

A Supranational Responsibility:

Perceptions of Immigration in the European Union

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the prevalence of anti-immigrant sentiment in Western European EU Member-States and political salience of immigration, measuring the different levels of prioritization of the issue in national policy and EU policy. It primarily utilizes and compares survey results from fifteen EU Member States on immigration. It also looks at how the EU's common immigration policy, especially in regards to third-culture nationals, is a point of contention between the attitudes of citizens of nations and Eurocrats, despite the fact that Europeans favor a common policy. This paper concludes that EU Member States view immigration as an issue that is and should be legislated on a supranational level to a greater extent than a national level. The discrepancy between Europeans' negative feelings about immigrants from outside the EU and pro-immigration policies determined by Eurocrats should direct future EU policymaking in the future, otherwise it could cause Europeans to lose faith in the EU as immigration becomes increasingly salient and increasingly Europeanized and denationalized, propelling the rise of Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant political parties.

## **Introduction**

For the first time in over fifty years, an “openly nationalist party” has won parliamentary seats in Germany’s 2017 national election (Connolly, 2017). This is alarming, since the country has historically staved off nationalist parties out of aversion to anything resembling the Nazi party of World War II; however, this trend is hardly unique in the region. The Alternative for Germany party stands alongside others built on anti-immigrant platforms, like France’s National Front, the United Kingdom Independence Party, and other parallel parties. Anti-immigrant sentiment has taken hold of Western Europe. Despite nationalist parties gaining votes and seats in their respective nations’ elections, immigration is not simply a national issue, but also a supranational issue, since the European Union has a hand in determining migration policy. After establishing that general anti-immigration attitudes towards those from outside the EU are pervasive in Western Europe, this paper will analyze data from fifteen EU Member States to prove that citizens of the EU do not see their own parliaments as the primary arbitrators of immigration policy; rather, the European Union holds a larger share of responsibility to solve the issue of immigration in the eyes of many Europeans, which could have ramifications on the legitimacy of the EU.

## **Methods**

This paper primarily uses results from the Standard Eurobarometer 83 to measure attitudes towards immigration. This particular survey, taken in Spring 2015, is ideal not only because of availability of data from other sources, but also because it predates the Brexit vote, which alters data from the United Kingdom in relation to attitudes towards the European Union. The fifteen countries analyzed are western Member States of the EU because the Eurobarometer

only surveys EU members, and because EU membership is intrinsic to the relationship evaluated in this paper.

To measure general anti-immigrant sentiment in each country, this paper uses results from the question that records the percentage of whether citizens felt “very positive,” “fairly positive,” “fairly negative,” or “very negative” about immigration from outside the EU, for which “fairly negative” and “very negative” are combined to create an aggregate measure of negativity for clarity, since cross-referencing “very negative” results with the same variables as the aggregate negative category produced no relevant differences in correlation (European Commission, 2015). A similar question measuring how participants felt about immigrants from other EU states was not cross-referenced with the other variables because the largely positive responses would not be relevant in determining correlations between anti-immigrant sentiments and other variables.

The level of general anti-immigrant attitudes is cross-referenced with a variety of indicators taken from 2015: GDP per capita (retrieved from the World Bank), levels of attachment to one’s own country (retrieved from the Eurobarometer survey), and levels of unemployment, levels of population growth caused by migration, and percentage of immigrants from outside the EU (retrieved from Eurostat).

To measure the salience of anti-immigrant attitudes in policy discussions, this paper compares results from the Eurobarometer survey questions asking participants to identify the top two issues facing their country, their lives personally, and the EU (European Commission, 2015). Measurements of survey participants’ views on the EU’s role in immigration policy are also analyzed in this paper.

## Results

General anti-immigrant sentiment, measured by the percentage of respondents who identified a negative reaction to “immigration of people from outside of the EU,” is prevalent across the fifteen countries studied in this paper (European Commission, 2015). With Greece reporting the highest levels of negativity at eighty-five percent, over half of survey respondents indicated opposition to immigrants from outside of the EU in all but three countries: Sweden, Spain, and Ireland (see Figure 1 in the Appendix) (European Commission, 2015). As a direct measurement that does not depend on participants’ reaction to other variables, the results of this question are the most straightforward and baseline indicator of overall opinion about immigration in each country. Therefore, when the majority of survey respondents express negativity towards immigration from outside the EU, this indicates that the majority of Europeans in the countries included in analysis hold an anti-immigrant position towards non-European citizens.

