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LATIN AMERICAN CAMPUS

GLOBAL AFFAIRS &  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE MIGRANT PROTECTION PROTOCOLS:

HOW AGE, RACE, AND POLITICAL IDENTITY SHAPE EVALUATIONS OF THE TRUMP  
AND BIDEN ADMINISTRATIONS

RESEARCH PROJECT FOR THE COURSE OF

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

AUTHOR:LESTER JOSEPH PEREIRA MARTINEZ

TUTOR: NELLY VALDIVIA

[nelly.valdivia@keiseruniversity.edu](mailto:nelly.valdivia@keiseruniversity.edu)

SAN MARCOS, CARAZO, NICARAGUA

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the ways in which age, race, and political identity shape public perceptions of the Migrant Protection Protocols, commonly referred to as the Remain in Mexico policy, across the Trump and Biden administrations. The research evaluates how various social groups understand the purpose and fairness of this policy and their assessments of its humanitarian effects and how they compare the two administrations' approaches. Immigration stands as a fundamental and contentious matter in the United States so research about how different social groups evaluate one policy helps explain the political and social divisions that affect public opinion.

The research design combines quantitative and qualitative methods together. The research combines official government reports with nonpartisan research and human rights documentation through an online survey that received responses from thirty one participants representing diverse demographic groups. The survey assessed participants' understanding of the policy and their opinions about safety levels and effectiveness and their assessments of humanitarian effects. The research team used age and race and political identity to identify recurring patterns between different groups.

The research results demonstrate that people evaluate the Migrant Protection Protocols through distinct perspectives. The survey results showed that migrants faced harm and safety risks according to respondents who were under thirty years old and Hispanic or Latino and Democratic Party supporters. The survey results showed that older participants and Republican respondents supported the policy as an essential border control measure. The participants shared a common understanding that Central American migration stems from violence and poverty and

limited job prospects while they saw Trump's approach as strict deterrence and Biden's approach as humanitarian although not always successful.

The research indicates that immigration policy perceptions stem more from demographic characteristics and political affiliations than from actual policy experiences. The research findings demonstrate the significance of public opinion in immigration debates while contributing to International Relations discussions about human rights and state responsibilities and border policy legitimacy.

## **RESUMEN**

Este estudio explora de qué manera la edad, la raza y la identidad política influyen en las percepciones públicas sobre los Protocolos de Protección al Migrante, conocidos como la política Permanecer en México, durante las administraciones de Trump y Biden. La investigación analiza cómo distintos grupos sociales entienden el propósito y la justicia de esta política, cómo evalúan sus efectos humanitarios y cómo comparan los enfoques de ambas administraciones. Debido a que la inmigración es un tema central y altamente polémico en los Estados Unidos, estudiar cómo diferentes grupos sociales evalúan una misma política permite comprender mejor las divisiones políticas y sociales que influyen en la opinión pública.

El diseño de la investigación combina métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos. El estudio integra reportes oficiales del gobierno, investigaciones imparciales y documentación de derechos humanos con una encuesta en línea completada por treinta y un participantes de diversos grupos demográficos. La encuesta evaluó el nivel de conocimiento sobre la política, las opiniones sobre seguridad y eficacia, y las percepciones sobre los efectos humanitarios. Las respuestas se

organizaron de acuerdo con la edad, la raza y la identidad política, lo que permitió identificar patrones recurrentes entre los distintos grupos.

Los resultados muestran que las personas evalúan los Protocolos de Protección al Migrante desde perspectivas muy diferentes. Los encuestados menores de treinta años, los participantes hispanos o latinos y quienes se identificaron con el Partido Demócrata tendieron a considerar que la política generaba daño y riesgos de seguridad para los migrantes. En cambio, los participantes de mayor edad y los republicanos tendieron a ver la medida como una herramienta esencial de control fronterizo. La mayoría coincidió en que la migración centroamericana se debe principalmente a la violencia, la pobreza y la falta de oportunidades, y describió el enfoque de Trump como uno de disuasión estricta y el de Biden como más humanitario, aunque no siempre eficaz.

El estudio indica que las percepciones sobre la política migratoria dependen más de características demográficas y afiliaciones políticas que de experiencias directas con la política. Los hallazgos muestran la importancia de la opinión pública en los debates migratorios y contribuyen a las discusiones de Relaciones Internacionales sobre derechos humanos, responsabilidad del Estado y legitimidad de las políticas fronterizas.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Migrant Protection Protocols, or Remain in Mexico policy, have generated extensive scholarly debate because of their humanitarian impact and their role in reshaping border enforcement in the United States. Most researchers agree that the policy marked an important change in how the United States treated asylum seekers from Central America, although they differ on its purpose, legality, and broader consequences. The literature can be grouped into three

main debates. These debates focus on the legal and institutional foundations of MPP, the humanitarian and security consequences of the policy, and the relationship between public opinion, political identity, and immigration enforcement. This section reviews those debates and situates the present study within them.

The first debate concerns the objectives and legal justification of MPP. Analysts from the Congressional Research Service explain that the policy was introduced in 2019 during the Trump administration as part of a broader deterrence strategy to reduce the number of asylum seekers arriving at the southern border (Kandel, 2019). Under this policy, certain asylum seekers were returned to Mexico to wait for the resolution of their U.S. immigration court hearings, which represented a departure from previous practices. Kandel notes that the administration described the program as a response to “fraudulent” claims, so called pull factors, and overcrowded facilities, meaning that the main aim was to discourage people from making the journey north. The Migration Policy Institute highlights that the program rested on a particular interpretation of section 235 of the Immigration and Nationality Act that previous administrations had not used in such an extensive way (Pierce, 2021). Taken together, these studies show that MPP was closely tied to a political narrative about border control, which helps explain why some groups continue to view it as necessary or effective.

