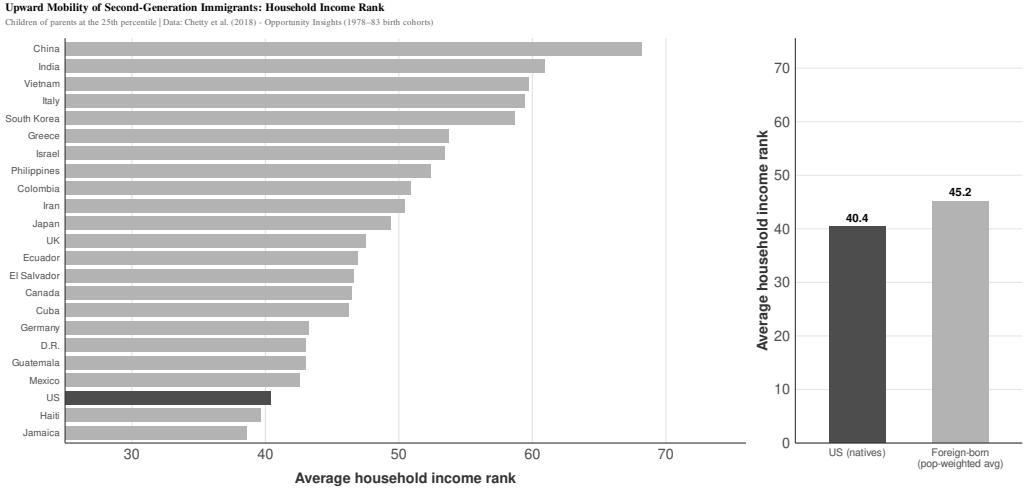
Immigration and policy preferences: looking at the wrong margin?

- In response to unprecedented migration flows, research on the political effects of immigration has expanded rapidly over the past decade Alesina & Tabellini (2024)
- The economics of migration literature overwhelmingly focuses on the effects of **first-generation immigrants** composition and characteristics on fiscal costs, political behavior and natives' attitudes and policy preferences Tabellini (2020), Dustmann et al. (2019), Sequeira et al. (2020)., Alesina et al. (2023), Grigorieff et al. (2020), Haaland & Roth (2020).
- **Recurring finding**: 1G immigrants are worse off than natives → immigration tends to generate backlash, reduce support for redistribution, increase vote for right-leaning parties **Reviews**: Alesina & Tabellini (2024); Giuliano & Spilimbergo (2025)

→ But this is inherently a **snapshot**: it captures where immigrants *are*, not where their families are *going*

Children of immigrants have higher upward mobility than children of natives



Mean income rank of US-born children and immigrant children from low-income families (at p25)

Own elaboration from (Abramitzky et al., 2021)

This fact is vastly unknown by the general public at baseline

- We document that only **15%** of Americans believe children of immigrants have higher mobility than children of natives
- This baseline belief ranges from 12% to 17% across subgroups
- **The intergenerational dimension speaks directly to the core policy question**: is immigration an asset or a persistent cost?

→ **New question:** Does informing natives about the intergenerational mobility of immigrant children shift their attitudes and policy preferences?

"Thinking about economic mobility in the United States, consider children raised in low-income families. In your view, which group is more likely to earn higher incomes as adults?"

15%

agree that children of immigrants have higher upward mobility

A key ex-ante ambiguity

New fact: Children of immigrants have higher upward mobility than children of natives

Competition / Threat

"They're doing too well, stealing our jobs and opportunities"

Policy translation More restriction, less welfare, less inclusion

Contribution / Integration

"They're contributing to the economy and our society, it's working"

Policy translation: More open immigration, more welfare, more inclusion

Which channel dominates is an **empirical question**

Mixed evidence on *actual* effects of immigration on natives' upward mobility: negative in Switzerland (Chuard, 2021), mixed in US (Feigenbaum et al., 2026; Borgschulte et al., 2025), origin-dependent in Norway (Hoen et al., 2022).

Research questions

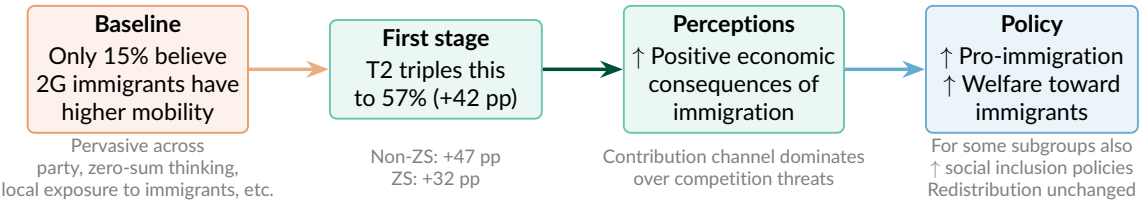
1. How do native-born Americans **perceive** immigrant upward mobility?

2. Does information about immigrant mobility **causally change** natives' attitudes and policy preferences on immigration, welfare, inclusion, and redistribution?

3. Does the **contribution** or the **competition** interpretation dominate? Through which channels?

4. Is the response shaped by **the local upward mobility dynamics between migrants and natives**?

Preliminary findings (I)



Preliminary findings (II)

- **1G migrants-natives income gap information alone does little:** limited downstream effects; if anything, reinforces negative perceptions
- **Mobility information updates beliefs sharply:** share believing immigrant children have higher mobility triples — from 15% to 57% (+42 pp)
- **No backlash:** no increase in perceived threat, negative emotions, or stereotypes
- **The contribution channel dominates:** mobility info shifts respondents toward pro-immigration positions and greater welfare support but redistributive preferences are unaffected
- **Zero-sum thinking is the master moderator** — predicts both compliance and response direction, stronger than party affiliation
- **Effects strongest in high-exposure areas:** concentrated in CZs where immigrant children have much higher mobility than natives

Contributions

1. **Survey experiments on immigration attitudes:** first to provide *intergenerational mobility* information — shifting from static immigrant characteristics to dynamic family trajectories

   Alesina et al. (2023), Grigorieff et al. (2020), Haaland & Roth (2020).

2. **Perceived upward mobility of immigrants and policy preferences:** extends Alesina et al. (2018) from general mobility to *immigrant-specific* mobility, and from redistribution only to immigration policy, welfare, and inclusion

   Alesina & La Ferrara (2005); Alesina, Stantcheva & Teso (2018); Alesina, Murard & Rapoport (2021).

