

Eating out, Opening Up? Culinary Engagement and Attitudes Toward Immigration in Austin Texas

Lale O'Reilly

January 2026

Abstract

Public attitudes toward immigration are shaped not only by economics and partisanship, but also by everyday encounters with cultural difference. This paper examines whether culinary openness, including enjoyment of foods from other cultures and engagement with diverse cuisines, is associated with warmer attitudes toward immigrants. Drawing on contact theory, I argue that food can function as a form of symbolic intergroup contact by exposing individuals to cultural difference in low-stakes, repeated, and familiar settings. Using original survey data collected in Austin, Texas, I test whether respondents who report greater culinary openness also express more favorable immigration attitudes. The descriptive results show a strong positive relationship between culinary openness and warmth toward immigrants, but that relationship weakens substantially once party identification and demographic controls are introduced. These findings suggest that everyday cultural practices may be linked to immigration attitudes, but that this relationship is closely intertwined with broader political identity.

1 Introduction

Immigration remains one of the most politically divisive issues in the United States, shaping elections, policy debates, and public arguments over national identity. In recent years, debates over border enforcement, asylum, and mass deportation have made immigration an even more visible and emotionally charged issue in American politics. Most explanations for immigration attitudes focus on economics, threat, or partisanship. Yet these explanations often overlook the role of ordinary cultural experiences shape how people respond to difference. As one immigration advocate put it, 'Sharing food is one of the best ways to get people open to understanding and accepting another culture. Sharing food and other cultural aspects in a multicultural festival won't solve major immigration or racial issues, but it's a way to get people to open their doors to later take on

big problems.¹ This intuition motivates the central question of this paper: can everyday food practices help explain variation in attitudes toward immigration?

This paper argues that culinary openness may function as a form of symbolic intergroup contact. People who regularly enjoy foods from other cultures are repeatedly exposed to cultural difference in familiar, voluntary, and low-stakes settings. These experiences may not seem political on the surface, but they can normalize diversity and reduce perceptions of unfamiliarity or threat. The core hypothesis is that respondents who are more open to foods from other cultures will also report warmer attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Rather than replacing standard explanations such as partisanship or perceived threat, this paper examines whether everyday cultural life offers an additional mechanism through which openness to difference may develop.

Existing research on immigration attitudes has largely emphasized economic competition, elite discourse, racial resentment, and partisan sorting. These approaches offer powerful explanations, but they leave relatively little room for the possibility that routine lifestyle practices also shape political attitudes. Contact theory suggests that exposure to out-groups can reduce prejudice, yet most applications focus on direct interpersonal interaction such as friendship, workplace contact, or neighborhood diversity. This paper extends that logic by examining whether food can operate as a subtler form of contact. In doing so, it contributes to scholarship on immigration attitudes by bringing together political behavior, contact theory, and cultural consumption.

Austin provides a useful setting for examining this question because it combines a highly visible food culture with significant political and demographic diversity. The city offers broad access to culturally diverse cuisines and regular opportunities for everyday contact with difference through restaurants, festivals, and public spaces. At the same time, Austin is not perfectly representative of Texas or the broader American South, which makes it both a useful testing ground and a case with important limits to external validity. Studying Austin therefore allows this paper to examine whether the relationship between culinary openness and immigration attitudes appears in a context where cultural exposure is especially accessible, while also highlighting the need for broader future research.

This paper proceeds as follows: the next section reviews existing scholarship on immigration attitudes and food, emphasizing explanations that tend to neglect everyday lifestyle factors. The following section develops the theoretical framework, showing how routine food practices may shape immigration attitudes through symbolic intergroup contact. I then outline the research design and survey measures before turning to the empirical analysis. The paper concludes by discussing the broader implications of the findings, as well as the study's limitations and directions for future research.

¹Quote shared with the author by Danny Cowser from an interview he conducted with a representative of a New Zealand immigrant-support organization, April 2026.

2 Conceptualizing Immigration Attitudes

At the highest level of abstraction, this study’s dependent variable is public attitudes toward immigration. Broadly, this concept refers to individuals’ evaluative orientations—positive, negative, or neutral—toward the entry, presence, and integration of immigrants in their society. Political scientists conceptualize immigration attitudes as a component of broader public opinion, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dispositions toward immigrant groups and immigration policy, as discussed in Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014). These attitudes matter because they shape democratic responsiveness, influence electoral outcomes, and inform the policy environment in which governments negotiate migration and integration strategies, a dynamic highlighted in Freeman (1995) and Citrin et al. (1997).