The second major debate focuses on the humanitarian consequences of MPP. Human rights organizations and academic researchers argue that the policy created serious risks for asylum seekers. Reports by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights describe high levels of violence, kidnapping, extortion, and lack of basic shelter in Mexican border cities where migrants were forced to remain (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). Human Rights First documents hundreds of cases of kidnapping, sexual assault, and torture affecting migrants returned under

MPP and concludes that the policy violates core principles of international refugee protection (Human Rights First, 2021). The American Immigration Council describes how the policy placed families in locations that made it very difficult for them to attend hearings or receive legal assistance, which affected their access to a fair asylum process (American Immigration Council, 2024). Together, these studies suggest that MPP generated extensive humanitarian harm. This helps explain why many survey respondents in this research evaluated the policy as dangerous or unfair and why younger people and racial minorities, who tend to show stronger support for human rights in public opinion research, may be especially critical of it.

A third debate examines how public opinion and political identity influence attitudes toward immigration enforcement. Research in political science shows that partisan identity is one of the strongest predictors of attitudes toward immigration. Surveys by the Pew Research Center report that Republicans are much more likely to support deterrence oriented policies that emphasize border security, while Democrats are more likely to prioritize humanitarian protection and asylum rights (Pew Research Center, 2022). Age also matters. Younger Americans are generally more supportive of immigrants and more critical of punitive enforcement. Race plays an important role too. Studies find that Hispanic and Latino communities, especially those with direct migration experience, are more likely to oppose restrictive policies such as MPP than white Americans. Black Americans tend to show higher awareness of the risks and inequalities associated with immigration enforcement. These patterns support the decision to focus this study on age, race, and political identity as key explanatory factors.

Another part of the literature compares the Trump and Biden administrations. While Biden promised to end MPP because of its humanitarian costs, legal challenges and political pressure created a more complicated process than expected. The Migration Policy Institute notes that

although the Biden administration tried to terminate the program in 2021, federal courts temporarily required its reimplementation, which produced a confusing situation at the border (Pierce, 2021). Scholars argue that Biden adopted more humanitarian rhetoric but still faced serious structural problems such as overcrowded facilities and backlogged cases. This context helps explain why many people see a change in tone but not necessarily a complete change in practice. It also suggests that public opinion might respond not only to legal changes but also to media images of border pressures and humanitarian crises.

Overall, the existing literature provides a strong foundation for evaluating the Migrant Protection Protocols. Many authors agree that the policy represented a major shift in asylum processing and raised serious humanitarian concerns. Studies also show that political identity, age, and race are crucial factors in shaping opinions on immigration enforcement. However, there are still gaps. Fewer studies link these demographic variables directly to public evaluations of MPP or connect those evaluations to differences between the Trump and Biden administrations. This research contributes by combining a descriptive comparison of the two administrations with an analysis of how age, race, and political identity shape public attitudes toward MPP. It bridges institutional analysis with social perception and helps explain why immigration policy remains contested even when the legal framework appears to change.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research design combines documentary analysis with quantitative survey data to achieve its objectives. The research evaluates Migrant Protection Protocols implementation between Trump and Biden administrations while studying how age and race and political affiliation affect public assessments of this policy. The research design enables institutional behavior and legal

frameworks and public opinion assessment through the combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence according to Lamont. The research examines Central American migrants from Honduras and Guatemala and El Salvador and Nicaragua who faced the Remain in Mexico policy during 2019-2024. The research cannot conduct direct border fieldwork so it depends on trustworthy secondary sources. The Congressional Research Service explains MPP's legal framework and operational structure and its purpose to deter migrants while forcing asylum seekers to stay in Mexico during their court proceedings. The United States Commission on Civil Rights published reports which documented migrants experienced violence and kidnapping and lacked legal assistance when they stayed in Mexican border towns. The American Immigration Council together with the Migration Policy Institute studied Biden administration efforts to terminate MPP while analyzing court decisions that forced partial program reinstatement and the political and operational barriers that slowed down changes. The sources deliver essential information about MPP operational details and its defensive purposes and documented human rights violations. The research team used Google Forms to create an anonymous online survey for data collection. The research team received thirty-one responses from people who currently live or used to live in the United States. The survey started by asking participants to provide their age and race and gender and educational background and political affiliation. The survey participants chose to identify as White or Black or Hispanic or Latino or Mixed and their educational attainment spanned from high school to graduate studies. The survey participants chose to identify as Democrats or Republicans or independents or undecided or they chose to remain silent about their political affiliation. The survey contained multiple-choice questions which asked participants about their understanding of Migrant Protection Protocols and their opinions on asylum seeker waiting locations and border safety assessments and their assessments

