

## THE BELONGING STUDY

A large body of research demonstrates that though a plurality of Americans hold pro-immigrant values, they feel very conflicted about immigration. Demagogues have been able to exploit this divergence to advance policies inimical to safe, thriving futures for migrants, immigrants, and refugees. In this study, the Opportunity Agenda and the Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy partnered with Worthy Strategy Group to explore what shapes attitudes around immigration and what people would need to embrace a pro-immigrant future.

We discovered there is a broad hunger for a future that is abundant and free and that embraces immigrants in the United States. Standing in our way - and felt across the ideological spectrum - are fears of scarcity, chaos, and a lack of safety. Americans are traumatized and scared, feel devalued and unheard, and are turning towards anxiety-driven scarcity mindsets.

However, our research revealed important clues for what can move audiences away from fear and toward pro-immigrant values and beliefs. Here we will share a summary of the key insights and pathways toward promoting a pro-immigrant vision of the future.

Our topline findings:

- People across all audience segments dream of a better future
- And they want a better immigration system
- But fear often outweighs audiences' pro-immigrant values
- An abundance mindset buttressed by perceptions of safety and order are necessary for audiences to embrace a pro-immigrant future
- Freedom and Mutuality were the two themes that characterized audiences' abundance lens on immigration
- Clear and fair structures and rules provides the sense of safety and order that audiences need to move past their anxieties
- Reframing safety to emphasize mutuality, strong communities, and looking out for each other can help further calm audiences' fears around safety

## METHODOLOGY

We worked with Gretchen Barton of Worthy Strategy Group to interview 48 participants who were socio-demographically representative by race, income, age, and location and who lived in Michigan, Ohio, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, Arizona, Western New Mexico, Upstate New York and Pennsylvania. We oversampled on Black, Latinx, and AAPI populations.

We wanted to learn about what made participants feel more open to immigration, so we asked them to consider a fictional scenario (inspired by an existing reality - the European Union): a future world in which North, Central, and South America operated as a “free movement zone,” where people could safely travel across borders for work, travel, and even to live. Then, through a careful multivalent process that included multiple interviews, we solicited metaphorical images through which they could explain their feelings and thoughts about immigrants and immigration. This process uses best practices from the world of psychology and neuroscience in order to give participants the time and the space to share what matters most to them in an unfiltered manner.

One important note: because we concentrated this research on finding a new paradigm for the immigration system rather than on perceptions of immigrants, the study didn't yield explicit insights on opportunities to advance a racial justice narrative within the pro-immigrant movement - something which we know is central to advancing a truly equitable pro-immigrant narrative. We plan on exploring this as a central aspect of our next phases of research as we dive deeper into the narrative pathways uncovered by this study.

## AUDIENCE SEGMENTS

To understand how attitudes differ across the population, we used Harmony Labs' [OBI Audiences Framework](#), a way to segment audiences according to their core values and cultural consumption. This framework differs from the more traditional segmentations that are often based on ideology and political affiliation. A values-based segmentation allows us to understand audiences relative to the culture and narratives in which they are steeped, and can reveal unexpected insights into where audiences have commonalities or differences.

There are four audience segments:

**People Power:** Community-minded, politically engaged, and ready to fight for system reform to solve social issues. They skew younger, female and Democrat and believe all types of people coming together will create change.

**If You Say So:** Independent realists who know the system is broken but are skeptical that there are real solutions to society's problems. They span all ages and races and value choice and autonomy.

**Tough Cookies:** Family-first rule followers who believe that while the system might be broken, hard work can create success. They skew older, span all political parties and love content featuring good deeds and helping hands

**Don't Tread On Me:** Conservative, achievement oriented, and strong believers that equal opportunity already exists. They skew white, rural and Republican and value authority and forceful leadership.

## AUDIENCE INSIGHTS

Here's what we learned:

### **People dream of a better future.**

Across all audience segments and ideologies, people dream of creating a **peaceful world that is better for everyone**, where everyone can **choose to live wherever their life would be best**, where everyone can **thrive**, where we **invest in our future** so we can **leave the world a better place** than we found it.

They **want a future that is calm, safe, and orderly**, and where the **rules make sense** and are followed.

They long for community, want a world where families, communities, and neighboring nations reconnect, and dream of a better, safer, more secure future for their kids. They envision a future where there is enough for everyone, where communities help and celebrate each other, and where people work together to solve problems.

### **And they want a better immigration system.**

We found that beliefs about immigration and immigrants don't track cleanly along partisan lines. Interviewees agreed that the immigration system is broken and is harming immigrants and non-immigrants alike. People in all segments described the current system as **cruel, impossible to maintain, unenforceable, and unfairly applied**. Across People Power, If You Say So, and Tough Cookies segments, many even had similar ideas to improve the system. They suggested...

- **Increasing resources** to simplify and speed-up a process that seems complicated and lengthy, while keeping “bad actors” out.
- **Increasing access** to diminish the need to migrate without documentation.
- **Streamlining the refugee and asylum process** to welcome those fleeing danger more quickly.

### **But fear often outweighs audiences’ pro-immigrant values.**

We have repeatedly seen through our research that most people (across all segments) hold deeply seeded pro-immigrant values. But right now, audiences are scared. They are not sure if they’re safe - from pandemics, guns, climate change, or war. They don’t feel valued and they don’t feel heard. On top of that, every audience segment revealed anxieties sown by fear-based anti-immigrant dominant narratives: they’re afraid of “chaos” at the border, “criminals” and “terrorists” whom they believe are trying to get into the country, and “free-loaders” who don’t contribute once they get here.