Research has identified several common explanations for variation in immigration attitudes, including economic concerns about job competition and resource strain (Sears and Henry 2003). Others highlight cultural or identity-based concerns, viewing immigration as a potential challenge to shared norms or traditions. Partisan alignment can also play a central role, with attitudes shaped by elite cues and ideological identity. These perspectives show that immigration attitudes arise from both material interests and symbolic meanings, a distinction emphasized by Sears and Henry (2003).

At a conceptual level, attitudes toward immigration reflect perceptions of group boundaries and intergroup relations. They capture how individuals think about who belongs within the national community, and whether cultural, economic, or security-related factors justify inclusion or exclusion. In survey research, these attitudes are often measured using general questions on whether immigration should be increased, decreased, or kept the same, or through feeling thermometers measuring warmth toward immigrants. Such measures aggregate diverse beliefs about economic competition, cultural threat, and national identity into a single evaluative stance.

Across contexts, researchers and polling organizations have found that immigration attitudes vary depending on cultural and regional factors, a pattern demonstrated in Hopkins (2010). Individuals in more diverse or immigrant-rich areas often express warmer views compared to those in more homogeneous regions, although appreciation of cultural contributions does not always translate into support for increased immigration levels, as Hopkins (2010) also finds. This variation highlights that attitudes toward immigration exist across several dimensions—economic, cultural, and political- and that individuals can hold mixed or even conflicting views across them.

By conceptualizing the dependent variable at this broad level, this study situates individual responses on a continuous scale, from strong opposition to strong support, as part of a wider theoretical landscape of intergroup relations. This framing allows the project to connect micro-level lifestyle practices, such as openness in dining habits, to broader public sentiment toward immigration.

3 Literature Review: Immigration, Contact and Cultural Consumption

Research on attitudes toward immigration has traditionally focused on economic competition, cultural threat, and contact based explanations for variation in public opinion. Economic self-interest and labour market competition theories suggest that opposition to immigration arises when citizens perceive migrants as competitors for jobs and welfare benefits (Cogitatio Press, 2022). Yet, anti-immigrant sentiment often stems less from objective demographic change than from perceived shifts in local diversity, revealing how symbolic threat and identity politics shape public responses Kawalerowicz (2021). Similarly, Janus (2010) demonstrates that measures of tolerance are frequently distorted by social desirability pressures, with respondents underreporting negative attitudes toward immigrants.

While these models capture structural and psychological sources of hostility, they fail to explain variation in openness among individuals with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and exposure. Scholars have increasingly turned to contact theory to address this gap, emphasizing that direct interaction between groups can reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Trop, 2006). Yet most applications of contact theory rely on overt, interpersonal encounters such as friendships or workplace relations, overlooking subtler and more symbolic forms of engagement that occur in everyday cultural practices.

This study proposes that food consumption (specifically the diversity of the cuisines individuals enjoy) represents a mode of intergroup contact. Eating ethnic food can arguably foster indirect yet meaningful encounters with other cultures, generating curiosity, empathy and positive attitudes toward immigrants (Leyva et al, 2025). Building on anthropological insights that food expresses identity and boundary-making (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002; Dusselier, 2009), this paper examines whether culinary openness predicts more inclusive immigration attitudes in Austin, a context where ethnic diversity and food cultures are deeply intertwined (Borruud et al, 1989).

The research of intergroup relations states that meaningful interaction across social boundaries can reduce prejudice, but they do not agree on the mechanisms that make such encounters effective. The contact theory, originating with Allport (1954), argues that contact can create positive attitudes when it happens in very calm and supportive conditions. Subsequently some scholars claim that their research has shown that these conditions can enhance the 'contact effect,' yet also demonstrate that contact benefits often extend beyond the groups studied (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Other work complicates this optimism by highlighting that contact is not always positive: Brown et al. (2008) display that casual, unequal, or involuntary encounters can leave biases unchanged or even worsen them, suggesting that the manner and context of the interaction matters as much as the contact itself. Building on these insights, newer frameworks expand what counts as contact. For instance, moral universalism, a generalized ethical concern for outgroups, can generate contact-like reductions in prejudice