of border control effectiveness and humanitarian treatment between Trump and Biden administrations. The survey system automatically recorded responses which were then transferred to a spreadsheet for analysis. The research team performed statistical calculations to determine answer frequencies and percentages for all survey questions. The research team analyzed survey responses through age categories and racial groups and political affiliations to detect specific patterns which showed how different groups viewed humanitarian protection and border control measures. The research team combined survey data with documentary evidence about legal frameworks and enforcement methods and humanitarian consequences. The study evaluated migrant safety risks under MPP through documented border city violence and insufficient legal protections. The survey results about Trump's strict border policies and Biden's humanitarian approach needed evaluation through legal and political assessments of their immigration strategies. The research design contains specific restrictions that affect the research. The research sample lacks national representation because it consists of only thirty-one participants who include mostly young people and students which might skew the results toward humanitarian concerns. Survey participants based their answers on general perceptions instead of showing detailed legal understanding so their responses might stem from limited information. The research minimizes advocacy organization bias through its use of government and nonpartisan reports for verification purposes. Immigration policies undergo regular changes which might cause public opinions to differ from the collected data. The research method provides an effective framework to study how demographic characteristics affect MPP evaluations and their connection to documented policy outcomes despite its acknowledged research constraints.

## RESULTS

The results of this research come from a survey completed by thirty one participants. All respondents were current or former residents of the United States. The purpose of collecting this data was to observe how age, race, and political identity shape people's perceptions of the Migrant Protection Protocols and the immigration approaches of the Trump and Biden administrations. The results rely entirely on quantitative data from the survey.

A total of thirty one participants completed the survey. Regarding age, 3.2% were 18 and under, 71% were between 19 and 25, 12.9% were between 26 and 31, 6.5% were between 32 and 40, 6.5% were between 41 and 50, and none were 50 and over (Figure A1, Appendix A). This reflects that the survey reached mostly younger individuals, which matches the context in which the survey was distributed.

In terms of political identity, 48.4% identified as Democrats, 25.8% as Republicans, 22.6% as independents or undecided voters, and 3.2% preferred not to say (Figure A2, Appendix A).

When participants were asked whether they had heard of the Migrant Protection Protocols, 83.9% said yes, 12.9% said no, and 3.2% were unsure (Figure A3, Appendix A). Among those who were familiar with the policy, 48.4% described it as exposing migrants to unsafe or unfair conditions, 19.4% said it strengthened border control, 16.1% said it was both effective and harmful, and 16.1% said they did not know enough to describe it (Figure A4, Appendix A).

Participants were also asked their opinion regarding whether asylum seekers should be allowed to wait inside the United States during their asylum process. A total of 64.5% said yes, 29% said no, and 6.5% were not sure (Figure A5, Appendix A). When asked whether the Migrant

Protection Protocols made the border safer, 12.9% said yes, 54.8% said no, and 32.3% were unsure (Figure A6, Appendix A). In a follow up question about whether the policy placed migrants and families at risk, 71% said yes, 12.9% said no, and 16.1% were unsure (Figure A7, Appendix A).

When comparing presidential administrations, participants were asked which administration handled immigration more humanely. A total of 64.5% selected the Biden administration, 19.4% selected the Trump administration, and 16.1% selected neither administration (Figure A8, Appendix A). In contrast, when asked which administration was more effective at controlling the border, 56.7% selected the Trump administration, 20% selected the Biden administration, 6.7% selected both equally, and 16.7% were unsure (Figure A9, Appendix A).

Participants were also asked whether Biden's policies improved the treatment of migrants compared to the Trump period. A total of 51.6% said there was noticeable improvement, 22.6% said there was some improvement, 19.4% said there was no improvement, and 6.5% said they were not sure (Figure A10, Appendix A).

Regarding the reasons Central American migrants come to the United States, 45.2% of participants said migrants leave due to both violence and poverty, 25.8% selected other combined reasons, 19.4% selected better opportunities, and 9.7% selected another explanation (Figure A11, Appendix A).

When asked whether the United States should focus more on border security or humanitarian protection, 51.6% selected humanitarian protection, 25.8% selected both equally, 19.4% selected border security, and 3.2% were not sure (Figure A12, Appendix A).

Finally, participants were asked if the media influences how people view immigration policy. A total of 87.1% said yes and 12.9% said no (Figure A13, Appendix A).

Overall, these results suggest that the majority of respondents were aware of the Migrant Protection Protocols and viewed the policy as exposing migrants to unsafe conditions.

Respondents tended to view the Biden administration as more humane while viewing the Trump administration as more effective in border control. Many also believed that Central American migration is mainly driven by violence, poverty, or both. Participants showed strong agreement that the media influences how people think about immigration. Together, these findings show clear patterns linking age, political identity, and personal beliefs about the humanitarian and security dimensions of immigration.

## DISCUSSION

The research investigated how age and race and political beliefs affect public assessments of the Migrant Protection Protocols under Trump and Biden presidencies. The survey results demonstrate distinct ways different social groups understand and evaluate this immigration policy. The survey results demonstrate that political identity stands as the dominant factor while age also plays a significant role. The participants evaluated Biden's immigration strategy as showing more compassion yet they maintained their concerns about border-related issues. The research question receives answers through these patterns because people evaluate immigration through their combination of security needs and humanitarian values. The research results match multiple findings which appear in the existing literature. The United States Commission on Civil Rights demonstrates how Remain in Mexico created dangerous conditions for asylum seekers in Mexican border areas while blocking their access to legal help and fair court proceedings.

