

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Politics of (Mis)perception: Understanding Americans' Beliefs About Immigrant Welfare Usage

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ABSTRACT

Background: Public concerns about immigrants' use of welfare programs have long influenced U.S. immigration and social policy. During the Trump administration, claims that immigrants exploit the American welfare system became central to the political agenda, amplifying perceptions that immigrants are economic burdens. These perceptions, whether grounded in reality or not, can shape public support for both immigration and the welfare state.

Aims: Few studies have systematically examined how closely Americans' perceptions of immigrants' welfare usage align with actual usage patterns, and how individual and contextual factors moderate this relationship. In this study we explore these connections.

Materials and Methods: We use original national survey data merged with state-level data on immigrant welfare usage to investigate the extent to which Americans' beliefs reflect the realities of local immigrant welfare usage.

Results: We show a significant—albeit modest—association between the objective rate of immigrant participation in welfare programs and individuals' subjective perceptions. However, this effect is not uniform: it is strongest among individuals who are more engaged in politics, though moderating effects of political ideology and education are mixed.

Discussion and Conclusion: These findings contribute to our understanding of the conditions under which factual context influences perceptions and belief formation in a polarized political environment. They also contribute to the growing literature on immigrants' fiscal impact, as well as the literature on immigration attitudes.

Public perceptions of immigrants and their relationship to the welfare state have become increasingly politicized in recent years. During Donald Trump's presidency, anti-immigration rhetoric reached new levels of visibility. Repeated claims that immigrants "drain" public resources or abuse US welfare programs were echoed in speeches, policy memos, and executive orders. Such anti-immigration rhetoric not only shapes immigration debates but also reinforces longstanding public concerns about immigrants' economic impact. Although the efforts of the Trump

administration intensified this discourse, they built on a much longer history of public perceptions of immigrants as undeserving beneficiaries of the welfare state (Yoo 2008; Alesina et al. 2023).

Social scientists have long debated the fiscal effects of immigration (Dustmann et al. 2010; Barrett and McCarthy 2007, 2008; Borjas and Hilton 1996; Card 2009; Hansen and Lofstrom 2003). Some studies suggest that immigrants and their children

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contribute more to the US economy than they receive in public support (Edsall 2016). Yet public attitudes often diverge sharply from these economic assessments. Immigrants are frequently perceived as net recipients of government benefits and are often perceived as the least deserving recipients of public welfare (Van Oorschot 2006; Reeskens and Van der Meer 2019; Simon and Lynch 1999). Such perceptions can erode public support for the welfare state, polarize immigration debates, and be used to justify exclusionary immigration policies.

In the United States, public beliefs about immigrants' use of welfare have also played a key role in shaping public policies. For example, the 1996 welfare reform, which excluded many immigrants from accessing federal welfare programs, was motivated by widespread and growing public beliefs that immigrants were burdens to taxpayers (Yoo 2008). More recently, public anxiety about migration and the possible fiscal impact contributed to the European refugee crisis backlash and played a role in Brexit (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). In the United States, such anti-immigration and policies concerns have been actively mobilized by conservative and right-wing leaders and used as reasons for exclusive social policies, especially during the Trump era.

Understanding what drives Americans' perceptions of immigrant welfare usage is therefore critical. A growing body of research has examined the sources of anti-immigrant attitudes and their policy implications (Dunaway et al. 2010; Brader et al. 2008; Mayda 2006; Merolla et al. 2013; Grigorieff et al. 2020; Christl et al. 2022; Finseraas 2008; Finseraas et al. 2024). Scholars have also explored how immigration attitudes intersect with support for the welfare state, emphasizing that what was once a "racialized" welfare discourse in the United States is now increasingly "immigrationized" (Garand et al. 2017; Alesina et al. 2023; Burgoon and Rooduijn 2021). At the center of this intersection is the perception that immigrants disproportionately consume public benefits.

Although studies have noted the existence of these perceptions (Alesina et al. 2023; Andreas et al. 2023; Simon and Lynch 1999), few have empirically examined how closely public beliefs align with local realities. Are Americans' perceptions shaped by actual immigrant welfare usage in their home contexts, or are they driven more by partisan cues, media narratives, or individual characteristics? In this article, we use original survey data to investigate the relationship between subjective perceptions and the objective reality of immigrant welfare usage in the United States. We merge individual-level opinion data with state-level information on immigrant participation in welfare programs to assess whether and how state context influences perception. Moreover, we explore which subgroups, based on education, ideology, and political engagement, are able to more accurately to connect perceptions and reality of immigrant welfare use in their environments.

Our findings reveal two key insights. First, there is a statistically significant link between the actual immigrant welfare usage rate in a respondent's state and their perceived immigrant welfare usage rate. Second, this relationship is moderated by individual characteristics: Perceptions are more responsive to objective conditions among highly educated, politically moderate, and politically interested individuals. These results shed light on the

conditions under which the factual context can shape public opinion and offer broader implications for policy communication and public trust in immigration discourse.

1 | Explaining Varying Degrees of Immigrant Welfare Misperceptions

Although numerous scholars have documented the (mis)perceptions of immigrants overusing welfare and the belief that immigrants take out more than they contribute (Alesina et al. 2023; Yoo 2008; Andreas et al. 2023; Simon and Lynch 1999; Cornelius and Rosenblum 2005), there has been very little work exploring the cause of such (mis)perceptions on immigrant welfare usage. Within the general literature of public opinion, scholars have identified the role of reality and context as an important foundation for the formation of public perceptions (Druckman et al. 2021; Xu and Garand 2010; DeVreese and Boomgaarden 2007; Hood and Morris 1997). Additionally, these same authors note that political ideologies, education, political interests, and other personal traits are also identified as important factors that could shape individuals' opinions and attitudes.