even without direct interaction (Bai et al., 2021). This idea can be further extended, it can be proposed that everyday cultural practices and interactions such as eating ethnic food can create low-threat exposure to differences that can foster openness toward immigrants (Leyva et al, 2025). However, much of this evidence comes from Europe or highly tolerant populations, leaving open the question of whether such “culinary contact” operates similarly in more polarized U.S. contexts. The present study addresses this gap by examining whether these subtle forms of cultural engagement predict immigration attitudes in the American South.

Anthropologists have long shown that food functions as both a cultural boundary and a medium of social exchange. Mintz and Du Bois (2002) describe food as a ‘total social fact’ that expresses relationships of power and belonging; eating practices can be seen to reproduce moral and cultural hierarchies (Dusselier, 2009) and culinary xenophobia mirrors national anxieties (Anderson and Benbow, 2015). These studies underscore that food is deeply political, shaping who is considered an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’, yet most remain qualitative and rarely connect food practices to measurable political attitudes. This project bridges that gap by empirically testing whether culinary openness to diversity correlates with greater political openness toward immigrants.

Taste itself carries political meaning. Purhonen and Heikkila (2016) find that ‘omnivorous’ consumers, those who enjoy varied cuisines and music, tend to hold liberal views, while traditional eaters are more conservative. As urban diversity increases exposure to ethnic food, more cosmopolitan views are likely to be held by those consuming the food (Rule, 2022). While these studies imply that ‘culinary cosmopolitanism’ signals openness, causality remains uncertain. The politics of eating complicates the idea that diverse tastes always equal tolerance. Heldke (2006) critiques ‘cultural food colonialism’, where privileged consumers appropriate ‘ethnic’ foods without understanding their origins. In contrast, Bonotti et al. (2023) argue that restaurants and dining spaces (gastrospace) can serve as civic arenas for respectful cross cultural engagement.

Texas offers a unique testing ground. Distinct ethnic food patterns persist among White, Black and Mexican American groups, reflecting both separation and hybridisation (Borruet et al, 1989)- Food thus mirrors the state’s diverse yet contested identity, making it an ideal site for studying how culinary openness may align with political inclusivity.

Economic and threat-based models explain prejudice through perceived competition (Kawalerowicz, 2021; Janus, 2010). Contact theory highlights the prejudice-reducing role of exposure (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Brown et al., 2008; Leyva et al., 2025), while cultural sociology interprets taste as an expression of identity (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002; Purhonen & Heikkila, 2016). Combining these, this study conceptualises culinary engagement as symbolic contact, a behaviour reflecting and potentially shaping cosmopolitan attitudes. By connecting food practices (Bonotti et al, 2023) with political attitudes, it bridges cultural anthropology and political sociology. Few studies test the political effects of cultural consumption quantitatively, or in the US South, contact theory rarely examines indirect contact such as food consumption (Leyva et

al, 2025). Ethical debates about cosmopolitan eating remain abstract (Heldke, 2006; Bonotti et al, 2023) and causality between taste and ideology is unresolved (Purhonen & Heikkilä, 2016). This study fills these gaps by empirically testing whether culinary diversity predicts pro-immigrant attitudes, integrating symbolic contact theory with regional and ethical perspectives.

4 Culinary Openness as Symbolic Intergroup Contact

This study proposes that culinary openness functions as a form of symbolic intergroup contact, shaping attitudes toward immigration through mechanisms of exposure, familiarity, and cosmopolitan identification. Traditional contact theory emphasises direct personal interaction, with the central psychological insight being broader: exposure to out groups under positive or voluntary conditions reduces prejudice by weakening threat perceptions and encouraging perspective taking (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This framework can be extended to the domain of cultural encounters. Recent work shows that indirect or symbolic models of exposure, such as engagement with cultural food, can foster empathy and reduce bias, even when no direct interpersonal contact occurs (Bai et al, 2021).

