

# When Gains Feel Like Losses: Exploring Zero-Sum Thinking in Immigration Policy and Public Opinion

Kayra Serpenguzel and Dr. Kai Ou

## I. Introduction

This research investigates the role of zero-sum thinking in shaping public attitudes toward immigration policy and political decision-making. Zero-sum mentality, the perception that one group's gains necessarily constitute another group's losses, has significant implications for understanding policy preferences and intergroup relations. The research employs a mixed-methods approach combining literature review, experimental design, and qualitative interviews. Preliminary data collection involved interviews with 15 Florida State University students from various backgrounds and majors, examining their responses to game theory scenarios and decision-making questions related to voting under uncertainty.

## I. Methods

Interview protocols were designed to elicit reasoning patterns that reveal zero-sum versus non-zero-sum thinking frameworks. Participants were presented with structured decision-making scenarios based on classic game theory models, including the Prisoner's Dilemma and Public Goods Game, in order to observe whether participants approached policy trade-offs as competitive (zero-sum) or cooperative (non-zero-sum) interactions. Preliminary findings suggest that participants' decision-making processes reflect varying degrees of zero-sum reasoning, with implications for understanding how individuals evaluate policy trade-offs and collective action problems. This research contributes to broader theoretical discussions on motivated reasoning, intergroup competition, and the psychological foundations of political polarization. Future directions include expanded experimental designs with larger participant pools and cross-sectional analysis of how zero-sum thinking varies across demographic groups and policy domains. Understanding these cognitive frameworks is essential for developing more effective political communication strategies and fostering constructive policy dialogue in increasingly polarized environments.