When people feel afraid, they are easily pulled into a scarcity mindset, where they turn inwards and try to conserve what is theirs, unwilling to expand beyond what’s known and what feels safe and familiar. We saw scarcity and fear driving how most audiences currently form their views on immigration.

Though many - across ideologies and audience segments - share the desire to see change in the immigration system, people have different needs that must be met for them to feel open to immigration and accepting of immigrants.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMING ATTITUDES**

In order to discover what might transform anti-immigration sentiments, we set out to unearth the underlying drivers of audiences’ attitudes and learn how far we could push their imaginations to envision and embrace a future where moving between countries is easy and available to everyone.

We learned that people across all audience segments were excited to imagine a free movement future, a world where coming and going across borders meant opportunities for cultural exchange, economic prosperity for all, and community enrichment. But they also held many fears about what it would take for that future to be realized.

**An abundance mindset is key.**

To imagine a future with free movement, the audiences in our study needed to access an **abundance mindset**. This is the mindset that there can be enough for everyone, that everyone can win, that more is more, and it allows people to open their imaginations and see the optimistic potential for a better future.

We saw two primary themes that characterized the abundance mindset in the audiences we talked to:

- **Freedom:** Interviewees said they felt trapped and longed to feel they are free to make the best choices for themselves and their families. They strongly resonated with the idea that they could choose the country in which their life would be best. It made them feel free to live better lives, unencumbered by restrictions, as if they were agents of their own destiny with endless opportunity. When they were able to imagine themselves as having this freedom, they were more open to extending that same freedom to others.
- **Mutuality:** When they were able to see how free movement could be mutually beneficial, it opened audiences to think about immigration from a different paradigm. Audiences across segments were quick to embrace the idea that migration helps us all become wealthier, freer, more diverse, culturally enriched, and happier. Audiences believe strongly in contribution, but are also able to see that as a two-way street; a better world is made when people from all backgrounds work together and solve problems together. This feels like an important reflection point for our movement, as calls for action on what's "right" or "humanitarian" are one-directional, based on altruism rather than mutuality.

### **Audiences need to feel there is safety and order to reach and maintain an abundance mindset.**

Our research revealed that people's need for safety and order must be satisfied for them to reactivate their pro-immigrant values and to embrace a pro-immigrant future.

We believe the following findings may point to pathways that can satisfy audiences' need for safety and order.

#### **Moving from Chaos to Order:**

- **Structure stops chaos.** All audience segments want to know the rules, for the rules to make sense, and for the rules to be followed. Furthermore, audiences need to perceive that the rules are being made deliberately and that they work as intended. (This does not necessarily indicate, however, that people need to hear every policy detail. More testing will be useful to understand the boundaries of this insight.)

- **Most audiences want to see rules that will make the immigration process faster, easier, and safer for everyone.** All segments except conservative Don't Tread on Me felt the immigration process was too complicated, takes too long, and needs more resources to improve it. But even Don't Tread on Mes felt the process needed improvement and wanted it to be simplified.
- **Audiences have a strong desire for fairness.** There is also a wide agreement that the immigration system is harming immigrants and needs to be improved. Many thought that the rules need to be changed, especially for asylum seekers and children.

### **Moving from Danger to Safety:**

- **The perception of safety is deeply tied to the perception of order.** When audiences felt there was a transparent and fair structure in place that could keep them safe, they were able to move past many of their anxieties.
- **There is no getting around the safety issue.** Safety came up more frequently than any other obstacle for all audiences, including our base. Without addressing safety, it does not appear possible for most audiences to embrace a pro-immigrant future. At the same time, addressing safety in the opposition's frame will simply reinforce their narrative. Safety needs a new paradigm, a reframing of what keeps us safe and a reframing of "danger" to focus on what immigrants needlessly face from harmful policies.
- **Audiences across segments believe that we create a better world when cultures work together to solve big problems, and when people help and look out for each other.** This is a view of safety through an abundance mindset. A "friendly" rather than "dangerous" world where people assume good intent, and safety grows from strong communities and relationships.

### **Audience segment surprises we can build upon:**

- **If You Say So's**, many of whom skew liberal and young, were the most concerned about structure and rules.
- **Tough Cookies**, who deeply value structure and order and talk a lot about the "right" and "wrong" way to do things, just wanted to keep everyone safe. They also surprised us by talking about ways the rules were sometimes arbitrary and might sometimes put people in danger.
- **Don't Tread On Me's**, who skew more conservative, presented as the most idealistic once their safety concerns were addressed, and were the segment most interested in

achieving a “friendly” future world where we all help each other and could even achieve world peace.

## WHAT'S NEXT

[The Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy](#) will focus our next phase of research on testing how these findings can be translated into narratives and content strategies. Simultaneously, we are conducting additional testing with our Chrysalis Lab grantees that will provide further insights into narrative strategies that transform attitudes. Through October 2022 we are also offering narrative strategy trainings for the pro-immigrant movement based on our Narrative Design Toolkit and the research findings we've generated over the course of our project.

[The Opportunity Agenda](#) will continue digesting these findings with our cohort of advocates from Arizona, Iowa, Michigan, and New York, brainstorming ways to infuse these insights into advocates' and activists' most pressing narrative and communications needs. We will also dive deeper into where these narratives have regional differences and/or overlaps, and distill regional and national trends for the regions our cohort works in. We will co-develop messaging guidance and communications tools that provide new approaches for persuading a range of target audiences, all while promoting a cohesive pro-immigrant narrative for the future.