



After the immigration shock: The causal effect of immigration on electoral preferences



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ABSTRACT

The influx of immigrants to Norway over the last decades is a large-scale natural experiment. This paper exploits municipal-level variations in the immigrant population (1977–2011) to estimate the causal effects on voter support for the right-wing, anti-immigration Progress Party.

The results indicate that voters keep incumbents accountable for permissive immigration policies. Immigration from non-Western countries (Africa, Asia, Latin America) has increased electoral support for the Progress Party. However, the effects are quite modest and noticeable only in the initial phases of immigration. Survey data covering ten elections (1989–2011) indicate a similar development in anti-immigration attitudes. The primary immigration shock tends to burn out quite fast as people get direct experience of immigrants on a daily basis.

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1. Introduction

Immigration is possibly one of the most contentious issues politicians in democratic states have to handle. Yet it still remains to be settled how the issue of immigration spills over into the electoral arena.¹ According to the accountability hypothesis, voters believe immigration poses a threat their 'way of life' and will therefore punish incumbent parties for overly permissive immigration policies and vote for right-wing, anti-immigration parties. In the view of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; Kaufmann and Harris, 2015), on the other hand, the effects of immigration on voter behavior are small and transient. Xenophobic attitudes and other immigrant-related concerns tend to diminish when the ethnic majority become familiar with the newcomers. For this reason, the anti-immigration party platform enjoys only modest gains.

This paper makes use of data on an 'immigration shock' to test these propositions. Historically, the Norwegian population has been extremely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, language, and culture. For example, in 1970, there were fewer than 3500

immigrants from non-Western countries in Norway, or 0.1 percent of the population. Indeed, two-thirds of the municipalities had not a single person originating from outside the Western hemisphere. The steep rise in immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America began in the late 1980 s.² A large part of the present day immigrant population were asylum seekers on arrival who have since been granted residence permits and citizenship, and been united with their relatives through the government's family reunion scheme. Over the course of a single generation, Norway was transformed into a multi-ethnic society.

There is no scholarly agreement in the literature on the partisan effects of immigration.³ On one hand, Lubbers et al. (2002), Golder (2003) and Arzheimer (2009) and Semyonov and Raijman (2006) found that immigration exert a positive influence on voter support for the anti-immigration parties. On the other hand, der Brug et al. (2005) suggest that the number of asylum seekers has no impact on voter support for the anti-immigrant parties. Sides and Citrin (2007) and Citrin and Sides (2008) suggest that contextual factors – which includes the size of the immigrant population – have little bearing on anti-immigration attitudes. Furthermore, Crepaz and Damron (2008) find the size of the welfare states bears

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¹ For example, the review by Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) concludes that "Research on immigration attitudes to date has been surprisingly divorced from research on political partisanship and ideology. The relationship between immigration attitudes and political partisanship and ideology should be a central issue moving forward."

² For example, in 2013, Norway granted protection status to 6770 asylum seekers. This amounts to 135 refugees per 100,000 Norwegians. Only Sweden and Malta accepted more refugees relative to their population sizes (Eurostat, 2014).

³ For a comprehensive review of the relevant literature based on field experiments and observational studies, see (Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2013).

a positive relation to acceptance of immigrants, while the percentage foreign-born has no statistically significant impact on welfare chauvinism (cf. [Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010](#): 322).

These cross-national studies face a number of methodological problems. It is hard to say whether immigration affects political attitudes or attitudes influence immigration (reverse causality), and countries differ on so many dimensions that it is practically impossible to find a credible set of explicit controls (omitted variable bias). Cross-national data on immigrant populations vary considerably in quality and relevance.⁴ Sub-national data on the size and composition of immigrant populations tend to have better quality, and cover longer time spans. Many institutional and other factors that vary between countries are invariant at the sub-national level.⁵ Sub-national data has therefore been employed to analyze the political effects of immigration. Most studies usually use cross-section designs,⁶ and the estimated effects are therefore susceptible to selection bias. For example, immigrants may settle in 'friendly areas', and antagonistic natives may respond to immigration by moving out of the neighborhood. It will appear as if immigration causes less resentment, suggesting that the results could be biased in favor of the contact hypothesis.

The current analyses exploit municipal-level register data on the size of the Western and non-Western immigrant populations to Norway, and merge these data with corresponding statistics on voter support for the political parties in local and national elections (1977–2011). I argue that the sub-national variations in these immigrant populations are as good as random (conditional on observables), facilitating an estimation of causal effects on voter preferences. The key finding is that increases in the size of the non-Western immigrant population, induce more support for the anti-immigration, right-wing political party. Nevertheless, the effect is small and only noticeable when the first immigrants arrive; it fades completely once the immigrant population has reached a certain – relatively modest – size. Additional immigration has no electoral effects. I explore whether these voter reactions can be understood as an accountability effect, and whether personal dealings with

immigrants (the contact hypothesis) explains the "dwindling" effect. The analyses therefore offer empirical support for both hypotheses.

