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Migration, identity and political economy in a globalizing world

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Migration, identity and political economy in a globalizing world*

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September 2026

Abstract

In this chapter, we discuss how immigration affects identity, with implications for politics. We build on key insights from social psychology and their formalization in economics to derive predictions about how immigration changes both self-identification and categorization of others into groups. These immigration-induced identity changes can explain two recent political transformations that have characterized many Western democracies: the rise of right-wing populism and the realignment of voters and parties along a socio-cultural, rather than economic, dimension of political conflict. We also discuss how immigration can reshape group boundaries and political cleavages, depending on the characteristics of immigrants, host populations, and the local context. We highlight open questions and possible directions for future research.

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Keywords: Immigration, refugees, social identity, nationalism, redistribution, populism, polarization.

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1 Introduction

This chapter investigates how immigration influences political outcomes through the channel of social identity. Across Western democracies, a sharp rise in both voluntary and forced migration has coincided with major political developments, including the surge of right-wing populism and political polarization. A growing body of research in political economy suggests that this correlation is mediated by psychological mechanisms related to group identity and status. Immigration brings together groups that differ along multiple dimensions—such as physical appearance, socioeconomic status, and cultural background—and sometimes find themselves in conflict over resources like jobs, housing, or public services. These dynamics activate social identity concerns among voters, which in turn affect political preferences, behavior, as well as the strategies of politicians and parties. The goal of this chapter is to provide a coherent framework for understanding these processes, by integrating insights from social psychology and political economy.

In Section 2, we begin by documenting descriptive patterns that highlight the growing salience of immigration in Western democracies. Since the second half of the 20th century, voluntary and forced migration flows—driven by globalization, conflict, and environmental change—have surged. These movements have not only transformed the ethnic and cultural composition of many receiving societies but have also coincided with major shifts in political alignments. Right-wing nationalist parties have gained electoral traction, and political discourse has increasingly focused on cultural rather than economic issues. Drawing on descriptive analyses of refugee flows and party manifestos, and surveying a broad literature, we show that higher inflows of refugees are associated with more nationalist and anti-redistribution positions among parties, as well as with increasing polarization over issues of multiculturalism and diversity. At the same time, refugee inflows are also correlated with heightened national identification among voters. These patterns, observed over the past three decades, echo historical developments in the United States during the Age of Mass Migration (1850–1920), when European immigration sparked similar nativist responses and weakened support for the welfare state.

The fact that immigration—both historically and today—has favored political forces that combine nativism with efforts to curtail the welfare state presents a puzzle for standard

economic explanations. The literature suggests that, more than concerns about economic competition, immigration often triggers perceptions of cultural threat and demands for restrictive immigration policies, even when immigrants have a positive economic impact on natives. Moreover, the shift away from left-wing parties and redistributive policies has been especially pronounced among voters with lower levels of education and skills—those who, in theory, would be most economically vulnerable to competition from predominantly low-skilled immigrants and stand to gain the most from an expanded welfare state. The fact that voters’ nationalism has also risen in response to immigration suggests that identity considerations may play a role in mediating these political developments.

Section 3 lays the groundwork for explaining how this process may unfold. A large body of research across disciplines, including recent contributions in economics, shows that group identity influences behavior by shaping individuals’ preferences and beliefs. We offer a framework for understanding how immigration may trigger such shifts. This framework builds on two theories from social psychology—Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT)—which provide the basis for studying endogenous identity formation and group categorization. In addition to being supported by robust experimental evidence, these theories have also served as a formal foundation for recent political economy models that explain how immigration can lead to shifts in political equilibria.

This framework highlights two key effects of immigration. First, according to SIT, immigration can reshape self-identification by altering both the perceived similarity to social groups and the relative status of those groups. Crucially, immigration decreases natives’ identification with groups defined by attributes shared with immigrants. For example, low-skilled immigration may weaken identification with the working class among native workers while strengthening identification with the national group. This reorientation of identity has important political implications, as group identification entails internalizing the group’s welfare and supporting policies that benefit it. Second, SCT offers a cognitive perspective on how the arrival of culturally distant migrants may change the salience of specific identity dimensions—such as race or nativity—and shift the boundaries of in-groups and outgroups. Specifically, immigration increases the salience of cleavages defined by attributes not shared between natives and immigrants, particularly when immigrants with those attributes are perceived as threatening. Empirical evidence from both historical

and contemporary settings supports the idea that large inflows of immigrants or minorities can trigger processes of recategorization, leading to the assimilation of some groups and the further marginalization of others.

We link these identity changes triggered by immigration to political outcomes in Section 4. First, we examine the rise of right-wing populism, and discuss how both group-based opposition to redistribution and nationalist identification among low-skilled voters can help explain why immigration benefits parties that combine cultural conservatism with economic retrenchment. Second, we explore how immigration has contributed to a realignment of political conflict along a socio-cultural dimension. We review papers showing that immigration raises the salience of identity groups—particularly along cultural lines—crowding out class-based identities and contributing to cultural polarization.

In Sections 5 and 6, we examine how various factors mediate the relationship between immigration and identity. Contact between immigrants and natives as well as the assimilation trajectories of immigrants can either exacerbate or mitigate identity-based tensions. Moreover, heterogeneity in the characteristics of both immigrants (e.g., skills, religion) and natives (e.g., education, values) plays a crucial role in shaping these dynamics. We review the literature from settings beyond Europe and North America to illustrate the importance of this heterogeneity and to show how insights from our framework may carry different political implications in countries with distinct racial, religious, and ethnic compositions compared to Western democracies.

In Section 7, we conclude by taking stock and highlighting open questions. The frameworks we discuss imply a number of testable—yet still untested—predictions about how voters' identification might shift and which social groups may become salient, depending on the characteristics of immigrants, host populations, and local context. There is also significant scope to explore how and when identity considerations among voters lead to the strategic politicization of immigration by politicians. As the projected number of migrants driven by conflict and climate change continues to rise (Kulp & Strauss 2019), this research agenda is likely to grow in importance.

2 Motivating patterns

Interest in the cultural and political effects of immigration has increased in recent years, prompted by a steady rise in migration flows. Figure 1 depicts this trend for the last three decades. According to the United Nations (UN), the number of immigrants worldwide rose from 150 million in 1990 to 270 million in 2019 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2019). The past 30 years have also been characterized by a dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers and refugees, driven by extreme weather events, international conflicts, and domestic unrest. The global population of forcibly displaced people has grown from 15.9 million in 1995 to 38.5 million in 2023 (Figure 2).¹ While most forcibly displaced individuals live within the same country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2024), cross-border displacement has grown steadily. Projections suggest this trend will accelerate, with up to 1.2 billion people potentially displaced by 2050 due to environmental degradation, conflict, and civil unrest (Institute for Economics & Peace 2020).

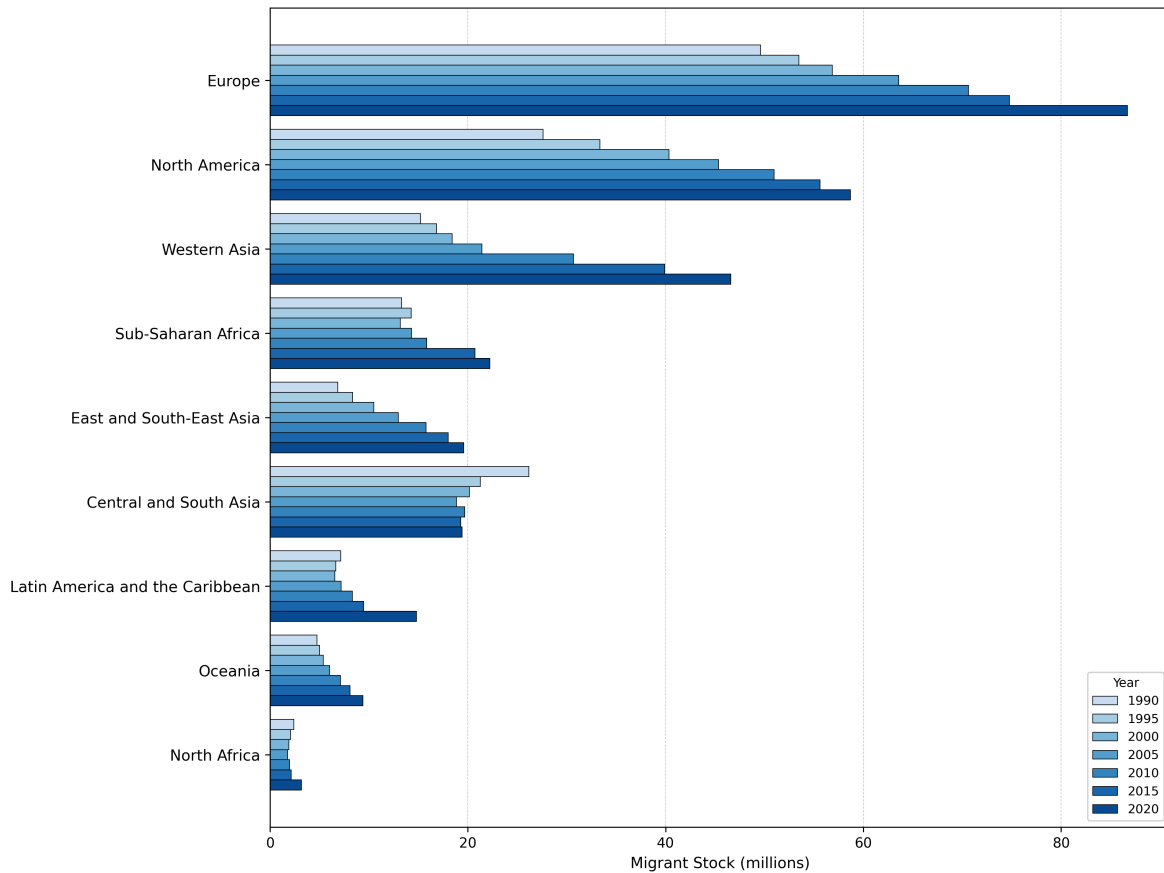
As shown in Figure 1, migrant flows until recently have been disproportionately directed towards “high income” countries, particularly in Europe and North America.² Between 1990 and 2019, the total number of migrants in Europe rose from 58 to 82 million; in North America, the respective number increased from 78 to 176 million. In terms of population shares, the foreign-born population in the US rose from 7.9% in 1990 to 13.9% in 2022.³ Several European countries experienced even larger changes: in Italy, Germany, and Sweden, the immigrant population share increased from 2.5%, 7.5%, and 9.2% to 10.6%, 18.8%, and 19.8%, respectively, between 1990 and 2020 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2020). As displayed in Figure 2, Europe has