The existing literature on "innumeracy" could also shed light on the cause of inaccurate perceptions. Americans' problems with innumeracy, defined by Paulos (1989) as difficulty employing probabilistic and statistical ideas, are well documented when it comes to estimating the size of minority groups. Perceptions of minority groups do not reflect the reality on the ground, with most Americans overestimating the size of minority populations (Highton and Wolfinger 1992; Nadeau et al. 1993; Hochschild 2001; Sigelman and Niemi 2001). More recent research also indicates that this innumeracy problem extends to estimates of immigrant populations in the American and European context (Alesina et al. 2023; Semyonov et al. 2004; Sides and Citrin 2007; Herda 2010, 2013).

Herda (2010) attempts to explain immigration innumeracy as a result of two forces: cognitive mistakes and emotional response. Although emotional response is based on preexisting negative views of immigrants grounded in feelings of threat and political ideology, cognitive mistakes are a function of exposure to political information and prior experiences such as contact with immigrants. Herda concludes that both forces are at work in driving innumeracy but also acknowledges that demographics such as gender, age, education, and race also play a role.

In more recent work in a cross-country study that includes the US and several European countries, Alesina et al. (2023) find widespread overestimation of the size of immigrant populations; at the same time, they find that the overestimation varies quite a bit across survey respondents. For example, respondents without a college degree and those who work in sectors with high immigration levels tend to overestimate the size of immigrant populations, indicating that personal characteristics and environment affect innumeracy. Even more important for this study, Alesina et al. (2023) find that the number of immigrants in the country and the characteristics of the immigrant population shape survey respondents' misperceptions about immigrants.

If individuals' perceptions of political topics are influenced by their personal traits, political predispositions, and the contexts in which they reside, how do these things work together to affect accurate perceptions of immigrant welfare usage? In this section, we discuss the theoretical underpinning of the misperceptions of immigrant welfare usage. First, we argue that one important source of perceptions is connected to the objective reality of immigrant welfare usage in one's near context. Second, we contend that individuals could very likely misperceive immigrant welfare participation rates, either randomly or as a function of other variables. Certain personal traits, such as political ideology, education, and political interests, are all important factors that can influence the accuracy of perceptions.

1.1 | Context Matters: The Impact of Reality on Perceptions

Although previous studies of individuals' perceptions of immigrants focused on political ideologies, media framing, and political information (Druckman et al. 2021; Xu and Garand 2010; DeVreese and Boomgaarden 2007; Hood III and Morris 1997), less attention is focused on the context in which individuals reside. Arguably, being able to connect immigrant welfare participation rates and attitudes toward welfare spending requires individuals to have a degree of knowledge about immigrant welfare participation rates in the first place. The context in which individuals reside can provide politically relevant information which can shape their perceptions of immigrant welfare usage. As Zaller (1992) argues, individuals have the tendency to resist information that is inconsistent with their predispositions, but if the contextual information accumulates beyond a certain threshold point, individuals will likely change their perceptions and beliefs. Research on innumeracy in estimations of minority size consistently finds that immigrant context (i.e., the size of the immigrant population) at the local level (Alba et al. 2005; Rajasarkar et al. 2022) and at the country level (Herda 2013; Alesina et al. 2023) matter. Therefore, context can have an effect on people's perceptions, even though such effects may not necessarily happen immediately.

For individuals who live in an environment with high levels of immigrant welfare usage, there is a much higher chance that they will witness immigrants (or those they perceive to be immigrants) using welfare in various ways. For instance, they may witness immigrants using food stamps in the supermarket; they may encounter immigrants using medical benefits in urgent care centers or hospitals; or they may see immigrants living in public housing. Individuals may also hear anecdotes about immigrants using various welfare programs when they converse with their friends, coworkers, and neighbors who may have witnessed immigrants using welfare usage. Americans can also read about immigrants using welfare in their local newspapers or through other media outlets.

To summarize: Context can provide information and signal individuals about the conditions in their environment. Once the contextual information accumulates to a certain threshold level in their minds, individuals will likely change their perceptions about an issue. When individuals obtain enough information about the reality of immigrant welfare usage in their home context through

these various channels, it is likely that they will change their perceptions about immigrant welfare participation. Overall, we think that a higher level of immigrants' welfare usage in one's context will lead individuals to perceive higher welfare usage by immigrants. This leads to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. *Higher levels of immigrants' welfare participation in individual's context will lead them to perceive a higher welfare participation rate by immigrants.*

1.2 | Political Ideology, Education, and Political Interest as Moderators

Individuals can, of course, misperceive immigrant welfare participation rates, either randomly or as a function of other variables. We argue that political ideology, education, and political interest are all associated with motivated reasoning in the development of perceptions and can moderate the relationship between objective reality and subjective perception of immigrant welfare usage. The fact that most Americans know relatively little about most political topics is one of the most consistent findings throughout decades of public opinion research (e.g., Berelson et al. 1954; Neuman 1986; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hutchings 2003; Hochschild and Einstein 2015). However, the low mean of political knowledge masks its high variance—that is, some people know significantly more than others. Investigations into the variation in what Americans know about political topics have repeatedly demonstrated a strong relationship between levels of educational attainment and political knowledge: more highly educated individuals typically also tend to know more about political topics (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Subsequent research also connects education to motivation (i.e., relatively higher marginal benefits) and opportunities (i.e., relatively lower marginal costs) for political learning.