Human Rights First presents evidence about migrant victims who experienced kidnapping and assault and abuse while under MPP while concluding that the program violates essential refugee protection standards. The survey results indicate that most participants believed MPP created dangers for migrants and their families while failing to enhance border security. The survey results indicate that the sample population shares humanitarian concerns which researchers and human rights organizations have documented about this issue. The evaluation between presidential administrations matches what scholars have studied about this topic. The Migration Policy Institute explains that Trump focused on border control through deterrence but Biden aimed to terminate MPP until legal and political obstacles blocked his path to change. The survey participants evaluated Trump as an effective border controller who lacked compassion yet they viewed Biden as more compassionate although he failed to solve border issues completely. The two administrations maintained different communication approaches yet they faced identical institutional barriers and legal restrictions. The research findings gain strength from the match between survey results and existing literature even though the study used a limited number of participants. The survey results introduce additional complexity to the discussion about Biden's immigration policies. Multiple researchers claim Biden established a new direction from Trump because he worked to bring back asylum programs and decrease border deterrents. The survey results present a different perspective than what some authors have suggested. The participants detected a change in official language yet they failed to see substantial improvements in border security. The participants maintained their perception of border instability and ongoing migrant pressure. The research demonstrates how public opinion reacts to both legal changes and ongoing humanitarian emergencies and border-related media coverage in International Relations. Lamont explains that policy outcomes result from how actors understand policies rather than the

way institutions are structured. People accept the new approach of Biden but they remain concerned about fundamental border issues. The research demonstrates how people evaluate security needs against their humanitarian values. The majority of survey participants supported either humanitarian protection or a combination of approaches but security-only support remained minimal. Research indicates that states and their citizens evaluate immigration through strategic goals and moral principles. The survey results show Trump linked to security measures and migrant deterrence but Biden linked to humanitarian concerns. The ongoing struggle between security needs and humanitarian values explains why immigration policy remains unstable and generates intense political reactions. The research findings create essential knowledge for understanding foreign policy operations and their effects on neighboring countries. The Migrant Protection Protocols required Mexican cooperation to function while creating new perceptions about the United States among Central American nations and international organizations. When citizens believe a policy threatens migrant safety it strengthens external criticism which damages the nation's human rights reputation. The survey results demonstrate that most participants support human rights organizations which state that MPP makes migrants more vulnerable. The survey results indicate that public opinion supports the notion that immigration policies create borderless effects which impact how other nations view the United States. The research contains specific boundaries which restrict its findings. The research findings remain restricted because the small unrepresentative participant group prevents generalization and the high number of young participants strengthens humanitarian-focused responses. The survey assesses how people feel about immigration law instead of their actual knowledge of the subject and their responses might stem from media reports or incomplete information. The border conditions experience rapid transformations which could produce

different public opinions after the research data collection period. The research provides valuable knowledge about how typical people understand the controversial immigration policy despite its restricted scope. The research demonstrates how demographic characteristics together with political affiliations affect people's assessments of MPP while exposing the immigration conflicts between security needs and legal frameworks and human rights protections in International Relations.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research investigates how different age groups and racial backgrounds and political affiliations affect public assessments of Migrant Protection Protocols during Trump and Biden presidencies. The research analyzed thirty-one participant responses through documentary analysis and survey data to understand how different groups perceive MPP objectives and fairness and humanitarian effects and their assessments of Trump and Biden immigration strategies. The research indicates that political affiliation stands as the primary factor which determines how people view this policy while age factors and race play a smaller role in shaping their opinions. Most survey participants demonstrated knowledge about MPP existed while they mostly viewed it as a policy which endangered migrant safety instead of securing the border. The participants evaluated the Biden administration as more compassionate than the Trump administration when it came to border control. Most survey participants agreed that Central American migrants migrate to the United States because of violence and poverty and economic opportunities. The research findings demonstrate that people understand migration through a framework which connects foreign country problems to U.S. immigration policies that affect migrant safety. The research investigates to what extent three factors including age and race and political identity affect people's opinions about MPP. The research data indicates that political

affiliation stands as the dominant factor which determines how people view this policy. The survey results showed that Democrats focused on humanitarian aspects while supporting asylum seekers to stay inside the United States and viewing MPP as dangerous. The survey results showed that Republicans supported border control measures and deterrence strategies as essential for national security. The survey results demonstrated that younger participants supported humanitarian protection more than older participants did which aligns with findings from national opinion polls. The study results showed that Hispanic and Latino participants demonstrated stronger criticism of immigration restrictions because they maintain personal connections to migration. The research adds value to International Relations by demonstrating how domestic public opinions influence discussions about human rights and state duties and border management systems. The research demonstrates that immigration policy exists beyond legal frameworks and enforcement methods because citizens develop their own understanding of how security measures relate to humanitarian standards. The way people understand these policies determines their acceptance of MPP and their perception of its legitimacy both domestically and internationally. The research contains specific boundaries which restrict its findings. The research data comes from a limited sample that lacks representation and contains mostly young participants while public opinions about MPP can shift rapidly because of changing border conditions and media reports. Future research needs to increase participant numbers while adding diverse age groups and regional representation and conducting interviews with U.S. citizens and Central American migrants who experience MPP effects. The research provides valuable insights about public understanding of MPP while demonstrating that security concerns and legal frameworks and human rights issues remain interconnected with public opinions about migration policies.