3. **Political effects of immigration — demand side:** how natives respond to information about immigrants' children's success, not to immigration shocks themselves

   Supply-side IGM: Chuard (2021), Feigenbaum et al. (2026), Borgschulte et al. (2025), Hoen et al. (2022).

4. **Local exposure as mediator** first to link experimental data on immigration attitudes to CZ-level intergenerational mobility estimates of natives and immigrants

   Chetty et al. (2020, 2025).

Roadmap

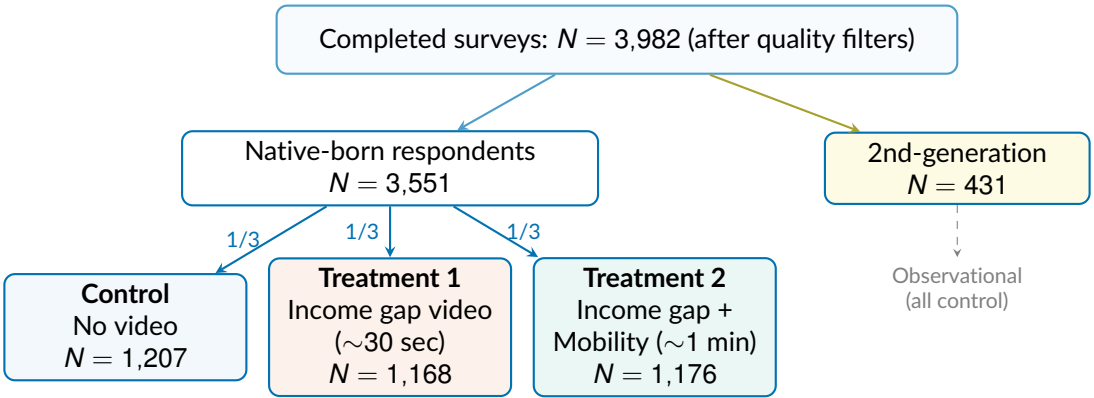
1. Data and experimental design
2. Baseline perceptions
3. First stage: belief updating
4. Treatment effects on policy outcomes
5. Who interprets mobility as contribution vs. competition?
   - 5a. Prior worldview: zero-sum thinking
   - 5b. Local context: CZ-level immigrant exposure
6. Conclusions

Data and Experimental Design

Survey design

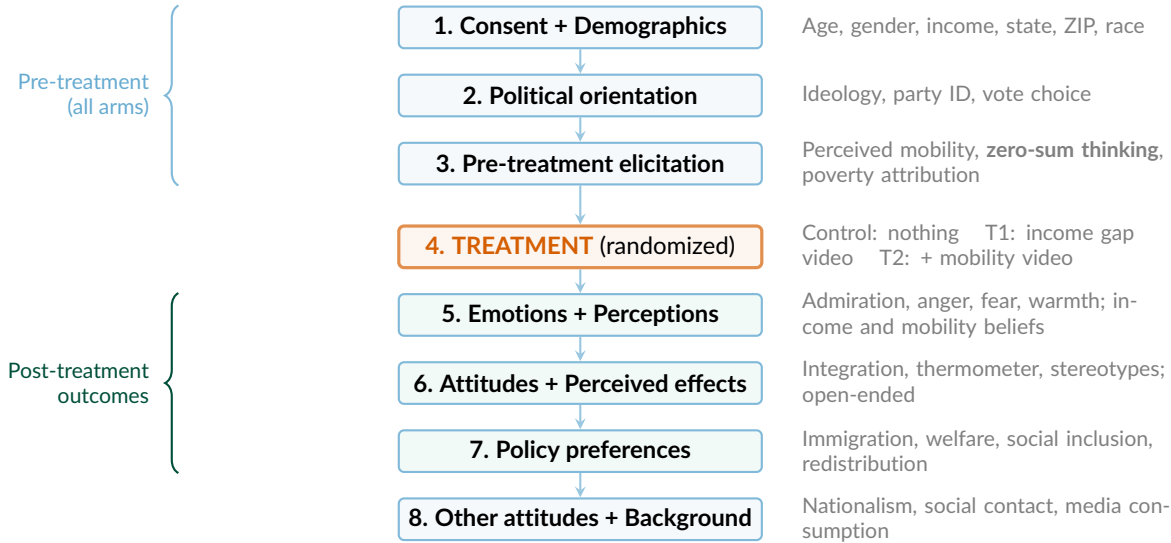
- Online survey experiment: $\sim$4,000 respondents (Cint platform). January-February 2026
- Representative on gender, age, income, and region
- US citizens aged 18–69; pre-registered (AEA RCT registry)
- Survey structure:
  - Political orientation and a wide range of demographics
  - Baseline beliefs (pre-treatment elicitation, including immigration-related zero-sum question)
  - Randomized informational treatment (video animation)
  - Post-treatment: emotions, perceptions, attitudes, perceived effects, policy preferences

Experimental arms



Recruited via Cint. Representative on gender, age, income, region. US citizens 18–69. **Quality filters**: excluded if ≥ 2 of 5 flags (attention check, speed, straightlining, slider, implausible shares). Pre-registered (PAP January 2026).

Survey flow



Average duration: ∼20 minutes. Comprehension check after video. ∼59% T1 and ∼54% T2 respondents fully treated

Treatment content

Treatment 1: Income Gap

- Native median HH income: $81,000/yr
- Immigrant median HH income: $73,000/yr

→ "**On average, immigrants earn less than native-born Americans**"

Treatment 2: Income Gap + Upward Mobility Gap

- All T1 information, plus:
- Children from low-income families ($35K):
  - Native parents → $42K as adults
  - Immigrant parents → $51K as adults

→ "**Immigrants may start with less, but their children often do better economically than the children of US-born parents**."