A substantial body of scholarship offers theoretical frameworks to explain the linkage between education and political knowledge. In his foundational rational choice model, Downs (1957) posits that individuals are most likely to acquire political information when the perceived benefits of information outweigh the costs of information acquisition. Education cultivates just this sort of interest in engaging with politics (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba et al. 1995; Mayer 2011). By creating opportunities for people to learn political information, education also reduces the costs of acquiring information.

Importantly, the effects of education on political learning extend beyond formal instruction. First, education increases the likelihood of social interactions with politically informed peers, thereby enhancing exposure to political discussions and information-sharing networks (Nie et al. 1996). Second, educational attainment is positively associated with media consumption habits, particularly attention to news and political coverage (Tichenor et al. 1975; Genova and Greenberg 1979). Through both interpersonal and mediated channels, education expands individuals' opportunities and motivations to learn about politics. As a result, people with more education are more motivated to learn about politics and have more opportunities to do so.

Education connects to political knowledge for another reason. In the terminology of Luskin's (1990) framework for political knowledge, individuals with more education tend not only to have more motivation and opportunity to acquire information but also to have a greater ability to do so. Those with higher levels of education tend to have stronger comprehension skills. For example, higher levels of education bring greater literacy and information-seeking skills that aid the processing of political information (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Education also provides larger stockpiles of prior knowledge that help individuals make sense of new information and integrate it into what they know (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Rosenberg 1988). Although some questions remain about whether this reflects selection bias in who pursues education versus an effect of education itself (see Kam and Palmer 2008; Mayer 2011), the association between education and the ability to process political information is clear.

In addition to the consistent link between education and processing political information, education level is a significant predictor of innumeracy when it comes to estimating the size of immigrant and minority populations (Alba et al. 2005; Wong 2007; Herda 2010; Alesina et al. 2023). Overall, we argue that more highly educated individuals are more capable of gaining information from their context or environment. Thus, they are more likely to update their belief systems based on this contextual information. Based on this argument, we develop our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. *Education moderates the relationship between objective reality and subjective perceptions of immigrant welfare participation, leading more highly educated individuals to link objective immigrant welfare participation to their perceptions of immigrant welfare usage.*

There are other personal traits that might moderate the relationship between context and perceptions. Recognizing that the marginal benefit of political knowledge to an individual voter for determining a political outcome is vanishingly small in most instances, Downs (1957) notes other motivations to acquire political information, such as a taste for politics—that is, political interest. People learn about politics because they are interested in politics; in other words, they derive some psychological or material benefit from knowing about politics. We argue that individuals with higher levels of political interest are more likely to form more accurate perceptions of objective reality for two reasons: (1) they are more likely to actively seek out relevant information on political and public issues from their context and (2) they are more likely to absorb the information acquired from the context and transform it to update their perceptions. For example, Herda (2010) assesses the effect of exposure to political radio and political newspapers and concludes that political newspaper exposure is associated with a decrease in innumeracy when it comes to estimating immigrant populations. Based on this argument, we develop Hypothesis 3:

Hypothesis 3. *Political interest moderates the relationship between objective reality and subjective perceptions of immigrant welfare participation, leading individuals with higher levels of*

political interest to be more likely to link objective immigrant welfare participation to their perceptions of immigrant welfare usage.

Of course, political learning is not merely a matter of exposure to information and dispassionate cognitive processing. Individuals bring their political predispositions to bear when encountering information, responding favorably to messages confirming those predispositions (Zaller 1992). Furthermore, those who are more politically aware and engaged—such as those with more education—are also better able to determine whether new information comports with their preexisting attitudes and to reject it if it does not (Zaller 1992). The theory of motivated reasoning provides a model for this process. Individuals have both *accuracy goals* (to get the facts right) and *directional goals* (to arrive at a particular favored conclusion). The latter goals steer cognitive effort to reinforce existing predispositions; information that supports an existing viewpoint is accepted, whereas contrary facts are set dismissed (Lodge and Taber 2013; Taber and Lodge 2006). This is not so much a matter of avoiding contrary information as it is a matter of arguing against it. Individuals' factual beliefs about political topics are, therefore, often consistent with the perceptions that are most in line with their political predispositions (Bartels 2002; Jacobson 2010; Jerit and Barabas 2012; Kuklinski et al. 2000; Schaffner and Roche 2017).

