

# Do Threats Galvanize Authoritarians or Mobilize Non-Authoritarians? Experimental Tests from 19 European Societies

Christopher Claassen

(christopher.claassen@glasgow.ac.uk)  
School of Social and Political Sciences  
University of Glasgow, UK

Lauren McLaren

(lm434@leicester.ac.uk)  
School of History, Politics and International Relations  
University of Leicester, UK

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## Abstract

Authoritarian predispositions and contextual threats are both thought to produce intolerance and prejudice towards immigrants and other minorities. Yet there is considerable dispute as to how authoritarianism and threats interact to produce an “authoritarian dynamic.” Some scholars argue that threats increase intolerance by “galvanizing” authoritarians. Others claim that authoritarians are always intolerant toward outgroups, with threat instead “mobilizing” non-authoritarians. Using experimental manipulations of immigrant cultural threat embedded in nationally-representative samples from 19 European societies, this study offers a dispositive test of these competing hypotheses. While we find some evidence for the “galvanizing” hypothesis, we find no evidence for the “mobilizing” hypothesis. The effects vary considerably across national samples however, with immigrants from Muslim societies being particularly likely to activate authoritarian predispositions. These findings show how the migration of culturally distinctive groups has the potential to activate authoritarian dispositions, thereby pushing the issue of immigration to the center of political debates.

Keywords: authoritarianism, cultural threat, public opinion, immigration, Europe

Words: 7,100

## 1. Introduction

At times, immigrants and refugees are tolerated, accepted, and possibly even welcomed. Yet at other times, they are disliked and vilified. As little as a year or so may separate periods of tolerance from periods of hostility, suggesting – as Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004, 35) put it – the “flash potential” of the issue of immigration.<sup>1</sup>

A theory that is particularly well-suited to explain the flash potential of anti-immigrant politics is the notion of the “authoritarian dynamic” (Stenner 2005). Long associated with support for aggressive leadership, a valorization of the ingroup, and an intolerance of difference (Altemeyer 1981; Feldman 2003), authoritarianism has more recently been linked with anti-immigration sentiment (Cohrs and Stelzl 2010; Dinesen, Klemmensen, and Nørgaard 2016; Ford 2011; Pettigrew and Christ 2007). Moreover, although it was originally conceived as a stable personality trait (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1981), subsequent research contends that authoritarianism can be activated by threats to the social fabric (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005). The combination of authoritarian dispositions – which are stable – and threats to cultural norms – which may arrive suddenly – allows this theory of the authoritarian dynamic to account for unexpected eruptions of intolerance.

There is, however, considerable controversy about how this dynamic works. While initial research on the authoritarian dynamic argued that threats galvanize hostility and intolerance among those already predisposed towards authoritarianism (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005; see also Lavine et al. 2002; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009), more recent research contends that threats instead mobilize intolerance among those who are not very authoritarian to begin with (Hetherington and Suhay 2011; see also Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, and Foucault 2008).<sup>2</sup> These theories suggest very different patterns of public opinion

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the Ipsos “Immigration and Refugee Poll” shows 20 percentage point shifts in attitudes toward immigration over periods of just a year or two in countries such as Turkey, Spain and the UK (Ipsos 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Feldman and Stenner (1997) describe their theory as involving the “activation” of authoritarian values. We

change following rising threat perceptions: according to the “galvanizing” theory, flare-ups of prejudice are largely due to increased hostilities among a fairly small but core group of authoritarians; according to the mobilizing theory it is the widening pool of intolerant individuals that is responsible (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). Determining whether the dynamic is a galvanizing or mobilizing one thus speaks to important questions about whether individuals who are not likely to be predisposed towards prejudice can be triggered into intolerance by particular threats.

Existing attempts to adjudicate between these theories have been limited in several respects. They have relied almost exclusively on observational research designs despite the difficulties of testing interactive, causal theories without experimental manipulations (Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). Threat has also been inconsistently conceptualized and measured. Finally, despite the apparent universality of the theory of the authoritarian dynamic (Stenner 2005), it has seldom been tested outside a single society – the United States.

This paper aims to provide a dispositive test of the theory of the authoritarian dynamic by addressing all these shortcomings. In particular, we examine how authoritarian values interact with the cultural threat posed by different groups of immigrants to shape attitudes to immigration in 19 European societies. Immigrant cultural threat is, moreover, experimentally manipulated by varying whether respondents were exposed to a more culturally familiar immigrant group or a more cultural distant one.<sup>3</sup>

Our findings are decisive when it comes to the test between the two versions of the authoritarian dynamic theory: while there is a fair degree of support for the galvanizing theory, there is no support at all for the mobilizing theory. As such, to the extent that threats interact with authoritarian values, they galvanize authoritarians rather than mobilize non-authoritarians. Yet we

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instead adopt the “galvanizing” versus “mobilizing” terminology from Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004), who – like us – describe the alternative ways in which predispositions (albeit not authoritarianism) interact with situational triggers.

<sup>3</sup>The experiment was embedded in the seventh European Social Survey, which was conducted in 2014. See Ford and Mellon (forthcoming).

also find considerable variation across the 19 samples in the extent to which authoritarianism interacts with cultural threats. This variation is largely due to differences in national contexts and immigrant-outgroup characteristics, with immigrants from Muslim-majority societies being particularly likely to provoke authoritarians.