## III. Analysis

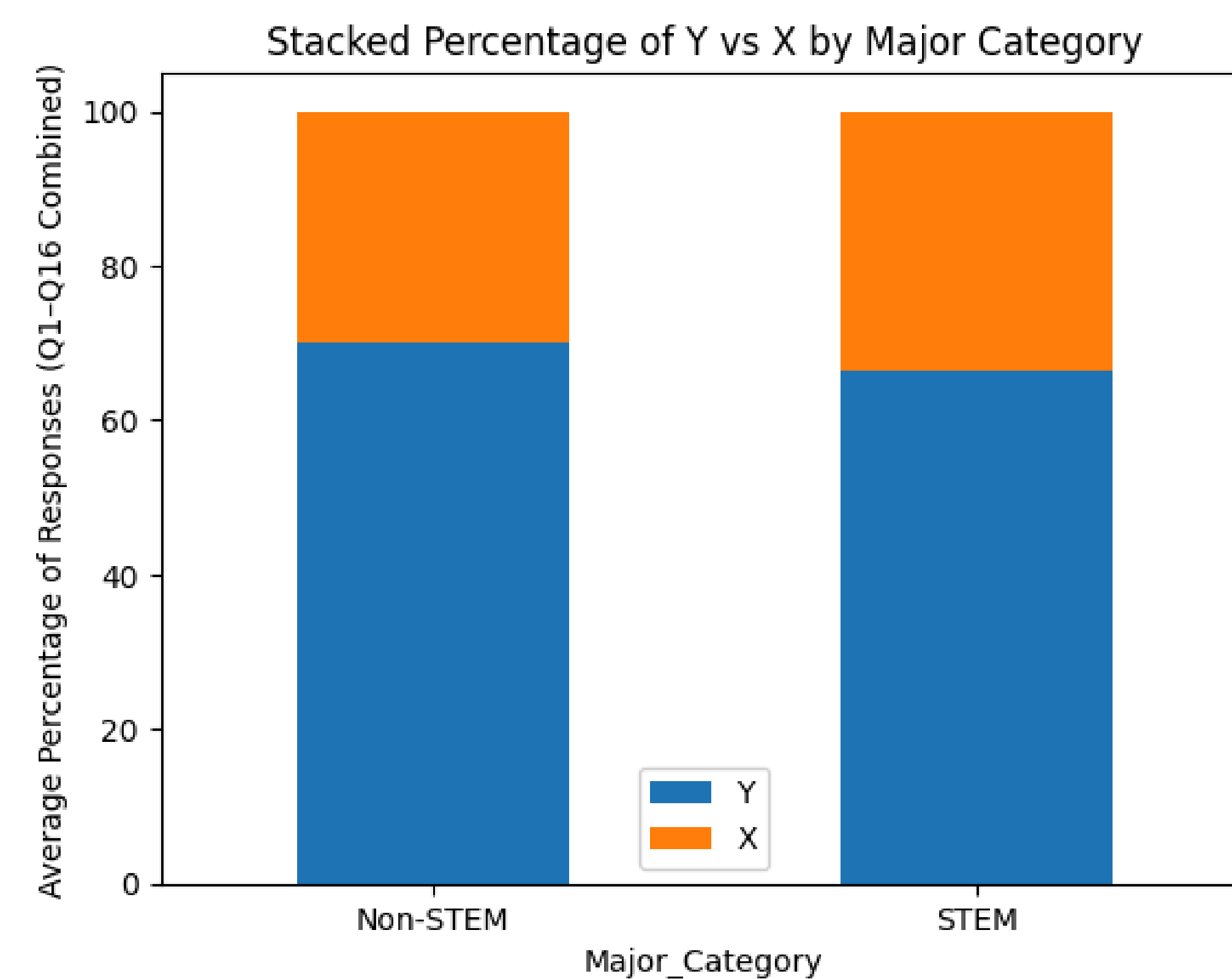