As a result, inaccurate perceptions about facts can be resilient even in the face of corrective information (Garrett et al. 2013; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). That said, there is growing experimental evidence that individuals sometimes do accept correct information and update their perceptions about political topics (Dowling and Miller 2015; Wood and Porter 2018; Dowling et al. 2020). Numerous scholars have documented the importance of political ideology in shaping immigration attitudes (Rowatt 2019; Musso et al. 2017; Wilkes et al. 2008; Sides and Citrin 2007; Hawley 2011; Hopkins 2010; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2016). In both Europe and North America, political ideologies play a prominent role in native-born citizens' attitudes toward foreigners and immigration. Typically, conservatives—and especially right-wing extremists—are much more likely to hold xenophobic and nationalist views, both of which could contribute to negative perceptions of immigrants (Mutz 2017). These ideologies can also serve as foundations of one's predispositions. Political liberals tend to hold more open and positive views about immigrants, whereas conservatives tend to hold more negative views about immigrants. Hawley (2011) and Hopkins (2010) show that political ideologies and group threat fears could interact; Republicans and conservatives tend to have more negative attitudes toward immigrants, especially in areas with a larger foreign-born population. Both liberals and conservatives are likely to interpret the information from context based on their predispositions. Politically moderate individuals will be more likely to objectively absorb the information from context to update their perceptions. We build our last hypothesis on this argument:

Hypothesis 4. *Political ideology moderates the relationship between objective reality and subjective perceptions of immigrant welfare participation; politically moderate individuals are likely to connect objective immigrant welfare participation with perceptions of immigrant welfare participation.*

2 | Data and Methods

In order to test our hypotheses, we inserted a set of questions on immigrant welfare usage in a national survey ($N = 1000$) conducted by YouGov during the time period from March 6–13, 2018.¹ The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology, and political interest. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file).

2.1 | Dependent Variable

2.1.1 | Subjective Perceptions of Immigrant Welfare Usage

We included an item measuring individuals' perceptive estimates of welfare participation rates for immigrants; specifically, we asked respondents the following question: "Of all of the immigrants in this country, what percent of them are recipients of welfare programs? Please tell me your best guess." Responses are coded on a scale from 0 to 100 based on respondents' perceptions of the percentage of immigrants perceived to be recipients of welfare programs.

2.2 | Independent Variables

2.2.1 | Objective Reality of Immigrant Welfare Usage

We collect data on the actual immigrant welfare participation rates for each state using data from 2017, the most immediate year before the survey when data are available from the ACS. We tabulate the percentage of foreign-born individuals (including both naturalized citizens and foreign-born noncitizens) in each state who participated in at least one of the following welfare programs: Medicaid, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or free or reduced school lunch.² The sample size for these state estimates ranges from 1179 (Maine) to 25,893 (California). The average immigrant welfare participation rate across all states in 2017 is 40.7, with a median of 40.6 and a standard deviation of 2.46.

2.2.2 | Political Ideology, Education, and Political Interest

We consider the possibility that three personal traits moderate the relationship between objective levels and subjective perceptions of immigrant welfare participation. We use self-reported political ideology, education levels, and political interest levels. The political ideology variable is measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (very liberal) to 4 (very conservative). The political interest variable is a 4-point scale that captures how often respondents are interested in political news, and the responses range from 0 (hardly at all) to 3 (most of the time). Finally, the education variable includes six categories, ranging from 0 (No high school) to 5 (post-graduate).

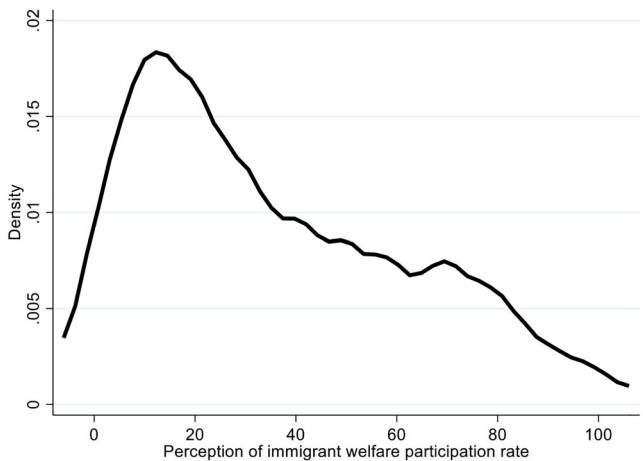


FIGURE 1 | Kernel density plot of perception of immigrant welfare participation rate.

2.3 | Control Variables

We also include a full set of control variables in our models, including partisan identification, age, gender, household income, and racial identification using dichotomous variables (Black, Hispanic, Asian, and other race).

A summary description of the variables used in our analyses can be found in Table A1.

3 | Empirical Results

As a starting point, in Figure 1, we present the kernel density plot showing the distribution of responses on our dependent variables. As one can see, individuals run the gamut (from 0% to 100%) in their perceptions of the percentage of immigrants who are participants in welfare programs. The distribution is skewed to the right—some respondents perceive that most or all immigrants are recipients of welfare programs—and the mean for this variable is 35.6%, with a median of 30.0 and a standard deviation of 26.7. Clearly, individuals vary considerably in their perceptions of the immigrant welfare participation rate.

Next, we consider the connection between the actual immigrant welfare participation rate in individuals' home state and their subjective perceptions of immigrant welfare usage. We expect to observe a positive and significant relationship between state immigrant welfare participation rates and respondents' perceptions of general immigrant welfare participation rates.

In Table 1, we present two sets of estimates: (1) a simple bivariate model showing the relationship between objective state immigrant welfare participation and individuals' perceptions of immigrant welfare participation rates, without any control variables; and (2) a multivariate model including controls for partisan identification, political ideology, political interest, and a variety of demographic and socioeconomic variables. As one can see from Model (1), there is a positive and significant relationship between state immigrant welfare participation rates and individuals' perceptions of the share of immigrants who participate

TABLE 1 | Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression estimates (with clustered standard errors) for model of individuals' perceptions of percentage of immigrant participants in welfare programs.