Outcome families

Module	Content
Emotions	Admiration, anger, compassion, fear, sadness, warmth
Perceptions	Immigrant shares, economic situation, upward mobility beliefs
Attitudes	Economic integration, social assimilation, thermometer
Perceived effects	Economic growth, jobs, crime, housing, cultural diversity
Welfare toward imm.	Access timing, equal treatment, opportunity equalization
Social inclusion	Anti-discrimination, community events, English classes
Imm./Redist. policy	Citizenship path, entry policy, redistribution preferences

- **For each module**: item-by-item analysis + PCA index + z-score index

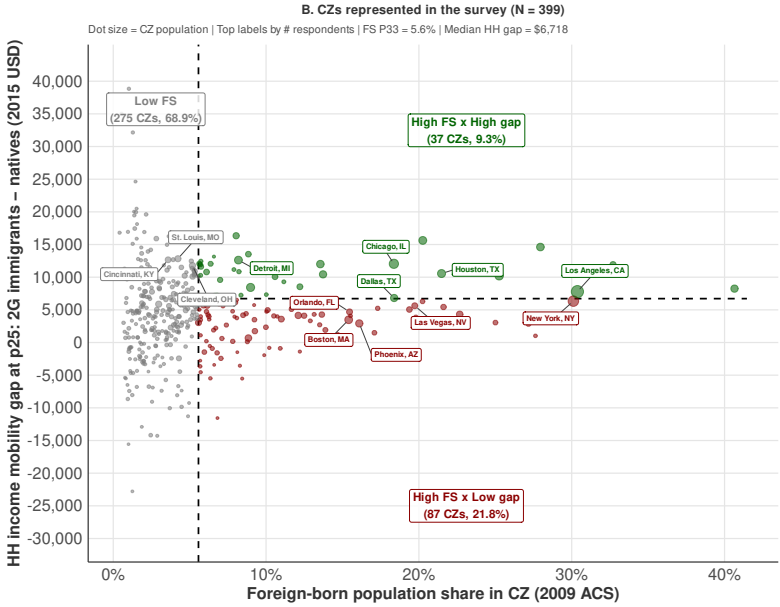
Key moderators (pre-registered, measured pre-treatment)

1. **Party affiliation:** "Do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent?"
   - Democrat / Republican / Independent

2. **Zero-sum thinking:** "Do you think immigrants' economic success generally comes at the expense of American-born workers?"
   - Zero-sum = "Yes, almost all the time" or "Yes, it often does" ($\sim$45%)
   - Not zero-sum = "No, it rarely does" or "No, almost never" ($\sim$55%)

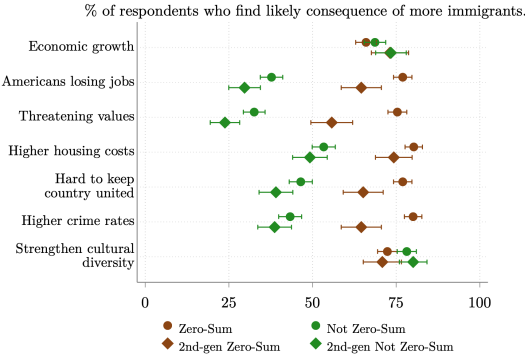
3. **Local exposure index:** respondents' ZIP $\rightarrow$ Commuting Zone, merged with Opportunity Insights data
   - Two CZ-level dimensions: foreign-born share $\times$ immigrant–native mobility gap
   - 3-bin split at population-weighted medians: *Low Exposure to Immigrants* / *High Exposure* $\times$ High Gap/ *High Exposure* $\times$ *Low Gap*

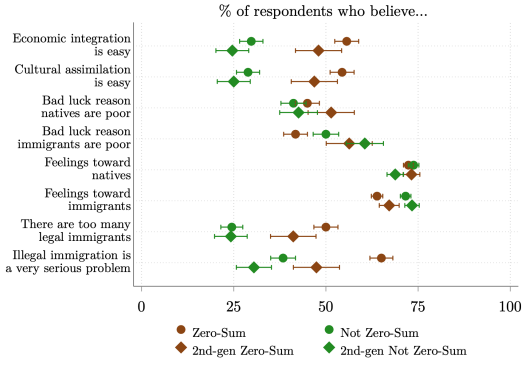
Local level exposure: graphical illustration



Baseline Perceptions

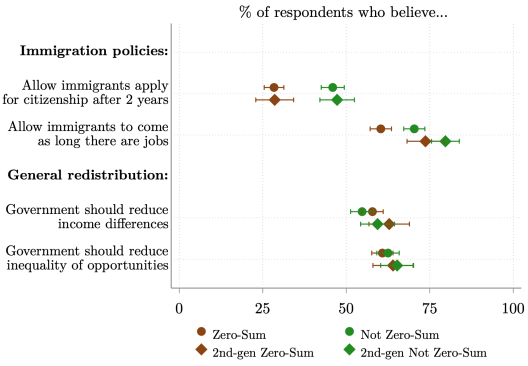
Zero-sum thinking predicts perceived consequences of immigration

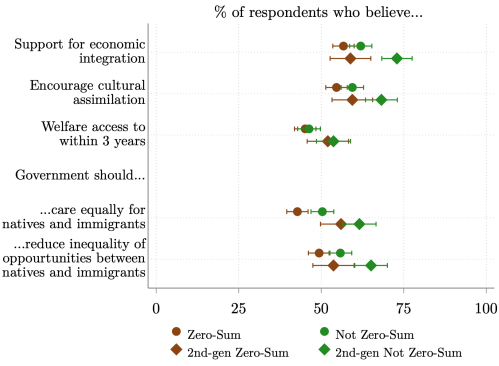




Control group only. ZS thinkers are 30–40 pp more likely to perceive economic threat, job loss, and cultural danger from immigration.

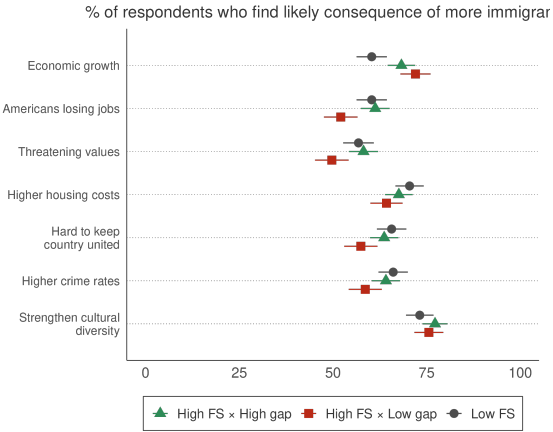
Zero-sum thinking predicts policy preferences

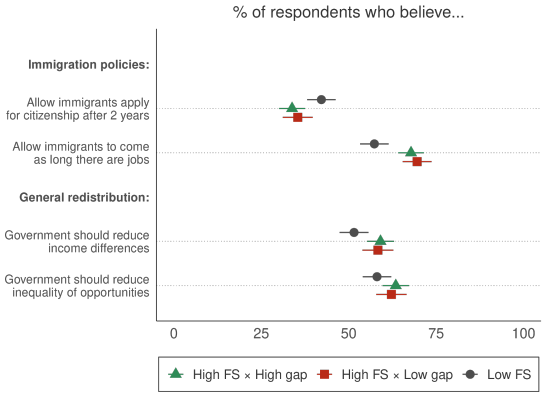




20+ pp gaps on citizenship, welfare access, and “care equally.” Note: “care equally” is the item that moves most under mobility treatment.

