

The Rise in Sentiment Against Immigrants in Germany: Economic Concerns or Something

More?

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### Abstract

Politicians and governments with xenophobic and anti-immigration policies often cite the economic insecurity that immigrants create to justify these policies. The refugee crisis in Syria and other areas of the Middle East has made immigration a particularly salient topic in the western world and especially in the European Union (EU) in recent years. Germany leads the EU in receiving asylum seekers from the crisis and historically has a welcoming culture or *willkommenskultur* to refugees; it has also experienced a rise in sentiment against immigrants according to the World Values Survey. This paper seeks to find if economic insecurity has caused sentiment against immigrants to rise in Germany. To answer this question, this paper analyzes sentiment toward immigrants in terms of the percentage of surveyed Germans who indicated that they did not want immigrants or foreign workers as their neighbors in a World Values Survey question from 1992-2013. This paper analyzes Germans' economic security in terms of the unemployment rate meant to indicate individual economic well-being from 1991-2016 with data from the World Bank. Finding a lack of connection between the two variables, this paper argues that economic concerns cannot account for the rise in sentiment against immigrants in Germany. Upon further analysis, this paper finds that security concerns and dissatisfaction with current policy provoked the rise in sentiment against immigrants and led some German voters to seek different political solutions in the recent election.

Keywords: immigrants, refugees, willkommenskultur, Germany

## The Rise in Sentiment Against Immigrants in Germany: Economic Concerns or Something More?

### **Introduction and Roadmap**

“They’re taking our jobs,” or some derivative of this phrase, is a common refrain among politicians and their supporters who desire stronger restrictions on immigration. Politicians and governments who attempt to curtail immigration to their country often justify these policies by pointing to the economic insecurity that immigrants create. The refugee crisis in Syria and other areas of the Middle East caused by war and political instability has made immigration a particularly salient topic in the western world in recent years, especially in the European Union (EU). Germany leads the EU in receiving asylum seekers from the crisis; it has also experienced a rise in sentiment against immigrants according to the World Values Survey (2016) (Pew Research Center, 2016). Popular rhetoric surrounding immigration and job loss makes economic insecurity an appealing explanation. According to data from the World Bank (2016), however, Germany presently enjoys low unemployment. This paper analyzes sentiment against immigrants in comparison with unemployment rates in Germany from 1991-2016. Finding a lack of connection between the two variables, this paper argues that economic concerns cannot account for the rise in sentiment against immigrants in Germany. Upon further analysis, this paper finds that security concerns and dissatisfaction with current policy may have provoked the rise in sentiment against immigrants and led some German voters to seek different political solutions in the recent election.

In this paper, I will first describe how this paper treats the terms refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants. I will then briefly discuss the refugee crisis, the EU’s response, and

Germany's role and reaction. Next, I will examine the relationship between the unemployment rate and sentiment toward immigrants in Germany as expressed in the chart located in the appendix of this paper. Finding a lack of connection between the two variables, I will discuss viable explanations for this trend including security concerns and dissatisfaction with current policy. I will then address a counterargument by Mocan and Raschke (2016) that xenophobia and racism decrease during periods of economic security in Germany. Finally, I will recommend what Germany's political leadership can do to address rising antagonism to immigration and growing electoral support for parties like the Alternative for Germany (AfD) that purport these views.

### **Definitions and Terms**

The United Nations (UN) gives the terms immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker unique definitions. The UN (2016) defines a migrant as "someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, regardless of reason or legal status". The UN (2016) defines a refugee as a person who resides outside of his or her country due to fear of persecution or instability that requires external protection. The UN defines an asylum seeker as someone who seeks protection once he or she arrives in a country, as opposed to a refugee who gains protection prior to his or her arrival (UNESCO, n.d.). Despite these qualifications, the UN (2016) and Brad Blitz (2017, p. 395), author of "Another Story: What Public Opinion Data Tells Us About Refugee and Humanitarian Policy," agree that the general public conflates the terms refugee and migrant. This paper extends this conflation to asylum seeker. These distinctions matter to political and legal debates, but this paper seeks to understand popular opinion in Germany. Since the average

person would understand these terms similarly, this paper will treat refugees and asylum seekers as types of immigrants.

