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Understanding the role of immigration and economic factors in boosting support for far-right political parties

By Sirus H. Dehdari **May 2025**

Overview

Far-right and right-wing populist political parties differ in many respects, but nearly all share one common thread: strong opposition to immigration. These parties often push for stricter border controls and, in some cases, advocate for repatriating immigrant communities already in the country.

Research also shows that immigration consistently ranks among the top concerns for the voters and supporters of far-right parties.[1] Yet studies examining the relationship between immigration levels and support for right-wing populist parties remain inconclusive. Some find that immigration fuels support for these parties, while others suggest no effect—or even the opposite.

This essay offers a new way to understand how concerns about immigration translate into political behavior. Below, I distinguish between two core concepts: triggers and channels. Triggers refer to changes or shocks to voters' circumstances—such as the rising presence of immigrants or the increased risk of unemployment—while channels describe the mechanisms through which these shocks lead to greater support for right-wing populist parties.

This framework helps clarify how both cultural and economic factors can interact to generate increased support for right-wing populist parties. I also explore how a different kind of demographic shift—emigration, or the movement of people out of an area—can influence voter behavior in similar ways. Finally, I discuss how increased exposure to immigrants can, somewhat counterintuitively, lead to reduced opposition to immigration, particularly when contact is meaningful and cooperative.

Explaining increased support for anti-immigration parties

The rise of far-right and right-wing populist parties marks one of the most significant political developments across advanced democracies in recent decades. These parties have gained ground in national legislatures around the world, and in several countries, such as Italy and Sweden, they have entered governing coalitions.[2] As a result, their influence on policy—especially immigration policy—has grown substantially.

Despite their differences, nearly all right-wing populist parties share a defining trait: firm resistance to immigration. Throughout this essay, I refer to them as anti-immigration parties, reflecting both their platforms and their rhetoric. These parties typically advocate for policies that restrict immigration, including hard limits on annual inflows and, in more extreme cases, calls for repatriation or denaturalization of foreign-born residents.

Research shows that the leaders of these parties overwhelmingly support such views.[3] The same applies to their voters.[4] Supporters of anti-immigration parties tend to rank immigration among their top political concerns and consistently favor tougher policies toward immigration. As a result, immigration is a unifying issue for both the leadership and the base of these parties.

Much of the academic and political debate around the rise of these far-right parties has focused on immigration as the key driver. The common assumption is that an increase in local immigrant populations directly fuels support for these parties, primarily through cultural concerns among the native-born population about perceived loss of status or identity as a result of increased diversity. Some research backs this up.[5] But other studies complicate the picture, suggesting that economic insecurity—rising unemployment or growing inequality, for example—plays a more central role than immigration.[6]

This debate often pits cultural explanations of populism's growing support against economic ones. But are these really opposing forces, or do they interact in more complex ways? Rather than viewing cultural and economic explanations as mutually exclusive, some scholars have suggested that these factors often operate in tandem.

One way to understand this interaction is by distinguishing between triggers—the immediate events or conditions that prompt political reactions—and channels—the interpretive or mediating frameworks through which these reactions are shaped. Both triggers and channels can reflect cultural or economic concerns, particularly when it comes to immigration.

How triggers and channels shape political behavior

Much of the existing research on support for anti-immigration parties focuses on identifying the conditions that drive changes in voting behavior. In many cases, these studies isolate specific shifts in local or national contexts that correlate with rising support for anti-immigration parties.

Political scientist Dominik Hangartner at ETH Zurich and co-authors, for example, examine the impact of refugee arrivals during the so-called European refugee crisis of 2015-2016.[7] The study compares Greek islands that received refugees to those that did not, arguing that the only meaningful difference between the two was the presence of refugees. Since other economic and social conditions were largely similar, the presence—and particularly the visibility—of immigrants served as a clear trigger for changes in political behaviors. In this case, immigration itself acts as the stimulus that pushes voters toward anti-immigration parties.

By contrast, economic triggers are at the heart of other explanations for populism's rise. For instance, University of Bocconi scholars Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig link job losses from rising import competition in the United Kingdom with support for the 2016 Brexit referendum.[8] Here, exposure to worsening economic conditions—rather than immigration itself—is believed to have shifted political preferences toward populist ideas.

These two examples are often used to illustrate a broader divide in the research. The first case highlights a cultural trigger, while the second focuses on an economic one. But to fully understand how these triggers lead to political change, we must also consider the channels through which they operate.

There are two main channels: an economic channel and a cultural or immigration-related channel. Both types of triggers—those related to immigration and those related to economic conditions—can influence voting behavior through either channel. Increased immigration, for example, might lead native-born voters to feel that their cultural identity is under threat, or it might raise concerns about labor market competition and the allocation of public resources. In both scenarios, the trigger—increased immigration—is the same, but the channel—threat to cultural identity or to economic security—differs.

The interaction can also work in reverse. Economic hardship can heighten awareness of immigration policies, leading voters to blame immigrants for declining services or limited job opportunities. Here, the economic trigger operates through a cultural channel, as economic stress is interpreted through the lens of increased immigration.