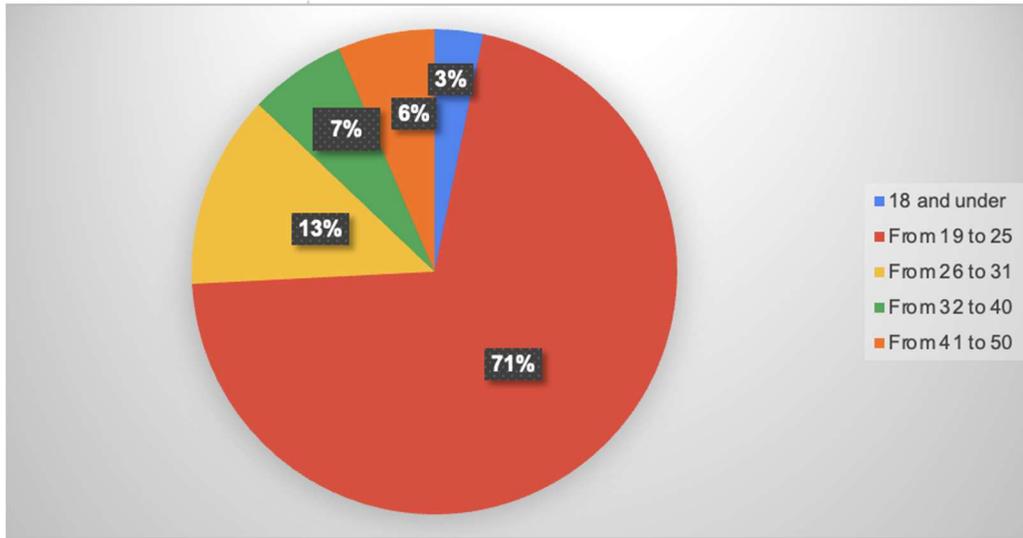
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## Appendix A Survey Graphs

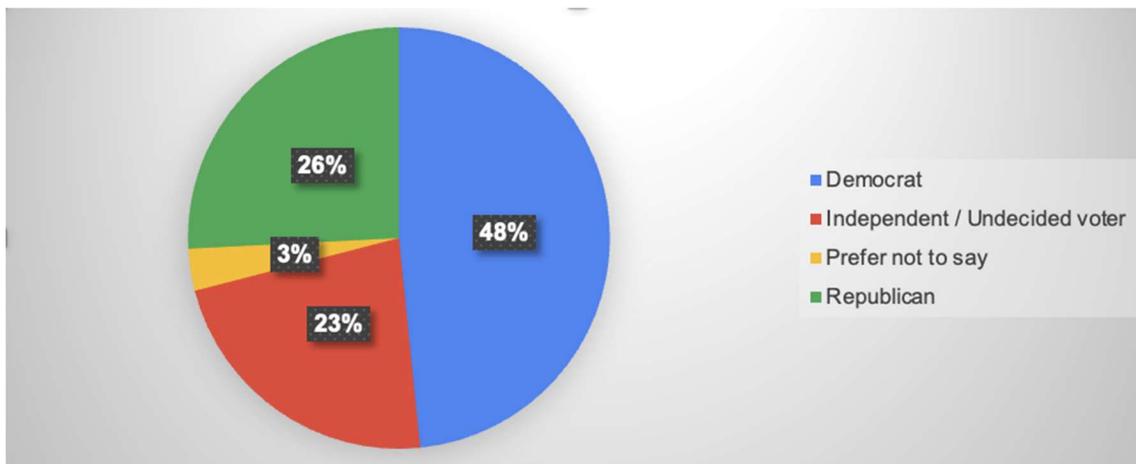
**Figure A1. Age of Participants**

*This figure shows the age distribution of the thirty one respondents.*



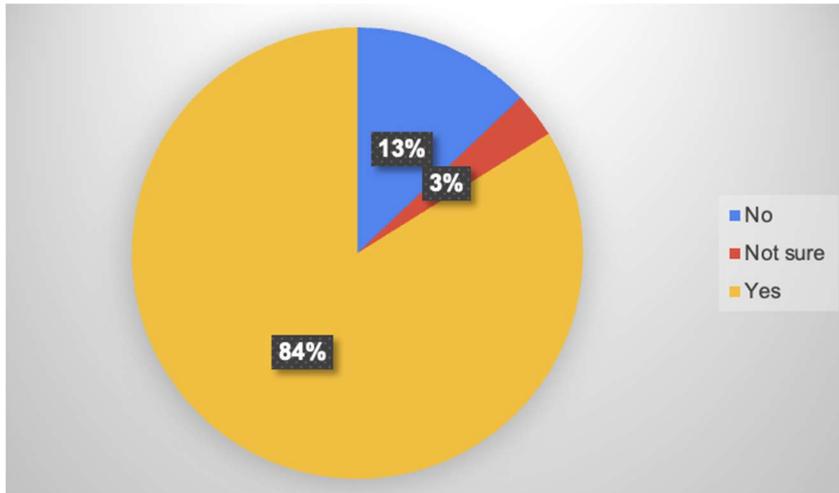
**Figure A2. Political Identity of Participants**