## **2. The Authoritarian Dynamic**

Scholars have long sought explanations for prejudice and intolerance towards outgroups in the bedrock of personality, with authoritarianism being perhaps the most prominent of these antipathetic dispositions. First proposed by Adorno et al. (1950), this “authoritarian personality” was later refined by Altemeyer (1981). He trimmed the concept of its psychodynamic interpretation, renamed it “Right-Wing Authoritarianism”, and narrowed its focus on to three of its original nine components: conventionalism, submission to strong leaders, and aggression toward outsiders.

These three core components of the authoritarianism map on to its attitudinal and behavioral consequences. Authoritarians are more likely to prefer order and social control (Huddy et al. 2005), support dominant and aggressive leaders (McCann 1997), and react with prejudice and intolerance toward outgroups (Altemeyer 1981; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005).

Authoritarianism has also long been associated with threat. Early works demonstrated that behavioral expressions of authoritarianism become increasingly prevalent as contexts become more threatening (e.g., Doty, Peterson, and Winter 1991; Sales 1973). Yet such conclusions sit uneasily alongside conceptualizations of authoritarianism as a dimension of personality. How can deeply-rooted dispositions be shaped so easily by contexts?

This paradox was initially resolved in a key contribution by Feldman and Stenner (Feldman and Stenner 1997; Feldman 2003; Stenner 2005). They distinguished authoritarianism from personality, recasting it as a core value that captures a tension between two conflicting desires: personal autonomy and social conformity (see also Duckitt and Sibley 2009). Feldman and Stenner then proposed an interactive relationship between authoritarianism and threat, on the one hand, and expressions of authoritarianism, on the other. In conditions of material abundance and social

stability, authoritarians and non-authoritarians have similar political preferences. When contexts are threatening, however, the authoritarian desire for social control is challenged. These threats “activate” authoritarian predispositions, with the result that authoritarians begin to diverge from non-authoritarians in their desire for order, conformity, and aggressive leadership.

This theory of the “authoritarian dynamic” revitalized the study of authoritarianism. Not only did it provide a compelling theoretical foundation for the concept, the specification of a fairly stable cluster of values acting in concert with contextual triggers allowed the theory of authoritarianism to account for the “flash potential” of prejudice and intolerance toward outgroups (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004, 35).

However, while scholars appreciated the power of this theory, they disagreed regarding the details of the interplay between authoritarianism and threat. Some subsequent studies found similar results to Feldman and Stenner: threats increase prejudice and intolerance but especially for those subscribing to authoritarian values (Lavine et al. 2002; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). Threats therefore “galvanize” authoritarians, to use the terminology of Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004). Others disagree, finding instead that it is non-authoritarians (or fellow travelers) who are most susceptible to threat (Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, and Foucault 2008).<sup>4</sup> Threats therefore “mobilize” hostility among non-authoritarians, reducing the gap between them and authoritarians.

It is perhaps not surprising that this literature reaches conflicting conclusions, because existing studies are riven with conceptual slippages and methodological limitations. There are three in particular.

First, observational research designs abound (e.g., Feldman and Stenner 1997; Feldman 2003; Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, and

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<sup>4</sup>This line of research is related to social psychological studies of “reactive liberals” (Nail et al. 2009) or conservatism as “motivated social cognition” (Jost et al. 2003), which find that ideological liberals are most susceptible to threats. These studies are distinct from those considered in this paper in that the concept of authoritarianism is not invoked.

Foucault 2008). These are of course far from ideal for testing causal conclusions, especially in the presence of a hypothesized interaction between two variables. Moreover, the studies that do use experimental manipulations of threat, have only small convenience samples (e.g., Lavine et al. 2002; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). These have their own problems, notably a surprisingly high likelihood of finding significant effects in the “wrong” direction (Gelman, Gelman, and Carlin 2014).

Second, widely-varying conceptualizations and measures of threat are employed. Hetherington and Suhay (2011) focus on the physical threats posed by terrorism, as do Merolla and Zechmeister (2009). Vasilopoulos, Marcus, and Foucault (2008) use the emotions of anger and fear in place of threat (they also use left-right ideology as a proxy for authoritarianism). These are all quite distinct from the threats to social cohesion and cultural norms proposed as activators of authoritarianism by Feldman (2003) and Stenner (2005).

Finally, existing tests focus almost entirely on the context of the United States, despite claims regarding the universality of concept of authoritarian values (Feldman 2003) and the theory of the authoritarian dynamic (Stenner 2005).<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Opposition to Immigration**

Opinions towards immigrants and immigration provide a useful testing ground for the theory of the authoritarian dynamic. Immigration has long been argued to be threatening to natives and it regularly features among the most salient political issues in many Western democracies (Ford, Jennings, and Somerville 2015; Newport 2018). Cultural threats posed by immigration have been shown to have particularly powerful effects (e.g., Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Ford 2011; McLaren 2003; Sides and Citrin 2007; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004), and these closely match the threats to conformity and social order proposed by Feldman and Stenner in the original

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<sup>5</sup>Vasilopoulos, Marcus, and Foucault (2008) use a French sample, and one of Merolla and Zechmeister (2009) samples are drawn from Mexico. Tests in a wider range of contexts are sorely lacking.

theory of the authoritarian dynamic. Namely, immigrants – especially those from seemingly very different cultural backgrounds – are often seen as a significant threat to social rules and norms believed to be helping to maintain the certainty and order in society that authoritarians crave. Not surprisingly, anti-immigrant attitudes are regularly posited as being a result of authoritarianism (e.g., Cohrs and Stelzl 2010; Ford 2011; Pettigrew and Christ 2007).