¹Estimates on the number of refugees are taken from UNHCR, Refugee Data Finder, available at <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=8Zy1en>. For detailed reviews on the rise of refugee migration and its economic and political consequences, see Brell et al. (2020) and Becker & Ferrara (2019), among others.

²The World Bank defines as “high income” countries those with more than a gross national income (GNI) per capita of \$14,005. They are 86 in the 2025 fiscal year. For further information, see the World Bank’s country and lending groups’ page: <https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906519-world-bank-country-and-lending-groups>.

³See, for instance, estimates available from the Migration Policy Institute at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/immigrant-population-over-time?width=900&height=850&iframe=true>.

Figure 1: International Migration Stock by Destination, 1990-2020

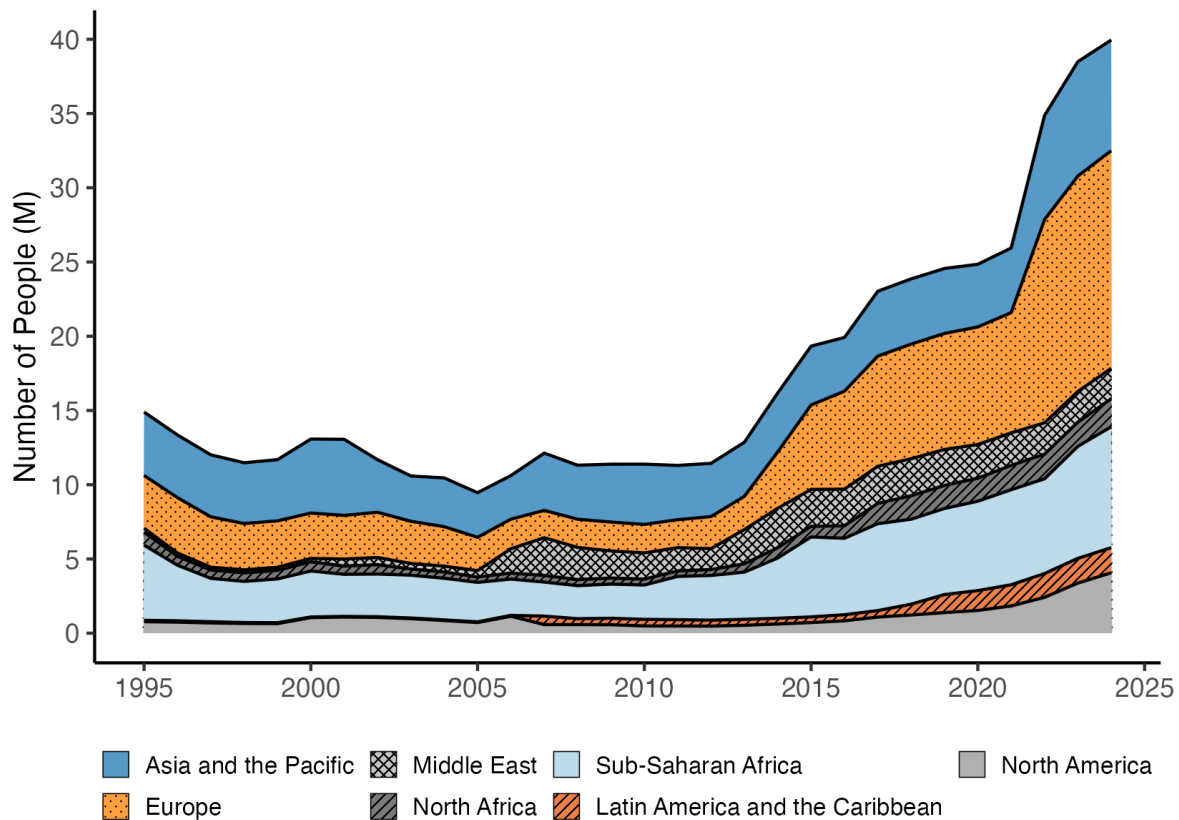


Notes: The figure shows estimates of the international migrant stock, disaggregated by area of destination, for the years 1990 to 2020, in five-year intervals. The data is based on national statistics and adapted from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020).

also been the primary destination of forced migrants, though this pattern may be changing with refugee inflows increasingly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

Large post-1990 immigrant and refugee flows in Europe and North America are the continuation of older trends. Europe experienced massive population movements as a result of WWII, including the forced displacement of 8 million ethnic Germans who were expelled from eastern Europe and transferred to West Germany (Peters 2022). Starting in the mid-1950s and until the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Italian, Greek, Turkish, and Spanish immigrants as well as workers from Former Yugoslavia moved to Western and Northern Europe, attracted by demand for labor (Messina 2007). The post-WWII period was also characterized by large flows of migrants from former colonies to European countries. It is estimated that between 1940 and the late 1970s, approximately 7 million Europeans returned from the colonies (e.g., the *pieds noir* in France and the *retornados* in Portugal). Over

Figure 2: Number of Refugees and Asylum Seekers by Destination, 1995-2024



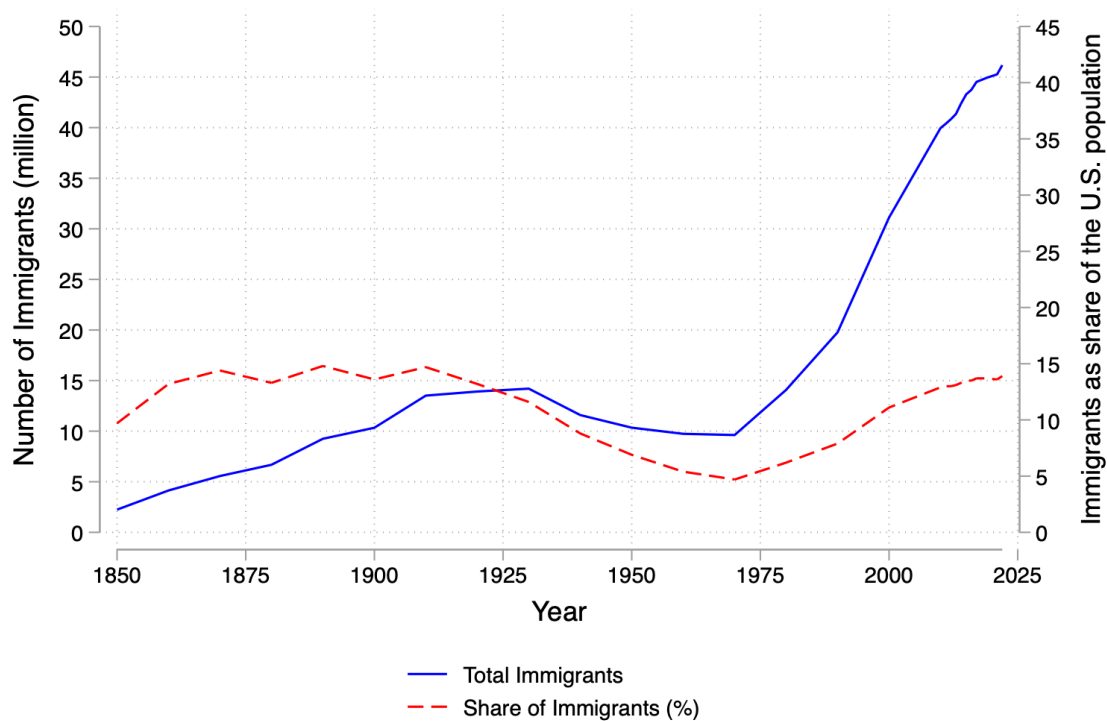
Notes: The figure plots the total number of refugees and asylum seekers, by region of destination, recorded between 1995 and 2024, according to official statistics from UNHCR.

time, the number of non-white migrants increased, eventually accounting for the majority of the flows (Bade 2003).

