

Final Report: Individual-Level Attitudes towards Immigrants over Time and across Contexts

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1. Abstract of the Executive Summary

The objective of the project was to examine the dynamics of attitudes towards immigrants in a series of inter-related analyses, combining expertise from different research traditions – economics, sociology, political science, and social psychology. To this end, we use longitudinal data to study an inherently dynamic phenomenon. The project demonstrates that contact with immigrants, particularly culturally distant immigrants, is a strong driver of positive attitudes to immigrants. At the same time, we demonstrate that recent contributions that negate individual-level economic competition as a source for negative attitudes have gone too far. Drawing on robust longitudinal analyses to describe an inherently dynamic social phenomenon, the project overall emphasizes that perceptions of competition indeed play a role when it comes to negative attitudes. Contrary to some recent contributions, we demonstrate that highly-educated individuals are not immune to negative attitudes. We conclude that both contact and perceived competition should be pursued in future work on attitudes and radical-right voting, and argue that claims that one factor may be more important than others may be inappropriate.

2. Executive Summary

Research Plan

The proportion of immigrants in most Western European countries has greatly increased since the 1970s – largely driven by economic demand. Some contemporaries have viewed these developments with unease, at least since the moment that immigrants have arrived in larger numbers and it became clear that many of them would stay. While there may be a general tendency to be suspicious of newcomers, individuals differ in their tendency to reject other groups. The literature has proposed many reasons why reactions vary, ranging from simple conservatism and basic political values to personalities and even genetic influence.

Most theories about attitudes to immigrants are about social change: describing and explaining a dynamic social phenomenon. In surprising contrast to the theory, most existing work draws on cross-sectional data. Panel data that trace individuals over time are increasingly available, and this project focused on the dynamic nature of attitudes: socialization, attitude dynamics, and changes. For this reason, panel data are at the heart of the project, although we also used other data where this makes sense, like the variables that are available in existing data sets. Where we did not use panel data, we complemented cross-sectional surveys with other data to make claims about changes over time, like historical data, or experimental data from the lab and from population surveys. We have also collected local data for better insights about the involved dynamics. The combination of approaches improves causal identification to the best that social science can offer these days, giving us a great balance of internal and external validity very rare to see in projects of this kind.

The project was organized around the expectation that the development and dynamics of attitudes to immigrants is shaped by both cultural aspects and economic threats. In this sense, we examined how the arrival of (more) immigrants into a neighbourhood affects attitudes to immigrants, but also paid attention to socialization and the stability of attitudes in the face of changing economic conditions. In particular, we have addressed three expectations outlined in the literature: the defended neighbourhood theses, socialization in early years, and with that the stability of attitudes over time. At the same time, the project has addressed related outcomes, such as votes for anti-immigrant parties and the radical right.

At the basis, the project drew on group threat theory that regards prejudice towards other groups and inter-group hostility primarily as reactions to perceived threats by (subordinate) groups. At its core, group threat theory revolves around a perceived zero-sum game where resources are limited and when one group wins the other necessarily loses out. This simple economic model of grievances is often formulated in terms of labour force competition, although the underlying group threat theory is more general and can be applied to economic, cultural, and symbolic threats. The nature of the threats is often unspecified – be this burdens to the social security system, limited accommodation, limited space on roads, in public transport, or in recreational areas, or the less tangible loss of traditions and ‘how things are done’. In all cases, however, immigrants threaten the economic position or well-being of natives, such as by potentially undercutting wages or ‘taking away’ the jobs of natives. Negative

reactions and attitudes are thus seen as a partly rational rejection of undue competition to preserve privileged status.

Research from across the disciplines has refined the argument of group threat theory to increasingly highlight that *perceptions* of threat matter more than objective competition, and that negative attitudes may also stem from prejudice, ideology, context, and cultural values. Immigrants may be regarded as threatening because the individual feels affected in a negative way – so-called egotropic concerns –, or because individuals feel that their group or society is affected in a negative way: so-called sociotropic concerns. Many recent contributions have emphasized the role of sociotropic concerns, and argued that this undermines the economic model. In our view, it is not productive to pitch different channels through which negative attitudes can be formulated against each other, especially if the nature of economic competition is not adequately considered: segmented labour markets or skill-specificity of the workers may lead to quite different insights than the common assumption that all immigrant workers have low levels of education and thus compete only with other workers with low levels of education.

