Immigration rates, political parties, and motivated reasoning

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Perceptions and performance voting

• Voters hold perceptions about social and economic conditions and how these have changed
• Economy
  • Economic perceptions: Changes in economic conditions
  • Economic voting: Individuals reward/punish governments based on these perceptions
• Other fields?
  • Foreign policy? Education? Health care?
  • Our concern: Immigration
Perceptions as political battlegrounds

• Economy
  • Parties argue about economic situation and record
    • Interpretation of situation
    • Assignment of credit and blame

• Immigration
  • Arguments about immigration
    • Numbers of immigrants – Migration Watch vs Migration Matters
    • Extent of integration
  • But: less of a valence issue
    • Is more immigration good?
    • How much should immigrants integrate?
What motivates misperceptions?

• Motivated reasoning as mechanism
  • Information processing
    • Pay greater attention to immigration news
    • Place greater credence in ‘negative’ statements
    • Downplay ‘positive’ information

• Alternative: Heuristically derived responses

• Directional goals:
  • Economy: Partisanship/government support (Evans)
  • Climate change: Values and identity (Kahan)

• Immigration:
  • Values and identity – positive affect towards diversity
  • Partisanship – party position of party supported
Contextual differences

• Strength of motivated reasoning and heuristic response may depend on contextual factors

• Values/identity and party system
  • Average party position
  • Party polarization
Measuring immigration perceptions

• European Social Survey Round 1
  • ‘Out of every 100 people living in your country, how many do you think were born outside the country?’
    • Innumeracy: Herda (2010)
    • Predictor of immigration attitudes
  • Who are immigrants (Schneider: non-Western)

• European Election Study 2009
  • ‘Over the last 12 months, has immigration in your country increased a lot, increased a little, stayed the same, decreased a little or decreased a lot?’
  • First or second derivative?
Predictors and endogeneity

• Values: Should immigrants assimilate?
• Partisanship: Position of party identified with (expert survey → also avg party position + polarization)
• Controls based on Herda (2010)
  • Ideology, democratic satisfaction, attitudes towards law/order, economic perceptions, EU opinion, political knowledge, socio-demographics
• Multi-level model, n=13,622 (7,174) in 20 countries
Results

• Attitude towards assimilation
  • People who want immigrants to assimilate also think that immigration rates are higher
  • Min-Max change
    ➔.32 increase on a 1-5 scale or 1/3 standard deviation

• Party position
  • People who support more anti-immigration parties also think immigration rates are higher
  • Min-max change
    ➔.20 increase on a 1/5 scale or 1/5 standard deviation
Results

Effect of immigration attitudes conditional on mean party position

Source: Based on Model 2, Table 1. The rug plot indicate the actual average party positions in the sample.
Results

Source: Based on Model 2, Table 1. The rug plot indicates the actual distribution of standard deviations in party positions in the sample.
Summary

• Values and partisanship are associated with perceptions of immigration rates
  • ESS: Values and partisanship associated with perceptions of immigration numbers as well
• Contextual factors (party competition) may matter
• Implications for public discourse and accountability
• Empirical challenges
  • Question format
  • Reverse causality: survey experiment