For North America as well, current migration trends are not unprecedented. During the Age of Mass Migration, between 1850 and 1920, more than 30 million European immigrants moved to the United States, and another 20 million moved to Canada and Latin America (Abramitzky & Boustan 2017). Though the total number of immigrants in the US is higher today than ever before, immigrants at the end of the Age of Mass Migration accounted for a larger share of the US population (14%) than today (see also Figure 3). Immigration restrictions imposed in the 1920s kept migration flows to the US low for more than 40 years, with the immigrant population share declining to 5% by 1970. However, migration rose again after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated the quota system, giving instead priority to family members of US citizens or legal permanent residents and to people who could be sponsored by employers. During this period, the composition of

migrants changed. While at the peak of the Age of Mass Migration, European immigrants accounted for almost 90% of the US foreign born population in the US, their share dropped to approximately 10% by 2023. This decline was mirrored by a steady rise in the number of immigrants from Latin and Central America as well as from Asia, who in 2023 accounted for 50% and 30% of the US foreign born population, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). The post-1965 era also marked a substantial surge in the number of undocumented immigrants. It is estimated that 11 million undocumented immigrants were living in the United States in 2022 (Pew Research Center 2024).

Figure 3: Immigration in US History, 1850-2022

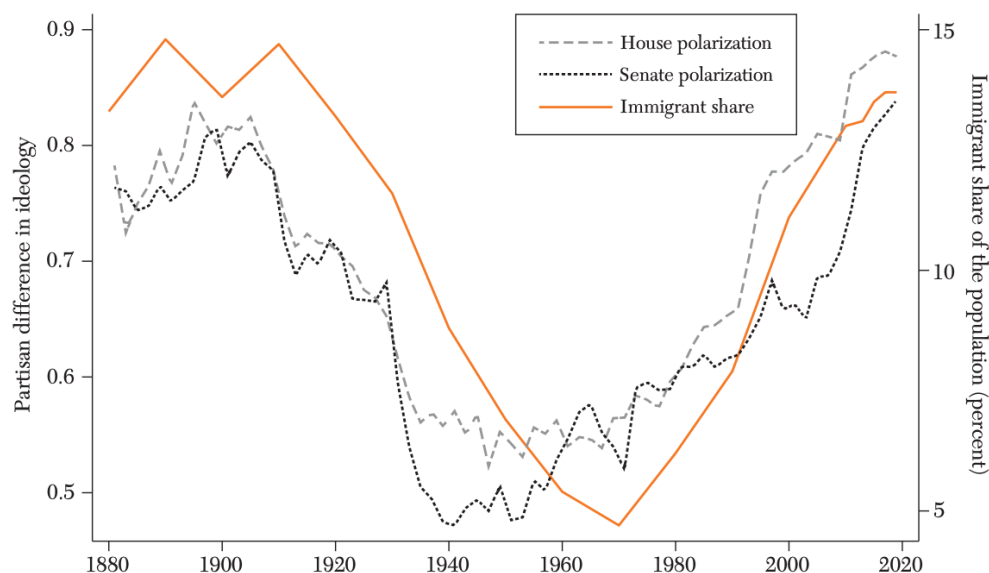


Notes: The figure plots the number of immigrants residing in the United States and their share within the total U.S. population over time, as aggregated by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI).

Both historically and in more recent decades, a stark temporal correlation can be observed between migration flows and changes in the political landscape. In the US during the early 20th century, migration, particularly from Eastern and Southern Europe, increased support for more conservative members of Congress, who in turn were more likely to vote in favor of the 1924 Immigration Act—the legislation that effectively shut down immigration to the US for more than 40 years. Immigration also reduced support

for redistribution—cities that received more immigrants lowered total public spending and tax revenues (Tabellini 2020). Moreover, throughout U.S. history, periods of high immigration have tended to coincide with heightened political polarization, as reflected in the ideological distance between the two main parties measured through roll call votes (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Immigration and Political Polarization in US History

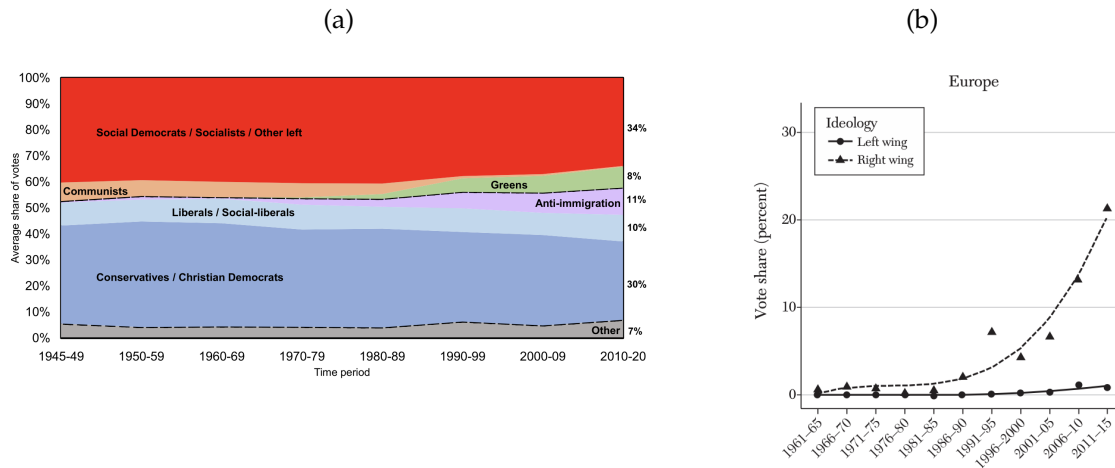


Source: Alesina & Tabellini (2024), Figure I. The figure plots the immigrant share of the U.S. population and the ideological gap between Democrats and Republicans in both chambers, based on the first dimension of the DW Nominate scores.

In Europe too, immigration drove political backlash. As immigration flows from the European periphery, former colonies, and refugee flows increased, anti-immigrant parties emerged and began gaining electoral success (Figure 5a). Similar to the pattern observed in the United States, immigration in Europe was accompanied by a decline in native-born individuals' support for redistribution (Alesina et al. 2021), largely attributed to their reluctance to share public goods with immigrants, particularly those perceived as culturally distant and “undeserving” (Alesina et al. 2023). Nativism and anti-immigrant rhetoric, together with an anti-redistribution stance, coalesced in the political agendas of right-wing populist parties (Shayo 2020), which experienced a spectacular rise in support in recent

decades (Figure 5b).⁴

Figure 5: The rise of anti-immigrant parties and right-wing populism in Europe



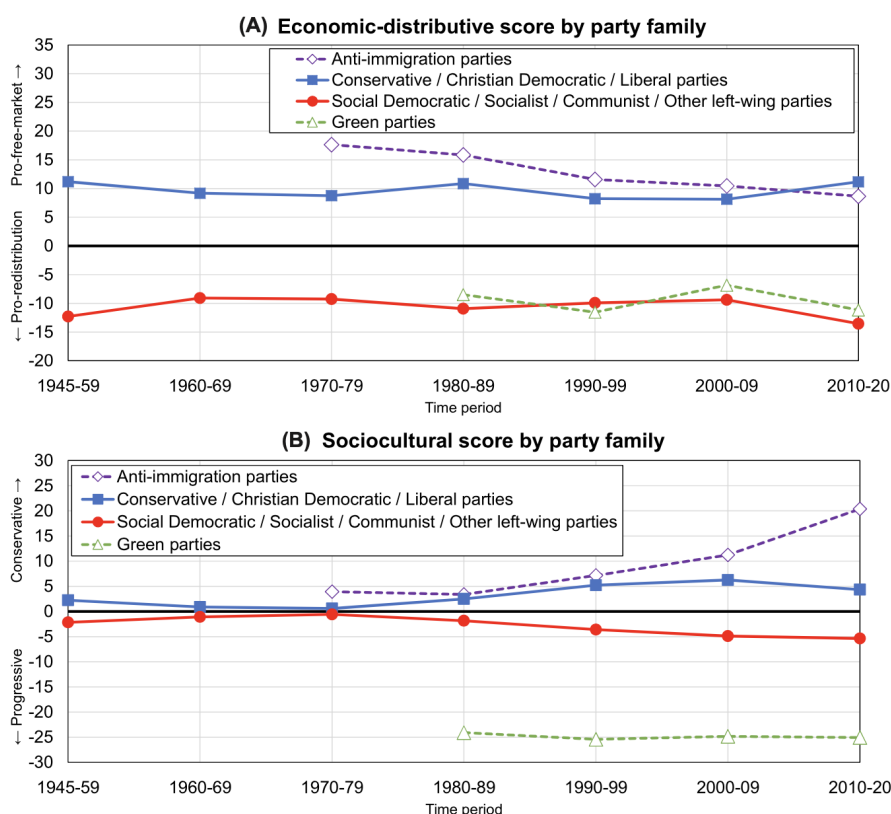
Source: (a) Gethin et al. (2022), Figure IV. (b) Guriev & Papaioannou (2022), Figure 4. Copyright American Economic Association; reproduced with permission of the Journal of Economic Literature.

