

Immigration and inequality: the role of politics and policies

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ABSTRACT

This commentary examines the relationship between immigration and economic inequality, focusing on the role of politics and policies. The main argument is that although the direct economic effects of immigration on native employment and wages may be minor, immigration can have significant indirect economic ramifications through political channels. We summarize existing evidence and discuss how immigration shapes politics and policies by influencing political discourse, voters, and parties. Notably, the rise of anti-immigrant parties can lead to shifts both in immigration and integration policy, and in other policy areas, such as law and order, social security, and international relations. These shifts have the potential to affect inequality across different segments of society, including between immigrants and citizens and along gender and employment dimensions. However, due to the scarcity of empirical evidence, predictions about the consequences of immigration on inequality across these groups are uncertain and further research is needed.

Key words: immigration; politics; policy

Introduction

This commentary complements the excellent article by [Dustmann et al.](#) on the relationship between immigration and economic inequality, by highlighting the central role of politics and policies in moderating this relationship. We structure the commentary in two parts. In the first part, we selectively summarize existing evidence on how politics and policies respond to immigration. In the second part, we discuss some of the pathways through which the political consequences of immigration might affect inequality. Because of the uncertainty about how these political consequences translate into (in)equality and the scarcity of empirical evidence, the second part is, by necessity, shorter and more exploratory.

We concentrate primarily on European destination countries and pay particular attention to the UK. Although we focus on economic inequality between immigrants and citizens, and across different segments of the society more broadly, we complement this economic perspective with social and political dimensions of inequality.

In the first part, we discuss research on the political reactions to immigration and make the following argument: although most studies document minor direct economic effects of immigration on native employment and wages (for a summary focused on the UK, see [Dustmann et al.](#) in this collection), immigration can have significant indirect or downstream economic effects through ‘political channels’.

In both representative and direct democracies, office-seeking candidates and their parties will respond to shifts in the extent

to which the public perceives immigration as a problem, and they will adapt their policy platforms accordingly. Beyond this passive approach, parties anticipate and actively fuel such debates and strategically position their campaigns and platforms to exploit them. Even if anti-immigrant parties do not accumulate enough votes to win office or directly determine policy, they can force other parties to move policies closer to their party’s ideal point.

The consequences of such policy shifts can go beyond the narrow domains of immigration and immigrant integration. Most parties with robust anti-immigrant platforms in Europe are members of the far-right party family. In addition to their anti-immigrant stance, these parties are united in their emphasis on law and order, welfare chauvinism, and isolationism; see also the publications in this collection’s ‘Trade and globalization’ theme (e.g. [Dorn and Levell](#)). Even if the growth in support for these parties is primarily driven by their anti-immigrant platforms, they may use their leverage to promote and implement policies in these other areas as well—and all of them have the potential to affect inequality not only between immigrants and citizens, but also between other segments of society, for example along gender or employment dimensions.

These downstream effects on inequality are the focus of the second part. We argue that political reactions to immigration likely have more of an impact on inequality than immigration’s direct economic consequences. We sketch how these indirect consequences can affect the distribution of work, wages, and wealth. Predictions about these consequences are, however, highly uncertain. The strength and the sign of the relationship between

Received: May 17, 2023. Revised: September 4, 2023. Accepted: September 5, 2023

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immigration, its political repercussions, and its downstream effects on inequality depend on various moderating factors. Rather than engaging in futile attempts to speculate without evidence, the last part of this commentary seeks to point toward the dark corners where additional theoretical and empirical research most urgently needs to shed its light to illuminate this relationship.

Political reactions to immigration

In this first part, we discuss how immigration can shape attitudes, beliefs, preferences, and votes. We begin by tracing the relationship between immigration—the international movement of people to a destination country—and the salience of immigration as a political issue. [Dustmann et al.](#) in this collection have given an overview of the history of immigration in the UK, which serves as an important reminder that, for many decades, immigration has been a far cry from the heated political issue that it has recently become. However, in lockstep with the increasing number of people moving to and within Europe since the early 1990s, immigration as a political issue has become more salient in society and more important for politics.

The UK's share of immigrants has substantially increased over the past 20 years (see [Dustmann et al.](#)). In particular, the share of people from non-European countries and countries that joined the European Union (EU) in 2004 (and afterward) increased. These groups of immigrants have also been at the centre of public debate.

