

# When do most voters support increasing immigration? Disentangling (parochial) altruistic motivations from self-interest and prejudice

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## Background

Widespread opposition to immigration among even educated and racially egalitarian voters is hard to explain using existing frameworks that attribute these sentiments to self-interest or prejudice. To address this puzzle, I develop a formal theory of parochial altruism stipulating that voters are often willing to help others at a personal cost, but they want to help their compatriots first. As a result, conditional on at least weak bias toward their compatriots, altruistic voters should be expected to oppose globally efficient policies that pose a conflict between greater national and global good. Given widespread perceptions about immigration's negative national impacts, the theory implies that voters tend to favor harsh restrictions on immigration when they perceive such restrictions as necessary to secure the well-being of their compatriots.

I thus hypothesize that, independent of their self-interest and various non-economic concerns, people oppose or support increasing immigration when they believe it hurts or helps their compatriots materially. In addition, I consider two prominent alternative accounts linking voters' motivations and policy preferences—pure self-interest and unconditional ethnoracial prejudice. To test the parochial altruism hypothesis against existing theories, I then aim to conduct a population-based conjoint survey experiment in the UK and other advanced democracies. In doing so, I estimate the effect of perceived national interest—as opposed to self-interest and other competing concerns—on policy choice with regard to immigration. The proposed survey experiment is part of a larger population-based UK study related to the project on parochial altruism and migration.

# Hypotheses

Building on recent advances in economics and psychology, numerous behavioral and attitudinal outcomes in political science are increasingly seen as a function of altruistic preferences. Most prominently, the genuine concern for the well-being of others may motivate political participation (Dawes et al., 2011) and support for redistribution among the rich (Fong, 2001). Nonetheless, altruism is often “parochial” (Bernhard et al., 2006)—that is, people are more willing to sacrifice for some more than others based on their group membership. Accordingly, there can be at least three distinct ultimate motives for cooperation or conflict, the last two of which are often confused in the literature: (egoistic) self-regarding, (parochial) ingroup-regarding, and (universal) human-regarding which respectively give rise to self-interest, group interest, and global interest (Schwartz-Shea and Simmons, 1991). While these motivations and their distinctiveness have been widely examined in a lab setting using multilevel social dilemma games (Dreu et al., 2014), they must be even more relevant in real-world politics.

To capture this dynamic, I propose a simple decision model of parochial altruism in which more or less “altruistic” and “group-biased” individuals choose between various policy and political participation alternatives.<sup>1</sup> The model thus acknowledges that, self-interest aside, people have mixed prosocial motivations that may be in conflict with each other. Consequently, altruistic actors with sufficiently greater ingroup weights may rationally decide to harm others when there is a tradeoff between group and global interests, even in the absence of intrinsic negative weights (e.g, “outgroup hate”) in their utility function. While the literature has traditionally examined a potential conflict between selfish and social interests, many problems in politics involve a choice of helping some groups at the expense of general social welfare and self-interest (and sometimes harming other groups). Consequently, it may be hard to sustain cooperation and avoid conflict even in a world of prosocial individuals.

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<sup>1</sup>More formally, let  $k$  be some political alternative that differentially affect total ( $H$ ), group ( $G$ ), and individual ( $S$ ) payoffs relative to the status quo. The utility function  $U_{ijk}$  of agent  $i$  in group  $j$  for  $k$  can then be presented as follows:  $U_{ijk}(S_{ik}, G_{jk}, H_k, \alpha_i, \beta_i) = \alpha_i S_{ik} + \beta_i G_{jk} + (1 - \alpha_i - \beta_i) H_k$ , where  $0 < \alpha_i, \beta_i < 1, \alpha_i + \beta_i < 1$ . Here  $\alpha_i$  and  $\beta_i$  are the relative weights of agent  $i$  for valuing the (relative change in) well-being of herself and her group over the global welfare in general.

Although I do not model this explicitly, in advanced democracies today parochial altruism must be especially present on the national level, since citizenship—as opposed to other ascribed identities—is one of the only circumstances of birth for which discrimination is, albeit variably, legal and socially encouraged (Brubaker, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

The contentious debate over immigration provides a quintessential example of how ambiguous the perceptions of “social good” can be in (inter)national politics. On the one hand, harsh immigration restrictions are inefficient and they obviously harm potential immigrants (e.g., Pritchett, 2006). On the other hand, people may feel especially compassionate toward fellow citizens—who are often perceived to be harmed by immigration—and thus resist international mobility despite global or even their personal interests.<sup>3</sup>