*This figure presents how respondents identified politically.*



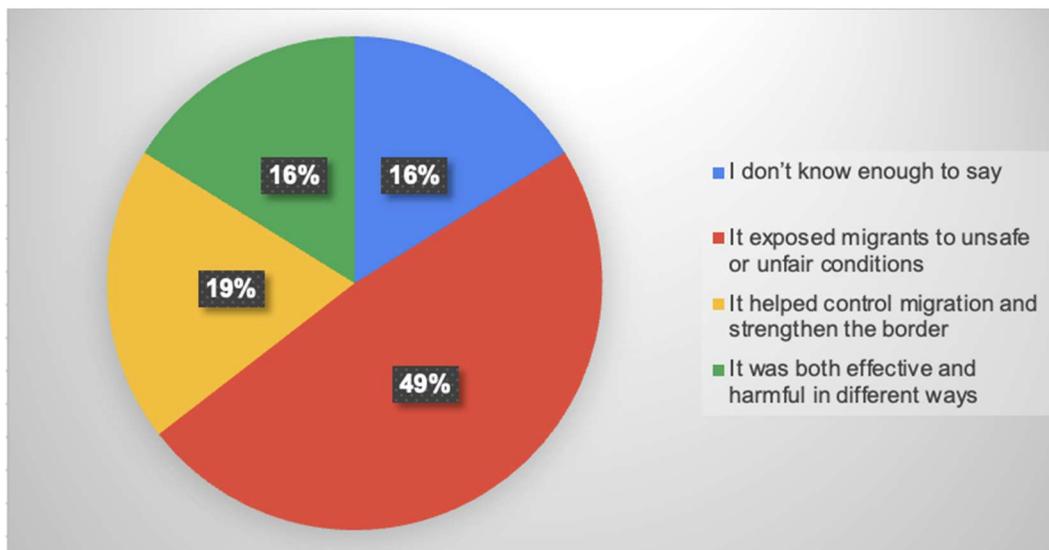
### Figure A3. Awareness of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)

*This figure shows whether participants had previously heard of the policy.*



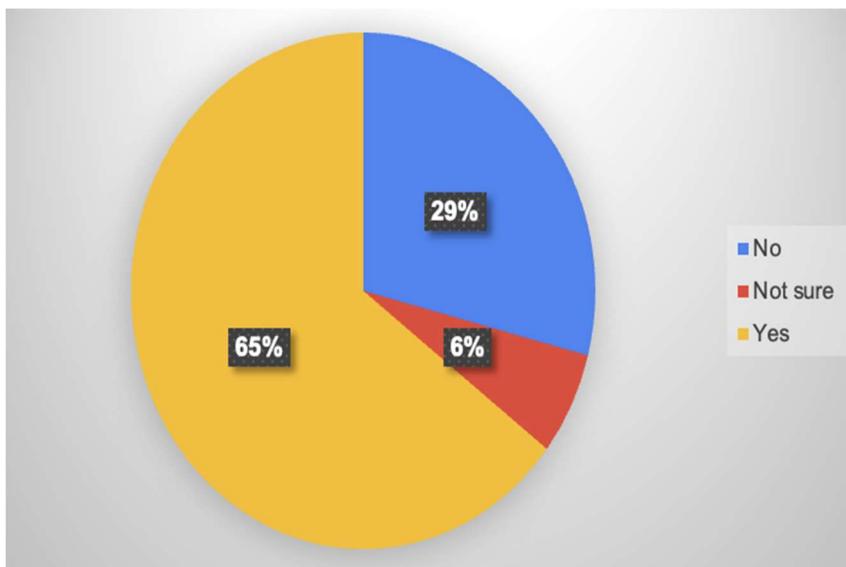
### Figure A4. Understanding of the Migrant Protection Protocols

*This figure illustrates how respondents interpreted or understood the policy.*



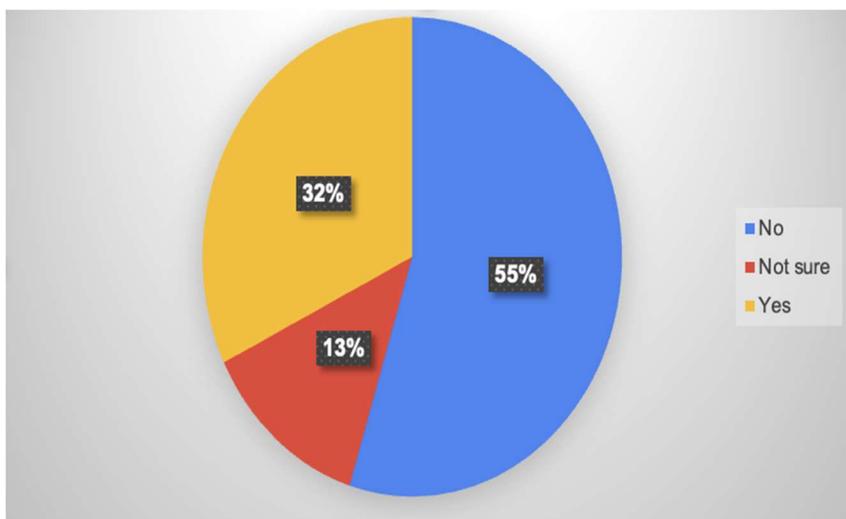
### Figure A5. Preference for Allowing Asylum Seekers to Wait Inside the United States

*This figure displays opinions on whether asylum seekers should wait inside the U.S.*