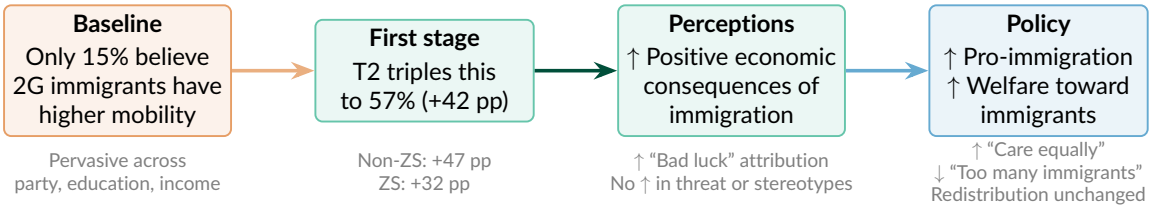
Local exposure: where immigrant success is visible vs. not



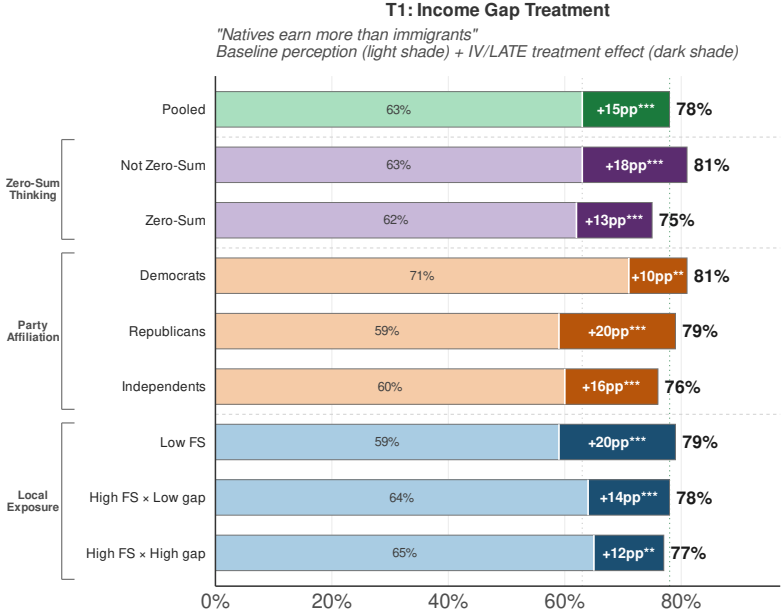


First Stage: Belief Updating

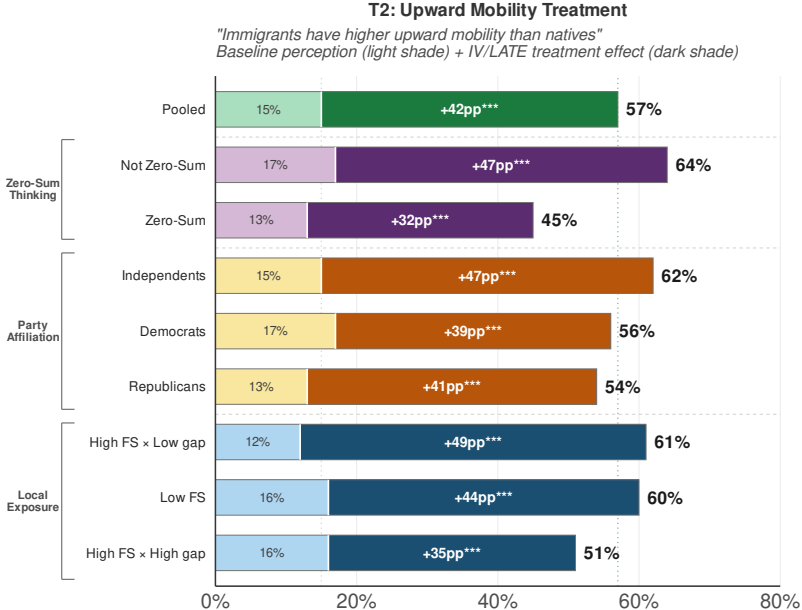
Causal chain of the treatment effects



First stage: treatments move relevant beliefs (T1)

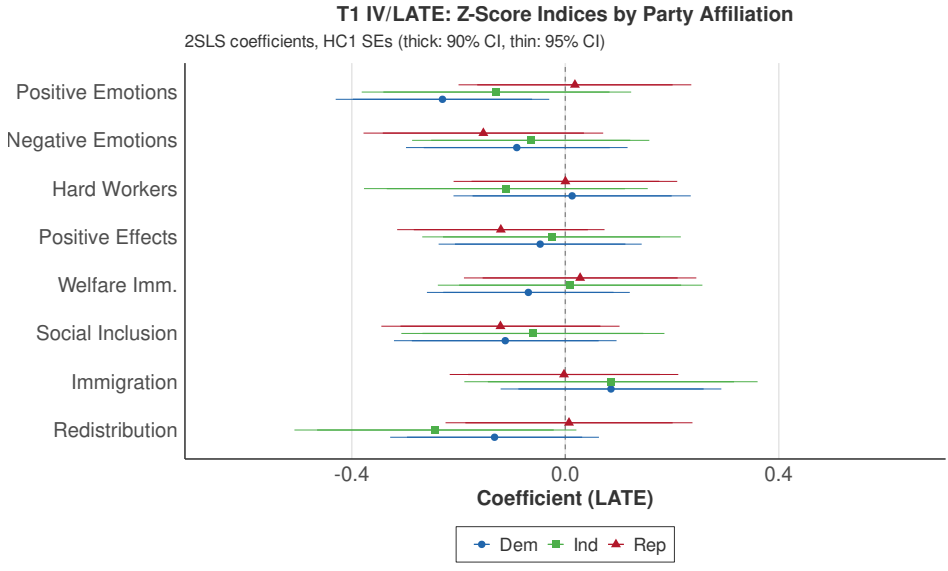


First stage: treatments move relevant beliefs (T2)