What is more, it is clear from the literature that individuals can and do differentiate between different immigrant groups, and different immigrant groups systematically elicit different responses: perceived cultural difference matters when it comes to negative attitudes. There are indications that reactions are particularly strong if the number of immigrants increases suddenly and unexpectedly – such as when wars lead to asylum seekers and refugees. At the same time, contact between (cultural) groups can reduce tensions and oppositions when it takes place under the right circumstances. Only a longitudinal approach can capture these dynamics that may involve individuals self-selecting into particular preferred neighbourhoods or occupations. Only a longitudinal approach can adequately capture changes to the neighbourhood and the economic situation of individuals – and with that cater for variance in egotropic concerns that several recent contributions seem to dismiss.

In terms of methodology, this project combined approaches from economics, political science, sociology, and social psychology to provide a more complete picture of the factors that influence individual attitudes to foreigners. While review articles normally combine insights from different research traditions, it is rare for individual studies to do so, and it is not uncommon to reduce entire research traditions to a single control variable – such as when labour force competition with immigrants is reduced to the level of education. Because it comes with clear empirical expectations, the starting point of this project was group threat theory – although because of the interdisciplinary nature of the research team we systematically included other factors suggested in the literature in the research design.

The outcome variable in the different research papers is negative attitudes to immigrants, although some of the papers also draw on support for anti-immigrant parties and support for redistribution as related concepts. To take advantage of panel micro data and other longitudinal data, we used multilevel modelling, using fixed-effect or random effect models as appropriate. The different papers focus on different predictor variables to take into consideration a broad range of theoretical expectations and to adequately address them. In some cases, the dynamics of attitudes are ascertained

through the use of historical data, and we also use data from survey and lab experiments to complement the results from secondary data analysis.

Results Obtained and Analysis

A first set of analyses has focused on the nature of the neighbourhood and how the ethnic composition of the neighbourhood shapes attitudes to immigrants. Here we draw on panel data from the Netherlands, and have complemented these with detailed data on the composition of the neighbourhoods of the panel participants. Making full use of the panel structure of the data, we paid attention to changes in the composition and relate these to changes in attitudes. Much effort was put into identifying the most appropriate level of analysis: the level at which a neighbourhood is defined. Using a follow-up survey among residents in two such neighbourhoods confirmed that the post-code based approach chosen on the basis of theoretical considerations corresponds closely to how individuals perceive their neighbourhood. This in itself is a major improvement over existing studies considering variation at the national and regional level.

One paper focused on the well-formulated defended neighbourhood thesis, while the second used sympathy for the anti-immigrant *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) as the outcome variable. The defended neighbourhood thesis stipulates that the composition of a neighbourhood at the time when new immigrants arrive determines the reactions of those already in the neighbourhood. If the neighbourhood is initially homogeneous, opposition to immigrants is expected to be high; if the neighbourhood is heterogeneous, there will be less opposition of new immigrants, if at all. For the period we can observe with panel data, we find no consistent evidence for defended neighbourhoods in the Netherlands. By contrast, in line with contact theory, an increase in the share of immigrants is associated with more positive attitudes. It is in particular changes in the share of immigrants from more distant cultures and those who are visible by their skin colour that are associated with changes in attitudes.

A second set of analyses has focused on socialization and the stability of attitudes. Here we draw on historical data on the composition of the surroundings at the time the respondents were children or young adults, as well as on referendums in Switzerland as a means to capture public moods or average attitudes. We benefit from the fact that the municipality of birth is known, and can demonstrate that the share of immigrants and the economic situation during childhood are strongly associated with present-day attitudes to immigrants. Theoretically, we draw on work on impressionable years and socialization that stipulates that attitudes to immigrants – and attitudes more generally – are to a large extent shaped at a young age, and relatively stable afterwards. The analysis suggests that what can be understood as cultural threats and economic threats in the labour market at a young age can have a lasting impact on attitudes that studies focusing on the situation at the present – ignoring the longitudinal aspect – will miss.

In a related paper, we relate relative changes in outcomes to referendums to changes in the composition of municipalities. Modelling changes at the municipal level, we show that an increase in the share of immigrants in the municipality is associated with a more positive outcome in a subsequent referendum on restricting immigration. Here we benefit from the frequent referendums in Switzerland

that also include questions of immigration. In line with contact theory rather than group threat, this paper resonates findings from the Netherlands where we used a more fine-graded approach to capturing neighbourhoods. Also in line with the research in the Netherlands, we find that the share of culturally different immigrants – here approached through linguistic distance – is associated more strongly with positive outcomes. At the level of municipalities, however, the economic situation also seems to play a role: where levels of unemployment or housing costs increase, the effects we attribute to contact with immigrants is reduced.

