



Xenophobia and immigrant contact: French public attitudes toward immigration



Seth K. Jolly^{b,*}, Gerald M. DiGiusto^a

^a USA

^b Syracuse University, USA

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ABSTRACT

How does the presence of immigrants in a local community affect xenophobic attitudes? Does contact with immigrants ameliorate or exacerbate anti-immigrant attitudes among citizens? Synthesizing public opinion, economic, and demographic data from France, we test hypotheses concerning the relationship between the presence of immigrant populations and xenophobic sentiments. Supportive of the contact theory, we find that larger immigrant populations decrease xenophobic attitudes. This finding challenges much of the country-level research on immigrant concentration and xenophobia and offers some hope for those who are concerned about the rise of xenophobia and the radical right in the midst of diverse European polities.

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1. Introduction

More than 190 million around the world are international immigrants, and Europe is a prominent immigrant-receiving region (Transatlantic Trends Immigration, 2008). According to the 1999 census (INSEE, 1999), there were nearly 3 million immigrants in France from outside the European Union (4.7%). By 2008, nearly 6% of the French population was comprised of immigrants, amounting to a foreign-born population of more than 3.7 million. Of those immigrants, nearly 61% arrived from outside the EU-27, mostly from African home countries (INSEE, 2008).

Meanwhile, European publics (Barber, 2007; Lahav, 2004a, 2004b) and political elites (Caldwell, 2009; Lahav, 2004a) are suspicious of these growing immigrant populations. More people in Europe view immigration as a problem than an opportunity (Transatlantic Trends

Immigration, 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, in almost every European democracy there are political parties who espouse xenophobic or outright racist messages, while many European countries have fringe movements who express more extreme xenophobic attitudes, even advocating violence (Economist, 2011). In France, for instance, the National Front has built support based on xenophobic and anti-establishment rhetoric, framing the foreign-born population as a primary cause of rising unemployment, crime rates, and other social woes (Mayer, 1995; Golder, 2003). But even mainstream parties have shifted their political rhetoric. Before the 2005 riots outside Paris, French President Nicolas Sarkozy described the Parisian suburban young people, largely immigrant and minority, as “*racaille*” or rabble (BBC News, 2012). In 2012, Sarkozy appealed to far-right voters by arguing that France has too many foreigners on its territory, and that France is not capable of integrating them into society (Samuel, 2012).

This political reality poses a challenge for liberal democratic leaders as well as an opportunity for political parties to seize on voter insecurity to achieve electoral gains. However, the manner in which changing demographics

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 3154432113.

E-mail addresses: skjolly@maxwell.syr.edu (S.K. Jolly), digiusto@gmail.com (G.M. DiGiusto).

affect European public attitudes toward immigrants and minority racial groups are not well understood. With its combination of a large immigrant population and thriving radical right political movement, France provides a useful arena to evaluate the effects of immigrant concentration on public attitudes in a sub-national framework not feasible in a larger multi-country study. In this paper, we therefore explore how demographics shape public opinion in France, using the contact and threat theories as the starting point for understanding the dynamics between increasing immigrant populations and public opinion.

According to a simplified version of Allport's contact theory (1954), increased contact with immigrants should undermine xenophobic sentiment. However, Allport and other contact theorists specify the particular conditions under which contact can improve or even exacerbate inter-ethnic tensions. Threat theory argues that intergroup contact intensifies conflict due to competition over scarce resources (cf. Hjerm, 2009; Hood & Morris, 1998; Kopstein & Wittenberg, 2009; Oliver & Wong, 2003; Quillian, 1995; Rink, Phalet, & Swyngedouw, 2009). From this perspective, in regions with larger immigrant populations, there is more of a perceived group threat, leading to more antipathy toward the out-group (Hjerm, 2009, p. 49). As Rink et al. (2009, p. 412) assert, minority group size can trigger group threat and increase prejudice regardless if the threat is real or simply perceived. This theory, therefore, offers a viable and testable alternative to contact theory.