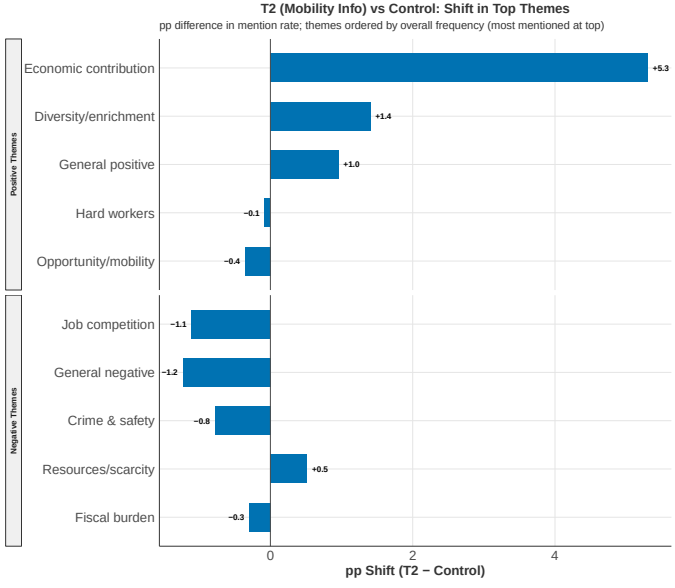


Treatment Effects on Policy Preferences

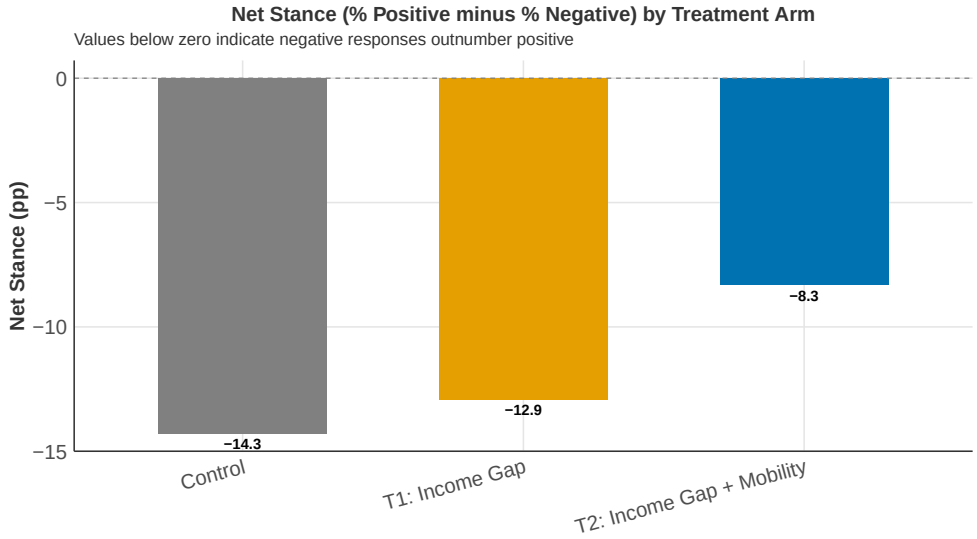
T1 effects on policy preferences, by party (index)



Open-ended question on the consequences of immigration



People have less overall negative takes regarding the consequences of immigration



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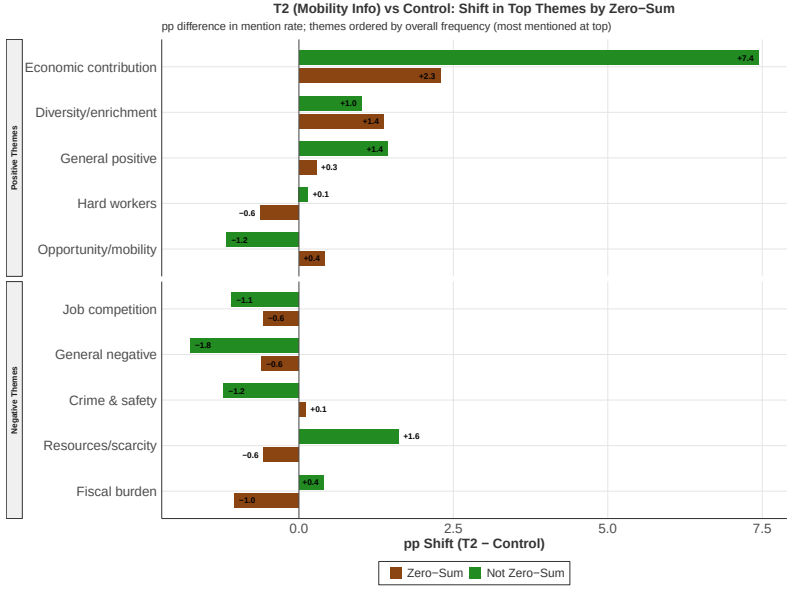
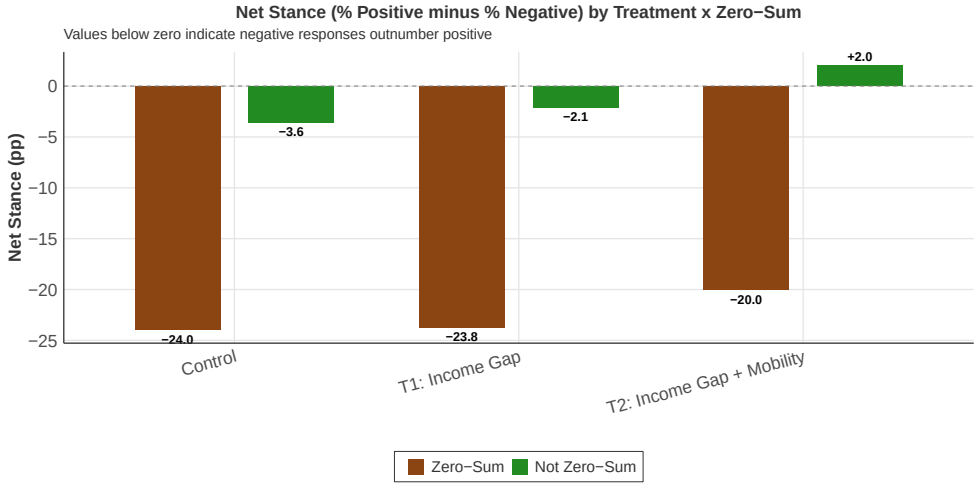
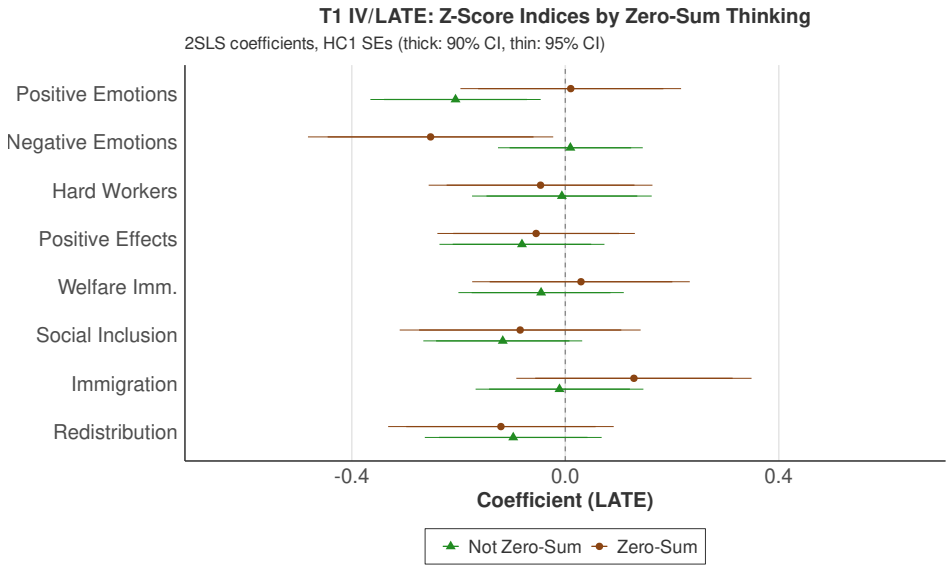