A third set of analyses takes a more eclectic approach to examine the nature of economic threat at the individual level. One paper draws on panel data in Germany to show that skill specificity is a strong driver of negative attitudes to immigrants. The economic reasoning here is that workers with skills that tie them to a particular job are less able to avoid competition with immigrant workers – real or perceived competition is irrelevant. Drawing amongst others on changes in the regulation of some occupations, the paper demonstrates that demand in the labour market matters for attitudes – not just the supply of workers commonly examined in the existing literature. The analysis shows that attitudes change in face of potential competition, something missed in the literature which focuses on actual, objective competition. The paper also highlights that the highly-educated are not immune from negative attitudes to immigrants – they may simply on average be more protected from competition.

In a related paper, we examine egotropic economic influences on attitudes to immigrants by examining the role of taxation. Drawing on experimental evidence, we show that attitudes to immigrants vary depending on whether taxation is (highly) progressive, and with that whether individuals are expected to bear some of the (purported) costs associated with the inflow of large numbers of immigrants. Put differently, we show that the economic threat perceived by middle-low and low-income individuals due to immigration is exacerbated by levels of regressivity in the fiscal system. Again, it crystallizes that economic considerations cannot be dismissed, and the paper helps understanding the deteriorating link between lower class constituencies from classical social-democratic spaces, and their switch to anti-immigrant attitudes and voting. Two further papers take these considerations clearly into the political realm. One examines why countries hit by an economic recession are often resilient to anti-immigrant parties, despite the ostensible potential to scapegoat immigrants for the economic downturn. We demonstrate that during economic downturns, economic and immigration-related issues tend to align, which in turn reduces the ideological fragmentation on which radical right-wing parties thrive. This benefits conservative parties and agendas that manage to credibly combine moderately anti-immigrant and economically right-wing positions. The second political paper examines how immigration policies affect trust, showing that policies around border control and labour-market integration may have a quite different impact.

In sum, the research coming out of this interdisciplinary project demonstrates that contact with immigrants, particularly culturally distant immigrants readily identified as ‘others’ in the everyday, is a strong driver of positive attitudes to immigrants. At the same time, we demonstrate that recent contributions that negate individual-level economic competition as a source for negative attitudes have gone too far. Drawing on robust longitudinal analyses to describe an inherently dynamic social phenomenon, the project overall emphasizes that perceptions of competition indeed play a role when

it comes to negative attitudes. Contrary to some recent contributions, we demonstrate that highly-educated individuals are not immune to negative attitudes, though typically they may be in labour-market positions where they feel less exposed to direct competition.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for an interdisciplinary project, we demonstrate that there is value in the different approaches in literature, and that many claims that one factor may be more important than others – say sociotropic concerns trumping egotropic concerns, or cultural concerns trumping economic concerns – may simply be due to glossing over features of the labour market. With this, the results of this project point to multiple causes driving attitudes to immigration, which suggests different policy interventions to enhance social cohesion by alleviating negative attitudes.

Correspondence to Research Hypotheses

At the outset, we specified seven related research hypotheses based on the literature. Hypothesis 1.1 described the defended neighbourhood thesis, and stated that “Attitudes towards immigrants are expected to be more negative in areas where there is an increase in the proportion of a salient ethnic minority population, and this proportion is initially low.” Using panel data from the Netherlands, we found no consistent support for this hypothesis for changes between 2008 and 2014. By contrast, our results are in line with contact theory, where a larger change is associated with more positive attitudes, especially for changes in culturally distant immigrants – using citizenship as a proxy for cultural practices. Similarly, the analysis of municipalities in Switzerland indicates that an increase in the share of immigrants is associated with more positive attitudes – this time approached through results in referendums. This analysis, however, added an important qualification in that poor economic conditions can reduce the positive impact of contact.

Hypothesis 1.2 added considerations of “politicization in the media”, something that we could not test systematically with the data at hand. In the analysis in the Netherlands, the frequency of media consumption does not relate to changes in attitudes to immigrants, although we suspect that politicization in the media is a reason for differences between immigrant groups presented in this analysis.

Focusing on socialization and the stability of attitudes, hypothesis 2.1 stated that “attitudes towards immigrants are affected more by the composition of the population when individuals are in their pre-teens (rather than by the composition at present)”, with a derivative in hypothesis 2.1 focusing on “the composition of the population when individuals enter the labour force”. Both these expectations bore out in the longitudinal analysis, suggesting that the research on attitudes to immigrants and voting for anti-immigrant parties may benefit from shifting the focus from the composition at present to the share of (culturally distant) immigrants earlier in life, particularly the transition into the labour force.