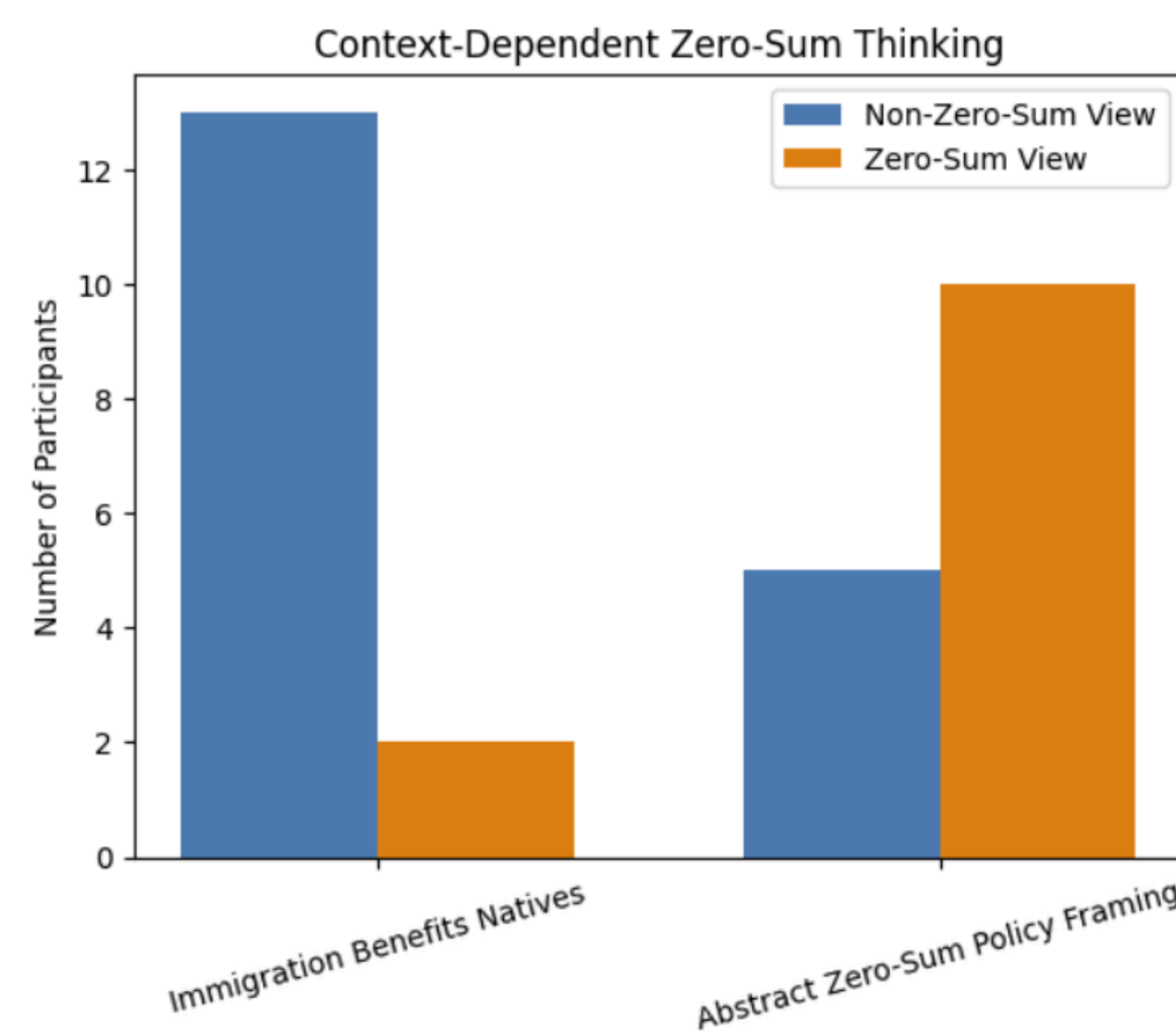