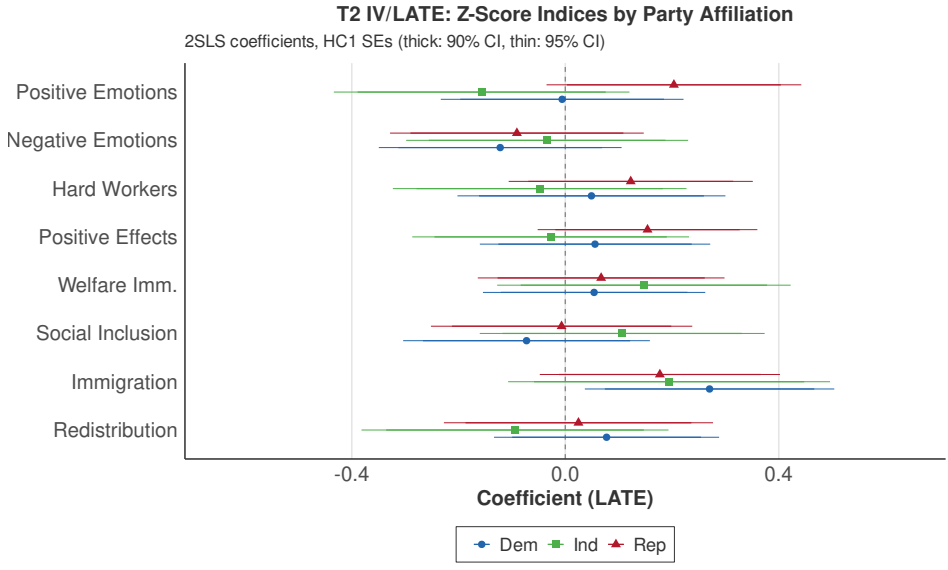
Huge differences in overall perceptions by ZST



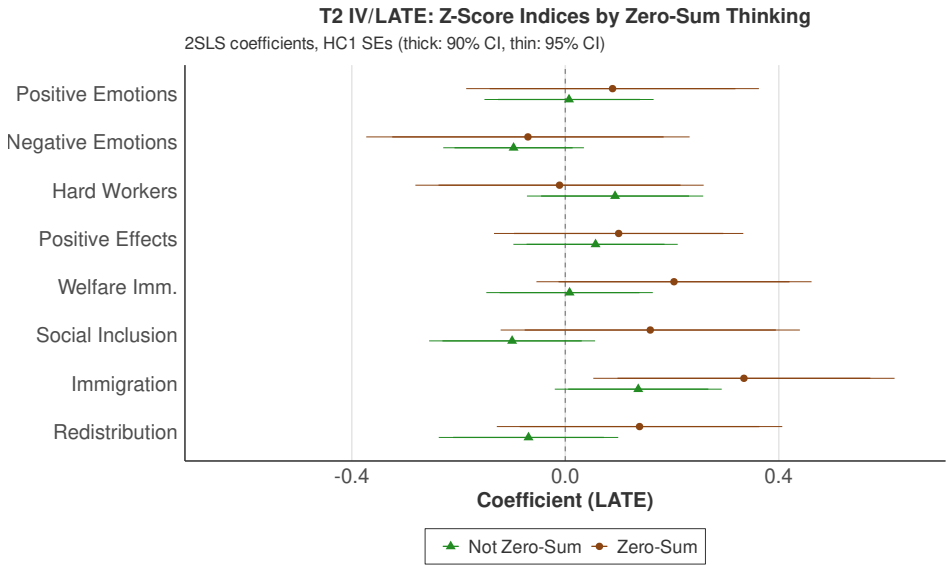
T1 effects on policy preferences, by ZST (index)



T2 effects on policy preferences, by party (index)



T2 effects on policy preferences, by ZST (index)



Local context: exploiting CZ-level variation in exposure to children of immigrant success

Linking respondents to local context

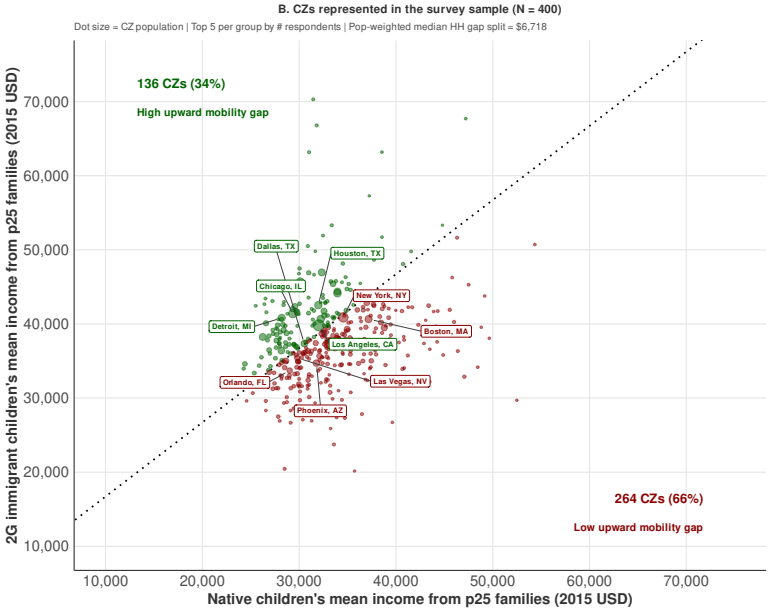
- Merge respondent ZIP codes → Commuting Zones (CZs)
- CZ-level microdata from Opportunity Insights:
  - Foreign-born share (2009 ACS)
  - Upward mobility gap: children of immigrants vs. natives (Chetty et al., 2025)
- Binary split at population-weighted median foreign-born share
- **Logic:** respondents in high-exposure CZs have direct experience with immigrant integration — the treatment information may be less surprising and more consistent with lived experience

