



Opinion: On Immigration, Trump Administration Chooses Messaging Over Facts

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The Republican Party's view on sanctuary cities is a textbook illustration of what social scientists call cognitive dissonance; the mental process by which humans exclude or ignore information that contradicts their view of the world. Attorney General Jeff Sessions gave a speech in Las Vegas this week on sanctuary cities saying, "According to a recent study from the University of California, Riverside, cities with these policies have more violent crime on average than those that don't."

He's wrong, and here's why.

Protesters gather at JFK International Airport's Terminal 4 to demonstrate against President Donald Trump's executive order on Jan. 28 in New York. Bryan R. Smith / AFP - Getty Images

This is an extraordinary statement from the Attorney General of the United States because it's not only false, but the study he appears to be citing specifically states the opposite is true. In fact, one need not read very far into the paper to see this conclusion.

The abstract of the paper, a customary short summary of the study academics place at the beginning of their research papers so as not to confuse the reader with scientific jargon, authored by Loren Collingwood and Benjamin Gonzalez-O'Brien states, "Our findings provide evidence that sanctuary policies have no effect on crime rates, despite narratives to the contrary."

The findings by Collingwood and Gonzalez-O'Brien are not controversial among academics, nor are they specific to researchers in "liberal" universities. Alex Nowrasteh, a researcher at the Cato Institute, a non-profit research center that describes itself as dedicated to "the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace", has made similar claims based on his own research.

Nowrasteh writes, "contrary to public perception, immigrants in the country illegally are much less crime prone than native-born Americans."

In fact, Collingwood and Gonzalez-O'Brien authored a piece in the Washington Post's Monkey Cage Blog last fall presenting their work in less technical terms. The title of the article was, remarkably, "Sanctuary cities do not experience an increase in crime". After Sessions' speech in Las Vegas, the two scholars wrote an analysis in the Washington Post; " the headline is "Jeff Sessions used our research to claim that sanctuary cities have more crime. They're wrong."

It is not surprising to see this level of dissonance in the public, whether it is the correlation between immigration and crime or the presence of in-person voter fraud that the Trump administration says is so pervasive that a special election fraud panel is needed to address the issue.

Despite the administration's assertion, however, the data once again points to the opposite conclusion. In fact the statistics gurus at FiveThirtyEight point out that there is a greater chance a person will be struck by lightning than commit voter fraud.

But let's go back to immigration. When asked about this misperception by Republicans, Collingwood said, "It's probably due to popular narratives in the media, in film, combined with having limited experiences with the immigrant population".

Collingwood, an Assistant Professor at the University of California, Riverside, has a point. Our perceptions drive how we assess new data about that issue, and the Republicans and the Democrats have diverted quite dramatically on the issue since 1994, and the two have solidified their views since the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Today, a majority of Republicans are far more likely to say that immigrants are "a burden" to American society than Democrats.

Collingwood makes a good point about how these narratives are influenced by the media. Marisa Abrajano and Zoltan Hajnal write in their book, White Backlash, that "news coverage is largely negative, largely focused on Latinos, and largely attentive to the negative policy issues associated with immigration".

The result is what they call a negative frame that influences our perceptions about immigrants, and the shift in demographics and party identification has driven the views of Republicans to be largely negative, despite the data showing that higher rates of immigration does not increase crime rates.

Whether or not the Republican Party will change their views on the issue is difficult to tell, and easy to see how it will not change any time soon.

Donald Trump's election is not only a symptom of this long standing skepticism of immigration; it's likely to harden views as the administration works to reaffirm pre-existing myths about immigrants that have been primed by years of negative messaging.

Attempts to validate the negative sentiment against immigrants through the President's VOICE hotline, aimed at providing public information and resources to the victims of crimes committed by undocumented immigrants, will only stoke the flames of ignorance already at five-alarm levels.