The “galvanizing” and “mobilizing” versions of the authoritarian dynamic theory would predict authoritarians and non-authoritarians to react in different ways when they perceive a group of immigrants to be threatening to a society’s cultural identity. These differing predictions have significant implications for the periodic advance of anti-immigration sentiment: if the galvanizing theory is correct, intolerance would generally be limited to authoritarians (though the strength of their intolerance grows) whereas the mobilizing theory presents the possibility that this group of strongly intolerant individuals (i.e., those with authoritarian predispositions) can become much larger as threat increases and may ultimately become large enough to be mobilized against the target of intolerance – in this case, migrants.

Specifically, the galvanizing theory, espoused by Feldman and Stenner, argues that it will be those individuals with the strongest needs for order and social conformity – the authoritarians – who react negatively to culturally distinctive migrants. Threats to cultural identity and norms trigger a larger anti-immigration backlash among authoritarians than for everyone else. The galvanizing theory would predict, therefore, that authoritarianism and cultural threat will show a positive interaction effect on opposition to immigration.

In contrast, the mobilizing theory claims that it is the individuals with the lowest levels of authoritarian values who would react most strongly to culturally distinctive migrants. As Hetherington and Suhay (2011) argue, authoritarians experience near-constant states of heightened threat and anxiety and thus would be expected to express consistent levels of intolerance regardless of threat level. Threats to cultural identity and norms therefore mobilize non-authoritarians more than they galvanize authoritarians, leading to an anti-immigrant backlash among the former. The galvanizing argument would, therefore, predict that authoritarianism and cultural threat will show a



negative interaction effect on opposition to immigration.

## 4. Data and Methods

### 4.1. The ESS Immigration Experiment: Opposition to Immigration and Cultural Threat

We investigate these propositions using 19 European countries in which a survey experiment was fielded, as part of the seventh round of the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2014.<sup>6</sup> The experiment was designed to “test the relative contributions of economic threat and cultural/identity threat to opposition to migrants comparatively and within individual nations” (European Social Survey 2015). Economic threat was manipulated using an immigrant skill manipulation (professional vs. unskilled) while cultural threat was manipulated using an immigrant national origin manipulation (European vs. non-European origin). Respondents received both an immigrant skill and immigrant national origin treatment, in a  $2 \times 2$  factorial design.

We make use of the national origin (European vs. non-European country) manipulation to measure cultural threat (the economic threat manipulation will be used below for the robustness tests). Specifically, respondents from each ESS sample country were randomly assigned to be asked about migrants from either (a) “a poor European country providing [the] largest number of migrants” to that sample country, or (b) “a poor country outside Europe providing [the] largest number of migrants” (European Social Survey 2015, 17).<sup>7</sup> The list of migrant-sending countries

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<sup>6</sup>We do not include the sample from Israel – the sole non-European country included in the ESS – because it has a distinct immigration regime that involves ethno-religious identity. As such, the immigrant origin experiment is unlikely to manipulate cultural threat. Similarly, initial findings from the experiment (Ford and Mellon forthcoming) indicate that the experimental manipulation did not manipulate cultural threat as expected in Portugal due to the specific choice of countries used in the manipulation: in particular, the use of Brazil as the culturally distinct non-European source of immigrants. We therefore also omit Portugal from our analysis.

<sup>7</sup>The designers of the experiment defend this approach as follows: “This way we ensure that the immigrant group used is consistently the most locally salient and representative nation from within each broader category (more culturally-similar European migrants; more culturally-distant non-European migrants). This will ensure relevance

used in the survey is provided in the Online Supplemental Materials. The question wording of the experiment is as follows:

Please tell me to what extent you think [country] should allow [professionals / unskilled labourers] from [poor European country providing largest number of migrants / poor country outside Europe providing largest number of migrants] to come to live in [country] – Allow many to come and live here, Allow some, Allow a few, Allow none.

The effect of the immigrant origin manipulation on respondents' opposition to immigration is displayed in Figure 1 (the black dots and lines). Alongside these main effects, the details of the sample countries, and immigrant origin manipulations are provided. The figure reveals that the immigration origin experiment significantly increases opposition to immigration in 13 out of the 19 national samples (see also Ford and Mellon forthcoming). The average effect, pooled across national samples, is also positive and significant. European respondents, in other words, are usually more opposed to immigration when the immigrants in question are framed as non-European rather than European.