→ Robust: SE clustered at the CZ level, individual controls and CZ-level controls (population, poverty share, college share). Dropping Top 5 CZs the pattern still holds

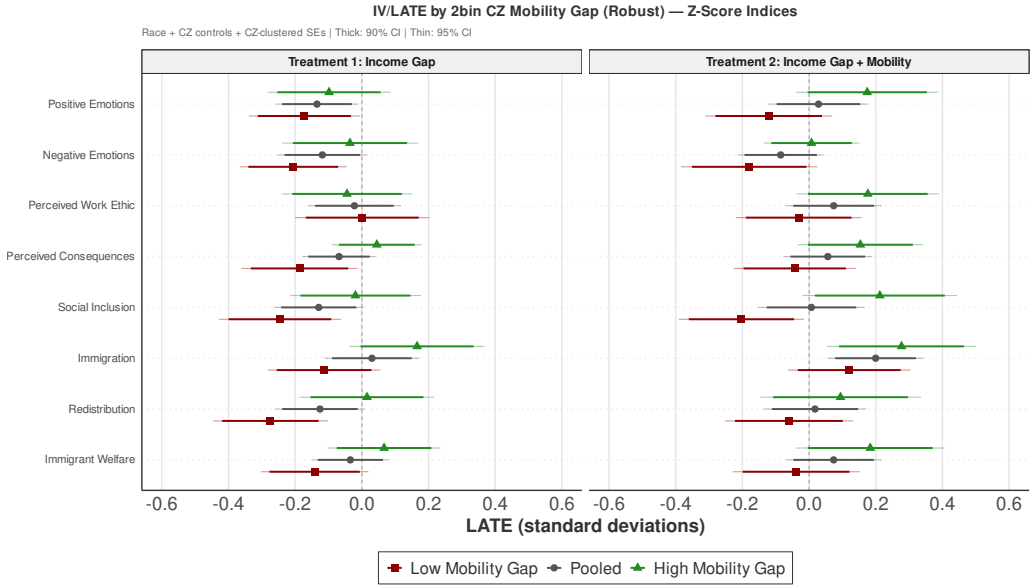
→ We also have 3 bin and 4bin version: results hold

Local level exposure: illustrating the sample split

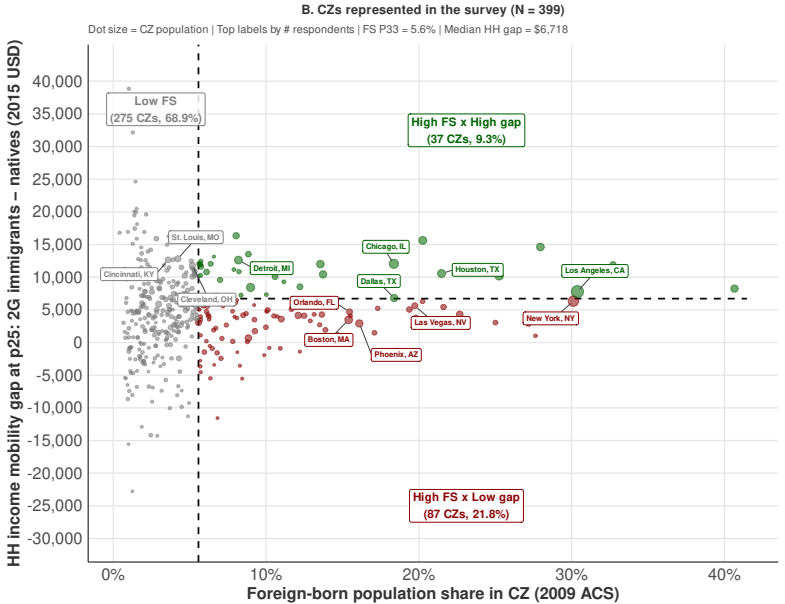
Local level exposure: illustrating the sample split



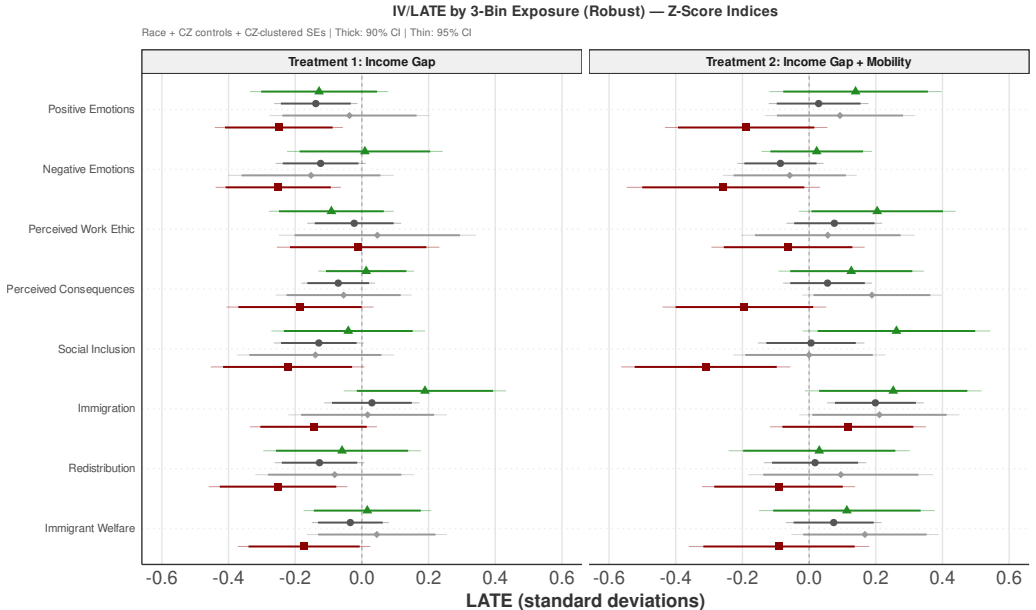
Treatment effects by local foreign-born share