The relationship between immigration as a demographic phenomenon and its salience in the media, among the public, and in politics is shaped by several factors. First, research shows that short-term spikes in immigrant arrivals influence voters' perception of immigration as a priority policy issue ([Hatton 2021](#)). The media and its coverage of immigration seem to play a significant role in moderating this relationship ([Hatton 2021](#)). The UK, where immigration has received broad coverage ever since the EU enlargement in 2004, is no exception to this ([Allen 2016](#)).¹

Importantly, across Europe, media coverage of immigrants and immigration is largely problem-centred (i.e. negative and conflict-centred; see [Berry et al. 2016](#); [Eberl et al. 2018](#)), and correlates with the extent to which immigration is perceived as an important problem or issue by the public (see, e.g. [Hatton 2021](#), p. 13; [Spirig 2023](#)).

Once immigration becomes a (salient) political issue, it can shape politics and policies by moving either the demand or the supply side. On the demand side, the most important effect of immigration is on how citizens vote. In representative democracies, voters determine which politicians and parties can serve in parliament and office, and can draft and implement immigration policies. In direct democracies, voters can directly enact such policies (e.g. Brexit, or immigration-related referendums in Switzerland). On the supply side, immigration can

incentivize parties to adjust their platform or contribute to the birth of new parties. Shifts on both the demand and supply sides will affect who serves in office and the policies that those who serve may implement.² We begin by discussing how immigration shapes political attitudes and voting behaviour.

To trace the causal impact—and not just mere correlations—of immigration's salience on host country politics is a challenging endeavour, particularly at the macro level ([Steinmayr 2021](#)). Macro-level research designs that seek to identify the effects of immigration on issue salience and voting behaviour typically must limit themselves to exploiting longitudinal variation and resorting to coarse cross-country comparisons, which raise the usual endogeneity concerns. Consequently, most credible studies focus on exploiting more disaggregated, subnational differences in, say, immigrant arrivals and votes. Although advantageous in terms of identification, these subnational studies paint an incomplete picture and risk severely underestimating the overall impact of immigration on politics, for example, by differencing out nationwide increases in support for far-right parties caused by immigration. Hoping they might inspire more design-based research on this critical question, we briefly summarize some of the correlational evidence provided by existing macro-level studies.

[Dennison and Geddes \(2019\)](#) use Eurobarometer data to establish across a range of countries that the salience of immigration strongly correlates with support for anti-immigration parties. In the UK, between 2005 and 2018, the correlation between the macro-level salience of immigration and the share of people who indicated that they would vote for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) was 0.655 ([Dennison and Geddes 2019](#), p. 114). In line with the predictions discussed above, correlational studies also show that parties' attention to immigration issues dynamically responds to demographic changes. In lockstep with increases in the foreign-born population, party manifestos from across the political spectrum dedicate more space to immigration ([Green-Pedersen and Otjes 2019](#)). A special role is played by populist radical-right parties, which sometimes become immigration 'issue entrepreneurs' ([Hobolt and de Vries 2015](#)), meaning that they are the first to politicize the issue when immigration increases. In multiple countries, political competition essentially occurred along a unidimensional, economic left (more redistribution)–right (less redistribution) policy space before the entry of far-right parties. It is the legacy of the most successful issue entrepreneur parties that they added a second, immigration-related dimension to this space (see, e.g. [Kitschelt 1995](#); [Mudde 2007](#); [Kriesi et al. 2008](#); [Hooghe and Marks 2009](#)). The macro-level—national- or regional-level exposure to immigration, often indirectly 'experienced' via media reports—might also interact with the micro-level—more immediate, local exposure—in relevant ways. One example comes from [Hopkins \(2010\)](#), who provides evidence that the portrayal of immigrants in the media shapes immigration attitudes and structures native citizens' encounters with immigrants. In particular, he suggests that 'at times when rhetoric related to immigrants is highly salient nationally, those witnessing influxes of immigrants locally will find it easier to draw political conclusions from their experiences' ([Hopkins 2010](#), p. 44).

¹ However, the relationship between the (relative) size of different origin groups and the media attention they receive is not deterministic (see, e.g. [Eberl et al. 2018](#)). For example, in Sweden, media coverage and issue salience of refugees exceed reporting on labour migrants. With the number of asylum seekers and refugees arriving at (and being resettled to) British shores considerably lower than in similar-sized European countries on the continent, this issue has received relatively little attention until recently. In contrast, the EU enlargement, and the intra-European labour immigration it spurred, has received outsized attention in the UK ([Grande et al. 2019](#)). These differences in origin groups, and the push factors that guide their emigration decisions, might also explain why economic frames are more prevalent in the UK's media coverage of immigration, compared with continental European countries, where cultural concerns are more prevalent (see, e.g. [Eberl et al. 2018](#)).

² These shifts can also affect other branches of government including the judiciary (see [Spirig 2023](#)).