Although parochial altruism likely has various (relatively immutable) genetic and environmental determinants (Penner et al., 2005), its effects may still be dependent on available beliefs. My framework thus also implies that, on the aggregate level, most voters can be in principle supportive of increasing immigration or any other policy as long as it is believed to be helping others, and especially their compatriots. Consequently, in the current study I will explore the following empirical implications of the parochial altruism theory<sup>4</sup>:

**Hypothesis (1: Altruism)** *Independent of personal consequences, the more positive (negative) beliefs about policy’s social consequences, the more supportive (opposed) voters are of a policy.*

**Hypothesis (2: Parochial altruism)** *Independent of personal consequences, the beliefs about policy’s group consequences are more important than global impacts for policy support.*

**Hypothesis (3: National parochial altruism)** *Independent of personal and global consequences, the beliefs about policy’s national consequences are more important than other group impacts for policy support.*

<sup>2</sup>At the same time, strong norms against ethnic parochialism in developed countries may significantly constrain the expression of these previously widespread motivations (Tankard and Paluck, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>While this logic is more apparent regarding the distributive consequences of economic competition between groups, it should similarly apply to non-material factors of group well-being related to differences in values.

<sup>4</sup>The first hypothesis naturally follows from the assumption that  $G_j$  (group payoff) is additively separable from  $S_i$  (personal payoff) and that  $\alpha_i$  (personal payoff weights)  $< 1$ . The second hypothesis follows from the assumption that  $H$  (global payoff) is additively separable from  $G_j$  (group payoff) and that  $0 < \beta_i$  (group payoff weights)  $< 1 - \alpha_i - \beta_i$ . Independent from the model, the third conjecture is based on the literature demonstrating the salience of national citizenship in modern democracies (e.g., Brubaker, 2015). Note that “social consequences” include any non-personal (group or global) interests.

## Alternative explanations

Of course, there is a large literature in social science suggesting that people's concerns about the well-being of their nation may be a significant factor in determining their immigration preferences. Most prominently, as some scholars rightly point out, people may decide to advance their perceived social interests as a heuristic or a proxy for their self-interest without being at all altruistic (Kramer, 1983; Kiewiet and Lewis-Beck, 2011; Weeden and Kurzban, 2017). Accordingly, numerous studies have argued for a purely selfish account of the opposition to immigration (for overview, see Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). While my account similarly assumes that self-interest can be the most influential motivation, it also specifies that it does not have to explain the most variation in policy preferences.

Furthermore, it is common to attribute anti-immigration attitudes to unconditional ethnoracial prejudice related to ethnocentrism (e.g., Kinder and Kam, 2010) or negative stereotypes (e.g., Burns and Gimpel, 2000). According to these or related accounts, people form policy preferences based on their intrinsic motivation for derogation of ethnic outgroups *regardless* of perceived policy consequences. While my account is not incompatible with the existence of prejudice, H1-H3 imply that ethnic biases observed in other studies (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014) are to a significant extent *conditional* on perceived policy consequences.

Overall, contrary to these existing approaches, I argue that people weigh their national interest against the other social and personal interests, as well as non-economic considerations. This implies that opposition to immigration does not have to be rooted in just selfish concerns or unconditional derogation of foreigners. Instead, given widespread beliefs about its negative national impacts, voters may resist immigration because they care about others *and* favor their compatriots. Consequently, I specify the following alternative hypotheses:

**Hypothesis (4A: Pure self-interest)** *Independent of personal consequences, beliefs about policy's social impacts are not related to how much supportive (opposed) voters are of a policy.*

**Hypothesis (5A: Unconditional ethnic prejudice)** *Independent of any consequences, the lower (greater) number or ethnic difference of immigration, the more supportive (opposed) voters are of a policy.*

## Experimental design

To test my argument, I propose to explicitly manipulate the beliefs about policy effects on one’s interests using a conjoint experiment in which respondents choose between alternative policy pairs with specified tradeoffs. Put differently, I aim to estimate the elasticity of immigration preferences to various personal and social interest effect perceptions. In doing so, I employ an established multidimensional choice experiment technique (Hainmueller et al., 2014), and then apply it to immigration *policy* preferences as opposed to *individual admission* preferences explored in earlier research (e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015).