Building on this foundation, the theory driving this study conceptualises eating diverse cuisines as an accessible and low threat form of cultural contact that may activate similar psychological processes. Leyva et al (2025) provide initial evidence for this mechanism, finding that consuming ethnic foods increases perceptions of similarity and reduces beliefs that immigrants pose social or cultural threats. Importantly, such encounters are voluntary, enjoyable, and repeatable- conditions that mirror the optimal environments for contact effects. Dining experiences offer structured and predictable interactions with culturally ‘other’ groups, which can enable curiosity and reduce uncertainty.

Anthropological and sociological accounts can help to explain why these symbolic encounters matter. Food is not merely a material necessity but a ‘total social fact’ that carries identity, memory, and meaning (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002, p.99). Eating practices reproduce or challenge social boundaries (Dusselier, 2009), making them uniquely salient markers of openness or exclusivity. Cultural sociologists have similarly shown that tastes embody and signal broader moral and political orientations: those with ‘omnivorous’ consumption patterns tend to express more liberal and open minded identities (Purhonen & Heikkilä, 2016). From this perspective, culinary diversity can serve both as an indicator and a generator of cosmopolitan dispositions.

The moral component of this mechanism is supported by Bai et al (2021) work on moral cosmopolitanism, which shows that individuals who adopt broader moral circles exhibit greater empathy toward outsiders. Culinary engagement may cultivate this orientation by normalizing cultural differences and fostering everyday appreciation of unfamiliar traditions. At the same time, debates

in food ethics caution that cosmopolitan consumption is not inherently virtuous. Heldke (2006) argues that ‘cultural food colonialism’ can reflect superficial appropriation rather than genuine openness. However, Bonotti et al (2023) counter that dining spaces (gastrospace) can serve as sites of civic virtue where respect and reciprocity are practiced. This study incorporates these insights by distinguishing between frequency and enjoyment of diverse cuisines, treating the latter as a better indicator of meaningful engagement rather than tokenistic consumption.

Taken together, these theory premises support the following causal claim: engagement with diverse cuisines fosters familiarity, cosmopolitan identification, and reduced cultural threat perceptions, which in turn predict more favourable attitudes toward immigration. This mechanism operates through symbolic contact rather than direct interpersonal interaction but draw on the same foundational psychological processes identified by contact theory. In a context like Texas- where cultural exchange is often mediated through food- culinary openness provides a theoretically grounded pathway through which everyday practices may shape political attitudes.

5 Final Design

Because the theory conceptualizes culinary engagement as a form of symbolic intergroup contact, this study uses a cross-sectional survey design centered in Austin, Texas. Rather than experimentally manipulating exposure, the design measures naturally occurring variation in respondents’ food practices and immigration attitudes. The main independent variable in the empirical analysis is culinary openness, operationalized as respondents’ self-reported enjoyment of foods from other cultures. This was measured through the survey item asking, ‘How much do you enjoy trying foods from cultures different from your own?’ Responses ranged from ‘Not at all’ to ‘Extremely.’ The main dependent variable is warmth toward immigrants, measured through a feeling-scale item asking respondents how emotionally warm or cold they feel toward immigrants on a 1-10 scale.

The survey also included additional measures of culinary engagement, including how often respondents eat cuisines that are not traditionally American and whether they actively seek out unfamiliar foods. Immigration attitudes were measured in several ways, including general immigration preferences, favorable or unfavorable views of immigrants, and whether immigration was seen as culturally threatening or enriching. In the empirical section, however, the primary analysis focuses on the relationship between enjoyment of foods from other cultures and warmth toward immigrants, because these measures provide the clearest test of the paper’s central hypothesis.

To account for alternative explanations, the regression models include controls for party identification, age, gender, education, and race. Party identification is especially important because prior research suggests that immigration attitudes are strongly shaped by political identity. Including these controls makes

it possible to assess whether the observed relationship between culinary openness and immigrant warmth remains once broader political and demographic factors are taken into account.

The survey was administered to respondents in Austin, including many individuals located in or around the University of Texas campus. This sampling strategy made it possible to collect responses from people with differing levels of political interest and cultural engagement, but it also means that the sample may be skewed toward younger and more educated respondents than the broader Texas population. That limitation is important for interpreting the empirical results and their external validity.

