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# Competitive threat and temporal change in anti-immigrant sentiment: Insights from a hierarchical age-period-cohort model

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## ABSTRACT

The study focuses on over-time change in anti-immigrant attitudes across European societies and on the role played by cohorts in producing the change in attitudes. We assembled data from four waves of the European Social Surveys for 14 countries between 2002 and 2014. The data analysis is conducted within the framework of a hierarchical age-period-cohort model (HAPC) to estimate the dynamic relations between anti-immigrant sentiment and country's social and economic conditions, while taking into consideration variations across individuals and birth-cohorts. The analysis lends support to expectations derived from the 'competitive threat' theoretical model. The findings show that a higher share of non-European ethnic minorities in the country's population is associated with a higher level of anti-immigrant attitudes. Anti-immigrant sentiment was found to be more pronounced in the 'old immigration countries' than in the 'new immigration countries.' The impact of economic conditions on anti-immigrant sentiment becomes evident through the effect of cohort in the 'new immigration countries': cohorts that entered the labor market when the unemployment rate was high are likely to hold more negative attitudes toward immigrants.

## 1. Introduction

Social scientists have long been concerned with understanding the social mechanisms underlying the emergence of prejudice and discrimination against outgroup populations. Subsequently, several alternative theoretical models have been advanced for explaining the social conditions that lead to the emergence of prejudice and discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities. Among the alternative explanations, the 'competitive threat' or 'group threat' theoretical model (see [Williams, 1947](#); [Blalock, 1967](#); [Blumer, 1958](#); [Olzak, 1992](#)) is perhaps the most dominant. According to the 'group threat' theoretical model, fear of competition resulting from either increased size of an outgroup population or depressed economic conditions or both is likely to prompt hostility, prejudice and discrimination against members of outgroup populations.

The 'competitive threat' model was originally developed in the context of American society to explain white-black race relations ([Williams, 1947](#); [Blalock, 1967](#); [Blumer, 1958](#); [Bobo, 1988](#); [Olzak, 1992](#)). However, in recent decades it was widely applied in the ever-growing body of comparative research of sources of negative attitudes toward immigrants in European countries (see [Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010](#) for a review of the literature on the topic). To date, the overwhelming majority of studies on the topic were conducted within a cross-sectional research design and only a few comparative cross-national studies were carried out within a longitudinal research framework (see [Semyonov et al., 2006](#); [Meuleman et al., 2009](#); [Pichler, 2010](#); [Bohman and Hjerm, 2016](#);

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Polavieja, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. The scarcity of studies of over-time change is not only surprising but also unfortunate because theoretical formulations of the rise in antagonism and prejudice toward outgroup populations were cast in dynamic terms (Semyonov et al., 2006).

In the present paper, we contribute to the literature on anti-immigrant sentiment and interethnic relations not only by focusing on sources of over-time change in attitudes toward immigrants within a cross-national comparative perspective but mainly by examining the role played by cohorts in shaping attitudes and in producing change in attitudes. We argue that cohorts are essential for understanding change in attitudes for two main reasons: first, the composition of a national population changes between two points in time due to cohort replacement and second, cohorts differ not only in their characteristics but also by differential exposure to crucial events that shape values and attitudes (Mannheim, 1952). In other words, cohorts are exposed to crucial events that may ‘scar’ them for life by affecting socioeconomic success, values and attitudes over the life course (e.g. Gangl, 2006; Coenders and Scheepers, 2008; Wilkes and Corrigan-Brown, 2011). By including cohorts in the analysis, the study goes beyond previous comparative studies of change in attitudes not only by adding another dimension to the analysis but also by providing deeper insights and broader understanding of the societal conditions that affect change in attitudes.