Unfortunately, much of the research on the European context does not adequately test these theories, as it focuses on individuals nested in states as the unit of analysis, ignoring intra-national variation in immigrant concentration. Using public opinion data from the French Electoral Panel, 2002, economic data from Eurostat, and immigration figures from the 1999 French National Census, we use hierarchical linear models to evaluate the extent to which the presence of immigrant populations, measured at the department level,¹ shape public opinion and the expression of xenophobic attitudes. The immigrant population shares in French departments vary significantly, giving us significant leverage on the research question.

By using these various datasets and by focusing on only one country, we test the contact and threat theories against other arguments common in the literature, especially egocentric (pocket-book) and sociotropic (regional economic) factors (Lahav, 2004a). Identifying how contact with immigrant populations and political economic conditions shape public opinion, especially racist or xenophobic attitudes, is essential to understanding public attitudes to racial minorities and immigrants in France and elsewhere in Western Europe. To preview the findings, political economic conditions matter as expected, while the presence of large immigrant populations is associated with diminished local xenophobia. This finding challenges most of

the country-level research on immigrant concentration and xenophobia, and offers some hope for liberal multiculturalists who worry about the rise of the radical right in the midst of diverse European polities.

2. Contact and conflict theories

We follow a well-established research tradition that began with social psychologist Gordon Allport's study of what has come to be called contact theory. In *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), Allport outlines his theory that interaction among disparate groups in the pursuit of common goals undermines stereotypes and thereby fosters understanding, integration, and peaceable relations (Byman, 1998–1999, p. 720). According to the theory, interaction reveals inter-group similarities, overcoming the differences and skepticism that engender conflict and violence (Brown & Lopez, 2001, p. 281). A sizeable minority group, therefore, produces opportunities for interaction that can reduce distorted images or negative stereotypes (Ha, 2010). Subsequent development of the contact hypothesis focuses less on Allport's emphasis of groups' common humanity and more on their relative status and goals (Brown & Lopez, 2001, p. 282). According to the most common variants of the contact hypothesis (cf. Pettigrew, 1998), convergence among group status and objectives reduces conflict and promotes intergroup cooperation. Stein, Post and Rinden (2000, p. 289) simplify further, arguing that "any type of frequent non-negative contact between majority/minority groups will reduce prejudicial attitudes and policy positions irrespective of the setting or nature of the contact."

From a more skeptical view, contact at the group level increases rather than attenuates tension (Forbes, 1997; Brown & Lopez, 2001, p. 284). Allport himself was well aware of the chance that contact can have a negative effect on attitudes if the conditions are not optimal. For Forbes (1997, p. 146), contact theorists' optimistic conclusion overlooks the countervailing effects that cultural interaction might precipitate. Scholars dating back to V.O. Key have argued that contact with "the other" triggers threat perceptions and even contempt (Burns & Gimpel, 2000, p. 209).

Ha (2010, p. 30) offers the simplest articulation of this main alternative theory: "threat theory suggests that racial heterogeneity heightens racial tension: the larger the proportion of the racial minority group, the greater is the perceived competition among racial groups for jobs and other economic resources." Threat perception does not have to be objectively present; a subjective perception of vulnerability to people who are seen as different would be sufficient (Kopstein & Wittenberg, 2009, p. 415). Theoretically, this perceived competition can lead to increased animosity and prejudice, although the evidence is mixed (McClain et al., 2006, p. 575).

Empirically, Quillian (1995) notices the scarcity of studies testing the effects of size of minority group on levels of prejudice using individual and group-level variables simultaneously. In earlier studies, National Front support in France at the department level is positively correlated with the size of the foreign-born population. Such results con-

¹ France's administration is organized into 26 regions subdivided into 100 departments. Departments are further divided into arrondissements, then cantons, and then communes.

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