### **The Refugee Crisis and Germany's Response**

In 2011, civil war broke out in Syria; the violence and political instability has caused the external displacement of over 5 million Syrians to date, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or the UNHCR (2017). The UNHCR (2017) also reports that close to 1 million Syrians have sought asylum in Europe. The EU Member States operate under the Common European Asylum System, but according to the European Commission (n.d.), "the nature and the content of protection granted vary, sometimes widely, between Member States." According to the Pew Global Research Center (2016), more asylum seekers have applied to settle in Germany than any other country in the EU since 2012.

Longtime chancellor Angela Merkel has led Germany's open-door policy on immigration that likely encourages asylum seekers to apply for asylum in Germany (Leonard, 2016). Germany's *willkommenskultur*, or welcoming culture, characterizes Merkel's response to the crisis (Leonard, 2016). This tradition began when Germany established a new government in 1948 after the Holocaust (Mayer, 2016). The country's Basic Law guaranteed the right to asylum for people around the world facing persecution from their country of residence (Mayer, 2016). Many Germans' response to the influx of migrants in the recent refugee crisis demonstrates a commitment to this character: In 2015, German citizens worked to fulfill needs for refugees like food and water for which the government did not provide (Boulila and Cari, 2017, p. 287). Not every German, however, has embraced the opportunity to accept asylum seekers (World Values Survey, 2016).

### **Analysis of Economic Security and Sentiment Against Immigrants**

Although many asylum seekers have found refuge in Germany, there are a rising number of Germans who express unwelcome attitudes to immigrants. In 2013, the World Values Survey (2016) asked Germans to indicate different groups of people whom they would not like as neighbors. 21% of respondents indicated the response choice of “immigrants and foreign workers” (World Values Survey, 2016). This is an increase from 2001 and 2006, in which 8% and 11% of respondents, respectively, indicated immigrants and foreign workers as groups of people they would not want as neighbors (World Values Survey, 2014). The data shows that Germany experienced similarly high levels of sentiment against immigrants and foreign workers in 1992 with 17% of respondents indicating this choice (World Values Survey, 2014). It should be noted that Germany experienced an influx of refugees in the early 1990s which likely accounts for the higher rate in this year (Mayer, 2017). The rise in Germans with an unwelcome attitude to immigrants corresponds to the increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees resettling in Germany. This information does not reveal, however, what provoked a negative attitude toward immigrants in an increased number of Germans.

This paper examines the unemployment levels in Germany to help illuminate the cause of rising negativity toward immigrants. Popular rhetoric in western countries suggests that immigrants cause economic burden and a loss of jobs. This paper seeks to find if this explains the trend in Germany. This paper analyzes Germans’ economic security in terms of unemployment rates as it indicates individual well-being and may be tracked from 1991 until present from data from the World Bank. If the two variables expressed here form a positive correlation, then it would be reasonable to assume that economic stress and loss of jobs caused

Germans to form a negative opinion of immigrants and foreign workers. In this scenario, Germans may see immigrants and foreign workers as taking jobs from native Germans. The chart in the appendix compares the unemployment levels as the independent variable and sentiment against immigrants and foreign workers in Germany from 1991 until present as the dependent variable. The most recent data for the dependent variable was recorded in 2013.

Based on the trend in the chart found in the appendix, this paper accepts the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between the two variables and that the rise in sentiment against immigrants and foreign workers appears unattributed to economic concerns. The unemployment rate in 1992 was 6.3% and the sentiment against immigrants was 17% (World Bank, n.d.; World Values Survey, 2014). The unemployment rate in 2006 was 10.25% and the sentiment against immigrants was 11% (World Bank, n.d.; World Values Survey, 2014). The unemployment rate in 2013 was 5.23% and the sentiment against immigrants was 21% (World Bank, n.d.; World Values Survey, 2016). As the unemployment rate fell, the sentiment against immigrants rose. From the comparison of these two variables, it is evident that economic insecurity as expressed by the unemployment rate does not provoke a rise in sentiment against immigrants in Germany.