This design does not allow for strong causal claims, but it does permit an observational test of whether culinary openness is associated with immigration attitudes. At the same time, the study cannot fully rule out reverse causality or omitted variable bias. It is possible that respondents who are already more politically or culturally open are both more likely to enjoy diverse cuisines and more likely to express warmer feelings toward immigrants. For that reason, the empirical analysis should be interpreted as testing association rather than proving a direct causal effect.

6 Empirical Section

To evaluate the relationship between culinary openness and attitudes toward immigration, I begin by examining the distribution of the independent and dependent variables. I then present a descriptive figure showing the relationship between the two variables, followed by regression models that test whether the observed relationship remains once political and demographic controls are included.

6.1 Distribution of the Independent Variable

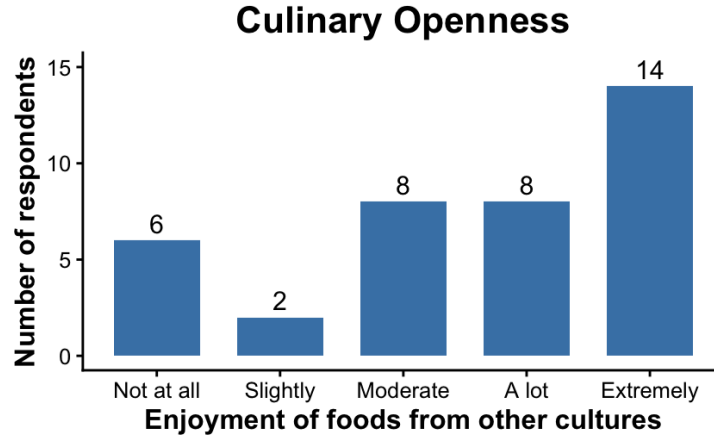


Figure 1: Distribution of culinary openness.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the main independent variable, culinary openness, measured as respondents' enjoyment of foods from other cultures. The distribution is skewed toward higher values, with relatively many respondents selecting high levels of culinary openness and comparatively few selecting the lowest categories. This suggests that the sample is generally quite open to foods from other cultures. The concentration of responses at the higher end of the scale is important because it indicates that the sample was not evenly distributed across levels of culinary openness from the outset.

Because the independent variable is concentrated at the high end of the scale, it is important to interpret the later analysis cautiously. A sample that is already relatively culturally open may be more likely to display positive raw associations between culinary openness and attitudes toward immigrants.

6.2 Distribution of the Dependent Variable

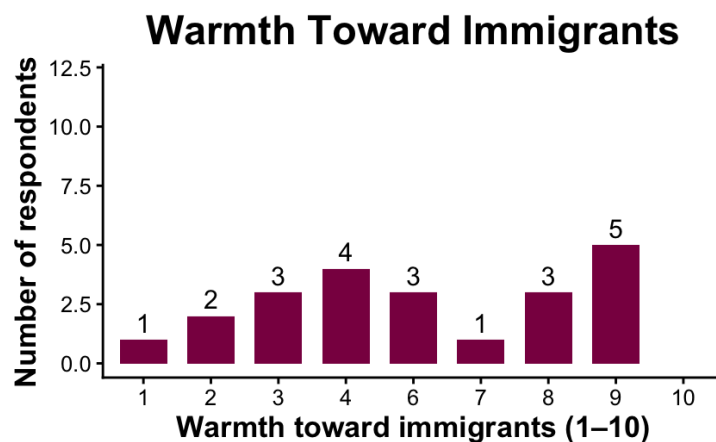


Figure 2: Distribution of warmth toward immigrants.

Figure 2 displays the distribution of the main dependent variable, warmth toward immigrants, measured on a 1–10 scale. The distribution is concentrated toward the higher end, indicating that many respondents report relatively warm feelings toward immigrants rather than cold or neutral feelings.

This pattern again suggests that the sample is predisposed toward relatively positive attitudes. The concentration of responses at the high end of both the independent and dependent variables makes it especially important to test whether the apparent relationship between them persists after accounting for political identity and demographic characteristics.

