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How changing conditions make us reconsider the relationship between immigration attitudes, religion, and EU attitudes

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Abstract

In a world where attitudes towards immigration and the European Union are at the forefront of political and economic agendas across the continent, this Special Issue is highly relevant and well timed. This Forum article reviews the Special Issue and summarizes lessons learned and identifies open, remaining and new, questions. As a future research agenda, it is advised to pay attention to (a) differentiation in EU attitudes, (b) the role of national political elites, (c) the changing communications environment, and (d) the role of religion and religious attitudes.

Keywords

EU attitudes, anti-immigration, religion, radical right voting

Introduction

The relationship between attitudes towards immigrants and attitudes towards the European Union is rightfully experiencing a (new) wave of social and scholarly attention. The proposition that citizens who hold anti-immigration attitudes are also more likely to be critical against the EU and European integration is not new (see e.g. de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2005; McLaren, 2002). But recent real world

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developments – both relating to immigration flows and to developments in the EU itself – has made revisiting this topic urgent, both socially and theoretically.

The Special Issue developed and edited by Kentmen-Cin and Erisen is very timely and includes a fine selection of articles from good scholars with various disciplinary backgrounds, university affiliations, and track records. In this invited Forum piece, I first highlight the main findings from each contribution in order to ask what we have collectively learned and what we might still need to know.

Special Issue Review

The Issue is opened by the editors, Kentmen-Cin and Erisen (2017). They cut right to the core of the Special Issue with their overview and critical assessment of previous scholarship of the relationship between anti-immigration attitudes and anti-EU attitudes. They make two important recommendations: first, that scholars employ a broader variety of methods and designs when trying to disentangle these relationships, and second, that scholars differentiate more between groups within larger immigrant populations. While it is hard to disagree with the first recommendation which is likely to make the empirical base stronger and open for more nuance, the latter recommendation is important and noteworthy, because it suggests a shift away from a more logic pursued in previous studies where citizens' general tendency to categorize others as out-groups, *ceteris paribus*, was leading (e.g. Sniderman et al., 2000). They reiterate the more general point that attitudes toward immigrants are a key explanatory factor in analyses of support or opposition for European integration. But they suggest that 'there is a need to redesign existing survey questions to identify the specific cultural *and* economic threats posed by immigrants and the nature of public interaction with them'. Two observations are in place here: It is hard not to be in favor of the unpacking and disentangling threat perceptions. That said, this claim also puts the burden on them and likeminded scholars to provide solid, systematic, empirical evidence to show not only that differences matter but also that catch all measures perform sub-optimally. In the absence of such evidence, some might still be led to believe that general threat perceptions and general out-group categorizations are most informative.

The second article, by Azrout and Wojcieszak (2017), takes on one of the opening article's recommendation in their specific example of how anti-immigrant sentiments influence attitudes toward the European Union. They show how EU attitudes are predicted by attitudes toward *specific* immigrant groups that are salient to *specific* EU policies. They look at attitudes toward two distinct immigrant groups, Muslims and Poles, in relation to two different policy dimensions, the strengthening of EU integration and potential Turkish EU membership. The authors first corroborate extant research, showing that anti-immigrant attitudes indeed explain opposition toward both further integration and Turkey's membership. This finding is consistent – see above – with arguments that people's *general* tendency to categorize others as out-groups increases one's opposition toward the

EU (Sniderman et al., 2000). In their words, ‘disliking immigrants in general makes people more likely to oppose both policies’. However, and very importantly, the addition of group-specific attitudes decreased the effect of anti-immigrant attitudes. Consequently, although partially, the effect of anti-immigrant attitudes may be explained by the *general* tendency to categorize, a substantial part is explained by group-specific attitudes. Albeit based on a comparison of two very heterogeneous groups (Poles vs Muslims) this ‘punch line’ is the main contribution of the article.

The third article, also by the Special Issue guest editors, Erisen and Kentmen-Cin (2017), addresses how different types of tolerance and perceived threat affect opinions about the EU immigration policy in Germany and the Netherlands. They distinguish social and political tolerance, and sociotropic and personal threats from Muslim immigrants and assess how these influence EU citizens’ beliefs that immigration is one of the most important issues facing the EU. Using experiments, in which the religion of the immigrant, level of perceived threat and type of tolerance are manipulated, they examine how people’s attitudes on immigration policies are affected. It is very good to augment the evidence in the Special Issue, mostly stemming from survey-based research, with experiments offering additional leverage in the causal claims.

The fourth article is by Steenbergen and Siczek (2017). They focus on the support for right-wing populist parties (in particular the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)) and vote intention in the Brexit referendum. Their starting point is that – in the wake of globalization – individuals’ risk propensity relates to support for these parties. Using survey data from the UK, they show how ‘risk’ as a personality trait relates to support for the UKIP and intentions to vote for a Brexit. They conclude that there is evidence of this psychological impact, both directly and indirectly, on UKIP and Brexit voting. The proposition of ‘risk propensity’ as a key concept is interesting and important, and, at the same time, begs the question how this finding relates to other explanations for such political preferences, including the relationship with other personality traits which have been found to relate to both EU attitudes (e.g. Bakker and de Vreese, 2016; Tillman, 2013) and support for populist voting (e.g. Bakker et al., 2015).