#### **4.2. Measuring Authoritarianism**

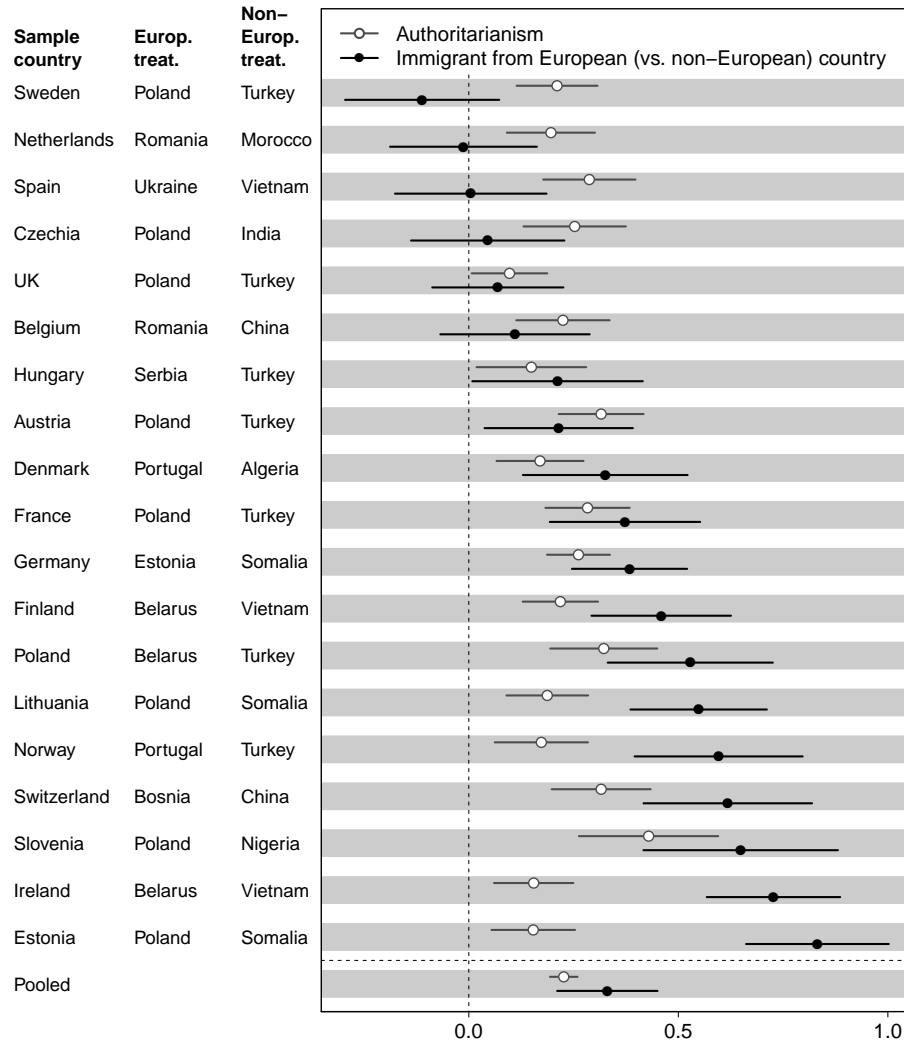
The ESS includes the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ), a 21-item battery designed to measure Schwartz's (1992) human values dimensions. Feldman (2003) demonstrates that several of these items can be combined to form a valid and reliable measure of authoritarianism (see also Duckitt and Sibley 2009; Norris and Inglehart forthcoming). In particular, Feldman (2003) recommends combining the "conformity" and "tradition" value scales to measure "support for social conformity" and combining the "self-direction" and "stimulation" value scales to measure "support for personal autonomy." Because authoritarianism captures the trade-off between social conformity and personal autonomy, Feldman recommends subtracting the latter from the former.<sup>8</sup> He shows

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within each nation, but by employing a unified logic will also allow for sensible comparison of reactions across nations" (European Social Survey 2015, 17).

<sup>8</sup>Doing so also helps adjust for respondent acquiescence bias (Cohrs et al. 2005; Schwartz 1992).

**Figure 1.** Effects of Authoritarianism and Immigrant Origin on Opposition to Immigration by Sample



The plot displays the regression effects of authoritarianism (in grey) and the immigrant origin treatment (in black). Separate ordered logit models were fit for each country, with controls for respondents’ dominance values, perceived financial comfort, gender, age, education, employment status, whether born in country, speaks a national language, is religious, and lives in an urban area. The estimate for the “pooled” sample is obtained from a multilevel ordered logit model with the slopes for authoritarianism and immigrant origin allowed to vary by country. Authoritarianism is unit-normal standardized (z-score) while immigrant origin is a dichotomous variable. The sample countries and manipulated immigrant origin countries (European and non-European) are shown on the left.

that the resulting authoritarian values scale correlates at 0.68 with Altemeyer’s right-wing authoritarianism scale, demonstrating its validity. Indeed, Feldman (2003) was sufficiently impressed by the PVQ measure of authoritarianism to add those items to the authoritarianism battery he had

developed.

We follow Feldman's recommendations, but also include a fifth Schwartz value, security, in the social conformity scale because further research has demonstrated its empirical linkages with authoritarianism (Cohrs et al. 2005; Feather and McKee 2012; Norris and Inglehart forthcoming). In sum, we use an additive scale of the six PVQ items corresponding to conformity, tradition, and security values to measure support for social conformity (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.71$ ), and an additive scale of the four items corresponding to self-direction and stimulation values to measure support for personal autonomy (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.65$ ). Finally, as per Feldman, we subtract the latter from the former to obtain our measure of authoritarian values.

Figure 1 also shows the relationship between authoritarianism and opposition to immigration (as measured by the experimental question above). This figure reveals that authoritarian values are always associated with more restrictive attitudes towards immigrants.<sup>9</sup> This is hardly surprising given extant research on the authoritarian hostility toward difference and diversity (Altemeyer 1981; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Pettigrew and Christ 2007; Cohrs and Stelzl 2010). In addition, Davidov and Schmidt (2008) find, using earlier ESS data, a positive association between Schwartz's tradition and conformity values – which form the core of our authoritarianism scale – and opposition to immigration.

### **4.3. Other Variables**

Cultural threat is experimentally manipulated and is therefore exogenous (within country). Authoritarianism is, however, measured observationally. We therefore include several control variables in our analyses.