As for the US, also in Europe the emergence of anti-immigrant parties was associated with a rise in political polarization. Figure 6 depicts this pattern relying on data compiled by Gethin et al. (2022) from party manifestos since the end of WWII. The figure shows that polarization across parties is driven by divergent party positions on social and cultural issues rather than on economic ones. While anti-immigrant and center-right parties became more conservative and left-of-center parties more progressive in the sociocultural dimension, divergence in the relative emphasis of different parties on pro-market versus pro-redistribution positions has remained largely constant or even declined over time.

We provide more systematic evidence that these political developments are linked to immigration by examining the impact of refugee flows on Western democracies between 2000 and 2020. This period was marked by several major refugee crises—including those stemming from conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa—which generated sharp increases in asylum applications across advanced democracies (Brell et al. 2020). These inflows were highly salient politically, widely covered in the media, and often framed as challenges to national identity and social cohesion (Halla et al. 2017, Barrera et al.

⁴As discussed in Guriev & Papaioannou (2022), by 2018 the vote share of populist parties in Europe had increased to as much as 25-30 percentage points—an increase driven by right-wing populism in particular.

Figure 6: Rising cultural polarization in party positions in Europe



Source: Gethin et al. (2022), Figure VIII, based on data from the Comparative Manifesto Project database.

2020). As such, they constituted significant and politically charged immigration shocks in recent decades.

We combine data on refugee flows with information on political ideology from the Manifesto Project for Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.⁵ Figure 7 plots the total number of refugees over time alongside vote shares and ideology scores of different party families.⁶ Two key patterns stand out. First, changes in the number of refugees move together with support for radical right, nationalist parties, which often campaign on anti-immigrant platforms (Panel A). This broad trend aligns with findings of a

⁵The Manifesto Project is a long-standing initiative that quantifies the policy positions of political parties by analyzing their electoral manifestos. It provides consistent cross-national data on party stances across a wide range of issues, including nationalism, multiculturalism, and immigration. See also Volkens et al. (2023).

⁶To smooth short-term fluctuations, party vote shares are calculated using a five-year moving average. We group party families included in the Manifesto Project into four broad categories.

growing empirical literature on the local political impact of immigrant and refugee flows (Alesina & Tabellini 2024). Second, there is ideological divergence. Panel B plots a composite measure of parties' ideological positioning on issues related to nationalism, separately by party family over time.⁷ Particularly after the 2016 migrant crisis, nationalist rhetoric has increased among nationalist and far-right parties, declined among social democratic, socialist, and other left-wing parties, and remained relatively stable among conservative and liberal parties.

To better understand the observed trends, Figure 8 decomposes nationalism into its two main components: positions on multiculturalism (Panel A) and support of the national way of life (Panel B)⁸. Among nationalist and far-right parties, the increase in nationalism reflects both a decline in support for multiculturalism and a concurrent rise in support of the national way of life. A similar but inverse pattern is evident among social democratic, socialist, and other left-leaning parties.

These aggregate trends also hold within countries. We estimate panel regressions of nationalism and its sub-components against the refugee population share across countries. We present results in Table 1. The baseline specification, presented in Panel A, includes election year and country fixed effects. In Panel B, we further control for party family fixed effects to account for time-invariant differences in political orientation across parties.⁹

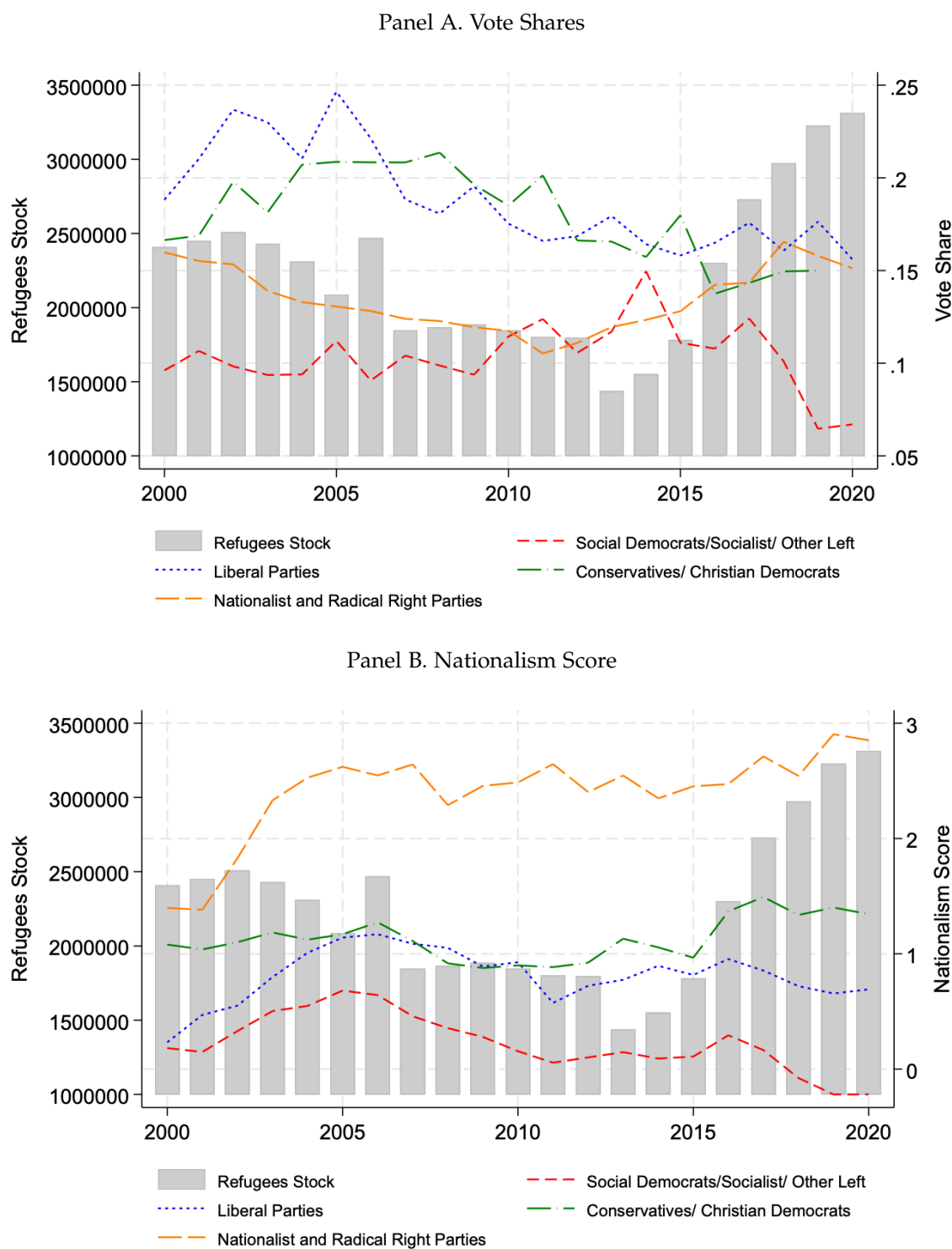
The estimate in column 1 suggests that, between 2000 and 2020, countries receiving more refugees experienced an increase in nationalist party rhetoric. This is due to both an increase in support for the national way of life (column 2) and a decrease in support for multiculturalism (column 3), but the estimate is statistically significant only for the latter. In column 4, we turn to attitudes toward redistribution, using as dependent variable

⁷Following Lowe et al. (2011), for each party p , in country c , and year t , we calculated this nationalism score as: $Score_{ctp} = \log(0.5 + z_{ctp}^+) - \log(0.5 + z_{ctp}^-)$ where z_{ctp}^+ and z_{ctp}^- denote the number of favorable and unfavorable statements, respectively, in the categories of *National way of life* and *Multiculturalism* in the party's manifesto. We then calculated the weighted average across each individual party's scores, using the vote share of a given party relative to all votes in the party family as weights. Next, we compute the simple average of these values across countries, applying a five-year moving average to reduce volatility.