6.3 Relationship Between Culinary Openness and Immigration Attitudes

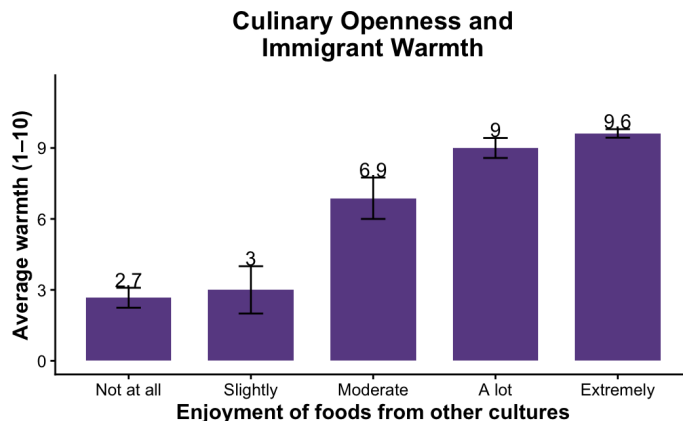


Figure 3: Average warmth toward immigrants by level of culinary openness. Error bars show standard errors.

Figure 3 shows the bivariate relationship between culinary openness and warmth toward immigrants. On average, respondents with greater enjoyment of foods from other cultures also report warmer attitudes toward immigrants. The figure suggests a clear positive relationship in the raw data.

However, descriptive relationships alone do not establish whether culinary openness has an independent association with immigration attitudes. It is possible that the apparent pattern is driven by broader political or demographic characteristics that influence both food preferences and views toward immigrants.

6.4 Regression Analysis

To examine whether the descriptive relationship between culinary openness and immigrant warmth persists once alternative explanations are taken into account, I estimate three ordinary least squares regression models. The first model includes only the bivariate relationship between the main independent and dependent variables. The second model adds party identification, while the third includes the full set of demographic controls. The baseline model can be written as:

$$ImmigrantWarmth_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CulinaryOpenness_i + \epsilon_i$$

where immigrant warmth is the dependent variable and culinary openness is the main independent variable. The later models extend this equation by adding political and demographic controls.

	Model 1: Bivariate	Model 2: Party Controls	Model 3: Full Controls
Constant	1.006 (0.663)	3.571** (1.279)	4.117* (1.543)
Culinary openness	1.807*** (0.174)	0.143 (0.278)	0.134 (0.308)
Lean Democrat		5.400*** (1.130)	5.472*** (1.151)
Lean Republican		1.333 (1.119)	0.764 (1.242)
Leaning Republican		2.000 (1.370)	
Other party ID		5.380*** (1.249)	5.272*** (1.307)
Strong Democrat		5.125*** (1.063)	4.771*** (1.149)
Strong Republican		-0.999 (1.137)	-1.401 (1.402)
Age			0.001 (0.015)
Female			-0.778 (0.499)
Education			0.153 (0.167)
White respondent			-0.369 (0.513)
Num.Obs.	37	37	34
R2	0.756	0.916	0.932
R2 Adj.	0.749	0.896	0.902
AIC	139.2	111.6	105.4
BIC	144.0	126.1	123.7
Log.Lik.	-66.608	-46.823	-40.684
RMSE	1.46	0.86	0.80

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Table 1 presents three regression models predicting warmth toward immigrants. Model 1 shows a strong positive bivariate relationship between culinary openness and immigrant warmth. The coefficient for culinary openness is positive and highly statistically significant, indicating that respondents who report greater enjoyment of foods from other cultures also report warmer feelings toward immigrants. Substantively, the magnitude is large: moving one step higher on culinary openness is associated with about a 1.8-point increase on the 1-10 warmth scale. This provides strong initial support for the paper’s hypothesis.

Model 2 adds party identification in order to test whether the bivariate association is actually capturing broader political orientation. Once party is included, the coefficient for culinary openness drops sharply and is no longer statistically significant. This suggests that the strong bivariate relationship is largely explained by political identity rather than culinary openness itself. In other words, respondents who are more open to foods from other cultures may also be more likely to identify with political groups that already hold warmer views toward immigrants.

Model 3 adds demographic controls for age, gender, education, and race. The substantive pattern remains unchanged: culinary openness remains statistically insignificant, while party identification continues to explain much of the variation in immigrant warmth. The increase in R-squared across the models reinforces this interpretation. While the bivariate model already explains a substantial share of the variation in immigrant warmth, the explanatory power rises sharply once party identification is introduced. Taken together, these results suggest that the original bivariate relationship may partly reflect omitted variable bias. Culinary openness appears strongly related to immigrant warmth in the raw data, but that relationship does not remain robust once political identity is taken into account.