Specifically, I ask respondents to choose from a sufficient number (5) of hypothetical policy vignette pairs that would have heterogeneous implications for the number of immigrants from different regions, as well as one’s (economic) self-, local, national, and human interest of various magnitude. For instance, would people be more supportive of an immigration policy if, as explicitly stated, it marginally increased their own economic well-being as opposed to a similar proposal that might also substantially undermine national economy?<sup>5</sup>

While the first (main) outcome question optimally forces respondents to choose one of the policies, the second (auxiliary) question asks respondents to rate each policy on a 7-point scale (for rationale, see Hainmueller et al., 2015). Given that all the policy consequences are randomized simultaneously and their effects are measured on the same scale, such design allows examining the relative importance of various (potentially correlated) motivations that underlie immigration preferences (see Figure 1). Since the data is on the individual level, it is also possible to assess whether various subgroups of voters respond differently to specific policy consequences or combinations thereof.

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<sup>5</sup>The vignette for the UK study: “Immigration control policies have a significant but different impact on the well-being of each particular individual, their community and sometimes even the world as a whole (including the effects on prices, jobs, wages, and taxes). Now, suppose Britain is holding a popular vote about two competing policy proposals concerning the regulation of immigration from different regions. In each case, suppose that the experts estimate with a good degree of precision that the policy choice will affect some overall measure of economic well-being over the next decade (but has no other effects that matter). Please examine each table carefully before answering the questions that follow.”

Overall, the proposed design has the following attributes ( $4 \times 5 \times 5 \times 5 \times 5 \times 5$ )<sup>6</sup>:

1. *Number of immigrants*: allow almost none, allow some, allow many, allow almost all
2. *Sending region*: Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, Middle East, Africa
3. *Your household wealth*: decreased by 5-6%, decreased by 1-2%, no change, increased by 1-2%, increased by 5-6%
4. *Your city or town's wealth*: decreased by 5-6%, decreased by 1-2%, no change, increased by 1-2%, increased by 5-6%
5. *British wealth*: decreased by 5-6%, decreased by 1-2%, no change, increased by 1-2%, increased by 5-6%
6. *Global wealth*: decreased by 5-6%, decreased by 1-2%, no change, increased by 1-2%, increased by 5-6%

Figure 1: Conjoint design (an example of a randomized UK policy choice task)

Scenario 1 out of 5		
	Policy proposal 1	Policy proposal 2
<b>Number of immigrants</b>	Allow some	Allow almost none
<b>Sending region</b>	Asia	Western Europe
<i>Consequences:</i>		
<b>Global wealth</b>	Increased by 1-2%	No change
<b>Your household wealth</b>	Decreased by 5-6%	Decreased by 5-6%
<b>British wealth</b>	Increased by 1-2%	No change
<b>Your city or town's wealth</b>	Decreased by 5-6%	Increased by 1-2%

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If you had to choose, which of these two policy proposals should be enacted?

## Sampling and Analysis

The proposed survey experiment will be conducted via a Qualtrics survey panel in England (2000 respondents) as a part of a larger population-based study related to the project on immigration and parochial altruism. The analysis will only be conducted among UK citizens who complete the survey and pass an attention check.

To test my hypotheses, I follow the empirical approach developed by Hainmueller et al. (2014) and estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) using simple linear regression with robust standard errors clustered by respondent. The AMCE represents the average difference in the probability of being chosen when comparing two different attribute values (e.g., a policy proposal of immigration from Western Europe versus Eastern Europe) where the average is taken over all possible other attribute combinations.

<sup>6</sup>The sequence of levels 3-6 is randomized.

## Heterogeneous effects

If my account is correct, one should also expect to see systematic individual differences in how voters evaluate different policies based on their characteristics. Most importantly, if sensitivity to social well-being independent of personal interests is indeed indicative of genuine altruism, we would expect it to be more pronounced among the actual altruists. To reveal altruist types, I will look at the respondents who decide to donate rather than keep their money in a pre-treatment economic game.<sup>7</sup>

**Hypothesis (6H: Revealed altruism or egoism)** *The relative effect of social versus personal policy consequences is greater among revealed altruists (compared to revealed egoists).*

To get at the relative effect, I will calculate the effect difference between social and personal consequences. In doing so, I will recode all consequence attributes from 0 (decreased by 5-6%) to 1 (increased by 5-6%) and thus estimate the effect of “social policy consequences” based on the arithmetic mean of local, national, and global wealth consequences.

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<sup>7</sup>Revealed altruism subgroup includes those who makes a non-zero donation in the following incentivized item: “*Independent of your compensation for the survey, we raffle off £100 among all respondents. If you are selected, you can decide to keep this money as a bonus or donate any or all of it to top charities that are committed to helping British citizens or people around the world. The winner will be contacted and the money will be distributed within five working days. First, please select one or more options for the contribution.*” (Respondents then choose from a menu of top charities and allocate money between them and their own account. The list is made of comparable country-specific charities matched by their specialization and reputation with a goal of minimizing potential non-altruistic reasons for donation decisions)

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