	(1)		(2)	
	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>
Immigrant welfare participation	0.537	1.88*	0.481	1.74*
Partisan identification	—	—	2.481	3.76***
Liberal-conservative ideology	—	—	4.842	4.06***
Political interest	—	—	0.154	0.15
Age	—	—	0.025	0.48
Gender	—	—	3.536	2.44**
Black	—	—	8.285	2.76**
Hispanic	—	—	0.128	0.03
Asian	—	—	8.335	2.04*
Other race	—	—	4.468	1.18
Education	—	—	-2.223	-3.79***
Household income	—	—	-0.822	-4.09***
Intercept	13.774	1.19	2.911	0.24
<i>N</i>		989		765
<i>R</i> ²		0.003		0.215
<i>F</i>		3.52		44.47
Prob(<i>F</i>)		0.025		0.000

Note: *Z* statistics are calculated using standard errors clustered by state.

***prob < 0.001, **prob < 0.01, and *prob < 0.05.

in welfare programs ($b = 0.537$, $z = 1.88$); without statistical controls, a 1-U increase in the immigrant welfare participation rate in respondents' home state results in a 0.537 increase in the perceived immigrant welfare participation rate. In Model (2), we see that the relationship holds up in the face of a full range of ($b = 0.481$, $z = 1.74$), controlling for both attitudinal variables (i.e., partisan identification, political ideology, and political interest) and socioeconomic and demographic variables (i.e., education, income, gender, and race). These findings show that there is, indeed, a connection between objective state immigrant welfare participation rates and Americans' perceptions of immigrant participation in the welfare system, though the effect is only of moderate magnitude.³

We also find strong effects of partisan identification ($b = 2.481$, $z = 3.76$) and political ideology ($b = 4.842$, $z = 4.06$); Republicans and conservatives are more likely to perceive a higher share of immigrants as participants in the welfare system. We also find that women ($b = 3.536$, $z = 2.44$), blacks ($b = 8.285$, $z = 2.76$), and Asians ($b = 8.335$, $z = 2.04$) perceive significantly higher levels of immigrant welfare participation. Interestingly, education ($b = -2.223$, $z = -3.79$) and household income ($b = -0.822$, $z = -4.09$) are negatively associated with perceptions of immigrant welfare participation. This might be because education and income are often associated with higher levels of tolerance of marginalized groups. Therefore, it may be that the negative coefficients for these two variables reflect an effort by those with high education and income to avoid stereotyping immigrants as heavy users of welfare programs.

3.1 | Possible Moderating Effects

We consider the possibility that the relationship between objective and subjective immigrant welfare participation rates differs across individuals' characteristics. To test Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4, we estimate a set of models to examine the association between objective reality and subjective perceptions of immigrant participation rates for subsets of respondents divided by education, political interest, and political ideology. We suggest that it is possible there are specific subgroups that are both more likely to connect the objective world to their subjective perceptions of it. It is these groups that may be more prone to connect state immigrant welfare participation and their attitudes toward welfare spending. In order to consider these possible moderating effects, we estimate separate models for respondents broken down by education (i.e., some college or more vs. high school degree or less), political interest (i.e., high vs. low/moderate), and political ideology (i.e., liberal, conservative, and moderate). In addition, we estimate interaction models to capture these moderating effects; for the sake of brevity, these results are reported in Tables A2 and A3 and generally complement the results based on separate model estimates.

First, we suggest that those with higher levels of education are more likely to connect the objective reality of immigrant welfare use to their perceptions of that use; highly educated individuals are likely to have the knowledge base, access to news and other information sources, and cognitive abilities to be

TABLE 2 | Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression estimates (with clustered standard errors) for model of individuals' perceptions of the percentage of immigrant participants in welfare programs, estimated separately for some college or more vs. high school degree or less.

	High school degree or less		Some college or more	
	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>
Immigrant welfare participation	0.285	0.43	0.634	1.77*
Partisan identification	2.727	2.61**	2.356	3.45***
Liberal-conservative ideology	4.459	2.15*	5.174	3.97***
Political interest	-0.445	-0.26	0.798	0.70
Age	0.038	0.38	0.020	0.37
Gender	5.484	1.75*	2.178	1.23
Black	9.705	2.03*	7.577	1.94*
Hispanic	-4.743	-0.74	3.246	1.03
Asian	18.146	1.65*	7.321	1.99*
Other race	7.568	1.02	2.710	0.38
Education	0.513	0.11	-2.743	-3.48***
Household income	-0.522	-0.99	-0.961	-2.91**
Intercept	6.715	0.25	-1.444	-0.10
<i>N</i>	301		464	
<i>R</i> ²	0.135		0.250	
<i>F</i>	6.90		15.76	
Prob(<i>F</i>)	0.000		0.000	

Note: *Z* statistics are calculated using standard errors clustered by state.

***prob < 0.001, **prob < 0.01, and *prob < 0.05.

able to observe immigrant and immigrant welfare participation levels. Hence, they should be more likely to connect immigrant welfare participation in their home states to their estimates of the general immigrant welfare participation rate. Second, we suggest that those with high levels of political interest should exhibit a stronger link between objective immigrant welfare participation and their perceptions of immigrant welfare participation. Those with high political interest should be more likely to be cognizant of political realities and politically relevant information, and we contend that the relationship between objective conditions and subjective perceptions of those conditions should be stronger in this key group. Finally, we contend that some individuals will be more open to information from their environment, whereas others will have partisan and ideological filters that activate motivated reasoning and may result in a weaker connection between objective conditions and subjective perceptions. As such, we suggest that political moderates will be more likely than strong ideologues to exhibit a relationship between objective immigrant welfare participation and perceptions of immigrant welfare participation rates.