As mentioned above, the most credible empirical research on the political consequences of immigration leverages identification from subnational comparisons. Still, researchers must overcome several inferential challenges to identify how citizens' local exposure to, and encounters with, immigrants shape their beliefs and behaviour. The most severe concerns typically revolve around the endogeneity of immigrants' residential choices, which are shaped by some of the same factors that independently fuel individuals' anti-immigrant party support: (pre-existing) exclusionary attitudes and labour market conditions. Therefore, in contexts where immigrants can self-select into host communities, causal claims about the micro-level effect of immigration are often fraught (see, e.g. [Dustmann and Preston 2001](#)) because we cannot disentangle unobserved differences in local attitudes and from the causal effect of immigration on votes. Consequently, well-identified studies often circumnavigate self-selection concerns by focusing on asylum seekers and refugees, who are exogenously assigned to host localities in many European countries.

Empirical work that successfully tackles these inferential challenges provides robust, but far from uniform, evidence that exposure to immigration shapes attitudes and votes. Our brief and selective survey of design-based studies reveals that immigration directly or indirectly benefits anti-immigration parties, yet this relationship is not deterministic and is subject to various scope conditions.

Relying on difference-in-differences designs or variants of shift-share instruments and, collectively, marshalling evidence from Italian, German, Spanish, Austrian, Danish, and Swiss municipalities, [Barone et al. \(2016\)](#), [Otto and Steinhardt \(2014\)](#), [Mendez and Cutillas \(2014\)](#), [Halla et al. \(2017\)](#), [Harmon \(2018\)](#), and [Brunner and Kuhn \(2018\)](#) all find that a larger share of immigrants benefits anti-immigrant, right-wing parties.³ [Halla et al. \(2017\)](#) argue that the arrival of low- and medium-skilled, but not high-skilled, immigrants is responsible for this effect in Austria.

Next, we turn to the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees. Most studies also find positive effects on support for anti-immigrant parties; see, for example, [Dustmann et al. \(2019\)](#) for Denmark and [Dinas et al. \(2019\)](#) for Greece. [Hangartner et al. \(2019\)](#) use a tailored survey to study the effects of refugee arrivals beyond voting behaviour. They document that the transitory presence of refugees can lead to lasting increases in antirefugee and anti-Muslim sentiment, strengthen preferences for exclusionary policies, and trigger political engagement to affect such policies. However, null effects have been found as well; see, for example, [Schaub et al. \(2021\)](#) for Eastern Germany and [Jensen \(2020\)](#) for Denmark.

[Steinmayr \(2021\)](#) focuses on Upper Austria, where the experience of hosting refugees reduced support for the main right-wing parties, and points toward a key moderating factor for the relationship between immigration and voting behaviour: the context in and extent to which contact between citizens and immigrants take place. Ever since the groundbreaking study by [Allport \(1954\)](#) on the 'contact hypothesis', researchers have sought to identify the conditions under which contact between a majority in-group and minority out-group can reduce exclusionary attitudes and behaviour. However, mere exposure does not qualify as meaningful contact. Citizens' exposure to immigrants—for example, when asylum seekers are passing through neighbourhoods, as was the case on the Greek Aegean islands or in the

Austrian–German border municipalities along the 'Balkan route' ([Dinas et al. 2019](#); [Hangartner et al. 2019](#); [Steinmayr 2021](#))—seems to strengthen rather than reduce exclusionary attitudes. Other factors hampering the potential for meaningful contact are when locals' negative pre-existing dispositions make them unlikely to engage with immigrants in the first place (see, e.g. [Dustmann et al. 2019](#)) or when institutional provisions or large and remote refugee hosting centres make meaningful contact challenging (see [Hangartner et al. 2021](#)).

Beyond its effects on anti-immigrant attitudes and votes, immigration might also have an impact on political attitudes and preferences along other dimensions. A growing body of literature explores the link between ethnic diversity and citizens' willingness to contribute to public goods. Existing research suggests that immigration reduces citizens' preferences for welfare spending ([Dahlberg et al. 2012](#)) and support for redistribution more generally (see, e.g. [Alesina et al. 2021](#)). Furthermore, immigration might also reduce citizens' trust in political institutions ([McLaren 2012, 2015](#)) and social trust in each other (for an overview, see [Dinesen et al. 2020](#)). In sum, growing evidence suggests that immigration can weaken redistributive preferences and diminish social and political trust. Nevertheless, we believe that the more immediate impact of immigration on inequality originates from its power to reshape electoral politics, to which we turn next.⁴