Because this indicator most directly represents general levels of anti-immigrant attitudes for each country, this variable is used to determine whether the level of anti-immigrant attitudes correlate with any other variables. No correlation was found when the percentage of negative feelings towards immigration from outside the EU was tested against GDP per capita, levels of attachment to one’s own country, percent of unemployment, percent of population growth caused by migration, and percent of migrants from outside of the EU (European Commission, 2015, “GDP per capita (current US\$) | Data,” n.d., “Migration and migrant population statistics - Statistics Explained,” 2017, “Unemployment statistics - Statistics Explained,” 2017). There are many variables that can also be tested for correlation, and a sample size of fifteen countries is

relatively small; however, a lack of correlation between the selected variables indicates that a variety of variables influence anti-immigrant sentiments, rather than just one causal indicator.

While the measurement of negative feelings towards immigrants from outside the EU establishes a general picture of attitudes towards immigrant populations, it does not necessarily measure political salience. One might have general negative feelings towards immigrants, but if other policy issues are more pertinent, an individual would not vote for an anti-immigrant or nationalistic platform if it did not satisfy the voter's higher priorities. Assessing voter priorities is essential to determining how pertinent attitudes towards immigration will be in elections. When respondents named the top two issues facing their country, the frequency by which they listed immigration varied greatly by country, ranging from only three percent of Portuguese to forty-six percent of Germans identifying immigration as one of the top two concerns; however, immigration has increased as a priority in national policy across the entire EU (European Commission, 2015). In contrast to general levels of anti-immigrant sentiment, where the majority in all but three countries hold anti-immigration sentiments towards those from outside the EU, the number of respondents who list immigration as one of the top two issues facing their country never breaks fifty percent due to a wider range of variables; however, it is perceived as one of the top two issues for many of the fifteen countries (European Commission, 2015).

While there is a wide variation of prioritization of immigration as a national policy issue between countries, very few respondents identified immigration as one of the top two issues facing their lives personally, the highest percentage of which being eleven percent in Italy (European Commission, 2015). This shows that immigration has relatively low direct impact on one's personal life relative to other issues, even though it might be seen as a major issue on the national scale.

Scale proves to be of continual importance when analyzing results of whether immigration is listed as one of the two top issues for the European Union. Furthermore, despite having a large number of options to choose, fifty percent or over identify immigration as one of the top two issues facing the European Union in two countries: Denmark and Germany (European Commission, 2015). For every country, a larger percent of respondents list immigration as a key issue for the European Union than those who list immigration as a key issue facing their country, making immigration the overall top priority for the entire European Union (European Commission, 2015). This means that as the scale broadens, from the personal to national to supranational realm, immigration is perceived as a greater priority (see Figure 2 in the Appendix). Furthermore, each country's level of national prioritization of immigration is positively correlated with its respective level of prioritization of immigration as a European issue demonstrating that the higher a country prioritizes immigration as a national issue, the higher it will prioritize it as a European issue (see Figure 3 in the Appendix). To reinforce that immigration is a supranational issue, "an absolute majority in all Member States are in favour of a common European migration policy" (European Commission, 2015).

### **Discussion**

Both the generally negative attitude towards immigrants from outside the EU found in the majority of the states analyzed as well as a rise in prioritization of immigration on both the national and supranational level explain why there is a growing trend of xenophobic, anti-immigrant right-wing parties gaining power across Europe (European Commission, 2015; Inglehart & Norris, 2017, p. 452). Since already present and growing dislike towards immigrants from outside the EU is also becoming more politically salient, it is no surprise that anti-immigrant parties are becoming viable options for voters while, at the same time, anti-immigrant

platforms are becoming viable platforms for parties. For example, Germany prioritizes immigration as a policy issue since it is experiencing the highest influx of immigrants, one of the highest rates of immigration when compared to population, and one of the highest rates of immigrants from outside of the EU (“Migration and migrant population statistics - Statistics Explained,” 2017). Thus, a nationalist party capitalized upon this to gain power in the 2017 election (Connolly, 2017). Although it is more likely that voter preferences determine party platforms, party platforms can make certain issues more salient in elections, so the relationship between the two is more symbiotic than causal.

The overall dislike towards immigrants from outside the EU provides an interesting point of departure from the perception of immigration as a low-priority problem in one’s own personal life. The majority of Europeans from the states analyzed may feel negatively about immigrants from outside the EU, but they do not view immigration as a problem to be solved in the personal realm. This could indicate that attitudes towards immigration are a byproduct of higher priority issues in one’s personal life, or, more likely, attitudes towards immigration are mainly shaped by the political sphere. The entire concept of immigration hinges on political processes; not only are borders themselves political constructs, but the path to residency and assimilation is a monstrosity of bureaucracy and overly-politicized procedures.