3.1.1 | Moderating Effect for Education

In Table 2, we estimate models separately for those with low education (i.e., those with a high school degree or less) and those with some exposure to higher education (i.e., some college or more). As one can see, immigrant welfare participation rates have no discernible effect on individuals' perceptions of immigrant

welfare participation for those with a high school degree or less ($b = 0.285, z = 0.43$). On the other hand, among those with at least some college or more, there is a significant effect of immigrant welfare participation rates on the dependent variable ($b = 0.634, z = 1.77$). For those in the high-education group, there appears to be a discernible connection between the immigration welfare participation rate in their home states and their perceptions of the percentage of immigrants involved in the welfare system. These results provide tentative support for our Hypothesis 2.

However, there is more nuance to the moderating effect of education on the relationship between objective and perceived immigrant welfare participation. In Model 1 of Table A2, we present the results for a model that includes an interaction for our some college variable and state immigrant welfare participation rates. The coefficient for immigrant welfare participation represents the effect of this variable for respondents with a high school degree or below ($b = 0.244, z = 0.37$); clearly, this effect does not achieve conventional levels of statistical significance. Moreover, the coefficient for the interaction variable ($b = 0.377, z = 0.45$) also fails to achieve statistical significance, suggesting that the effect of state immigrant welfare participation for respondents with some college is statistically indistinguishable from that for respondents with lower levels of educational attainment. It is important to note, however, that the effect of objective immigrant welfare participation on perceived immigrant welfare participation for respondents with some college (i.e., $b = 0.244 + 0.377 = 0.621, z = 1.80$) is, while modest, statistically distinguishable from 0. These effects are illustrated in Figure A1, in which we present

TABLE 3 | Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression estimates (with clustered standard errors) for model of individuals' perceptions of percentage of immigrant participants in welfare programs, estimated separately for high vs. low/medium political interest.

	Low/Medium political interest		High political interest	
	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>
Immigrant welfare participation	0.078	0.19	0.881	2.67**
Partisan identification	0.473	0.48	4.677	5.63***
Liberal-conservative ideology	4.929	3.21***	3.352	2.21*
Political interest	0.215	0.11	—	—
Age	0.015	0.22	0.001	0.01
Gender	4.595	1.81*	1.925	1.16
Black	3.890	1.11	14.603	3.38***
Hispanic	0.681	0.13	-2.791	-0.63
Asian	7.454	1.57	3.251	0.25
Other race	2.685	0.34	5.122	0.72
Education	-2.909	-4.39***	-1.260	-1.39
Household income	-0.872	-2.51**	-0.852	-2.23*
Intercept	27.148	1.40	-16.224	-1.29
<i>N</i>	365		400	
<i>R</i> ²	0.124		0.320	
<i>F</i>	9.53		31.62	
Prob(<i>F</i>)	0.000		0.000	

Note: *Z* statistics are calculated using standard errors clustered by state.

***prob < 0.001, **prob < 0.01, and *prob < 0.05.

predicted values on the dependent variable associated with different values on the state immigrant welfare participation rate variable, calculated separately for those with a high school degree or below and those with some college or more. This figure shows a small effect of immigrant welfare participation across its range of 3.4 (i.e., 41.7 – 38.3) for those with lower educational attainment but a modestly larger effect of 7.6 (i.e., 34.5 – 26.9) for those with some college or more.

The bottom line is that education has only a weak effect in moderating the relationship between state immigrant welfare participation and perceptions of immigrant welfare participation. To be sure, this effect of immigrant welfare participation is statistically different from 0 (but of modest magnitude) for individuals with at least some college, but the interaction results for Model 1 in Table A2 indicate that this effect is statistically indistinguishable from the null effect for individuals with a high school degree or less.

3.1.2 | Moderating Effect for Political Interest

In Table 3, we find solid support for the moderating effect of political interest on the relationship between objective state immigrant welfare participation rates and individuals' perceptions of immigrant welfare participation rates. For individuals with low or medium levels of political interest, there is no discernible relationship between these two variables (*b* = 0.078, *z* = 0.19); on the other hand, among individuals with high political

interest, the relationship is positive and statistically significant (*b* = 0.881, *z* = 2.67). These results provide strong evidence that individuals who are highly engaged with and interested in politics are able to connect the immigrant welfare participation levels in their home states with their perceptions of general immigrant welfare participation, while those who are less engaged with and interested in politics do not do so. These results support our Hypothesis 3.