### **Supporting Research and an Alternative Explanation**

Other research supports the null hypothesis and presents evidence that security concerns may explain this trend. In 2016 the Pew Research Center found that 61% of Germans believed that “refugees will increase the likelihood of terrorism in [their] country, whereas only 31% of Germans believed that refugees burden the economy (Wike, Stokes, & Simmons, 2016). Further, 75% of Germans expressed confidence in their economy in 2013 (Manevich, 2017).

This data point is particularly important because 2013 is the latest data available on the sentiment toward immigrants in Germany. In addition to a low unemployment rate this year, the vast majority of Germans expressed faith in the country's economy. This data supports the assertion that economic fears have not caused the rise in sentiment against immigrants, and suggests that security concerns may provide a better explanation.

Other evidence from recent surveys of respondents in the EU and Germany endorses the alternative explanation as well. The Special Eurobarometer 464b found that only 68% of respondents living in the EU in 2016 believed the European Union to be "a secure place to live," as opposed to 79% of respondents in 2015 (European Commission, 2016, p. 4). In the same survey, 95% of respondents cited terrorism as a chief obstacle to EU security (European Commission, 2016, p. 4). Further, a survey from the European Parliament (2016) found that 55% of German respondents believed "the EU should strengthen its policy on security and defense in the European Union." The attitude of German citizens corresponds to the trend of citizens of other countries in the EU. Germans share a growing feeling of precariousness about their external security. This appears to be linked specifically to fears of terrorism. As discussed above, the Pew Research Center (2016) survey found that a majority of Germans believe terrorism will increase as the number of refugees grows. The data leads to an evident conclusion. Security concerns have contributed to the rise in sentiment against immigrants as Germans see growing numbers of refugees as a cause of unsafe situations such as terrorist attacks.

### **Political Consequences**

Germany's leading parties, including Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), face political consequences for the rise in sentiment against

immigrants (Federal Returning Officer, 2017). According to the Federal Returning Officer (2017) in Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party won 12.6% of the vote in 2017 provisional elections as opposed to 4.7% of the vote in 2013. The AfD party has gained popularity for its stances against Islam and migration (Leonard, 2016). The AfD party represents the segment of the population that does not wish to accept asylum seekers and desires greater restrictions on immigration. Due to the increase in voter support, the AfD will hold 94 seats in the 19th German Bundestag (Federal Returning Officer, 2017). Its electoral success makes the AfD the third most represented party in the Bundestag behind the CDU and SPD (Federal Returning Officer, 2017). Although the Pew Research Center (2017) finds that the AfD is overwhelmingly unpopular in Germany with 88% of Germans holding an unfavorable view of the party, its increase in voter support in the recent election shows its message resonates with some German constituents. Security concerns may have led many German voters to seek alternative political solutions to the policies of the leading mainstream parties.

Researcher and author Carsten Zelle supports this analysis in “Social Dealignment Versus Political Frustration: Contrasting Explanations of the Floating Vote in Germany” published in 1995. It should be noted that the highest levels of migration to Germany were previously in the early 1990s when migrants fled the Balkans to escape war in Yugoslavia (Mayer, 2017). As mentioned previously, the data analyzed in the chart located in the appendix shows that Germany experienced similar levels of sentiment against immigrants from 1989-1993. In this paper, Zelle (1995) analyzes the increase in political dissatisfaction and electoral volatility in the period 1990-1993 and attributes it to “the concept of the ‘frustrated floating voter’” (p. 345). The ‘frustrated floating voter, as defined by Zelle (1995), may switch votes due to “dissatisfaction

with the own party, with the party system and with the political system” (p. 332). This model understood in the context of the refugee crisis in Germany in the early 1990s offers a system of analysis for the political rise of the AfD and frustration of German voters today. It is likely that voters concerned about security and dissatisfied with Merkel’s open door immigration policy found an alternative in the AfD party.

### **An Opposing View**

In contrast to the findings of this paper, in “Economic Well-Being and Anti-Semitic, Xenophobic, and Racist Attitudes in Germany,” Mocan and Raschke (2016) argue that racism and xenophobia diminish when “people feel more secure about their economic conditions” (p. 45). Their research is intriguing and supported by extensive data, but the authors form their conclusions from data collected in 1996 and 2006 (Mocan and Raschke, 2016, p. 42). These years fall after and before the refugee crises of the early 1990s and present day. The data that forms the basis for this paper’s conclusions captures unemployment rate and sentiment against immigrants from 1991-2016 and finds no connection between these two variables. Due to the limited years the conclusion of Mocan and Raschke (2016) rests on, this paper maintains its position that sentiment toward immigrants is not connected to economic well-being.