⁸*Multiculturalism* captures favorable references to cultural diversity and plurality, including support for preserving religious and linguistic heritages. *National Way of Life* reflects favorable views of the country's nation, history, and national identity.

⁹Standard errors are clustered at the country level. To account for the varying political relevance of different parties, regressions are weighted by party family vote shares.

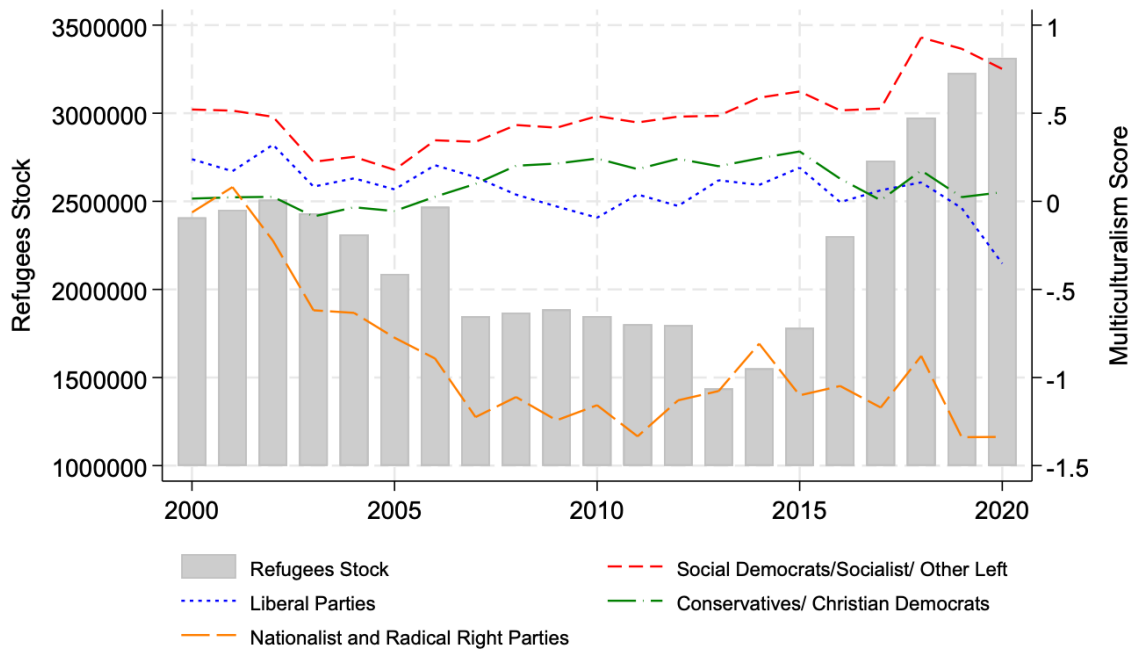
Figure 7: Stock of refugees, vote shares, and nationalism by party family, 2000–2020



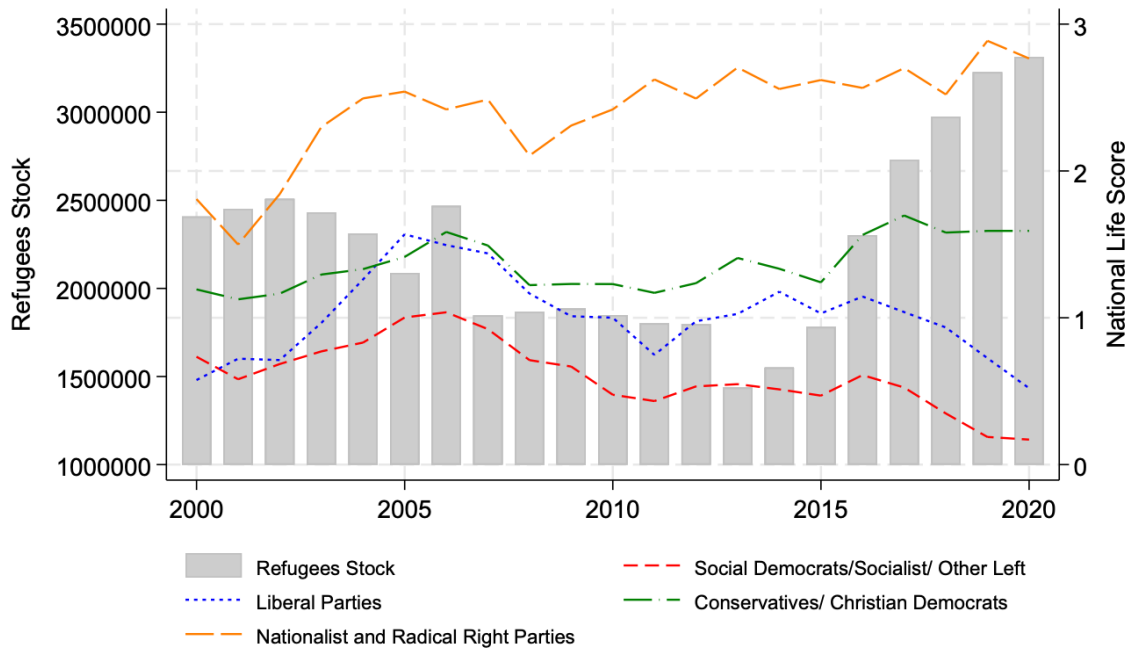
Notes: : The figure plots the average vote share (Panel A) and nationalism score (Panel B) by party family for Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The lines represent weighted averages for each party group (Social Democrats, Liberals, Conservatives, and Nationalist/Radical Right parties). Both party vote shares and nationalism score are calculated using a 5-year moving average to smooth out fluctuations. The gray bars represent the number of refugees in each year (reported on the left y-axis).

Figure 8: Refugees, Multiculturalism, and National Way of Life, 2000–2020

Panel A: Multiculturalism



Panel B: National Way of Life



Notes: : The figure plots scores for *Multiculturalism* (Panel A) and *National way of life* (Panel B) by party family for Europe, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The lines represent weighted averages for each party group (Social Democrats, Liberals, Conservatives, and Nationalist/Right- wing parties). Scores are calculated using a 5-year moving average to smooth out fluctuations. The gray bars represent the number of refugees in each year (reported on the left y-axis).

the difference between statements in favor of welfare state expansion and welfare state limitation. The resulting *Welfare state* score thus takes higher values when a party family is more supportive of public services or social security schemes. Consistent with the evidence discussed, higher refugee inflows are associated with reduced support for the welfare state in party platforms. The similarity of coefficients in Panel A and Panel B suggests that results are driven by changes within parties, rather than by overall shifts in the composition of parties running for elections.

Table 1: Regressions of Manifesto Outcomes on Refugee Share

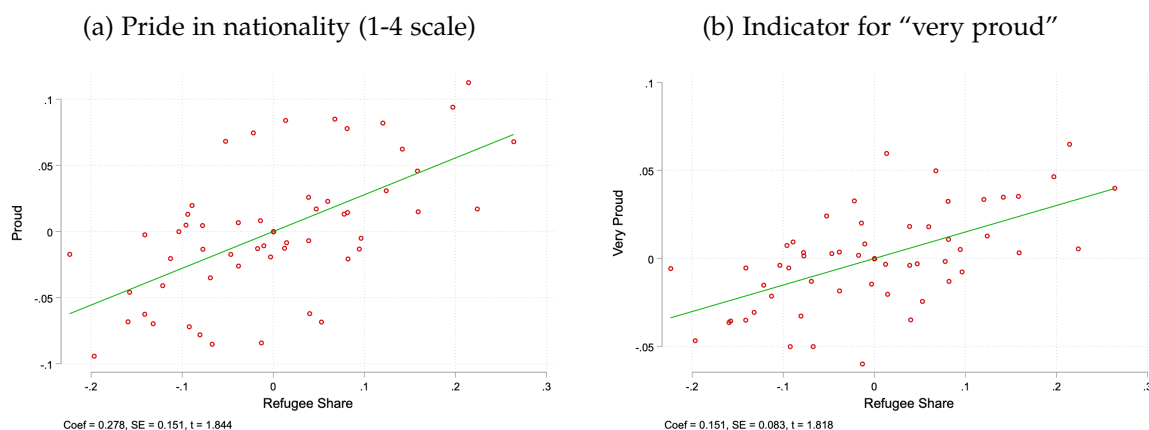
<i>Dep. var.:</i>	Nationalism (1)	Multiculturalism (2)	National Life (3)	Welfare State (4)
Panel A: Country and Year FE				
Refugee Share	0.728*** (0.253)	-0.637*** (0.152)	0.382 (0.227)	-0.402** (0.150)
Adjusted R-squared	0.0884	0.178	0.118	0.192
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Panel B: Country, Year and Party Family FE				
Refugee Share	0.675** (0.263)	-0.621*** (0.154)	0.332 (0.238)	-0.327** (0.136)
Adjusted R-squared	0.445	0.410	0.414	0.360
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Party Group FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	830	830	830	830
Mean Dep. Var.	0.606	0.200	0.965	2.344
SD Dep. Var.	1.425	1.073	1.205	1.051
Mean Refugee Share	0.329	0.329	0.329	0.329
SD Refugee Share	0.481	0.481	0.481	0.481

Notes: The dependent variables are scores constructed from party positions as coded in the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2023). *Nationalism* is a composite of positions on *Multiculturalism* (column 2) and *National way of life* (column 3). *Welfare state* is the difference between statements on welfare state expansion and welfare state limitation. We scale favorable and unfavorable statements on each dimension following Lowe (2021). Panel A includes country and year fixed effects; Panel B includes party family, country, and year fixed effects. Regressions are weighted by the vote share of the party family. The sample covers the period from 2000 to 2020 in Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Standard errors clustered at the country level. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

One notable development, which motivates the remainder of this chapter, is that these changes in the positions of parties are accompanied by changes in voters' identification. We show this by turning to attitudinal data for the same period (2000-2020) from the In-

tegrated Values Surveys (IVS). Figure 9 shows that a rise in refugee inflows is correlated with increases in national identity within country over time, as measured by responses of native-born residents of Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to the question “How proud are you of your nationality?” A stronger national identity among voters has gone hand in hand with the rise of nationalist rhetoric and electoral success of anti-immigrant parties.