This conclusion is reinforced by the interaction model results reported in Model 2 of Table A1. The coefficient for the immigrant welfare participation variable (*b* = -0.106, *z* = -0.28) represents the effect of this variable for individuals with low or moderate levels of political interest, controlling for the effects of other independent variables in the model; clearly, for those with low or moderate levels of political interest, the relationship between objective and perceived immigrant welfare participation rates is indistinguishable from 0. On the other hand, the coefficient for the interaction variable is positive and statistically significant (*b* = 0.992, *z* = 1.97), suggesting that the relationship between objective and perceived immigrant welfare participation for respondents with high political interest is statistically different from the relationship for individuals with low or model levels of political interest. Indeed, the estimated coefficient for immigrant welfare participation for those with high political interest is *b* = 0.886 (i.e., -0.106 + 0.992) and it is statistically significant (*z* = 2.55). This finding is reflected in Figure A2. For respondents with low political interest, shifting across the range of the immigrant welfare participation variable generates a shift in the

TABLE 4 | Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression estimates (with clustered standard errors) for model of individuals' perceptions of percentage of immigrant participants in welfare programs, estimated separately for liberals vs. conservatives vs. moderates.

	Liberals		Conservatives		Moderates	
	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z</i>
Immigrant welfare participation	0.076	0.16	0.442	0.67	1.081	2.24*
Partisan identification	1.281	0.82	0.996	0.86	4.364	3.73***
Liberal-conservative ideology	5.585	2.19*	5.478	1.55	—	—
Political interest	0.143	0.08	1.983	1.77*	-1.453	-0.82
Age	-0.137	-1.63	0.177	2.52**	0.006	0.06
Gender	3.212	1.19	1.867	0.63	4.709	1.74*
Black	9.081	1.21	22.972	3.88***	1.137	0.32
Hispanic	8.368	1.68*	5.899	0.76	-8.852	-1.70
Asian	-0.234	-0.08	-10.413	-2.35**	11.037	2.44**
Other race	6.283	0.74	-0.457	-0.06	6.541	0.90
Education	-2.764	-2.21*	-2.012	-1.27	-2.006	-1.85*
Household income	-0.369	-0.62	-1.034	-2.14*	-0.920	-2.06*
Intercept	26.474	1.24	-2.549	-0.08	-12.024	-0.53
<i>N</i>	235		256		274	
<i>R</i> ²	0.144		0.126		0.167	
<i>F</i>	8.88		2.92		10.45	
Prob(<i>F</i>)	0.000		0.001		0.000	

Note: *Z* statistics are calculated using standard errors clustered by state.

***prob < 0.001, **prob < 0.01, and *prob < 0.05.

dependent variable of a trivial 0.846 (i.e., from 35.911 to 36.757); on the other hand, for those with high political interest, the shift across the range of the immigrant welfare participation variable is a discernible 9.577 (i.e., from 27.156 to 36.733). Overall, it appears that political interest has a strong moderating effect in magnifying the conversion of *objective* state immigrant welfare participation rates into *perceptions* of immigrant welfare participation rates.

3.1.3 | Moderating Effect for Political Ideology

We suggest that strong conservatives and strong liberals are more likely to have preconceived notions about the level of immigrant participation in welfare programs. Further, these groups are more likely to have strong views toward welfare spending that may be relatively impervious to additional information about welfare policy. Hence, we expect that perceptions of immigrant welfare participation among political moderates—who are less likely to have strong preconceived notions—will be most responsive to information about immigrant welfare participation rates. In Table 4, we find evidence to support this view. As one can see, the coefficients for state immigrant welfare participation rates are small and nonsignificant for both liberals ($b = 0.076$, $z = 0.16$) and conservatives ($b = 0.442$, $z = 0.67$), but the coefficient for moderates is positive and statistically significant ($b = 1.081$, $z = 2.24$). These results suggest that it is political moderates who are most responsive to contextual information about immigrant welfare participation, controlling for the effects of other variables (e.g., education and political interest) that

would facilitate the acquisition of knowledge about individuals' contexts. These results support our Hypothesis 4.

This hypothesis receives additional (albeit mixed) support in the interaction results reported in Table A2. Here, we include interactions for immigrant welfare participation with liberal identification and conservative identification. In such a specification, the coefficient for the (non-interaction) immigrant welfare participation variable represents the effect of this variable for political moderates. As one can see, the coefficient for this variable is positive and statistically significant ($b = 1.001$, $z = 1.98$), suggesting that for moderates there is a discernible positive effect of state immigrant welfare participation rates on perceive immigrant welfare participation. The interaction coefficients represent *changes* in the relationship for liberals and conservatives. We find that the coefficients for both the liberal interaction ($b = -0.907$, $z = -1.27$) and conservative interaction ($b = -0.757$, $z = -0.81$) are negative but do not achieve conventional levels of statistical significance, suggesting that there is not a significant difference in the effects of state immigrant welfare participation for moderates, liberals, and conservatives. We note, however, that the effect of immigrant welfare participation is positive and significant for moderates, but in calculating the effect for liberals ($b = 1.001 - 0.907 = 0.095$, $z = 0.22$) and conservatives ($b = 1.001 - 0.757 = -0.249$, $z = 0.35$), we find that these effects are statistically indistinguishable from 0. The resulting patterns can be shown in Figure A3, in which we graph the predicted values on the dependent variable for conservatives, moderates, and liberals that are associated with different values on the immigrant welfare

participation rate variable. As one can see, going from the lowest to highest value on the immigrant welfare participation rate results in a negligible shift in the dependent variable of 0.832 for liberals, a small shift of 4.805 for conservatives, and a substantially larger shift of 11.754 for moderates. All in all, it appears that there is a significant effect of being a political moderate on respondent sensitivity to the immigrant welfare participation rate and a nonsignificant effect for liberals and conservatives, though the *differences* in the coefficients for moderates, liberals, and conservatives do not achieve statistical significance. We are left with mixed evidence about the effects of political ideology on the relationship between objective immigrant welfare participation rates and perceived immigrant welfare participation rates.⁴