The first control variable is another major dimension of values, which we call dominance values due to their conceptual overlap with Sidanius and Pratto's (1999) social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO has been shown to be strongly connected to prejudice (e.g., Esses et al. 2001). Dominance values are measured using four of Schwartz's values from the ESS PVQ. As suggested

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<sup>9</sup>The underlying ordered logit models include control variables, which are described in the next sub-section.

by Schwartz (1996), to measure “self-transcendence,” we combine the PVQ “universalism” and “benevolence” scales (five items; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.73), and to measure “self-enhancement,” we combine the “achievement” and “power scales” (four items; Cronbach’s alpha = 0.73). Other scholars have demonstrated that self-transcendence is negatively correlated, and self-enhancement, positively correlated, with SDO (Feather 1996; Cohrs et al. 2005). As such, we calculate dominance values by subtracting the former from the latter, as per the logic of Feldman (2003). Dominance values therefore measure the relative preference for personal status, power, and wealth versus solidarity, equality, and caring for others and the environment. Like SDO, dominance values are largely independent of authoritarianism (the correlation in the pooled dataset is  $-0.10$ )

We also include several demographic variables. In particular, respondents’ perceived financial comfort (a 4-point Likert scale), age (coded to a 4-category nominal variable), education (a 3-category nominal variable), employment status (a 3-category nominal variable), and dummy variables for gender, whether the respondent is born in country, speaks an official language (e.g., Dutch, French, or German in Belgium), is religious (i.e., identifies religion as “none”), and lives in an urban area. Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in the Online Supplemental Materials.

#### **4.4. Empirical Strategy**

The ESS immigrant origin experiment randomly allocates respondents to experimental treatments, but non-randomly chooses which countries feature in those treatments. Indeed, the pair of immigrant origin countries are selected based on existing migration flows in the destination country. The design of the ESS immigrant origin experiment therefore introduces endogeneity at the level of country (although retaining an exogenous measure of threat within countries). We use two methods in this paper to account for the cross-national variance in the independent variable. First, we conduct our analyses separately by country, in effect treating the 19 country samples as separate experiments. Second, we pool the samples, and apply multilevel models, with the effects of the key variables allowed to vary across countries. Since the dependent variable is an ordered

factor, we use ordered logistic regression models. Finally, all analyses are weighted using the post-stratification weights provided by the ESS.

## 5. Results

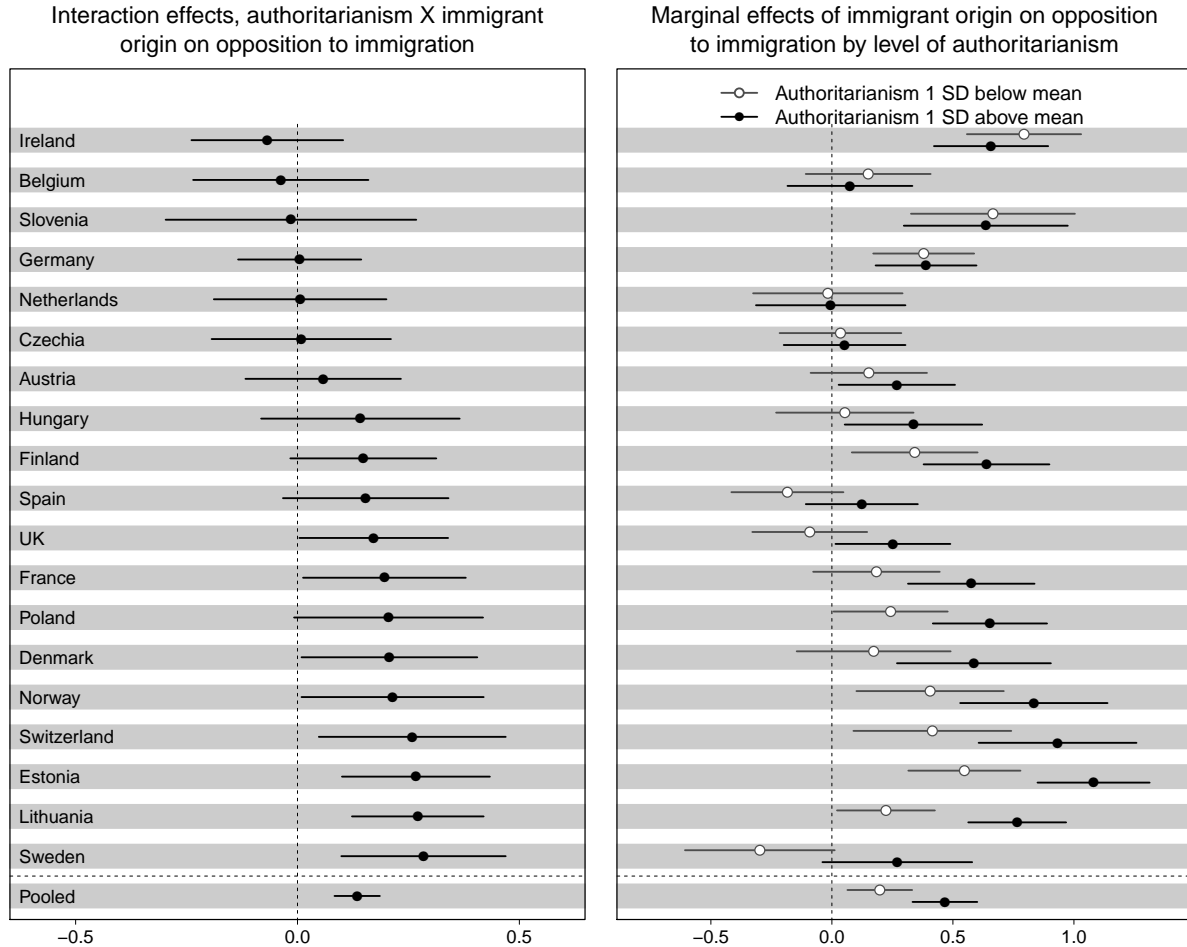
### 5.1. Interaction Effects of Authoritarianism and Threat

The theory of the authoritarian dynamic focuses on the interplay between authoritarian values and contextual threat. This is usually tested using an interaction between these variables (e.g., Feldman and Stenner 1997; Hetherington and Suhay 2011). We use the same specification, adding an interaction term between cultural threat (immigrant origin) and authoritarian values to the model including the main effects of these variables, as well as the set of control variables. Results are shown in Figure 2, with the first panel displaying the interaction effects.