Although a lack of prioritization of immigration in one’s personal life is easily explained by the political nature of immigration itself, the increased prioritization from the national to supranational level requires a less obvious explanation. Perhaps the obvious answer for why immigration would be seen as a higher priority for the EU than one’s own nation is that immigration is simply perceived as a bigger problem for other EU Member States than for one’s own state. However, this is not the case because, even for the countries where immigration is

highly prioritized, immigration is always seen as a greater priority for the EU (European Commission, 2015). For example, since Germany has one of the highest levels of immigration and prioritizes immigration as the most significant national problem, one might expect Germany to view immigration as a higher priority within one's own country than the EU as a whole, since the rest of the EU is not struggling with immigration to the same extent as Germany, but this expectation is not correct (European Commission, 2015, "Migration and migrant population statistics - Statistics Explained," 2017). Instead, data would suggest that Europeans see immigration as the number one issue for the EU because Europeans see immigration as more of a European issue than a national one.

The European Union has large influence over immigration policy in Europe, mainly through a common immigration policy and European citizenship, "which follows automatically" from national citizenship and allows for freedom of movement (Strumia, 2016, p. 421). Although states are able to make their own immigration policies, they are always complementary to the EU policy, which acts as a baseline and, some argue, degrades the individual sovereignty of the state because "the rules and narratives of European citizenship protect a right to belong in a domain where national rules and narratives, as well as the rules under the EU common immigration policy, rather point towards the state's power to exclude" (Strumia, 2016, p. 435). Because the EU's immigration policy sets the baseline immigration system and can supersede national policy, this would explain Europeans' tendency to perceive immigration as a supranational priority over a national one. This idea is reaffirmed by the fact that an absolute majority of citizens in EU Member States support a common European immigration policy (European Commission, 2015). Furthermore, some states advocate for a more "binding" immigration policy in order to intentionally force themselves to relinquish domestic power (Luedtke, 2009, p. 20). Not only do

citizens see immigration as a supranational issue, some states are willing to deliberately give up their domestic power over the issue to make progress toward a common policy for the EU.

The concept of a common EU immigration policy and European citizenship most directly relates to anti-immigrant sentiments in the case of third-country nationals, or individuals who immigrate from a country outside of the EU. The EU has attempted to construct a system of rights for third-country nationals after the previous immigration system resulted in “special rights and privileges for EU citizens, but a lack of rights and privileges for [third-country nationals]” that restricted freedom of movement (Luedtke, 2009). Although this may seem beneficial because it lessens discrimination, allowing third-country nationals full European citizenship exacerbates predominant anti-immigrant sentiment towards those from outside the EU, since allowing third-country nationals free movement makes it easier for immigrants from outside the EU to move into one’s own country after they obtain citizenship from another country. Since the “Eurocrats” making the EU policies are not bound to the popular vote, they can make pro-immigrant policies, while, at the same time, state legislators attempt to define third-culture nationals as a “security threat” (Luedtke, 2009). Due to this dynamic, populations are more likely to take issue with EU immigration policy than their own state policy, since state legislators are pressured to appease anti-immigration sentiments. Although respondents in the survey might find immigration to be the greatest problem facing the EU, as the survey results suggest, they might turn to national and nationalistic representatives for the solution, which would explain why Eurosceptic right-wing extremists are gaining ground through anti-immigration platforms (European Commission, 2015; Inglehart & Norris, 2017). However, Europeans dissatisfied with current immigration policy would likely prefer a stricter common immigration policy over a de-Europeanization of immigration policy.

The discrepancy between the Eurocrats' actions and the desires of their citizens on the issue of immigration birthed the right-wing nationalist populist parties in Europe. Because populists are characterized by their anti-elite ideology, populism and nativism go hand in hand in Europe because the elitism of the EU can be most clearly demonstrated when it enacts policies that far-right parties paint as favoring immigrants over native Europeans (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 18). Though Eurosceptical on all fronts, these populist parties push their anti-immigrant policies the hardest, riding the wave of hostilities towards immigrants aroused by the Great Recession and migrant crisis (Dancygier & Donnelly, 2014). If the EU fails to solve Europeans' concerns about immigration, these Eurosceptic populist parties could continue to gain power and threaten the EU's existence. However, the fact that the majority of Europeans support a common European immigration policy suggests that, if the EU could enact a common policy that sufficiently addressed problems with immigration, it would neutralize this threat from populist parties, since Europeans are not necessarily against the EU, they are simply dissatisfied with the EU's current immigration policy.