Figure 9: Refugee Flows and National Pride



Note: The figures display the correlation between responses to the question ‘How proud are you of your nationality’ and the share of refugees in the country and year using data from the Integrated Values Surveys (IVS), years 2000-2020. They plot residuals of a regression of the dependent variable listed in the title on the share of refugees, controlling for country and year fixed effects and individual-level controls for age, age squared, a male dummy, a dummy for being married, income decile dummies, and education dummies for primary, secondary, and higher education levels. In figure (a) the dependent variable ‘Proud’ is coded as 1 ‘Not proud at all’, 2 ‘Not very proud’, 3 ‘Quite proud’, 4 ‘Very proud’. In figure (b) dependent variable ‘Very Proud’ is coded as 1 if ‘Very proud,’ otherwise 0. The sample is limited to respondents who are born in the country. Point estimates and standard errors, clustered at the country level, are reported in the notes.

Why should refugee flows increase national identification? And why does support for nationalist parties go together with greater opposition to redistribution, leading to the success of party platforms that combine anti-immigrant and right-wing economic policies? One plausible explanation for these patterns is psychological and relates to the perception of immigrants and refugees as outgroup members, which activates identity considerations among voters. In the remainder of this chapter, we examine how these processes operate and how they can explain the link between nativism and the erosion of support for the welfare state, as well as the salience of sociocultural over economic divides in migrant-receiving countries.

3 Immigration and identity

Group identity is a major determinant of human behavior across social, political, and economic domains, as demonstrated by a large literature in biology, psychology, and, more recently, economics. This section provides preliminary background on identity (Section 3.1) and then considers how immigration may prime or reshape social identification in ways that may affect political behavior.

Social identity has traditionally been the focus of social psychology—the discipline that provides the most thorough and robust evidence on how people identify with groups and how that affects their perceptions and choices. Two influential psychological frameworks have also influenced research by economists: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT). We apply these frameworks to the context of immigration. Section 3.2 relies on SIT to show how immigration can shape the identities individuals adopt. Section 3.3 draws from SCT to show how immigration may change the salience of different groups relevant for identification and social categorization. Both processes affect individuals’ choices through preferences and beliefs, with potential consequences for the political equilibrium. We return to the connection to politics in Section 4.

3.1 Identity preliminaries

The importance of identity in economics has been recognized only recently. Its role in shaping human behavior was first highlighted by other disciplines, which described both how social identity influences human actions and how it may have emerged. Starting with the influential experiments of Henri Tajfel on minimal group paradigms (Tajfel 1970, Tajfel et al. 1971) in which individuals assigned to artificial groups displayed ingroup bias, social psychologists documented that people tend to identify with social groups and treat members of an ingroup differently from those of an outgroup, even when the groups are delineated based on arbitrary markers. A literature in anthropology and political science (Barth 1969, Horowitz 1985) showed that distinctions between human groups such as ethnicity, which were once considered primordial, are in fact socially constructed, and that people can cross group boundaries through processes of assimilation and deliberate exclusion of others. Yet a third line of work in evolutionary biology and related fields showed that the parochial

altruism that characterizes humans—and which social psychologists documented in their experiments—likely evolved to support cooperation within groups in the context of inter-group conflict (Bowles & Choi 2004). Because humans are unique among animals in the extent to which they possess culture—that is, in their ability to learn socially from others as opposed to individually through their interactions with the environment—biologists have proposed that markers of group belonging, such as dialects or modes of dress, evolved because they were adaptive in supporting social learning, as people learn more effectively from others similar to them (Boyd & Richerson 1987, McElreath et al. 2003).

Regardless of the origins of humans' tendency to groupiness, malleable social identification with behavioral implications is empirically well-documented. The original minimal group experiments of Tajfel have been replicated countless times in a variety of contexts (Diehl 1990, Pechar & Kranton 2017). In addition, many later studies, including in economics, showed empirically that, depending on the context, different social identities can be primed and made salient, prompting behavioral change even when economic stakes are involved and often in real-life settings. For instance, priming racial identity changes discount rates and risk aversion (Benjamin et al. 2010) or naturally increasing the salience of caste identities in the Indian context reduces the performance of low caste individuals in a simple incentivized task (Hoff & Pandey 2006). Shayo (2020) provides a more detailed review of this literature and the implications of identity in a variety of domains—from education to consumption.

The malleability of social identification applies to both self-identification and the categorization of others into groups. These are two interrelated but distinct processes. In social psychology, the paradigm that encompasses both is known as the social identity approach (Reicher et al. 2010). It consists of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel 1981, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner et al. 1989). Both theories study the factors that determine how people see themselves as members of social groups and how they categorize others. SIT highlights both perceptual factors—such as situational salience—and motivational factors—such as the desire for positive distinctiveness of one's group from others—in driving group identification. SCT focuses specifically on the cognitive process through which people categorize themselves and others, and studies those in more detail than SIT. This theory builds on general cognitive processes that people use to perceive the

world and classify stimuli into categories—beyond just individuals in social groups. While SIT generally treats salience of identities as an exogenous factor, SCT identifies the cognitive underpinnings that make certain categories more salient than others for self-identification and categorization. Both of these processes have been recently incorporated in economic research and both turn out to have important implications for the political economy impact of immigration.

Formally, identity has been incorporated into economic models in one of two ways. Following the seminal contribution of Akerlof & Kranton (2000), the majority of models that assign a role to identity consider it as a factor that enters peoples' preferences. Identity is most commonly modeled as a type of ingroup-specific altruism or social preference that assigns a different weight to the benefit of in- versus outgroup members (Shayo 2009, Chen & Li 2009, Kranton et al. 2020). A different approach is to focus on and explicitly model the cognitive implications of social identification. Research in social and cognitive psychology has shown that the salience of social groups leads people to view others less as individuals and more as group members. In practice, this may manifest by distorting one's views of others so that they are assigned stereotypical group attributes. Building on these insights, some approaches model identity as distorted beliefs (Bonomi et al. 2021). Clearly, the two approaches are complementary, each emphasizing different implications of social identity for behavior.

3.2 Immigration and endogenous social identity

SIT was developed based on a body of experimental evidence on ingroup bias which established that people identify with social groups and that this identification can be malleable. According to SIT, social identity is influenced both by contextual features that shape individuals' perceptions and by the desire to enhance self-esteem by identifying with groups that are positively evaluated in society (Tajfel & Turner 1986). Shayo (2009, 2020) provides a formal framework of identity choice that incorporates many of these premises. Here, we borrow and simplify elements from this framework and related work (Lindqvist & Östling 2013) to understand how immigration may affect individual identity choice by members of

a migrant-receiving society.¹⁰

Given the set of social groups with which individuals can identify, identity is chosen optimally based on two components: one cognitive and one affective. On the cognitive side, people choose identities so as to minimize the perceived distance between themselves and their social group. Perceived distance is based on the difference between an individual's attributes and the prototypical attributes of members of the group, commonly operationalized as the average of attributes across group members. The affective component of group identification is status—a quality of the group that is valued by the individual. This formalizes one of the main insights of social identity theory as articulated by Tajfel & Turner (1986), namely that people “strive for a positive self-concept” which is “based on favorable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups.”¹¹ Social status hierarchies may be fixed and based on pre-determined group rankings—such as with caste in India—or they may be malleable, and based on underlying variables that individuals can influence with their actions—such as education or income.