Recall that Feldman and Stenner proposed a positive interaction, with threat galvanizing authoritarians while Hetherington and Suhay predicted a negative interaction as threat “mobilizes” non-authoritarians. We find significantly positive interaction effects in eight of the 19 samples, with insignificant interactions in the remaining eleven, and no significantly negative interactions at all. In an analysis of the pooled data, the average interaction effect is positive and highly significant, even allowing interaction effects to vary across countries. This also lends support to Feldman and Stenner’s galvanizing hypothesis. We therefore find some support for the galvanizing hypothesis but no support for the mobilizing theory. The two versions of the authoritarian-threat theory make predictions about the marginal effects of threat as well as the sign of the overall interaction between threat and authoritarianism. These marginal effects of threat are displayed in the second panel of Figure 2. The hollow dots (with grey confidence intervals) display the marginal effects of threat when authoritarian values are low (one standard deviation below the mean); the filled dots (with black confidence intervals) display the marginal effects of threat when authoritarian values are high (one standard deviation above).

The galvanizing theory predicts that the marginal effect of threat will be positive among

**Figure 2.** Authoritarianism and Immigrant Origin: Interaction and Marginal Effects



The first panel displays the interaction effects of authoritarianism and immigrant origin. The second panel displays the marginal effects of immigrant origin when authoritarianism is either low (grey lines) or high (black lines). Separate ordered logit models were fit for each country, with controls for respondents' dominance values, perceived financial comfort, gender, age, education, employment status, whether born in country, speaks a national language, is religious, and lives in an urban area. The estimates for the "pooled" sample are obtained from a multilevel ordered logit model with the slopes for authoritarianism, immigrant origin, and their interaction allowed to vary by country.

authoritarians (it is agnostic about the marginal effect among non-authoritarians other that it will be weaker). The mobilizing theory, in contrast, predicts that the marginal effect will be positive among non-authoritarians. We can see that the prediction of the galvanizing theory is borne out in 14 of the 19 national samples, as well as the average effect estimated from the pooled sample. In the remaining five national samples, the marginal effect is insignificant. In sum, when it comes to the marginal effects of cultural threat, the evidence again generally supports the galvanizing theory

and does not support the mobilizing theory.

## **5.2. The Conditioning Effect of Immigrant Origin Country Factors**

The evidence is not wholly in favor of the galvanizing theory, however. There is considerable variance in the authoritarianism-threat interaction effects, with many of these insignificant. In this section, we explore why there might be such variation in these interaction effects. To do so, we calculate the marginal effects of authoritarian values when immigrants are presented either as European or non-European.<sup>10</sup> We then model these 38 marginal effects as the dependent variable in an OLS regression. The independent variables are measures of features of the immigrants' countries of origin, which may help to explain the strength of authoritarian reactions to these groups.<sup>11</sup>

Namely, we use two indicators of potential cultural threat – (1) linguistic distance and (2) the extent to which the migrant groups named in the experiments are likely to come from predominantly Muslim countries – as well as a measure of potential economic threat posed by each migrant group. Linguistic distances measure the number of changes in pronunciation required between a pair of languages, across a list of basic words – a method known as “lexicostatistics”.<sup>12</sup> Under the assumption that linguistic differences mirror historical population divisions, these measures capture the cultural drift or distance between two societies (see Fearon 2003; Spolaore and Wacziarg 2016). The extent to which the migrant groups named in the experiments come from predominantly Muslim countries is measured using the Muslim population share in each origin country.<sup>13</sup> This

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<sup>10</sup>A plot of these marginal effects is included in the online supplementary materials.

<sup>11</sup>Sides and Citrin (2007) use a similar method to unpack the conditioning effect of contextual factors on opposition to immigration in Europe.

<sup>12</sup>We use data on linguistic distances between all world languages provided by the Automated Similarity Judgment Program (ASJP; <https://asjp.cllld.org/>).

<sup>13</sup>The data come from the Global Religious Futures project run by the Pew Research Center (<http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/>).



**Table 1.** The conditioning effect of immigrant origin country factors

	Model 2.1	Model 2.2
Intercept	.512 (.198)*	.490 (.272)
Linguistic distance	-.162 (.127)	.136 (.137)
Proportion Muslim	.122 (.041)**	.095 (.042)*
log GDP per capita	-.020 (.017)	-.035 (.021)
Country fixed effects		✓
<i>N</i>	38	38
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.294	.771
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.231	.470
Regression standard error	.104	.087