The ensuing sections describe the institutional setting, including a brief outline of the election system and immigration policies. I outline the research design and provide descriptive statistics. Next, I present the baseline estimates of immigration, and discuss a large set of robustness tests. Having established the key result, I explore the causal mechanisms. First, I exploit that elections to the municipal and county councils are held concurrently. Only the municipalities have responsibility for immigration and integration policies. I therefore test the accountability hypothesis exploiting differences in voter support for the anti-immigration, right-wing party in the two elections. Second, I use survey data from the Norwegian Election Studies (1977–2011) to demonstrate that non-Western immigration raises concerns for national culture. Consistent with the contact hypothesis, this effect fades out when the immigration has reached a moderate level relative to the native population.

2. The institutional setting

Norway has a three-tier system of government with 429 municipalities at the district level (2011), 19 counties at the regional level and central government at the national level. Norwegian counties and municipalities are responsible for implementing national welfare policies. The large local government sector delivers a number of services including child care, primary and secondary schooling, primary health care and care for the elderly and various infrastructure services. The municipal and county governments are financed by proportional income taxes and block grants, while user charges and property taxes account for a smaller part of the costs. Since the income tax rates are regulated by central government, the local authorities have a little influence on total revenues.

2.1. Election system and voting rights

The election system is based on proportional representation on the local councils and in the national parliament (Storting). Norway has a system of staggered elections. National and local elections are held every fourth year but at an interval of two years between them. People who are eligible to vote are automatically registered in the national population register ('Folkeregisteret'), and they also receive a card in the mail containing information about the local polling place and the date of the election.

Only Norwegian citizens can vote in the national elections. The criteria on which Norwegian citizenship is granted differ between groups. Immigrants whose parents are not Norwegian nationals can apply for citizenship from the age of twelve. Several conditions apply. 1) a valid residence permit for at least one year. 2) certified proof of identity; 3) a clean record (no criminal convictions); 4) resident in for at least seven of the past ten years; and 5) have held residence permits that were each valid for at least one year. New rules in 2005 require applicants to have completed an introductory language course, or have sufficient knowledge of the Norwegian language. Special rules apply for some groups, particularly citizens from the other Nordic countries. Foreign nationals can vote in local elections (municipal and county council elections) after residing legally in the country for at least three years.⁷

In the 2009 national election, 4.6% of the electorate were first or second generation immigrants. In the 2011 local elections, 4.9% of

⁴ For example, [Sides and Citrin \(2007\)](#) employ OECD data on the percentage of foreign-borns in the population. [Lubbers et al. \(2002\)](#) use data on "non-European Union citizens." Similarly, [Golder \(2003\)](#) and [Crepaz and Damron \(2008\)](#) use data on the percentage of the population comprising "foreign citizens" in general. The variety of these data raises questions about country differences in naturalization and acceptance of double citizenship. [van der Brug et al. \(2005\)](#) and [Arzheimer \(2009\)](#) use data on asylum seeker numbers, the search for asylum constituting one of the main channels for people from non-Western countries. Applicant numbers are obviously related to the restrictiveness of immigration policies, and they vary considerably between countries. The indicators are questionable, moreover, first because the relevant immigrant populations may come from particular countries; second because people's opinions of immigration do not hinge on whether the latter have become naturalized or not; and third because the immigrant population may be multi-generational. The quality of the data varies a lot as well. The population registers of Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, and Germany contain highly reliable data on immigration. Many other countries employ on other data sources, such as labor market data and work permits. Their quality is lower, and the data are not necessarily comparable across countries.

⁵ [Hainmueller and Hopkins \(2014\)](#) (c.f. their conclusion 4) urge researchers to address causality by moving away from cross-sectional designs where attitudes are regressed against attitudes, possibly exploiting panel data, conducting natural experiments, or field experiments. For examples of studies using natural experiments, see [Luttmer and Singhal \(2011\)](#), [Hainmueller and Hopkins \(2014\)](#) and [Freier et al. \(2016\)](#).

⁶ For example, such studies have analyzed political effects of immigration based on data on Denmark ([Harmon, 2012](#)) ([Gerdes, 2011](#)), Germany ([Semyonov et al., 2004](#)), ([Weber et al., 2014](#)), the Netherlands ([Dinas and van Spanje, 2011](#)), Norway ([Bay et al., 2007](#)), Sweden ([Dahlberg et al., 2012](#)), Switzerland ([Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014](#)) and the US ([Hopkins, 2010](#)), ([Hero and Preuhs, 2007](#)). [Jesusit et al. \(2009\)](#) present results from a study analyzing cross-regional variations in a number of countries. They find no support for the hypothesis that immigration increases voter support for the extreme right parties.

⁷ Nationals from the other Nordic countries can vote in local elections as soon as they have a permanent residence permit in Norway.

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