### **Suggestions for Germany’s Political Leadership**

This paper finds that sentiment toward immigrants is not affected by levels of economic security in Germany. It appears that security concerns and dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties may offer an alternative explanation for the rise in sentiment against immigrants. These concerns and frustrations have manifested in concrete political consequences for mainstream political parties. The AfD won 94 seats in the 19th German Bundestag in 2017 as

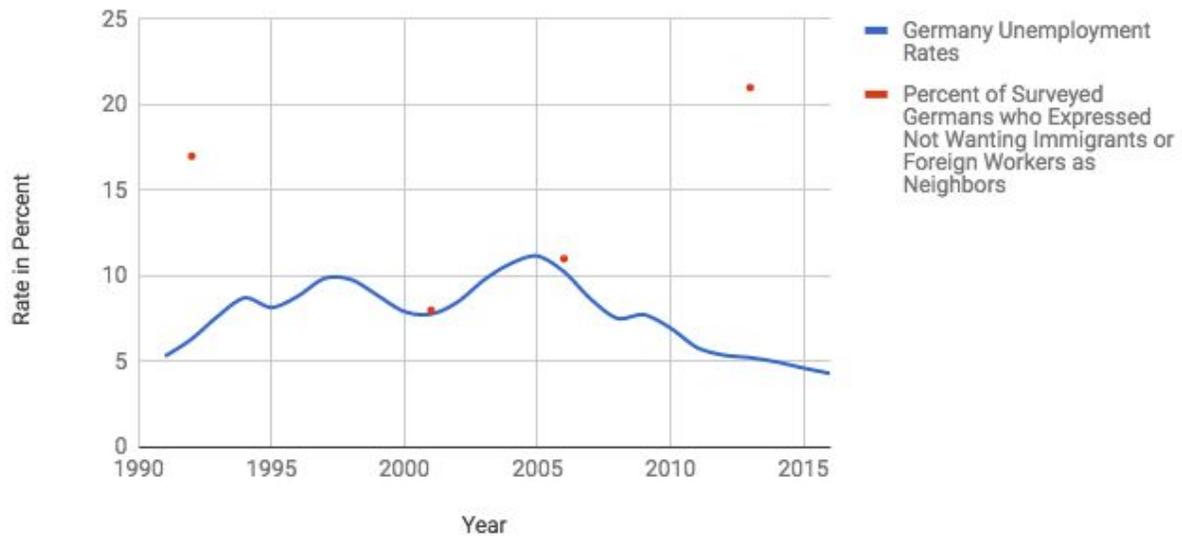
compared to its failure to win representation in 2013 (Federal Returning Officer, 2017). Its anti-immigration and anti-Islam stance has resonated with voters. German political leadership should pay attention to voters' security concerns by enacting more thorough processes by which refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants enter the country. This may calm fears and allow Germany to continue its tradition of *willkommenskultur* to the foreigner.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examines sentiment against immigrants in comparison to unemployment rates to determine whether rising sentiment against immigrants in Germany may be attributed to economic insecurity. Based on the data represented in the chart in the appendix, this paper finds no connection between the two variables and embraces the null hypothesis. Other research shows that security concerns and frustration with current policy in Germany may account for the rise in sentiment against immigrants and the AfD party which represents anti-immigration views. While research from Mocan and Raschke (2016) finds that economic well-being diminishes xenophobic attitudes in Germany, the years from which their data was collected are too limited to discount the findings of this paper. This paper recommends that the German political leadership should seek to calm security fears through policy to preserve Germany's *willkommenskultur*.

## Appendix

## German Sentiment about Immigrants/Foreign Workers as Compared to Unemployment Rates



Source for Unemployment Rates: World Bank 1991-2016

Source for Sentiment Against Immigrants: World Values Survey 1992\*, 2001\*, 2006, 2013

\*Note: The World Values Survey has not released the exact years for data collected in Germany in the second wave (1990-1994) and the fourth wave (1999-2004). The author selected the median year of the waves for clearer data expression and discussion.

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