Another derivative, hypothesis 2.3 focused on the influence of parents on the attitudes of their children. Because we drew on a different – more appropriate – data set for the longitudinal analysis to address hypothesis 2.1 and 2.1, we did not address this particular form of the hypothesis and leave it for future research.

The third group of hypotheses related to economic and cultural factors. Hypothesis 3.1 stated that “for individuals where economic factors are dominant in shaping attitudes, changes in economic circumstances can be expected to lead to changes in attitudes towards immigrants; for individuals where cultural and ideological factors are dominant in shaping attitudes, changes in economic circumstances are unlikely to lead to changes in attitudes towards immigrants: more stable patterns can be expected over time.” Contrary to the expectation coming out of the literature, with the data at hand we could not identify individuals whose attitudes are clearly affected by economic concerns and others clearly affected by cultural concerns. With this, hypothesis 3.1 is left for future research, although we suspect that the hypothesis itself will need substantive revision.

Hypothesis 3.2 brought in (perceived) protection from competition, stating that “Workers in an occupation requiring an apprenticeship are more likely to possess occupation-specific skills than workers with more general education. This makes it more difficult for them to change occupation in reaction to competition with immigrants, which can be expected to lead to more negative attitudes.” To benefit from a naturally occurring change in liberalization affecting some occupations only, we focused on skills-specificity rather than the apprenticeship part of the hypothesis. The expectation that skills specificity is associated with attitudes to immigrants is clearly supported by our analysis – highlighting that individual-level economic concerns cannot be discounted.

With the data at hand, we were not satisfied that we could adequately test the derivative hypothesis 3.3 that “For *some* groups of workers with specific skills, by contrast, the apprenticeship in itself is a protection from competition.” The intuition is that the recognition of diplomas can ward off (perceived) competition with immigrant workers. With the strong results for skills-specificity we assume this to be the case, but recognized that the hypothesis needs further elaboration to describe the nature of protection before it can be examined empirically.

Practical Application of Results

While the project focuses on basic knowledge generation, we were keen to keep practical applications in mind throughout the entire research. The results make it clear that there is value in considering both contact theory and threat when it comes to understanding attitudes to immigrants: Claims that one of the two basic approaches is irrelevant are unwarranted. In the same way, we should continue considering economic and cultural channels, and possibly the interaction between the two.

The results make it clear that research on attitudes to foreigners should focus on perceptions of threat rather than relying on objective indicators. Both theoretically and empirically perceptions of threat are more relevant than objective indicators – to the extent that the two do not necessarily agree –, and future research will continue to face endogeneity issues with perceptions of threat unless these are adequately addressed such as by relying on longitudinal and experimental data like this project did. One way to address perceptions of threat is to differentiate different groups of immigrants, and indeed it may be adequate not to consider some Western-European immigrants as the source of perceived threat. Put differently, rather than assuming that the presence of immigrant groups has a negative impact on attitudes to immigrants, such threat perceptions should probably be tested empirically.

Questions that Merit Further Exploration

While the use of longitudinal data has allowed this project to resolve some issues around endogeneity, when it comes to statistically predict and understanding the drivers of attitudes to immigrants, further research is necessary to establish under what circumstances the different mechanisms related to contact and threat come to the fore. We have shown that negative economic circumstances can reduce the positive impact of contact, although our research could not determine the nature of this statistical interaction in the sense of establishing its exact mechanisms.

Future research should also address the hypotheses we could not address in this project. For instance, we did not address the expectation that the attitudes of parents shape attitudes of their children, but by demonstrating that the situation during so-called critical periods like the transition into the labour market is a strong correlate of present-day attitudes suggests that this hypothesis could be supported. Another example is the expectation that for some individuals economic factors are dominant in shaping attitudes, while for others cultural factors are dominant, which would lead to different kind of changes depending on how the economy and society change. More detailed data on individual attitudes are required to address this hypothesis in quantitative analysis.

Better data are also necessary to consider the politicization of immigration in the media and how this affects attitudes to immigrants at the individual level. While in the analysis in the Netherlands the frequency of media consumption does not relate to changes in attitudes to immigrants, we suspect that politicization in the media is a reason for differences between immigrant groups presented in this analysis. Advances in automated coding of media coverage and an increasing importance of social media may make such analyses more likely in the near future.