7 Conclusion

This paper set out to test whether culinary openness functions as a form of symbolic intergroup contact associated with more favorable attitudes toward immigration. The central hypothesis was that respondents who are more open to foods from other cultures would also report warmer attitudes toward immigrants and more favorable attitudes toward immigration. At the descriptive and bivariate levels, the findings appeared to support that expectation. Respondents with greater culinary openness generally reported warmer feelings toward immigrants, and the initial relationship between these variables was strong and positive.

However, the regression analysis complicates that initial picture. Once party identification was introduced, the apparent effect of culinary openness became much smaller and was no longer statistically significant. Adding demographic controls for age, gender, education, and race did not meaningfully change that result. Taken together, these findings suggest that while culinary openness is clearly associated with warmer immigration attitudes in the raw data, that

relationship may not be independent of broader political identity. In this sample, political orientation appears to explain more of the variation in attitudes toward immigrants than food-related openness alone.

There are several important limitations to these findings. First, the sample was relatively small and appears to include many respondents who were students or people located around the University of Texas campus. That likely matters because people in and around UT may be younger, more educated, more exposed to cultural diversity, and more likely to hold liberal political attitudes than the broader Texas population. As a result, the sample may already be predisposed both toward trying different foods and toward expressing positive views on immigration. This makes it difficult to generalize the findings beyond the immediate survey environment and means that the results likely apply most directly to a relatively urban, educated, and Austin-centered context.

Second, the study is vulnerable to social desirability bias. Immigration is a politically charged issue, and respondents may have felt pressure to present themselves as tolerant or open-minded, especially in a survey context where questions about food and cultural openness were paired with questions about immigrants. It is possible that some respondents overstated both their openness to different cuisines and their warmth toward immigrants in order to appear more accepting. This means that the observed relationship may partly reflect self-presentation rather than fully sincere underlying attitudes.

Another important limitation is that the survey did not directly control for where respondents live. That omission matters because access to diverse cuisines is not evenly distributed across places. People living in central Austin are much more likely to have regular access to a wide range of restaurants and cultural food experiences than people living in the suburbs, small towns, or rural areas. At the same time, residents of urban Austin may also be more likely to hold liberal political views and more favorable attitudes toward immigration than people living outside the city core. Without a stronger measure of respondents' location, it is difficult to know whether the observed relationship reflects culinary openness itself or the broader social and political environment in which respondents live.

Future research could improve on this design in several ways. A stronger follow-up study would draw from a larger and more geographically diverse sample, including respondents from central Austin, surrounding suburbs, and smaller communities outside the city. Adding a clear measure of where respondents live would make it possible to test whether the relationship between culinary openness and immigration attitudes varies across urban, suburban, and rural settings. Future surveys could also include stronger measures of ideology, interpersonal contact with immigrants, and neighborhood diversity in order to better separate food-related openness from broader cosmopolitan or liberal orientations.

Further research could also improve the measurement strategy itself. Rather than relying only on self-reported attitudes, future work could incorporate more concrete indicators of behavior, such as the types of cuisines respondents actually consume or the frequency with which they visit culturally diverse restau-

rants. An experimental design could also help establish causality more effectively. For example, researchers might compare attitudes before and after exposure to cultural food events, or test whether information about immigrant food traditions affects perceptions of immigrants. These approaches would make it easier to determine whether culinary openness has an independent causal effect or whether it mainly reflects preexisting political identities.

More broadly, this research matters because it highlights the possibility that everyday cultural practices are connected to larger political attitudes in ways that are often overlooked. Immigration is usually debated in terms of economics, security, and partisanship, but this project suggests that ordinary experiences such as eating out may also shape how people understand cultural difference. Even if culinary openness does not independently drive immigration attitudes, the fact that it is associated with them in the descriptive data still tells us something important about how lifestyle, identity, and politics intersect. Understanding those connections matters not only for academic debates about contact theory and public opinion, but also for thinking about how communities create environments that encourage openness, coexistence, and a broader sense of belonging.

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Quote shared with the author by Danny Cowser from an interview he conducted with a New Zealand immigrant-support organization representative, email to author, April 2026.

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