### **Conclusion**

Widespread anti-immigrant sentiment is growing in the current political landscape of Western Europe. Immigration is increasingly perceived as a function of the EU for Member States due to a common European immigration policy that can supersede state sovereignty. While more and more Europeans look to the EU as the foundational creator of immigration policy, more and more have become increasingly dissatisfied with Eurocrats' disregard of negative attitudes towards non-EU immigrants. The dynamic between European citizenship, rights for third-culture nationals, and a general negative attitude towards immigrants from outside the EU has caused a paradox where Europeans support a common European immigration

policy but at the same time find the current policy to be at odds with their anti-immigrant values. This incongruity has birthed nationalist populist parties that advocate for Euroscepticism based on the premise that the EU is elitist and ignores the concerns of the people. Because immigration is the top issue of the EU for many Europeans, adopting a policy that closer mirrors European citizens priorities while still maintaining a common European policy might restore the EU's legitimacy while cutting off the rising momentum of right-wing nationalist parties. However, this is largely speculation since Europeans' hostility towards immigrants might be a result of economic and cultural insecurities not directly related to the actual realities of immigration itself, so Europeans may still perceive immigration as an alarming issue caused by EU policy despite changes to the scope and implementation of immigration policy.

Further research could analyze to what extent prioritization of immigration at both the national and supranational level is actualized through anti-immigrant parties gaining control and policies being put into place. Furthermore, it is important to note that this paper primarily focuses on citizens' *perceptions* of immigration, without including analysis on the actual economic and cultural impact of immigration, so examination of causes of these perceptions is needed to enact policies that rectify the disjunct between anti-immigrant views and EU policy. Analyzing how the rise of nationalist populist parties coincided with the Great Recession and then the Syrian refugee crisis could be key in determining what factors played a larger role in their growing prominence, and, therefore, what problems the EU should focus on if it wishes to remedy Euroscepticism.

### Appendix

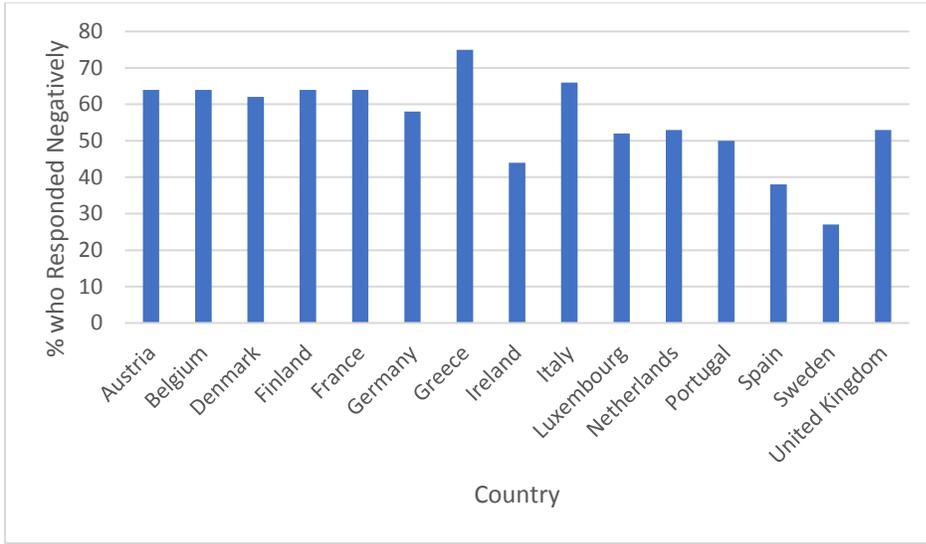


Figure 1. Negative responses to immigration of people from outside the EU (Standard Eurobarometer Survey 83, Spring 2015)