On the other hand, the argument that the recognition of diplomas and apprenticeships may protect some workers from perceived competition with immigrants needs further theoretical development. With the strong results for skills-specificity we assume such protection from perceived competition to be relevant for the dynamics of attitudes to immigrants.

While the results coming out of this project are largely in line with contact theory, we showed that an analysis of group threat requires an adequate consideration of the labour market. Similarly, the link between attitudes and behaviour – discrimination of minority applicants – requires further investigation especially when it comes to policy implications.

Practical and Policy Recommendations

A first practical implication of the research in this project is that we should continue examining different mechanisms and theories on the factors shaping negative attitudes to immigrants.

A second practical implication is not to focus on individuals with low levels of education because highly educated individuals are not immune to negative attitudes – the level of education appears to be an imprecise proxy.

A third practical implication is that tough borders combined with accessible access to labour market is actually well received, and may help integration.

A fourth practical implication is that campaigns and the media may be less important for attitude change than suggested by some pundits. At the same time, we should highlight that attitudes need not change (much) to affect behaviour and the success of anti-immigrant parties, because issue salience may be more important: whether individuals consider immigration an important topic.

A fifth practical implication is that contact with immigrants matters. While encouraging positive contact may be difficult to enact through policy, preventing segregation and enclaves may be possible as part of efforts to encourage ‘mixing’ more generally. We have shown that when the economy does less well, the effects of contact are muted, suggesting that equitable economic growth has wider implications on social cohesion – something that may act as a feed-back loop.

A sixth practical implication is that labour-market policies need to be designed to keep fluidity of *demand*, even if this requires moderate levels of flexibility. Labour-market policies targeted at limiting foreign supply to protect native workers anxiety are likely inconsequential.

Publications

Heerden, Sjoerdje van, and Didier Ruedin. 2018. ‘How Attitudes towards Immigrants Are Shaped by Residential Context: The Role of Neighbourhood Dynamics, Immigrant Visibility, and Areal Attachment’. *Urban Studies*. Online First. doi:10.1177/0042098017732692

Other Activities

The research of this project has been presented at several high-level academic *conferences* in different disciplines.

APSA – American Political Science Association meeting 2017: radical right paper and progressivity

APSA – American Political Science Association meeting 2016: PVV support

Midwest Political Science Association 2017: radical right paper and progressivity

EPSA – European Political Science Association 2016: skill specificity

EEA-ESEM Annual Conference of the European Economic Association 2017: “Exposure to Immigrants and Voting on Immigration Policy”

EEA-ESEM Annual Conference of the European Economic Association 2016: “Individual attitudes towards migration: reconciling opposing views”

SPSA – Swiss Political Science Association annual conference 2018: PVV support

Politicologenetmaal 2016: “Neighbourhood Composition and Perceptions of Threat”

The research of this project has been presented at several high-level academic *workshops* and *invited talks* in different disciplines.

Workshop on “The Swiss Experience with EU Market Access: Lessons for Brexit”, Department of European Economic Studies, Collège d’Europe, Bruges, 23 November 2017. Paper presented: “Exposure to Immigrants and Voting on Immigration Policy”

Workshop on ‘Radical Party Challenges and Realignment in Advanced Democracies’, Duke University: 2018 (radical right paper)

Nottingham Interdisciplinary Centre of Economic and Political Research, University of Nottingham: 2017 (Skill specificity)

Barcelona-Gothenburg-Bergen Workshop in Experimental Political Science University of Bergen: 2017 (Progressivity)

Workshop on 'Party Competition and the Challenges of Post-Industrial Societies' at Humboldt University in Berlin: 2016 (Radical right paper)

2017 Humboldt University in Berlin, Comparative Political Behavior Lecture series: progressivity; invited talk

2017 Social Science Research Center WZB-Berlin: skill specificity; invited talk

2017 Sciences-Po Paris, General Seminar of the Centre d'Etudes Europeennes: radical right; invited talk

2017 University of York, Department of Political Science: progressivity; invited talk

2016 University of Southampton, C2G2 seminar series, Department of Politics: skill specificity; invited talk

2016 Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, Department of Political Science: skill specificity; invited talk

Annual Conference of the nccr – on the move, Neuchâtel, 23-24 June 2016. Paper presented: "Individual attitudes towards migration"

Several papers were presented in our final event on 20 March 2018 in Geneva. At the Politicogenetmaal and the final event in Geneva we exchanged with policy makers and representatives from international organizations. Working paper versions of the papers presented at the various conferences and workshops are expected to be available online in due course.