



Immigrant Integration policies and perceived Group Threat: A Multilevel Study of 27 Western and Eastern European Countries

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ABSTRACT

Although immigrant integration policies have long been hypothesized to be associated with majority members' anti-immigrant sentiments, systematic empirical research exploring this relationship is largely absent. To address this gap in the literature, the present research takes a cross-national perspective. Drawing from theory and research on group conflict and intergroup norms, we conduct two studies to examine whether preexisting integration policies that are more permissive promote or impede majority group members' subsequent negative attitudes regarding immigrants. For several Western and Eastern European countries, we link country-level information on immigrant integration policies from 2006 with individual-level survey data from the Eurobarometer 71.3 collected in 2009 (Study 1) and from the fourth wave of the European Value Study collected between 2008 and 2009 (Study 2). For both studies, the results from multilevel regression models demonstrate that immigrant integration policies that are more permissive are associated with decreased perceptions of group threat from immigrants. These findings suggest that immigrant integration policies are of key importance in improving majority members' attitudes regarding immigrants, which is widely considered desirable in modern immigrant-receiving societies.

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1. Introduction

A vast number of studies reveal marked differences in how European nation states approach the integration of immigrants with regard to integration policies (e.g. Geddes, 2003; Howard, 2005). Immigrant integration policies are broadly defined here as the institutional practices adopted by state agencies to deal with the settlement of immigrants in host societies (Bourhis et al., 1997). Parallel to this line of research, another set of studies demonstrates persistent cross-national variation in the prevalence of anti-immigrant attitudes among European citizens (Meuleman et al., 2009; Semyonov et al., 2006). However, although immigrant integration policies have long been hypothesized to be important in shaping attitudes regarding immigrants (Bourhis et al., 1997; Favell, 2001), systematic empirical research exploring this relationship is largely absent. Indeed, scholars have repeatedly emphasized the need to account for country-level political characteristics in order to achieve a better understanding of the contextual sources of anti-immigrant sentiments (e.g. Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010, p. 310; Kunovich, 2004, p. 41; Schlueter and Wagner, 2008, p. 169). This study is designed to contribute to this task.

We start from the notion that immigrant integration policies can be placed on a continuum ranging from 'restrictive' at one end to 'permissive' at the other (Bourhis et al., 1997; Geddes, 2003). At the restrictive end of the continuum, the provision of equal rights to immigrants is contingent on several preconditions and is somewhat limited, whereas at the

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permissive end, equal rights are relatively readily granted and are comprehensive. There are two main views concerning the way in which integration policies affect attitudes regarding immigrants. Following a group conflict model (e.g. Meuleman et al., 2009), the first view suggests that permissive immigrant integration policies will stimulate intergroup competition. Consequently, those taking this perspective predict that integration policies that are more permissive will increase perceptions of group threat from immigrants. The opposing view, informed by the literature on group norms in intergroup relations (Chong, 1994; Pettigrew, 1991), considers integration policies as inducing social norms for adequate intergroup relations. This implies that immigrant integration policies that are more permissive will decrease the perceived group threat from immigrants. In examining these opposing predictions, we try to improve on earlier work in several ways. As a theoretical contribution, we connect immigrant integration policies as a contextual characteristic with prior theory and research on group conflict and intergroup norms. As outlined above, doing so produces two opposing predictions regarding the way in which immigrant integration policies shape attitudes regarding immigrants. Empirically, we take advantage of the recently developed ‘Migrant Integration Policy Index’ (MIPEX, see Niessen et al., 2007) in order to assess immigrant integration policies. This comparative database provides indicators for six different strands of integration policies, and thus offers more detailed information than was available to most prior research. Furthermore, in combining this national-level information on integration policies with individual-level data on perceived group threat, we capitalize on an unusually comprehensive data source. Specifically, our data comprises of 27 countries not only from Western, but also from Eastern Europe. This broad set of country-cases substantially enhances the generalizability of our findings. Finally, we are able to cross-validate our results using cross-sectional data from the Eurobarometer wave 71.3 collected in 2009 (Study 1) and from the fourth wave of the European Value Study collected between 2008 and 2009 (Study 2). This replication provides more accurate conclusions on the country and individual-level parameter estimates than was possible in past research.

2. Theory and previous research

2.1. Group conflict model

Why would integration policies affect majority group members’ anti-immigrant reactions? One important theoretical perspective from which to approach this question is through using the group conflict model, or equivalently the group threat model (for example, see Meuleman et al., 2009; Scheepers et al., 2002; Quillian, 1995; for theoretical origins, see Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958). The key assumption underlying this perspective is that majority group members and immigrants are locked into competitive intergroup relationships. According to this approach, anti-immigrant sentiments and behaviors result from perceived group threat, broadly defined here as concerns that immigrants challenge the well-being of the majority group (Stephan and Renfro, 2002, p. 197; Riek et al., 2006, p. 336). On an empirical level, most researchers have modeled perceived group threat as a single construct (Scheepers et al., 2002; Semyonov et al., 2006; Kunovich, 2004; Schlueter and Wagner, 2008; Davidov and Meuleman, 2012).¹ It is nevertheless instructive to note that such threat perceptions typically refer to resource-based, economic matters, as well as to symbolic, cultural issues (McLaren, 2003; Stephan and Renfro, 2002; Semyonov et al., 2008; Gorodzeisky, 2011). To expand on this, economic threats reflect concerns about intergroup competition with immigrants for valued goods, such as well-paid jobs or welfare state resources. Cultural threats refer to concerns that immigrants adhering to different morals, norms, and values endanger the cultural order of the majority. The group conflict model contends that such subjective experiences of intergroup rivalry are centrally shaped by the characteristics of the contexts within which intergroup relationships take place. In this line of thinking, countries have proved to be important contextual units of analysis (for example, see McLaren, 2003; Kunovich, 2004; Scheepers et al., 2002). Indeed, it is at the country level where policies concerning the integration of immigrants are usually drafted. Given that integration policies regulate immigrants’ access to valued goods, it seems appropriate to connect integration policies with the group conflict approach. For example, consider integration policies that provide immigrants with relatively encompassing rights. Such institutional directives might indeed improve immigrants’ opportunities in the domains of educational participation, political decision making, or employment. However, according to the group conflict approach, members of the majority group will perceive such gains on the part of the immigrant population as a loss of their own group’s important resources. This means that integration policies that are more permissive will promote notions of intergroup competition, and thereby heighten majority members’ perception of group threat. This logic also holds true for threats referring to symbolic issues, where it is presumed that majority group members wish to maintain the cultural predominance of their own group. Therefore, challenges to this predominance – such as integration policies that ease the recognition of immigrants as national citizens – should also result in heightened perceptions of group threat.

2.2. The role of norms in intergroup relationships

The group conflict model outlined above suggests that immigrant integration policies that are more permissive will increase perceived group threat. However, such policies can also be seen as institutionalized norms regarding the desired role

¹ One might speculate that in part, this common practice is due to the typically rather limited number of indicators available in large-scale survey studies. However, Stephan et al. (1998) assess perceived group threat in a very detailed and comprehensive manner. Still, these authors report that modeling different forms of threat as belonging to one common construct is superior to more nuanced approaches.

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