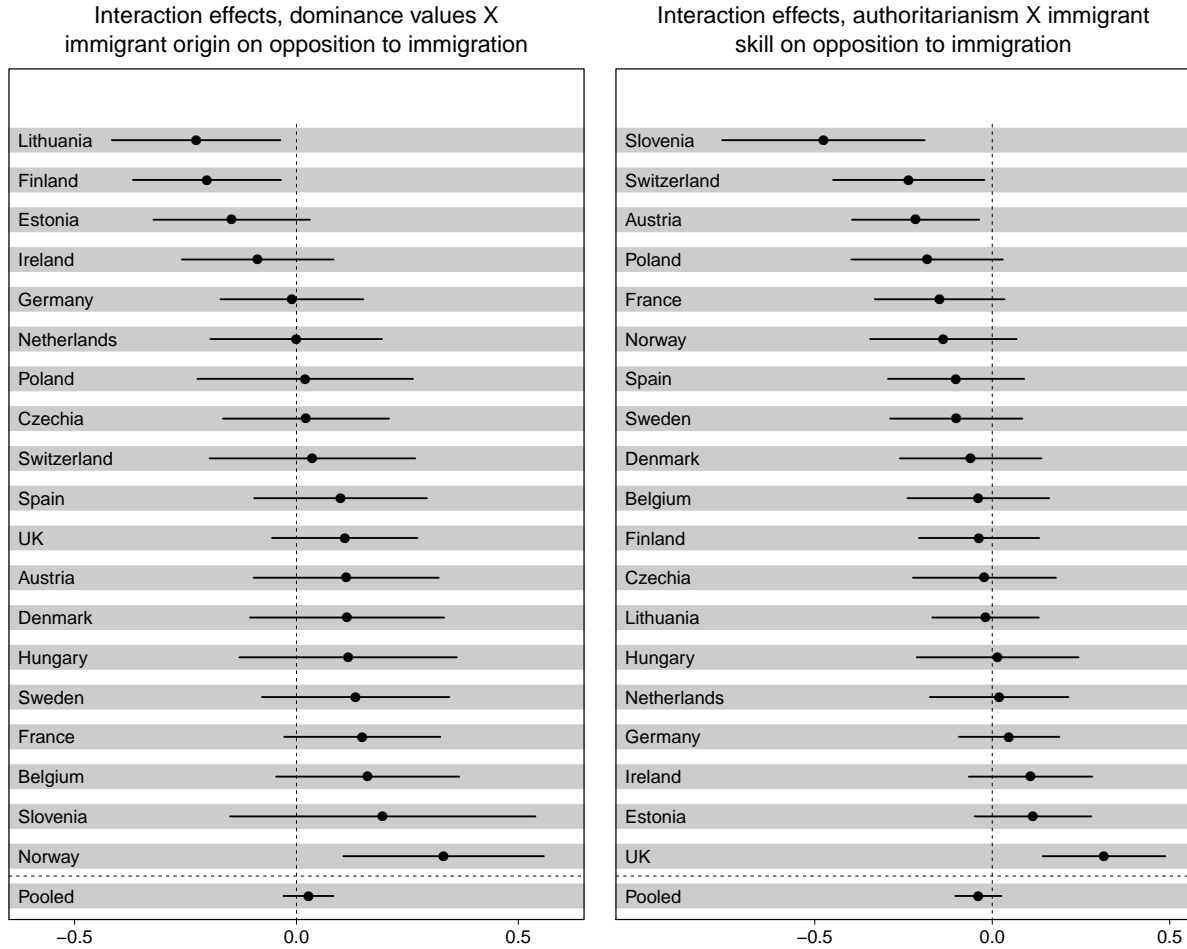
\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . OLS models with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the 38 marginal effects of cultural threat, as depicted in Figure 2, panel 2.

measure captures the likelihood of an immigrant from a particular country being Muslim, a group that many Europeans find particularly threatening (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2016; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004, e.g.). Potential economic threat is measured with GDP per capita in the migrant sending countries named in the experiment.<sup>14</sup> This allows us to examine whether the varying levels of development evident in the list of immigrant origin countries influences the threat felt by respondents.

The results are presented in Table 1. Muslim population share alone accounts for a fair proportion of the variance (23%) in the marginal effects of authoritarianism. The coefficient is significant and positive, indicating that authoritarian values exert a stronger effect on attitudes to immigration as immigrants are more likely to be Muslim. Muslim migrants therefore appear to be particularly likely to activate authoritarian dispositions. Neither linguistic distance nor GDP per capita has a significant effect. Adding country fixed effects to control for sample country characteristics (Model 1.2) does not greatly alter the relationship between authoritarian marginal effects and Muslim population share. Country fixed effects do add considerably to model fit however, suggesting that idiosyncrasies in each sample country underpin a fair proportion of variance in authoritarian-threat interactions.

<sup>14</sup>GDP per capita estimated in 2014 by the International Monetary Fund using purchasing power parity adjustments.

**Figure 3. Placebo Tests**



The first panel displays the interaction effects of dominance values and the immigrant origin treatment. The second panel displays the interaction effects of authoritarian values and the immigrant skill treatment. For further modeling details, see Figure 1.

In sum, this analysis shows that variability in the effects of the authoritarian dynamic are partly due to features of both immigrant origin countries and the sample countries. In particular, if immigrants originate in Muslim-majority countries, authoritarianism becomes more charged, exerting a more powerful influence on immigration preferences. However, cultural difference per se – as measured by linguistic distances – plays little to no role in enhancing or dampening the effects of authoritarianism.