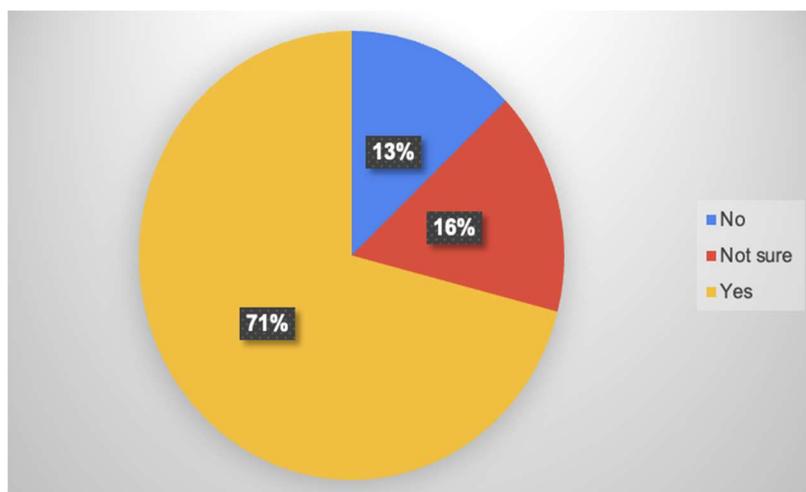
**Figure A6. Perception of Whether MPP Made the Border Safer**

*This figure summarizes whether respondents believed MPP improved border safety.*



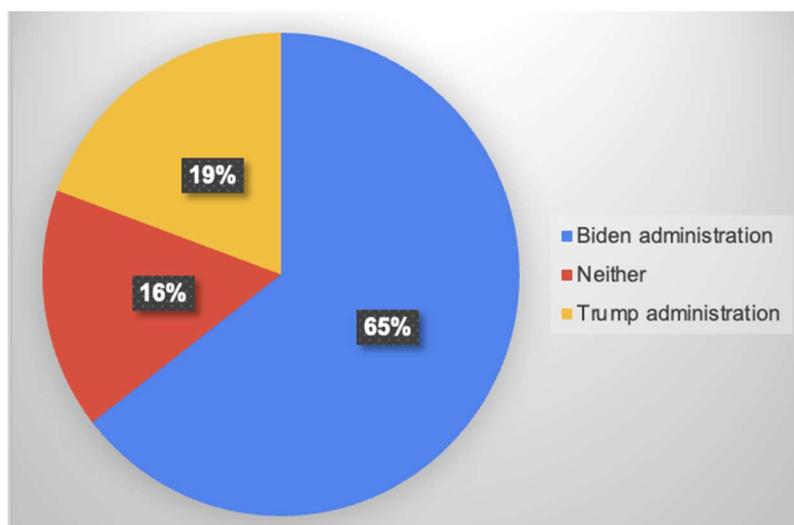
**Figure A7. Perception of Whether MPP Put Migrants and Families at Risk**

*This figure shows views on whether the policy endangered migrants and families.*



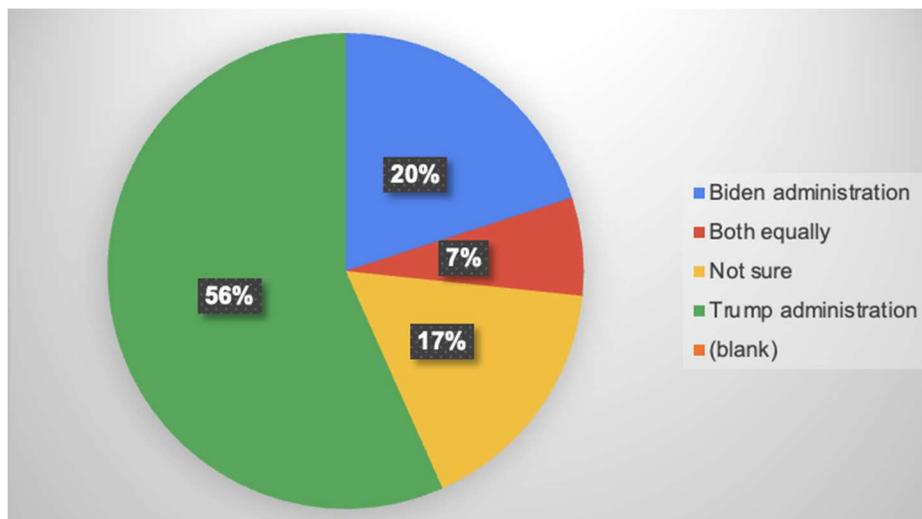
**Figure A8. Which Administration Handled Immigration More Humanely**

*This figure compares perceptions of humane treatment under the two administrations.*



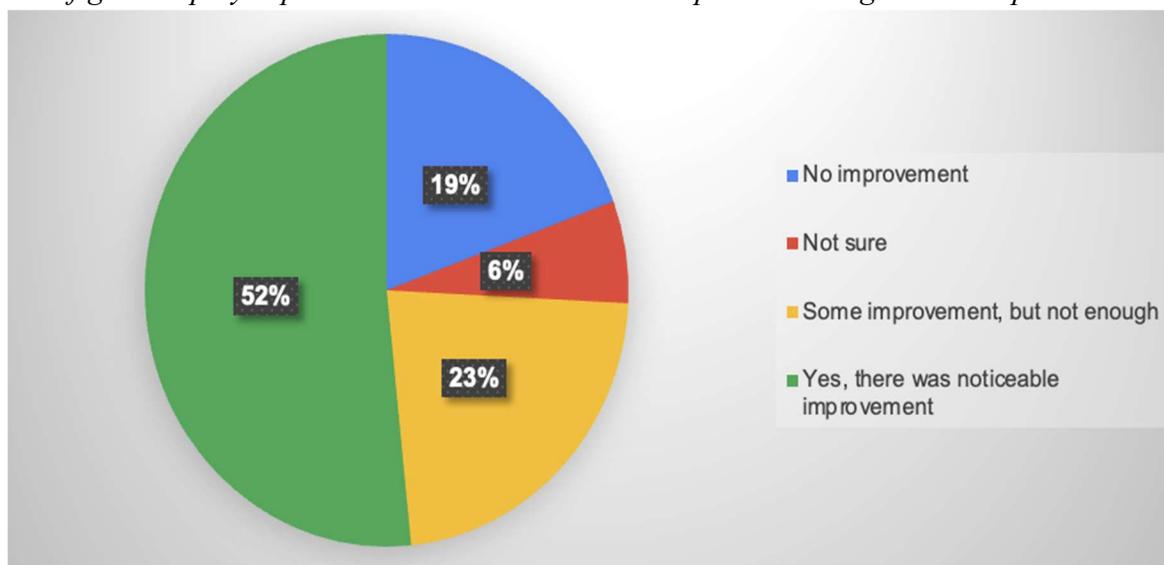
**Figure A9. Which Administration Was More Effective at Controlling the Border**