Immigration, salience, and inequality

Anti-immigrant parties (e.g. UKIP or the French National Front/National Rally) and candidates (e.g. President Trump) tend to favour anti-immigrant policies. When they garner electoral support, they can change immigration and integration policies in a restrictive direction. These policies influence almost all aspects of immigrants' lives: they regulate who can enter the country, who can access the labour market, who is covered by welfare benefits and health insurance, and who obtains the right to vote, permanent residency and, finally, citizenship in the host country. A burgeoning literature has begun to document how restrictive integration policies hurt immigrants' economic, social, and psychological well-being, and perpetuate and amplify inequality between them and native citizens. These policies are particularly relevant for asylum seekers and refugees who tend to be integrated into the labour market at lower rates than citizens (and labour immigrants), earn lower wages, and often struggle with mental health ([Brell et al. 2020](#); [Fasani et al. 2022](#)).

We only have space to highlight a few studies here. Regarding economic consequences, research shows that even temporary employment bans have long-term repercussions for refugees' economic integration ([Marbach et al. 2018](#); [Fasani et al. 2021](#)), that tying work visas to employers can persistently reduce earnings—see [Wang \(2021\)](#) for a somewhat similar law and see also [Naidu et al. \(2016\)](#)—and that host-country citizenship can improve immigrant earnings ([Gathmann and Keller 2018](#); [Hainmueller et al. 2019](#)). Regarding psychological well-being, studies document how (episodes of) uncertainty about legal status have a detrimental impact on the mental health of immigrants ([Page et al. 2020](#)) and their offspring ([Hainmueller et al. 2017](#)), as do lengthy asylum processes ([Hainmueller et al. 2016](#); [Hvidtfeldt et al. 2018](#)).

⁴ We note, however, that if increasing ethnic diversity is not accompanied by effective integration policies, the politicization of immigration might indeed create the kind of pressures on European welfare states that some scholars fear ([Putnam 2007](#)). The consequences for redistribution have the potential to be severe, particularly in the longer term, and need further study, ideally with research designs that resolve some of the endogeneity concerns plaguing some of the existing research.

³ Many of these studies on the effects of labour and asylum-related immigration on voting behaviour discussed here are also contained in a recent meta-analysis by [Cools et al. \(2021\)](#).

Regarding social and political integration into the host society, several studies document how access to voting and citizenship rights can catalyse immigrants' political incorporation and social integration (Hainmueller et al. 2017; Ferwerda et al. 2020). Consequentially, withholding voting and citizenship rights prolongs political inequality between immigrants and citizens.

The inequality consequences of anti-immigrant parties and candidates gaining support are not limited to immigration and integration policies. Anti-immigrant parties, despite their label, are seldom single-issue parties (Mudde 1999). Instead, they combine their anti-immigrant platform with a set of secondary positions on (Euro-sceptic) protectionism and isolationism (see, e.g. Arzheimer 2018; Walter 2021a), welfare chauvinism (see, e.g. Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016), and law-and-order policies (some of these policies are targeted toward immigrants, others apply to all citizens; see Mudde 2007; Dinas and van Spanje 2011; Biard 2019). Because of their most direct effects on economic inequality, we focus on welfare chauvinism and isolationism.

Across Europe, anti-immigrant parties are far from unified in their view of the size and role of the welfare state. Some of the largest anti-immigrant parties belonging to the populist right (for example, the Swiss People's Party and the Freedom Party of Austria) were instrumental in promoting welfare state retrenchment in the 1990s (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Afonso 2015). However, contemporary radical right parties often dedicate little space to the welfare state in their manifestos (Enggist and Pinggera 2022). Furthermore, Röth et al. (2018) argue that the economically diverse voter base of radical right parties makes them less likely to reduce welfare spending when in government, compared with traditional right-wing parties. Furthermore, some radical right parties have even defended the welfare state in contexts where mainstream parties have decreased social protection (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016).

Although anti-immigrant parties might disagree about the role and size of the welfare state, they agree on who should benefit from it. To differentially benefit (native) citizens, anti-immigrant parties generally favour redistributive programmes such as pensions, unemployment, and other welfare benefits that can be selectively targeted (Abts et al. 2021; Enggist and Pinggera 2022). The idea that the welfare state should primarily 'support our own' finds higher popular support when refugee arrivals are increasing (Marx and Naumann 2018). Beyond excluding foreigners, anti-immigrant parties also seek to remodel the welfare state to align with their views of a traditional family and the role of women (see Akkerman 2015), for example by cutting support for extrafamilial childcare (see Ennser-Jedenastik 2022). Such, and similar, welfare cuts target those—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—considered 'undeserving', that is, immigrants, but also labour market outsiders or women (see, e.g. Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2022).⁵ If implemented, such differential programmes would tend to reduce benefits for already disadvantaged and marginalized groups, and potentially increase economic inequality between immigrants and citizens, and between labour market insiders and outsiders, and perpetuate gender inequality.