In this framework, immigration can affect identity choice through both perceived distance and status. Beginning with the first component, consider a case, similar to that examined by Shayo (2009), in which individuals are distinguished by their socioeconomic class $c \in \{u, l\}$ —upper or working, and defined, for instance, by education or occupation—and their place of birth $b \in \{n, f\}$, where n stands for natives and f for foreigners. A native-born person can identify with the upper or working class or the nation as a whole. The non-material utility they receive from identifying with group $j \in \{U, L, N\}$ is given by:

$$u_{c,b}^j = \gamma S^j - w_C d_{c,C}^j - w_B d_{b,B}^j$$

where S^j is the average status of members of group j , $d_{c,C}^j$ is the distance with respect to class for an individual of class c and group j and $d_{b,B}^j$ is the distance with respect to nativity for an individual of nativity group b and group j . w_C and w_B are exogenous salience

¹⁰For a more thorough discussion of the underlying framework of endogenous identity choice see Shayo (2020). In this section, we mainly focus on the components of individual identity choice of most relevance for the role of immigration.

¹¹Atkin et al. (2021) provide evidence in support of this assumption by using a revealed preference approach and data on food consumption in India to show that social identity responds to group status.

weights assigned, respectively, to class and nativity attributes. These are meant to reflect the attention each attribute receives, which depends on features of the context.

Define as $s_{c,C}^j$ and $s_{b,B}^j$ the share of people in group j who have, respectively, the same class or nativity as the individual. We can then rewrite the individual's problem as:

$$u_{c,b}^j = \gamma S^j - w_C(1 - s_{c,C}^j) - w_B(1 - s_{b,B}^j)$$

Based on this, the effect of immigration on identity choice will depend on the class profile of incoming immigrants. If we assume, as is the case in most migrant-receiving countries, that the majority of immigrants are lower class (i.e., unskilled), then immigration reduces $s_{n,B}^L$, which increases the perceived distance of native l types from the lower class.¹² This result resonates with the prominent idea that immigration in the United States diluted the identity of the working class and hindered the development of a strong labor movement such as the ones that developed in Western European countries (Lipset & Marks 2000, Alesina et al. 2001).

Beyond the endogenous response of identity to immigrant inflows, this framework also allows for identity change in response to changes in the exogenous salience weights placed on different attributes. By drawing attention to immigration or emphasizing differences between immigrants and natives, politicians and the media can increase w_B .¹³ Reduced class solidarity and support for left-wing policies then can be a result of both demographic changes and—potentially strategic—manipulation of the salience of immigration by political actors.

The perceived distance channel is cognitive. In addition, immigration can also affect identity choice through the pathway of status. The status of group j can be specified as a function of its income and the income of a reference group $R(j)$:

¹²In 2022, 34% of immigrants in the US had a college degree or higher (see also Immigrants in the United States). Estimates from Eurostat indicate that numbers are similar for the European Union, where 27% of immigrants held at least a college degree in 2024 (Eurostat 2024).

¹³A recent body of work in political economy has documented that strategic political entrepreneurs can influence voters' attitudes by increasing the salience of immigration and amplifying misperceptions about immigrants (Barrera et al. 2020, Alesina et al. 2023). See Alesina & Tabellini (2024) for a more detailed review.

$$S^j = y^j - y^{R(j)}$$

so that a group's status can increase either directly, as its average income increases, or indirectly as the average income of its reference group drops. Individuals have either high (y_{high}) or low (y_{low}) income, with $y_{high} > y_{low}$ and average income is higher among the upper class than the working class ($\bar{y}_u > \bar{y}_l$).

How immigration will affect the identity choice of natives through the income channel then depends on immigrants' income profile. If immigrants are poorer on average than the native working class, then the status of the working class will decrease and l types will be less likely to identify with it. But status may be influenced even if immigrants do not differ in income from working class natives. Besides its compositional effect, immigration has direct economic effects with likely distributional consequences for the native population. One strand of the literature has shown that immigrants can compete for jobs with native workers, reducing their wages (Borjas 2003). If that is the case, low-skilled immigration may lower y^L , reducing l types' likelihood to identify with the working class. This channel may be amplified if low-skilled immigration acts as a complement to high-skilled natives (Borjas & Monras 2017), increasing $y^{R(L)}$. Another strand of the literature, instead, has shown that immigrants may have positive effects on native workers' employment and wages, through complementarities or by contributing to occupational upgrading (Peri & Sparber 2009, Ottaviano & Peri 2012). In this case, immigration may actually enhance the status of the working class.

The possibility that immigration increases identification with the nation aligns with the patterns shown in Figure 9. It is also consistent with the growing success of nationalist parties among working-class voters (Margalit 2019, Guriev & Papaioannou 2022, Alesina & Tabellini 2024), as low-skilled individuals are those for whom working-class identification may be diluted by the arrival of culturally distant, low-skilled immigrants. Surprisingly, the literature offers little direct causal evidence that immigration increases national identification, with the exception of Zhou (2019), who finds higher national identification in Tanzania in response to the inflow of refugees from Burundi. Testing the link between immigration and national identification in other contexts would be straightforward, though

establishing whether national identity is a cause or a consequence of support for parties with anti-immigrant positions and associated nationalist platforms may be more challenging. Empirical studies could also draw on other predictions of a SIT-based framework to examine whether immigration fosters nationalism through channels related to status or increased cognitive distance from the working class.

The impact of immigration may be even more complex if income also enters the perceived distance function as an additional attribute people consider when assessing their similarity to a social group. Based purely on a compositional effect, if immigrants are poorer than working class natives, perceived distance with the working class will further drop for the latter group. This generates the interesting, yet untested, prediction that, all else being equal, inflows of poor migrants should reduce working-class identity more among the better-off members of the working class. If, on top of the compositional effect, immigration also affects natives' income directly through labor market channels, the end-result will depend on the direction of this effect. Perhaps counterintuitively, if immigrants compete with working class natives and act as complements to the upper class, therefore widening the native income distribution, identification with the nation will be negatively affected for l types. In the context of rising income differences between upper and working class, the poorer segment of the population will be less likely to see itself as part of the same national community as the rich.

The mechanisms discussed thus far need not apply only to class identity. Consider a case in which race, rather than class, is the relevant social group besides the nation one can identify with. People are distinguished into white (w) and non-white (nw) and the utility of a person of race r and nativity group b is given by:

$$u_{r,b}^j = \gamma S^j - w_R(1 - s_{r,R}^j) - w_B(1 - s_{b,B}^j)$$

where $s_{r,R}^j$ is now the share of people with same race as the individual in nativity group j . In this case, it is the racial profile of incoming migrants that will determine how the identity of the native-born changes. An inflow of white immigrants, like that seen in the U.S. in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily affects white native-born individuals. By “diluting” the profile of the white racial group (increasing $s_{n,B}^W$), immigration increases

perceived distance with whites as a social category among white natives and decreases the likelihood of identifying with one's race. If instead migrants are non-white, identity will change for non-white individuals, who will now perceive a higher distance to the non-white group.

More generally, migration can reduce identification of natives with a group that is characterized by attributes that the natives share with immigrants. The intuition is straightforward: inflows of foreigners dilute the homogeneity of a category, increasing perceived distance and reducing the likelihood that natives identify with it. Pérez et al. (2024) provide evidence for this dynamic using a survey experiment. Respondents who read a news brief titled "The Continued Growth in U.S. People of Color Is Transforming What It Means to be 'American,' Giving the United States a New Look and Traditions." identified more strongly as white, measured as a composite index that includes, among others, perceptions of commonality and affective attachment to white identity. In this case, increased perceived distance from the "American" group, leads respondents to identify more strongly with their race.¹⁴

In sum, with endogenous social identity determined by perceived distance and status considerations, immigration changes how natives identify through both cognitive and affective channels, and both directly through its compositional effect, as well as indirectly through its distributional effects on native incomes, which determine relative group status. Immigrant and refugee inflows dilute the homogeneity of native groups that share relevant attributes with immigrants and lower their likelihood of identifying with associated social categories. Low-skilled immigration undermines working class identity and non-white immigration undermines racial solidarity. This effect may be compounded through the status channel if immigrant attributes reduce the average status of a particular social group. Poor immigrants lower the status of the working class or of the racial group they represent, lowering natives' identification with those groups. Finally, immigration's indirect impact via

¹⁴Pérez et al. (2023) examine the effect of directly priming American identity among Latinos, which corresponds to an exogenous increase in W_B . A prime that makes Latinos feel more American worsens attitudes towards Blacks, which is interpreted as higher conformity to prejudiced ingroup (i.e. American) norms. Priming exclusion from American identity also worsens attitudes towards Blacks, but this time through a status mechanism, equivalent to exogenously shifting S^{nw} .

distributional effects on natives' socioeconomic status yields ambiguous predictions: competition with lower skilled natives may reduce working class identification through a status channel, but may also limit identification with the nation through a cognitive channel, as rising inequality undermines perceived similarity between poor and rich natives.