The next article by Erisen (2017) goes beyond the impact of attitudes towards immigration and national identity attachment on the one hand, on EU attitudes on the other. Instead, the focus is on how non-EU immigration heritage affects European identification. Using Eurobarometer (EB) data, it looks at the degree of European identification of ‘those with a first generation non-EU immigration heritage [compared] to that of EU country natives’. The punch line, that anti-discrimination policies are conducive for immigrants’ identification with nation states rather than the EU, is both theoretically interesting and great importance in current debates and policy discussions on immigration and integration.

The sixth and final article is written by Lubbers and Coenders (2017). They unpack the role of nationalism as part of the voting for the radical right.

Using European Value surveys, they point out that especially those who 'value ancestry as relevant for nationhood' are more likely to vote for the radical right. Their observation, although not cast directly in the light of scholarship on populism, bears a great relevance for this work by putting central the notion of a homeland based in-group.

New items on the research agenda

Collectively, this Special Issue provides timely new insights in the intricate relationship between immigration attitudes, EU attitudes, and (right wing) voting. There is a strong degree of consistency of findings with extant research, but a couple of articles offer evidence that takes this scholarship in a new and more nuanced direction. As a Special Issue, the value is primarily *within* the different articles and less so across the articles where more attention could have been paid to articulating a coherent and novel, overarching theoretical framework. As this important research agenda moves forward, at least the following points merit attention: (a) differentiation in EU attitudes, (b) the role of national political elites, (c) the changing communications environment, and (d) renewed attention for the role of religion and religious attitudes.

First of all, it is noteworthy that virtually all articles in the Special Issue rely, when addressing, on different measures of EU attitudes. This is not uncommon for such research which is inhibited by either relying on very limited, longitudinal survey data (like EB, ESS, EVS) or specific items used in specific studies. As argued at length elsewhere (Boomgaarden et al., 2011), it is imperative that we treat EU attitudes as multi-dimensional. For some citizens, EU attitudes might converge, but for many there are fundamental differences between evaluating, say, the utilitarian aspects of EU membership, the performance of EU institutions or the degree of identification with the EU. Such nuances are important to capture also to better understand the reluctance and ambivalence held by many citizens. These nuances, also when it comes to the topic of Turkish membership (see Azrout et al., 2012), are imperative for moving our understanding of EU attitudes forward in an era where the EU itself is very different from what it was a decade ago. In the same vein, there is a need to re-consider both long-standing explanations for EU attitudes such as left-right preferences (van Elsas and van der Brug, 2015) and the influence of disruptive events such as the financial and debt crises (Serricchio et al., 2013). Finally, EU attitudes may indeed be increasingly important for understanding citizens' voting behavior, not only in European Parliament elections (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016) and in referendums on EU issues (Schuck and de Vreese, 2008), but even in national elections (de Vries and Hobolt, 2016).

Second, the Special Issue touches, at least indirectly, on the important role that political elites play. More studies are needed that disentangle how EU attitudes converge with other (economic or immigration) attitudes (see e.g. Otjes and Katsanidou, 2016), both amongst citizens and elites. Equally importantly we also need to assess how issues of European integration are addressed in conjunction

with other concerns like immigration and globalization by different political elites to better understand the changing dynamic of the political supply side. Has the ‘sleeping giant’ (van der Eijk and Franklin, 2007) been woken up or has the EU discussion become interwoven and aligned with other salient topics?

Third, in an age where the dynamics between immigration attitudes, EU attitudes, and voting behavior is changing, we need to pay more attention to the information environment. Media coverage has been widely demonstrated to affect public attitudes towards the EU (see e.g. de Vreese et al., 2016), but it is high time to also assess the role and interplay of new, online, and social media. Especially, the latter is feared to create possible filter bubbles in which citizens are either shielded or actively shying away from information about such important topics or being exposed mostly to like-minded information, potentially in a disproportionate fashion. Several of the articles in this Special Issue touch on topics (e.g. Brexit, Turkish membership) whether other scholarship has pointed to the media and the communication environment as important factors.

Fourth and finally, the Special Issue also calls attention to the role of religion. Religion plays out both in terms of actual religious attachments, degree of religious behavior, and (in)tolerance towards other religions. Previously, Hobolt et al. (2011) showed how religious intolerance affects EU attitudes and support for Turkish EU membership. This Issue is a reminder of including this factor in future research.

In sum, the Special Issue’s renewed attention for anti-immigration attitudes and EU attitudes, and the several adjacent questions pertaining to, e.g. globalization, populism, and religion and actors such as the political elites and the media, is most welcomed. In this respect, the Special Issue is a scholarly home run in terms of timing.

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