### 5.3. Placebo Tests

The original theory of the authoritarian dynamic holds that it is threats to cultural norms that interact with authoritarian values. But perhaps threat galvanizes all sorts of values and orientations, not merely authoritarianism. We consider whether cultural threats activate a second dimension of cultural values regarding the trade-off between personal status and power, on the one hand, and benevolence and equality, on the other. As noted above, given the conceptual and empirical link with social dominance orientation (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), we call these dominance values. As the first panel in Figure 3 shows, the interaction between dominance values and cultural threat is significantly different from zero in only three of our 19 samples: Norway, where the effect is positive, and Lithuania and Finland, where the effect is negative. Moreover, when pooling the sample and applying a multilevel model, the average interaction effect is small and insignificant. These results confirm that it is authoritarian values in particular that are activated by threats to cultural norms.

Recall that the experiment used for the analysis here included a manipulation of potential economic threat. We take advantage of this aspect of the experiment to provide a further placebo test. (Feldman 2003) and (Stenner 2005) emphasize the impact of threats to social conformity and normative order on authoritarians. Since economic threat does not pose as clear of a threat to social conformity, the impact of variable economic threats on authoritarian reactions to immigration should not be as strong as the impact of variable cultural threats. Figure 3 illustrates the interaction effects between authoritarianism and economic threat. In three countries, there are significant negative interactions, and in one country, a significant positive interaction. The interaction is insignificant in 15 national samples, and also in the pooled sample. There is therefore little evidence that threat posed by unskilled immigrants activates authoritarianism predispositions.

In sum, these placebo tests have revealed that the positive interaction between cultural threats and authoritarian values is fairly unique. There is no corresponding interaction between economic threats and authoritarian values, and neither between cultural threats and dominance values. The evidence therefore indicates that authoritarian values are particularly sensitive to cultural

threats, arguably because these threaten the social conformity valued so dearly by authoritarians.

## **6. Conclusion**

Existing research emphasizes the significant consequences of authoritarianism for prejudice and intolerance of minorities (Altemeyer 1981; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005), including prejudice against immigrant-origin minorities (e.g., Cohrs and Stelzl 2010; Ford 2011; Pettigrew and Christ 2007; Davidov and Schmidt 2008). Our findings similarly show that authoritarians are more likely than non-authoritarians to want to reject new immigrants in all 19 European societies we examine. However, our findings also show that the extent of negative reaction to new migrants varies significantly depending on the specific threat presented, and that authoritarian opposition to new migrants increases even further when the immigrants are culturally distinct. Culturally distinct immigrants thus activate authoritarian values, galvanizing hostility and resistance to immigration. Though it might have been expected that authoritarians would be consistently negative about all forms of migration and that the response of non-authoritarians would vary depending on the level of threat (e.g., building on the arguments developed by Hetherington and Suhay (2011), we find no evidence to support this proposition. Thus, for scholars and policymakers concerned about intolerance against target groups being activated among wider populations, our results indicate that this is unlikely to be the case, and that it is primarily individuals with authoritarian predispositions who become increasingly intolerant in the face of threats to social conformity.

These findings provide some insight into how cultural threats and authoritarianism together shape the politics of immigration. While research on attitudes to immigrants suggests that “situational triggers” may prompt an increase in anti-immigrant prejudice and that the trigger of cultural threat is particularly powerful (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004), our study indicates that such triggers may, in fact, have variable effects. The strong need for conformity on the part of those with authoritarian predispositions (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005) makes these individuals more likely to react negatively when presented with potential threats to conformity. Culturally distinct migrants present precisely such a threat, and our findings suggest

that Muslim migrants are especially likely to activating the authoritarian dynamic.

Our results present the possibility that it may be those with authoritarian predispositions who are driving much of the rise in hostility and tension surrounding immigration in European societies. The findings, in turn, suggest very different policies to ameliorate immigration-related tension than those being pursued in some European countries. Namely, policies that focus on reducing the normative threat felt by authoritarians may be more effective at reducing tension surrounding this issue than more blanket-approach immigration policies such as a wholesale reduction in immigration, which may be unnecessary for much of the rest of a population and damaging to wider societal needs (e.g., filling labor shortages in health care services).

Our findings may also shed some light on how migration at times prompts substantial increases in support for far-right anti-immigration parties. We show how migrants from Muslim countries in particular are likely to activate the authoritarian-threat dynamic, and it may be that increases in numbers of such migrants – or even the potential threat of increases (for instance during the Syrian refugee crisis) – may suddenly activate authoritarians and prompt a response of voting for the far-right.

It must be emphasized that the pattern found in many of the countries investigated here does not hold in all societies. In eleven of the national samples, there is no authoritarianism-threat interaction. This suggests that the link between cultural difference and threat requires greater investigation. For instance, what types of threats are perceived as such significant threats to social conformity that they activate the authoritarian dispositions of native citizens? Our analysis of immigrant country-of-origin features suggested that cultural distance is not especially threatening. Neither does economic threat activate authoritarian values to any great extent. Rather, immigrants from Muslim-majority countries were most likely to activate authoritarian dispositions, and were therefore most threatening to native citizens. It is unlikely that Muslim-origin immigration is the sole threat to social conformity that concerns authoritarians, however, and further research could go further in understanding these threats and their variable impact on European societies.

The broader question of how the authoritarian-threat dynamic plays out in the realm of

immigration politics – particularly in terms of individual behavior – is another avenue for further research. For instance, how does this dynamic impact voting behavior and the rise of anti-immigration parties? Moreover, how does the rhetoric of these parties interact with the authoritarian dynamic to produce particular patterns of behavior? And to what extent does education – known to be important in producing a “sober second thought” in the realm of tolerance – moderate the strength of the authoritarian dynamic? Nevertheless, our findings contribute to understanding how the authoritarian dynamic plays out in the European context and for an increasingly controversial and sizable target of intolerance, immigrant-origin minorities.

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