3.2 | Perceptual Accuracy

Our argument is that Americans are generally (but not specifically) aware of the level of immigrant welfare participation in their home states and that these perceptions of state immigrant welfare participation are translated into perceptions of the general level of immigrant welfare participation. We do not, however, necessarily contend that individuals have precisely accurate information about the specific share of welfare participants at either the national or state levels. We would expect individuals in states with high (low) immigrant welfare participation rates to perceive a high (low) level of general immigrant welfare participation, but we would not expect individuals to have precise and accurate estimates of those specific rates. Given this, we would expect—and we find—a relationship between objective state immigrant participation welfare rates and perceptions of general immigrant welfare participation rates, but we would not expect individuals to be able to report precisely what those immigrant welfare participation rates are.

In order to consider the accuracy of individuals' perceptions of immigrant welfare participation, we calculate the gap between individuals' perceptions of national immigrant welfare participation rates and actual state immigrant welfare rates. In Figure A4, we present the distribution of misperceptions of immigrant welfare participation rates among our survey respondents, and in Table A5, we present model estimates for these misperceptions. For the sake of brevity, we report a full discussion of these results in the Supporting Information Appendix. We can say briefly that there is considerable variation in Americans' misperceptions of general immigrant welfare participation rates, with Americans slightly underestimating the immigrant welfare participation rate by about 5%. Further, we find in Table A5 that Republicans, conservatives, women, Blacks, and Asians are more likely to overestimate immigrant welfare participation, whereas individuals with high education and high income are more likely to underestimate immigrant welfare participation rates. A more detailed discussion is presented in the Supporting Information Appendix.

4 | Conclusion

In this article, we explore the sources and determinants of subjective perceptions of immigrant welfare usage, with a focus on the role of objective reality in individuals' home contexts. We

find reasonably strong support for the assertion that there is a relationship between the level of immigrant welfare participation in Americans' home states and their perceptions of overall immigrant welfare participation rates. Further, we find that there are important subgroups of our sample for whom the relationship between immigrant welfare participation rates and perceptions of immigrants' participation in the welfare system is statistically discernible. The clearest evidence supporting possible moderating effects is for political interest; simply, we find that individuals who have high levels of political interest are particularly likely to connect objective immigrant participation rates and their subjective perceptions of immigrant welfare participation. Moreover, we find mixed evidence for a moderating effect of education and political ideology. For education, the relationship between state immigrant welfare participation and perceptions of general immigrant welfare participation is positive and statistically significant for respondents with some college or more, but the coefficient for this variable is not statistically different than the coefficient for those with a high school degree or less. For political ideology, this relationship is stronger among political moderates, who may be open to relevant information, than among liberals and conservatives, who may have strong views about the appropriate level of welfare spending and preconceived notions about welfare participation among immigrants. The magnitude of the effect for political moderates is statistically different from 0, whereas the effects for liberals and conservatives are not statistically significant. However, the observed effect for political moderates is not statistically distinguishable from the effect for liberals and conservatives.

These findings have important implications for the body of research that suggests that increasing numbers of immigrants in a population decreases support for the social safety net. Research on attitudes toward immigrants has focused on the relative roles of reality and perception for decades and has acknowledged that citizens' assessments of immigrants and immigrant-related policies are based on substantial misconceptions (Cornelius and Rosenblum 2005). This complicates matters for the growing body of research exploring the causal mechanisms behind the relationship between attitudes toward immigrants and support for the social safety net (Eger 2010; Mau and Burkhardt 2009; Garand et al. 2017; Alesina et al. 2021, 2023). These findings suggest that Americans' perceptions of immigrant welfare usage are associated with the reality on the ground. As research moves forward that explores the causal mechanisms behind the idea that individuals' opinions on social safety are influenced by who they see using the social safety net, scholars should think carefully about the consequences of the variation that exists in individuals' ability to accurately perceive who is using the social safety net.

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Endnotes

¹ YouGov interviewed 1176 respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 1000 to produce the final dataset. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression

was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and ideology. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles.

²Data on program participation are not available for all welfare programs—for example, public housing, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), women, infants, and children (WIC), supplemental security income (SSI), and so forth.

³We tested for the difference-in- R^2 for models that both included and excluded the state immigrant welfare participation rate and find that the difference is not statistically significant ($F = 2.04$, $\text{prob}[F] = 0.1539$). Although the addition of state immigrant welfare participation does not increase the overall explanatory value of the model, the significant coefficient for this variable suggests that it has an independent effect on the dependent variable, though in combination with other independent variables the R^2 value for the model does not increase.

⁴We also consider the possibility that there is a moderating effect of partisan identification on the relationship between immigrant welfare participation rates and individuals' perceptions of immigrant welfare participation. We report the results for this analysis in Table A4. As one can see, within partisan groups there are no significant effects of state immigrant welfare participation rates on Americans' perceptions of immigrant welfare participation. The coefficients for state immigrant welfare participation fail to achieve conventional levels of statistical significance for Democrats ($b = 0.693$, $z = 1.59$), Republicans ($b = 0.785$, $z = 1.54$), and Independents ($b = -0.680$, $z = -0.81$). It would appear that partisanship does not have the same kind of moderating effect that we observe for other variables.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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