These interactions complicate the simple dichotomy between cultural and economic explanations. Rather than viewing them as competing theories, this framework helps us understand how they often work together through different channels to shape political behavior.

Immigration as a trigger shaping political behavior

Because immigration is a central policy concern for anti-immigration parties, it is no surprise that many demand-side explanations in the research focus on it. Numerous studies have shown that immigration consistently ranks among the most salient political issues for both voters and representatives of these parties.[9]

In most analyses, immigration is operationalized as either the level or the change in the share of foreign-born individuals within native-born populations' local areas. These aggregate-level indicators are then linked to either individual-level survey data or election outcomes at the aggregate level.

Scholars generally identify two main reasons why increased immigration in a neighborhood might influence native-born voters' propensity to support anti-immigration parties. The first is cultural: Immigrants—particularly those perceived as coming from "culturally distant" regions—are often viewed as a threat to the cultural and social status of native-born residents. As the presence of immigrants becomes more visible, some voters fear that their traditions, identity, and social position are at risk.[10]

The second is economic, with two separate but related mechanisms. First, there is concern over labor market competition. Native-born workers may fear that immigrants, especially from low-income countries, will accept lower wages or take jobs that would otherwise go to them.[11] Second, there is concern over access to welfare services. Economically vulnerable voters might worry that increased immigration will lead to greater competition for unemployment benefits, public housing, or other forms of public assistance.[12] The visibility of immigrants in these neighborhoods makes such concerns more immediate and politically salient.

Notably, these economic fears are expected to have the greatest impact on voters who are themselves economically insecure.[13] Yet there is a related economic channel that can affect voters beyond those facing direct economic vulnerability: Increases in local immigrant populations may signal to native-born residents that the government will need to redirect public funds—for education, health care, or transportation—toward accommodating new arrivals.

Some voters might also worry that taxes will be raised to meet these demands. These concerns are not limited to lower-income groups. Indeed, even higher-income voters may perceive immigrants as a net burden on public finances, resulting in increased demand for restrictive immigration policies.[14]

While immigration serves as the trigger across these examples, the channel through which it affects political preferences varies—cultural for some, economic for others. These competing interpretations often lead to different conclusions about what drives support for anti-immigration parties: either immigration itself or the underlying economic conditions that shape how immigration is perceived.

Economic conditions as triggers shaping political behavior

An alternative category of triggers relates to economic factors. These can be broadly divided into two subtypes. The first concerns changes to voters' personal economic circumstances, and particularly their labor market status, such as wage reductions, job losses, or heightened unemployment risks. The second involves shifts in broader neighborhood or regional economic conditions, such as long-term industrial decline or the erosion of both private and public goods and services, often as a consequence of austerity policies.[15]

These economic shocks can feed into anti-immigration sentiment through several channels. One common pathway connects economic hardship to immigration-related fears. For instance, a laid-off worker might attribute their displacement to labor market competition from immigrants.[16] Others might worry that, in the wake of personal economic decline, they now face greater competition from immigrants over access to welfare services, such as unemployment benefits or social assistance. In these cases, economic hardship acts as the trigger, while immigration becomes the perceived threat—making anti-immigration policy more salient.[17]

Voters also can perceive declining neighborhood conditions as stemming from immigration. Government resources directed toward immigrant populations may be seen as coming at the expense of investment in struggling local economies. In this view, the state is seen as prioritizing immigrants over native-born citizens, reinforcing perceptions of neglect among these groups.[18]

Importantly, economic triggers can also operate through direct, nonimmigration channels. Although anti-immigration parties are primarily known for their positions on immigration, many also advocate for protectionist trade policies. They frequently oppose free trade and international agreements, arguing that these policies harm domestic industries.

In this context, economic distress—especially that caused by import competition—can drive voters toward anti-immigration parties not because of immigration, but due to dissatisfaction with global trade. Workers laid off due to competition from low-wage countries, for example, might demand more protectionist policies at home and find their views reflected in these parties' platforms.[19]

Finally, most anti-immigration parties also adopt populist narratives that blame mainstream political elites for economic decline. These parties portray themselves as champions of "the people" in opposition to the interests of a distant political class, which is often aligned with economic, media, and cultural elites.[20] Within this framework, established parties are blamed for rising inequality and regional economic stagnation.

Voters in these economically depressed areas may feel "left behind" as wealth and opportunity become concentrated in urban centers. While immigration can still factor into this narrative, the core grievance may focus more broadly on elite neglect, austerity, or perceived urban bias in public investment.[21]

Beyond immigration: Emigration and the effects of intergroup contact

So far, this essay has focused on how immigration is expected to increase support for anti-immigration parties. Yet two additional demographic dynamics merit attention: emigration from depopulating areas and the role of intergroup contact in shaping attitudes toward immigration.