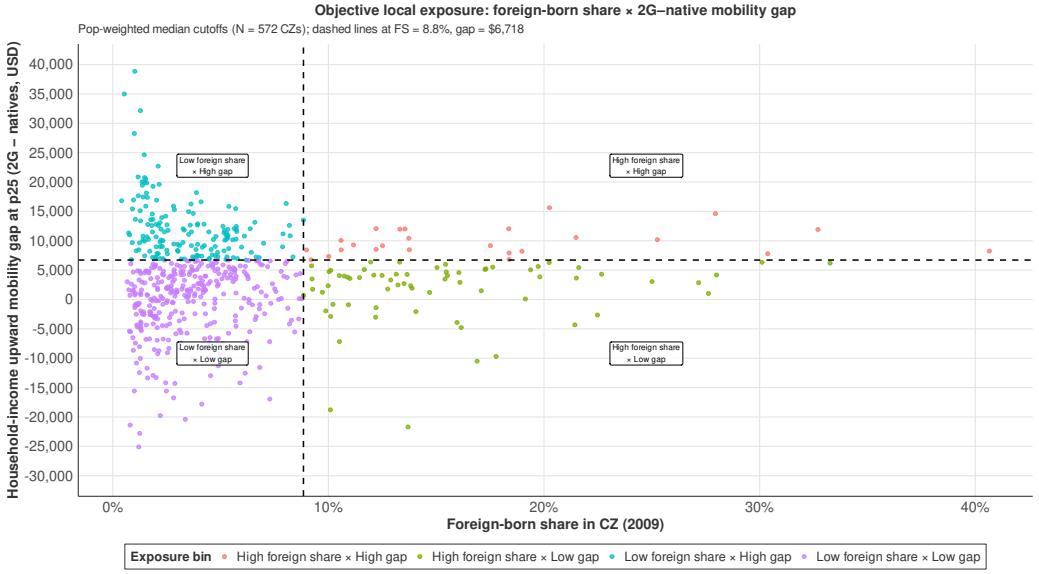
Local level exposure: 3bin split



Treatment effects by local foreign-born share

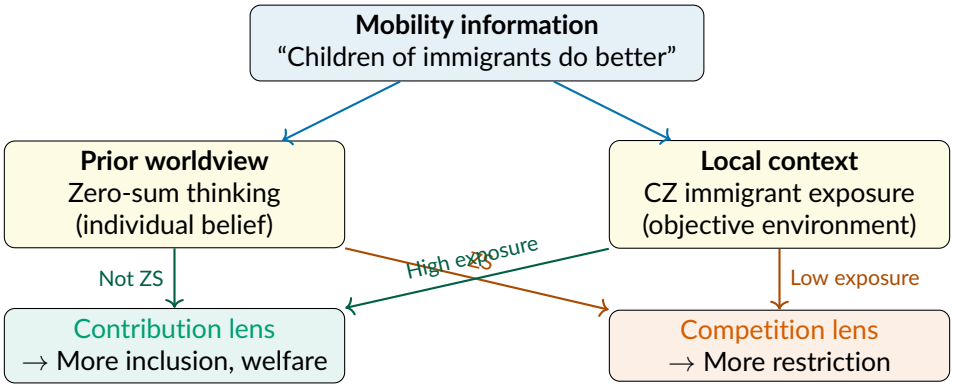


Local level exposure: 4bin split



Who Interprets Mobility as Contribution vs. Competition?

Two lenses on the same question



Both moderators capture whether immigrant success is *experienced* or *imagined* — and whether it triggers solidarity or threat.

Reconciling Worldview and Context

Two channels, one mechanism

- **Zero-sum thinking** and **local exposure** are *complementary* moderators, not competing explanations
- They capture different layers of how people process mobility facts:
  - ZST = *dispositional*: a prior belief about whether the economy is zero-sum
  - Local exposure = *experiential*: whether you live in a place where immigrant integration is a visible reality
- Both predict the **same interpretive split**:
  - Not-ZS / High-exposure $\rightarrow$ mobility info = evidence of successful integration $\rightarrow$ contribution lens
  - ZS / Low-exposure $\rightarrow$ same info = competitive threat $\rightarrow$ competition lens
- ZST is largely independent of party affiliation — it captures a deeper cognitive frame
- Local exposure provides external validation: people who *see* immigrant success respond differently from those who only *hear about* it

Implications for policy communication

- Information about immigrant mobility is not “one-size-fits-all”
- The same factual message produces **opposite effects** depending on the receiver’s interpretive lens
- For non-zero-sum thinkers and those with direct exposure:
  - Mobility info $\rightarrow$ more support for equal treatment, inclusion, open immigration
- For zero-sum thinkers and those without direct exposure:
  - Same info $\rightarrow$ no welfare backlash (“care equally” still rises) but no liberalization either

$\rightarrow$ Intergenerational mobility may be a more persuasive frame than static income gaps, precisely because it highlights *dynamic contribution* rather than *current costs*

Preliminary Conclusions

Summary of findings

1. **Large misperception:** only 15% of Americans know immigrants' children have higher mobility — a genuinely unknown fact
2. **Treatments update beliefs:** T2 raises perceived mobility by 22 pp (ITT); effect is *twice as large* for non-zero-sum thinkers
3. **Modest average effects mask meaningful heterogeneity:** two complementary channels determine the direction of responses
4. **Zero-sum thinking** (dispositional) and **local exposure** (experiential) jointly predict whether mobility info triggers a contribution or competition interpretation
5. **Robust result:** "Government should care equally for natives and immigrants" increases under T2 even among ZS thinkers (survives MHT, Romano-Wolf p=0.038)

Contributions and next steps

Contributions

- First experiment providing *intergenerational mobility* information about immigrants
- Identifies zero-sum thinking as the key lens through which economic facts are processed
- Links survey experiment to CZ-level administrative data: local experience as external validation

Next steps

- Finalize CZ analysis (add mobility gap dimension to exposure index)
- Open-ended text analysis (AI-detection pipeline built)
- Triple interactions: Treatment $\times$ ZS $\times$ Party
- Complete IV/LATE for all outcome families

Thank you!

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Appendix