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Article

Immigration and the Rise of Far-right Parties in Europe

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INTRODUCTION

The immigrant share of the population has risen substantially in most European countries since the beginning of the century. Figure 1 shows this rise for selected countries between 2002 and 2014. Not only is the immigrant share of the population high in absolute terms, exceeding 10% in a majority of the countries in the figure, in many cases it has increased quite rapidly, with growth exceeding 50% for several countries during this period. While the rapid increase in the immigrant share of the population has posed major policy challenges for European countries, involving assimilation, education, and employment, inter alia; for many observers the more fundamental challenge has been the coincident rise of far-right-wing political parties.

Table 1 presents vote shares for far-right political parties in national parliamentary elections for the period 2002-2017. Many parties secured substantial vote shares (>15%), e.g. FPÖ in Austria, DF in Denmark, Finns Party in Finland, FRP in Norway, Jobbik in Hungary, for various reasons; e.g., Ivarsflaten (2006), Rydgren (2008), and Mudde (2013) investigate the impact of immigration on electoral outcomes of lightright parties, whereas, Sakeris and Vasilakis (2016), Vertier and Steinhardt (2014) find that local ethnic diversity has the opposite effect on far-right voting. In less urban municipalities with high pre-policy immigrant share of the population and reside in one of the 14 countries with at least one significant far-right party, and for which the OECD has fostered support for far-right parties. The remainder of this article addresses these issues.

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Individual level variables are obtained from the ESS survey responses and include variables indicating information on a variety of demographic, economic and cultural characteristics that may influence their voting decision. Demographic variables include measures of education attainment and employment status. Cultural variables include an individual’s religious affiliation, the immigration status of the individual and their parents, and a measure of religiosity.

Our primary independent variable is the natural log of the immigrant population share, which is taken from OECD (2017). Our focus on the immigrant population share (IPS) is motivated by the salience hypothesis (Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967), which holds that an increase in the presence of another racial or ethnic group tends to increase an individual’s awareness of their own ethnic identity, a process that would potentially give rise to native political support for parties with an ethno-nationalist ideology. Given that our dependent variable measures an individual’s decision to vote for a far-right party in the last national elections, we match IPS to individual respondents using the year of last national election rather than the survey year.

Given the binary nature of the outcome variable (i.e. decision to vote for far-right parties), we estimate a probit regression. Our hypothesis in this respect is that the immigrant share of total population of a country increases the probability of voting for a far-right political party, which is given by

\[ \Pr(\text{Rightvote}) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \log(\text{IPS}_i) + \alpha' \mathbf{X}_i + \gamma_1 + \gamma_2). \]

where Rightvote, is a binary dependent variable representing individual i’s decision to vote for a far-right party; IPS is the immigrant share of total population in country c at time t; \( \mathbf{X} \) is a vector of individual level characteristics as presented in table 3; \( \gamma_1 \) and \( \gamma_2 \) are country and year dummies, which are included to account for unobserved country and period characteristics; and \( \Phi \) is the standard normal distribution’s cdf. For ease of interpretation, we report the adjusted predictions at means (APMs) of far-right voting for different values of immigrant share (IPS). INDEPENDENT CHARACTERISTICS, IMMIGRANT POPULATION SHARE AND FAR-RIGHT VOTING

Figure 2 presents the adjusted predictions at means (APMs) for the relationship between immigrant population share (IPS) and far-right voting (FRV) from our baseline specification. We find a strong positive relationship between the immigrant population share and the propensity of individuals to vote for a far-right party. While Figure 2 presents the average relationship between immigrant share and far-right voting, it’s quite possible that this relationship differs systematically across individuals with different characteristics. To explore this possibility, we augment our baseline regression with terms by interacting the IPS with a variety of individual characteristics including educational attainment, employment status, urban location and religiosity.

Our choice of characteristics to examine is motivated by prior theoretical work on ethnic conflict. (see Quillan 1995). Our interest in respondents’ education and employment derive from group threat theory, which suggests the response to immigration is likely to be more hostile among individuals who perceive themselves as competing with immigrants for jobs or public resources. More educated respondents tend to exhibit lower levels of ethnocentrism, place greater value on cultural diversity and tend to be more optimistic about the economic impact of immigration (Hainmueller and Hobson 2010). Similarly, unemployed individuals may find competition from immigrants in the labor market as the reason for their unemployment (O’Rourke and Sinnott 2006). Allport’s (1954) contact theory suggests that increased contact with immigrants should reduce anti-immigration or xenophobic sentiments. A broad reading of this theory suggests that individuals living in urban areas, with greater exposure to cultural and ethnic diversity, may be less threatened by rising immigration than their rural counterparts. Finally, our investigation of religiosity is motivated by cultural theories of ethnic conflict.

Figure 3 shows the relationships between the immigrant share of the population and far-right voting for various population subgroups. Figure 3a, for example, shows that less educated and highly educated respondents show distinct relationships between IPS and far-right voting. The less educated are defined as individuals with 12 or less years of education. Not only are the poorly educated more likely to vote for a far-right party for any level of immigration, but their voting behavior is also more sensitive to a rise in immigration, as seen by the steeper slope of the curve.

Similarly, as seen in Figures 3b and 3c, we find far-right voting is also more sensitive to changes in the immigrant population share among the unemployed and the rural population than among their employed and urban counterparts. These results are broadly in line with the predictions of group threat and contact theories. Interestingly, in Figure 3d, we find that far-right voting is higher among non-religious individuals, but it is more sensitive to changes in IPS among the
relational characteristics, it has the familiar positive slope. These results suggest that national culture plays an important role in mediating the relationship between immigration and support for far-right political parties. Overall, voters in more individualist societies appear less likely to respond to immigration by embracing an ethno-nationalist ideology.

CONCLUSION

The rapid rate of European immigration has breathed life into far-right political movements which, if they continue to gain power, may come to pose fundamental challenges to Europe’s governing institutions and to its continued development as a modern, post-ethnic society. Broadly speaking, the potential for immigration to alter the political equilibrium within European countries suggests that immigration policy should not be considered in a vacuum.

More narrowly, the analysis presented here has two implications for European immigration policy. First, the current commitment to relatively free population movements across most European countries may not constitute an equilibrium policy. Continued rapid immigration may foster additional support for far-right parties and the ethno-nationalist identities that support them. And, of course, if political support for far-right parties translates into actual political power, as it has in Hungary, for example, it might have significant implications not only for European immigration policies, but also for the stability of trans-European institutions that support the current liberal order. The willingness of left and center-right parties to consider marginal adjustments to European immigration policies may be necessary to reduce support for political parties that would institute far more dramatic changes to European policies and institutions.

Second, the analysis suggests that the relationship between immigration and far-right voting differs significantly across well-defined population subgroups and countries with different macroeconomic conditions and national cultures. This information may be of use when considering the appropriate criteria for allocating refugees across European societies (e.g., European Commission 2015).

REFERENCES

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