First, let's consider emigration as a trigger. When working-age residents leave depopulating areas in search of jobs or education, this lowers the local tax base and reduces demand for both public and private goods and services. When a former mill town loses its main employer, for example, its young residents might move away in search of opportunities elsewhere, leading to cuts in services, such as health care, education, and transportation. As demand shrinks and revenue declines, public infrastructure deteriorates. The remaining population faces reduced access to essential services and amenities.[22]

Beyond material consequences, emigration can also foster a psychological sense of abandonment. Residents might literally feel "left behind," giving rise to a form of collective low self-esteem or resentment. These sentiments can be politically mobilized by populist parties and politicians, who blame the decline on neglect by established political elites. While regional decline can result from long-term structural changes beyond any government's immediate control, populist narratives often frame it as a deliberate political failure.[23]

Second, while much research emphasizes how immigration can increase anti-immigration sentiment, a growing body of work challenges this assumption. Under certain conditions, the presence of immigrants might actually reduce support for anti-immigration parties. This insight draws on the so-called contact hypothesis, which posits that intergroup contact—especially when cooperative and repetitive—can reduce prejudice.[24]

Studies have shown that extensive, cooperative interactions between majority and minority group members can undermine negative stereotypes and foster more tolerant attitudes.[25] When contact is brief, superficial, or perceived as competitive, however, it may instead heighten anxiety and reinforce negative attitudes.

One important social arena is the workplace, where cooperative interactions between co-workers are often facilitated and encouraged. In this context, intergroup contact has the potential to reduce opposition to immigration. At the same time, the increased visibility of immigrants in the workplace might reinforce native-born workers' fears of labor market competition—potentially more so than visibility in other everyday settings, such as public squares or supermarkets. Workplace contact can therefore have both positive and negative effects on attitudes toward immigration.

Using Swedish administrative data, one recent study investigates how increased exposure to foreign-born co-workers affects political preferences.[26] The results suggest that intergroup contact can indeed reduce support for anti-immigration parties—but only in smaller workplaces and among co-workers of similar skill levels. In such settings, interactions are more likely to be intimate and sustained, often centered around shared goals. These conditions appear to offset fears of labor market competition with similarly skilled immigrant co-workers.

Conversely, the study finds that same-skill intergroup contact in large workplaces tends to increase opposition to immigration. In these environments, workers can more easily opt out of social interactions, leading to more superficial or incidental contact. Without the benefits of meaningful engagement, the perception of competition remains unmitigated.

Most importantly, the study shows that vulnerabilities in the labor market influence the effects of contact. Specifically, when immigrant co-workers become more visible in occupations characterized by high insecurity, such as office and customer service clerks, then opposition to immigration increases. The reverse is true for secure occupations, such as managers and associate professionals, where contact leads to decreased opposition to immigration. In short, workers who face real risks of losing their jobs are more likely to interpret the presence of immigrants as a threat to their employment prospects.

The distinction between meaningful and superficial intergroup contact helps explain why some studies find that increased immigration boosts support for anti-immigration parties, while others show the opposite. The quality and context of intergroup contact matter significantly.[27]

Together, these two perspectives—on emigration and on the moderating effects of intergroup contact—complicate the assumption that more immigration automatically generates demand for more restrictive policies. They underscore the importance of local context, social dynamics, and psychological perceptions in shaping political behavior.

Conclusion

There are many demand-side explanations for increased support for right-wing populist parties and various reasons why voters turn to them. Although immigration remains the most salient political issue for these parties—and for most of their voters—the existing evidence on the relationship between immigration and native-born voters' propensity to support them is mixed.

At the same time, there is growing scholarly consensus that economic factors also play a key role in rising support for right-wing populist parties. They are widely believed to benefit from periods of economic downturn.

This essay highlights that economic and immigration-related explanations for rising support for right-wing populism are often intertwined rather than mutually exclusive. For instance, both increased immigration in native-born voters' neighborhoods and negative shocks to their economic circumstances can heighten perceptions of competition over economic resources.

While these trigger factors differ, they can lead to similar outcomes—namely, increased support for more restrictive immigration policies. Immigration, as a trigger, might then translate into opposition to immigration through economic concerns. Likewise, economic insecurity can fuel demand for stricter immigration policies due to fears of increased competition from immigrants.

Yet increased local immigration can have the opposite effect, depending on the nature of intergroup interactions. Meaningful, repeated contact—particularly when characterized by cooperation—tends to reduce prejudice and lower opposition to immigration. The mixed empirical findings in the research can, in part, reflect differences in the quality and character of contact between native-born and foreign-born individuals.

Lastly, a growing body of research highlights the importance of another major demographic shift: emigration. Increased support for right-wing populist parties has been observed in areas where large shares of working-age residents have moved away—either to urban centers or abroad—resulting in both material

and psychological consequences for those who remain. This dynamic adds yet another dimension to the broader puzzle of how and why voters are drawn to populist movements.

As such, policymakers seeking to stem the growing support for right-wing populism must consider all of the above when determining how to use immigration policy to garner more support among voters.

About the author

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