*This figure shows respondents' views on border enforcement effectiveness.*



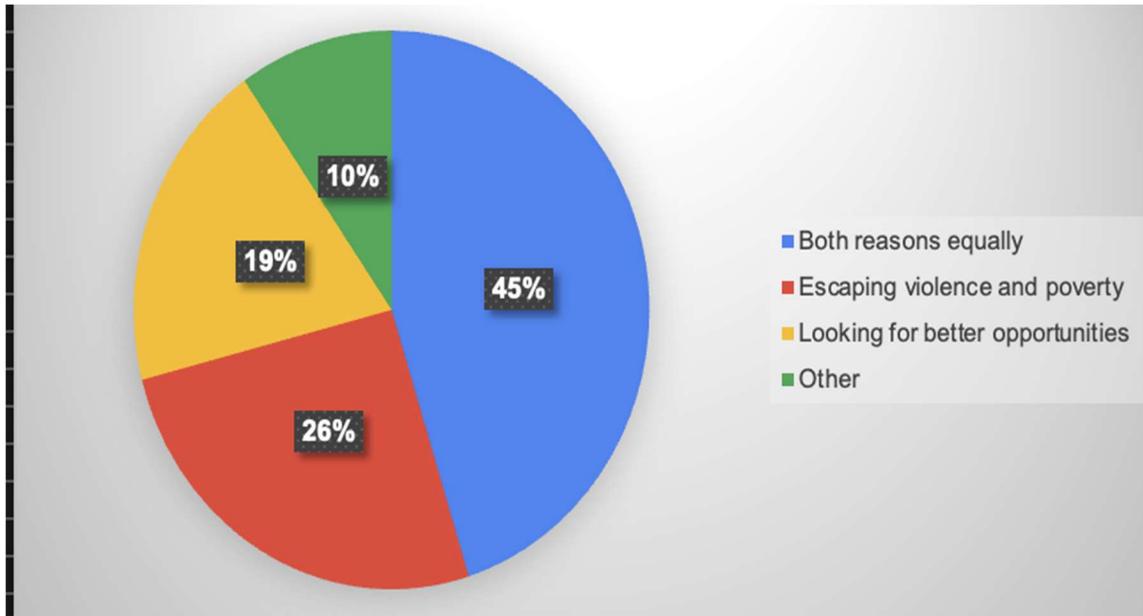
**Figure A10. Perceptions of Whether Biden Improved Migrant Treatment**

*This figure displays opinions on whether treatment improved during the Biden period.*



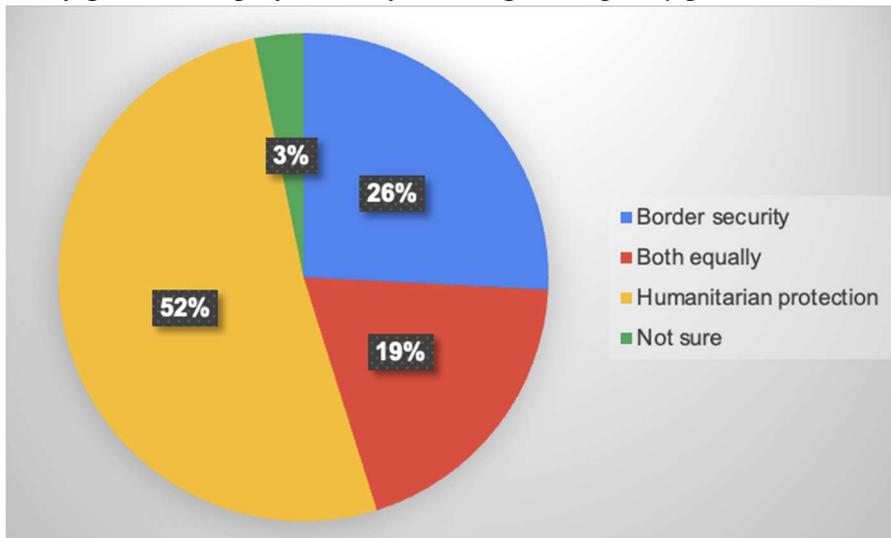
**Figure A11. Motivations for Central American Migration**

*This figure summarizes what respondents believe motivates migration.*



**Figure A12. Whether the U.S. Should Prioritize Border Security or Humanitarian Protection**

*This figure shows preferences for immigration policy priorities.*



**Figure A13. Influence of Media on Views of Immigration Policy**

*This figure presents whether respondents believe media shapes immigration perceptions.*