Table 1: Analyzes the difference in voting under uncertainty between STEM and Non-STEM majors at Florida State University

Table 2: Addresses Context-dependent Zero-Sum Thinking across all 15 interviewees by illustrating how most individuals had a Non-Zero Sum View with how Immigration policies as those which benefit Natives, while most interviewees had a Zero-sum perspective when asked Abstract questions about policies



## IV. Data Collection

Participants completed semi-structured interviews consisting of two sections:

1. Policy Scenario Questions (Required):
2. Respondents were presented with hypothetical voting scenarios involving two distinct public policies under conditions of uncertainty. These questions were designed to elicit reasoning about distributional trade-offs, perceived winners and losers, and assumptions about resource allocation.
3. Opinion-Based Policy Questions (Optional):
4. Participants were asked broader questions regarding U.S. domestic policies, including immigration, to assess whether zero-sum reasoning extended beyond structured experimental prompts into general political attitudes.

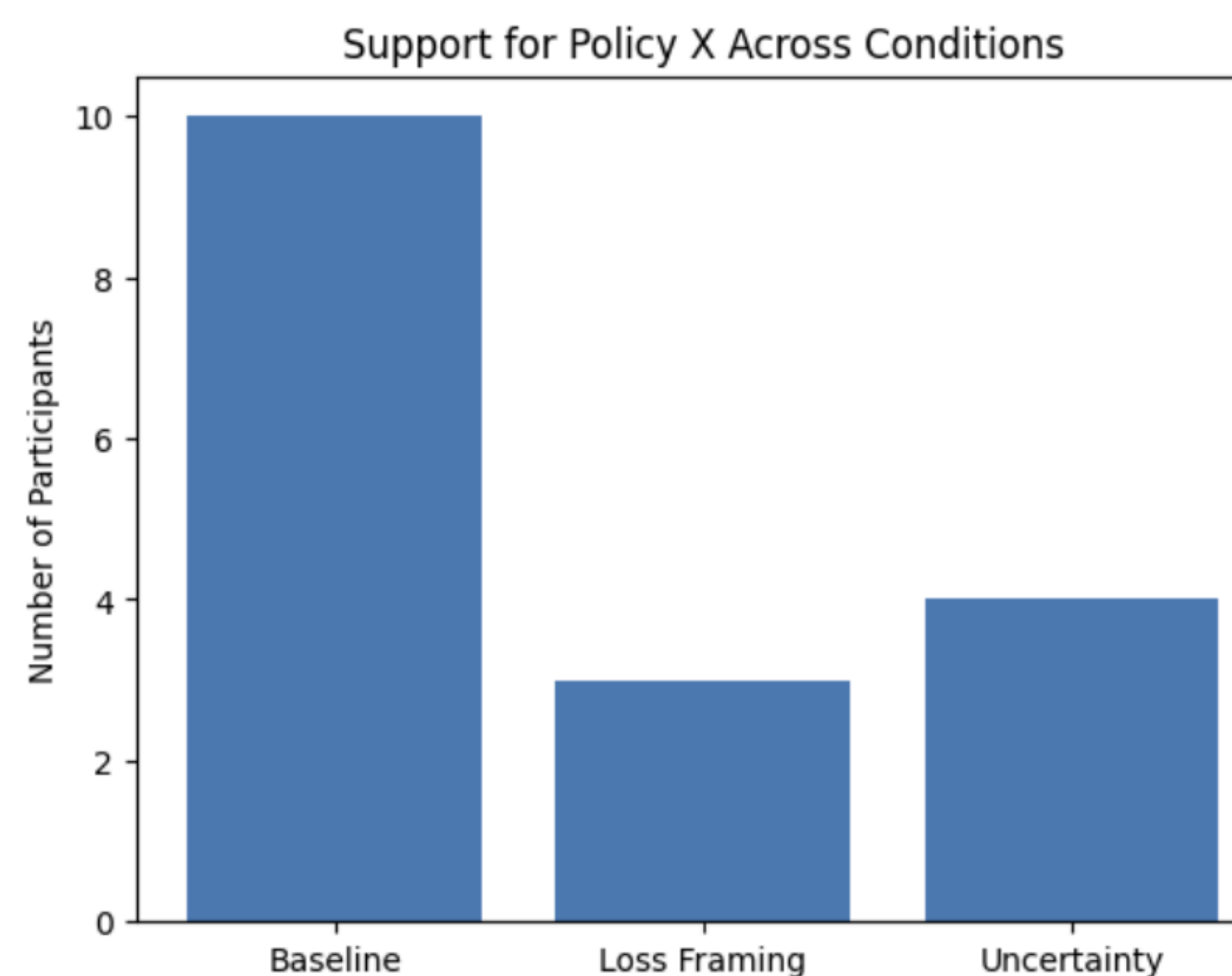


Table 3: Displays the Support for Policy X Across all conditions and questions asked throughout the interview. Under situations of uncertainty, most people voted for Policy X. These findings are relevant for immigration reform because they suggest that individuals who interpret policy outcomes through a zero-sum framework may perceive immigration policies as creating winners and losers between immigrants and native-born citizens. This perception can shape support for or opposition to reforms, particularly when policies are framed as redistributing economic opportunities, public resources, or social benefits. Understanding these cognitive patterns helps explain why immigration debates often become polarized even when policies could produce broader collective benefits.

## V. Data Analysis

Interview responses were compiled into a structured dataset (Microsoft Excel) and coded for patterns in zero-sum versus non-zero-sum reasoning. Responses were analyzed for language indicating perceived competition over scarce resources, assumptions about fixed gains and losses, and conditional reasoning under uncertainty. Patterns were then compared across participants to identify recurring themes and variation in cognitive framing

## VI. Next Steps

Future research will expand the sample beyond Florida State University students to include members of local immigrant communities, nonprofit and advocacy representatives, and policymakers involved in immigration issues. This broader participant pool will allow for comparisons across different social and professional perspectives on immigration policy. The study will also increase the sample size and incorporate additional experimental scenarios to better examine how zero-sum thinking varies across demographic groups and policy contexts.

## VII. References



FSU  
Kayra Serpenguzel  
kbs24a@fsu.edu

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Kai Ou for mentorship and guidance throughout this research project. I also appreciate the support of the Florida State University Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program for providing the opportunity to conduct this study. Finally, I am grateful to the FSU students who participated in interviews and shared their perspectives, which made this research possible.