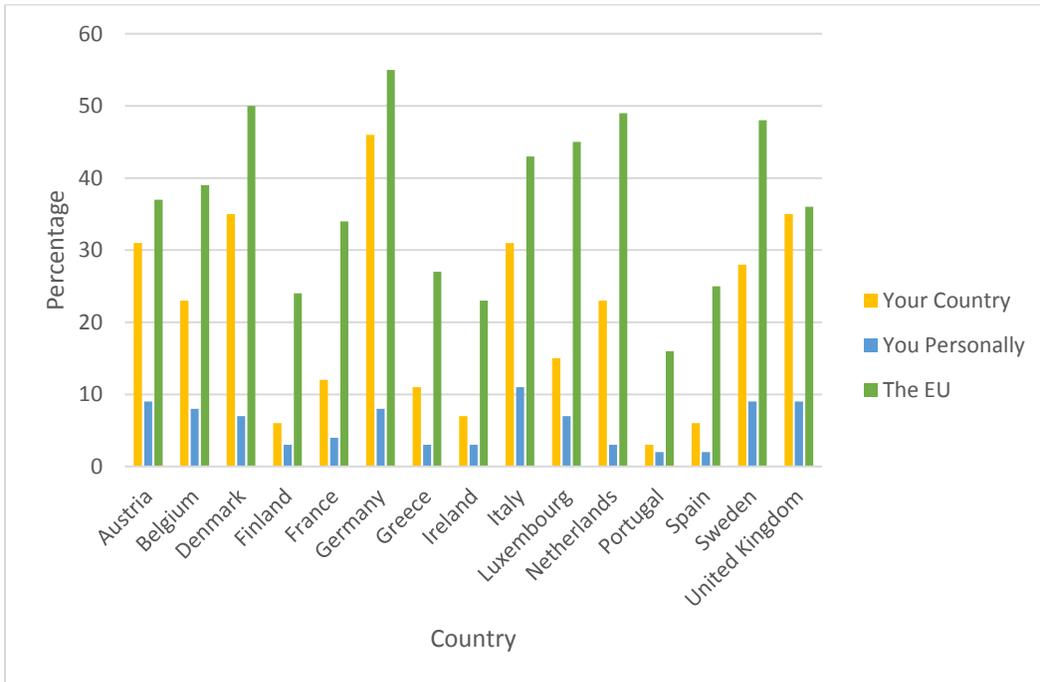
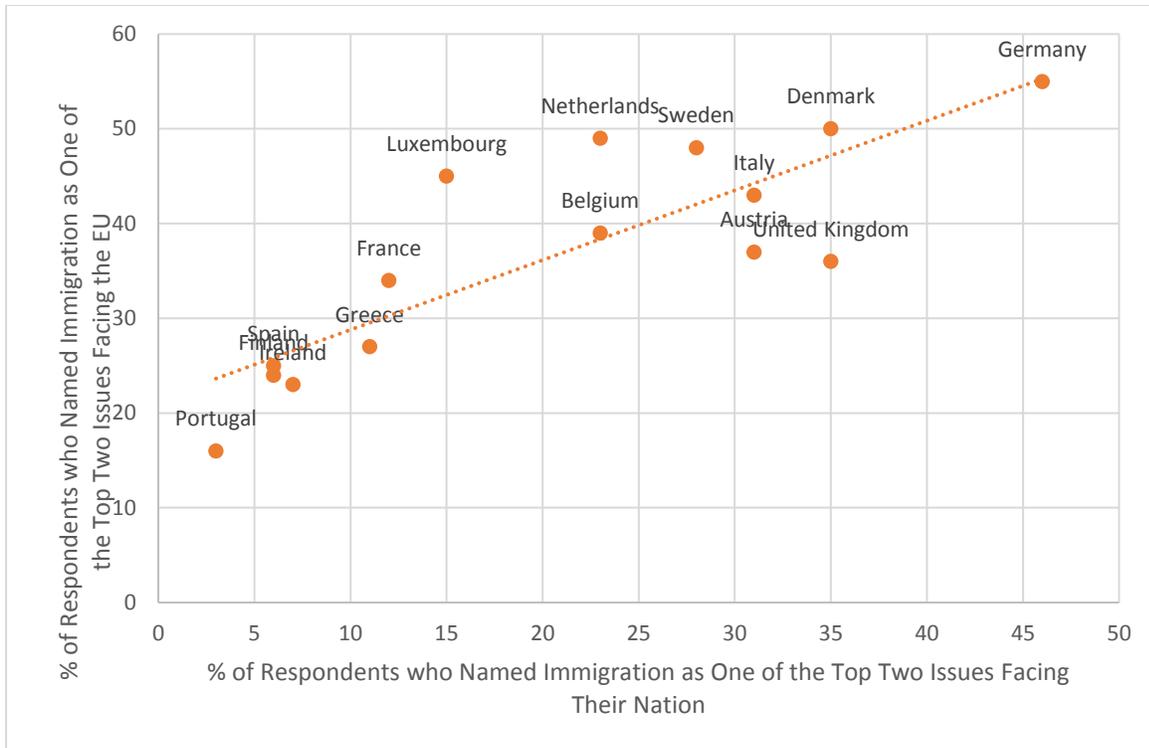


Figure 2. Percent of participants who view immigration as one of the top two issues facing: your country, you personally, the EU (Standard Eurobarometer Survey 83, Spring 2015)



*Figure 3.* Prioritization of immigration in one's own country vs. the EU, shows the correlation between those who view immigration as one of the top two issues in their own country with those who view it as one of the top two issues in the EU (Standard Eurobarometer Survey 83, Spring 2015)

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