Even more consequential for inequality are isolationist and protectionist policies, often advanced by anti-immigrant parties; see the discussion in the article by Dorn and Levell on trade and inequality in this collection. A recent example of a populist

and staunchly anti-immigrant politician who pursued isolationist policies is US President Donald Trump. During Trump's presidency, the USA withdrew from various international commitments, ranging from climate change agreements to international security collaboration (see Cooley and Nexon 2020).

In addition to these first-order consequences of increasing support for anti-immigrant parties, second-order effects must also be considered. There are at least two ways anti-immigrant parties can affect policymaking, even when they are not in government. Extended media coverage of anti-immigrant parties and platforms helps them with agenda-setting. Such media coverage increases the salience and politicization of the covered issues (see, e.g. Abou-Chadi and Helbling 2018, Hobolt et al. 2022) and contributes to a legitimization and mainstreaming of views that were previously considered 'radical' (see, e.g. Bursztyn et al. 2017; Bischof and Wagner 2019).

Anti-immigrant parties that are not represented in governments can affect policymaking through another channel, which is to exert pressure on more established parties. Research suggests that established parties often react to the success of anti-immigrant parties by moving their policy positions closer toward the position of the anti-immigrant party (see, e.g. Golder 2016; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Spoon and Klüver 2020). This not only happens regarding immigration and integration policy (van Spanje 2010; Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020);⁶ there is also evidence that established parties adopt more authoritarian (see van Spanje 2010) and welfare chauvinist (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016) policies.

The Brexit referendum is an example of a combination of first- and second-order effects. The outcome was arguably affected by the salience of immigration—immigration was one of the most salient and prominently discussed political issues during the 2016 EU referendum campaign (see, e.g. Moore and Ramsay 2017) and one of the main reported reasons for voting Leave (see Carl 2018). However, the outcome of the Brexit vote was also indirectly affected by immigration because UKIP's success exerted pressure on the Prime Minister, David Cameron, to promise an EU referendum eventually (see Bale 2018). Although assessing the full impact of Brexit on inequality remains challenging, economic and inequality implications seem inevitable (see also Dorn and Levell in this collection). According to Walter (2021a), antiglobalization policies often create international responses in terms of retaliations against countries implementing protectionist policies (Irwin 2017) and an increase in demands from other governments to renegotiate existing agreements (Walter 2021b). Although some facets of globalization likely increase inequality, many of the implications of isolationist policies, such as those most likely following Brexit, remain unclear.

One important thing to note is that the relationship between immigration, immigration salience, and politics is far from deterministic. As highlighted throughout the commentary, the relationship depends on various factors, including the political system (Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016; Rinaldi and Bekker 2021) and the immigration and integration policies set by governments.

⁵ The social policies that radical right parties are more positive about instead benefit those they deem 'deserving': the elderly and labour market insiders (Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2022).

⁶ Even before the 2010s, when anti-immigrant parties were electorally not as successful in most countries (Austria, Switzerland, and France, to some extent, are exceptions), they were successful at 'nudging mainstream parties to adopt more restrictionist immigration policies', according to Cornelius and Rosenblum (2005, p. 104).

Conclusion

This commentary highlights that there are many ways in which politics and policy mediate and moderate how immigration affects inequality. We discuss how immigration and immigration's salience are connected, and how these have led, in some contexts, to successes for anti-immigrant parties and for anti-immigrant, welfare chauvinist, and isolationist policy platforms. We have argued that the 'political channel' through which immigration affects economic growth and inequality has the potential to be much larger than direct economic channels.

Although there is a growing body of work focused on the individual-level political consequences of exposure to immigration, we believe that further theoretical and empirical research is key to assess the full scale of the politics-driven economic consequences of immigration. For this, it is necessary to go beyond a mechanical understanding of the immigration-voter response relationship and to shed light on the factors that explain when immigration is made salient, and how its coverage by the media affects voters and parties. Our commentary highlights that more research is desperately needed on the implications of anti-immigrant parties and the policies they advance for inequality. In particular, we still know relatively little about the ways in which the policies propelled by the success of anti-immigrant parties shape inequality between immigrants and citizens, between labour market insiders and outsiders, and across genders.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Lucinda Platt for valuable comments on an earlier version of this commentary.

FUNDING

This commentary was written for the IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities, funded by the Nuffield Foundation (grant reference WEL/43603). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

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