To examine the role played by cohorts we apply the hierarchical age-period-cohort model (hereafter HAPC) (e.g. Yang and Land, 2006, 2008) to data obtained from four waves of the European Social Surveys (ESS) during the 2002–2014 period across 14 Western European countries. The HAPC analytical model takes into consideration variations across individuals, birth cohorts and periods (e.g. Reither et al., 2015). We contend that the HAPC analytical framework is more suitable for the study of the dynamic relations between over-time change in the structural sources of competitive threat and anti-immigrant sentiment than the analytical approaches utilized in previous studies on the topic. Therefore, by utilizing the HAPC analytical model we will be in a position to provide a more direct examination of the ‘competitive threat’ theoretical model and to delineate the ways in which change in structural characteristics of society and inter-cohort variations shapes and influences change in attitudes toward outgroup populations.

## 2. Theory and previous research

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

The logic embodied in the ‘competitive threat’ theoretical model (see various versions of the model that were formulated throughout the years by, e.g. Williams (1947), Blumer (1958), Blalock (1967), Bobo and Hutchings (1996), and Olzak (1992)) is rather straightforward and socio-psychological in nature. The central tenet of the model is that intergroup relations are shaped by group identification and by group competition and struggle over rewards and resources. The theory operates under the premise that members of the majority population view the relationships between groups in terms of a zero-sum game. According to the model, members of the majority population consider themselves first in line in access to privileges and resources as compared to members of the minority population. Increased competition over resources and rewards (whether real or symbolic) and especially a rise in fear of competition is likely to prompt hostility, prejudice and discrimination against the minority population. In other words, a rise in hostility and in negative attitudes toward the minority population is understood as a defensive reaction toward emerging threats and challenges to the exclusive superiority of the majority population in access to rewards and resources.

In line with the ‘competitive threat’ theoretical model, researchers took the view that attitudes toward immigrants are driven by both individual-level attributes and contextual characteristics of the social system (e.g. Quillian, 1995; Scheepers et al., 2002; Semyonov et al., 2006; Schlueter et al., 2013). At the individual level, the theory leads us to expect that anti-immigrant sentiments will be more pronounced among members of the majority group who are socially and economically vulnerable. This is so because vulnerable people are more threatened by the presence of an immigrant population. They are more likely to fear competition that is geared up by perceptions that immigrants take away jobs, depress the salaries of local workers and exploit the welfare system. A large number of studies lend firm, uniform and consistent support to the thesis that socioeconomically vulnerable individuals (i.e., unemployed individuals and those with low income and low education) are more likely to express negative and hostile attitudes toward immigrants (e.g. Esses et al., 2001; Scheepers et al., 2002; Rajman et al., 2003; Pichler, 2010; Gorodzeisky, 2011).

Recently, occupations were also considered as a potential source of opposition to immigrants. According to Ortega and Polavieja (2012) and Polavieja (2016), occupational content can bring differential levels of exposure to competition with immigrants and, thus, influences anti-immigrant sentiment. Specifically, these studies revealed that engagement in occupations with lower levels of skill specialization and monitoring costs as well as with prevalence of manual versus communication skills are associated with higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment. From a theoretical point of view, the findings reported by Polavieja (2016) (p. 414) stress the importance of ‘real economic experience’ associated with occupations in shaping attitudes toward immigrants.

At the contextual-ecological level, the ‘competitive threat’ model leads us to expect that negative sentiments toward outgroup populations will be more pronounced in places with large proportions of immigrants and where economic opportunities are scarce. This is so because such places are characterized by intense competition (whether real or perceived) over social and economic resources between in- and out-group populations. Following the pioneering research by Quillian (1995), a large number of studies in European societies have lent support to the expectation that negative attitudes towards members of out-group populations tend to be more pronounced in places with a large proportion of outgroup populations (mostly captured by the share of non-EU population) and in places with depressed economic conditions (mostly captured by Gross National Product per capita or by rate of unemployment)

<sup>1</sup> In addition, there are several country specific studies that examined change in anti-immigrant attitudes over time (e.g. Wilkes and Corrigan-Brown, 2011; Lancee and Pardos-Prado, 2013). The present paper focuses on comparative cross-national analysis.

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