3.3 Immigration and social categorization

The framework based on SIT presented above views identity choice as determined by perceived distance and group status. The attributes that enter the perceived distance function vary in salience, as determined by exogenous factors. SCT offers a different way to determine how social identities change, focusing directly on what makes particular identities salient. By dealing in more detail with the cognitive rules that people follow when classifying themselves and others into groups, SCT has the advantage of linking social categorization to more general cognitive processes of context-specific perception of stimuli (Parducci 1965, Stewart et al. 2006) and of offering a framework for understanding not only how people choose their own identities, but also how they view others.

A central insight of SCT is that the salience of different identities is contextually determined. As noted by Turner et al. (1994), studies in psychology show that "self-categorization tends to become more inclusive as the comparative context is extended to include others who are different from the self and prior others. As the context is extended, self and prior others will be recategorized as 'us' in contrast to 'them,' where previously the self was defined as 'me' in contrast to 'you.'" Experimental evidence indicates that whether others are perceived as distant or evaluated negatively depends on whether they are compared with more distant outgroups (Hogg & Turner 1987, Haslam et al. 1995, Wilder & Thompson 1988). Comparison with even more different others could recast them as members of the ingroup and change behavior towards them (Gaertner et al. 1989). Studies from sociology and political science that rely on priming experiments provide more direct evidence for this in the context of immigration.

Craig & Richeson (2014) show that priming the rise in the size of ethnic minorities in the US population increases pro-white and anti-minority bias among white Americans, consistent with an increase in the salience of race as a basis of social categorization. Abascal (2015) primes specifically Latino immigration and finds that to increase contributions to

whites relative to Blacks in a behavioral game. Similarly interpreted, recategorization along a white vs. non-white divide alters behavior toward Black individuals and other racial minorities. Cikara et al. (2022) provide evidence of recategorization in the context of ethnic and racial diversity in an observational setting. Using data from hate crimes against minority groups in the US between 1990 and 2010, they show that, even conditional on their size, groups ranked as largest in the size distribution of minority groups in a county become the target of more hate crimes, which are redirected away from groups that are lower in size rank.¹⁵

Concretely, SCT posits that individuals categorize stimuli into categories by considering—among other factors—what has been termed *comparative fit*, namely the perceived fit between the presented stimuli and the categories. Comparative fit is assessed heuristically: people sort stimuli into categories so as to maximize meta-contrast, namely the ratio of within-category differences over cross-category differences in relevant attributes. Experiments in psychology have provided evidence that people categorize others into social groups following this rule (Oakes et al. 1991). A recent set of studies has found support for contextual recategorization of groups in response to immigrant inflows, with implications for attitudes and behavior.

One such study is Fouka et al. (2022), which examines the historical context of the First Great Migration—a major wave of internal migration between 1915 and 1930, during which over 1.5 million Black Americans moved from the South to cities in the North and Midwest. Prior to this period, a key social cleavage outside the South was between native-born whites and immigrants. As noted in Section 2, the U.S. had experienced successive waves of immigration from Europe, and by the early 20th century, the foreign-born share had reached unprecedented levels. Many of these recent immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were low-skilled, illiterate men who fueled strong nativist sentiment (Higham 2002). Religious cleavages were also prominent, as the growing numbers of Catholic immigrants from Italy and Ireland challenged the dominance of Protestant natives of Anglo-Saxon descent.

¹⁵McConnell and Rasul show that increased animosity towards Muslims in the US after 9/11 worsened sentencing outcomes for Hispanics in the federal criminal justice system, but left outcomes for Blacks unchanged. This is consistent with increased salience of foreign background as basis for classification that determines the bias of judges.

Using a shift-share instrument to predict Black inflows in cities outside the South, Fouka et al. (2022) find that Black migration led to higher social assimilation for European immigrants, who became more likely to marry outside their ethnic group and to apply for and obtain US citizenship. Black migration lowered the residential segregation of European immigrants from white non-immigrants and also improved their economic standing, moving them out of manufacturing and into more highly skilled occupations. Fouka et al. (2022) rationalize these findings based on a framework that draws directly from the meta-contrast principle in SCT. They posit that the native white majority engages in taste-based discrimination driven by a psychic cost of interacting with outgroups. This cost is a function of perceived distance, which is itself context-dependent; a group of any given distance appears closer when compared to outgroups further away. This is an application of the meta-contrast principle on classifications into in- and out-groups. Inflows of Black migrants reduce the perceived distance of white European immigrants, resulting in lower discrimination and a higher degree of interaction with white natives, as evidenced by lower segregation and higher intermarriage rates.

Evidence from local newspapers supports a channel of changing group classifications: the co-occurrence of references to immigrant groups and negative stereotypes (such as “Italian” and “mafia”) dropped in cities that received more Black migrants. Instead, the frequency of co-occurrence of mentions to “Blacks” or “Negros” and stereotypes related to violence and sexual threat increased. This is consistent with the recategorization of European immigrants as part of the racial ingroup. As additional evidence for this interpretation, the Black migration lowered social barriers primarily for “whiter” groups: British, Northern and Western European and German immigrants experienced higher increases in intermarriage rates than immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe or Russia.

These results can also be interpreted as an exogenous salience shock in the context of the social identity framework presented in Section 3.2. Assuming that native whites chose their identities by minimizing a perceived distance that included both nativity and skin color, an inflow of Black Southern migrants could have increased the salience of skin color (as well as diluted the racial composition of the native-born group), increasing racial identification among whites. Stronger identification as white would, in turn, lead to more altruistic behavior toward other white groups and less toward non-white groups. This approach would

require that Eastern and Southern Europeans were always considered white, and their lack of integration was due to low identification of native whites with their racial group. This, however, was not the case. At the turn of the 20th century, against the backdrop of then influential theories of scientific racism, distinctions were made among different European “races,” who were perceived to vary in their phenotypes and degree of whiteness and were ranked hierarchically. “Mediterraneans” were seen as having a darker skin color and standing lower in the hierarchy than “Nordics” (Spiro 2009). These perceptions influenced the design of immigration quotas which restricted inflows from Southern and Eastern Europe in 1924.¹⁶ The meta-contrast principle offers a direct explanation for why the racial classification of groups like Southern and Eastern Europeans shifted with the arrival of Black Americans.

The findings in Fouka et al. (2022) are consistent with a reduction in perceived distance of European immigrants from white natives, but this study does not provide direct evidence that what drives this reduction is the salience of race as a result of meta-contrast. Fouka & Tabellini (2022) explore this more directly in the context of rising Mexican immigration to the US after 1965. Using an identification strategy similar to Fouka et al. (2022) and data from the American National Election Study (ANES), Fouka & Tabellini (2022) find that increases in the share of Mexican immigrants lead to warmer feelings and less prejudiced attitudes of whites towards Black Americans. A survey experiment provides direct evidence that Mexican immigration prompts recategorization: after being primed with the size of the Hispanic population in the US, white respondents are more likely to state that “American” is an attribute that applies well to Blacks.

Fouka & Tabellini (2022) show that their findings are consistent with individuals choosing different attributes (race versus nativity) as classifiers for in- and outgroup categorization so as to maximize meta-contrast. They formalize the meta-contrast ratio R for an attribute j as the average of within-group distances over that of across-group distances when

¹⁶The thinking of prominent eugenicists like Madison Grant and Sir Francis Galton is reflected in some of the assessments of the Dillingham Commission, which was formed in 1907 by Theodore Roosevelt to study the consequences of immigration to the US. The committee relied heavily on cultural rather than economic arguments and made racial distinctions among groups of Europeans that were more or less resistant to assimilation. The recommendations of the commission laid the foundation for later immigration restrictions.

groups are defined based on that attribute:

$$\max_j R_j = \frac{\frac{\sum_{k \in K} \delta^k n^k I_j^k}{\sum_{k \in K} n^k I_j^k}}{\frac{\sum_{k \in K} \delta^k n^k (1 - I_j^k)}{\sum_{k \in K} n^k (1 - I_j^k)}}$$

where n^k is the size of group k and I_j^i an indicator equal to 1 if individual i differs from the ingroup in terms of attribute j . The relevant measure of distance, δ^k is affective. Affective distance refers to the emotional response towards a group of people, which often precedes cognitive categorization (Zajonc 1980) and can be driven by a variety of factors including perceived threat or competition.

Based on this heuristic, when a group of higher affective distance to the ingroup than existing ones appears—or when its size grows larger—meta-contrast increases for attributes that differ between that group and the ingroup. This result echoes group threat theory (Blumer 1958, Blalock 1967), an influential sociological theory of prejudice which posits that increases in outgroup size heighten perceptions of threat and foster negative attitudes. At the same time it allows for different responses to the same increase in size for outgroups that are seen as more or less threatening for a variety of contextual reasons.

Consistent with this, Fouka & Tabellini (2022) show that the affective distance of whites from Hispanics, measured as feeling thermometer ratings or perceptions of closeness, is higher than that from Blacks in most of the available years in the ANES. For a variety of reasons related to physical proximity, media narratives (Massey & Pren 2012, Valentino et al. 2013) and perceptions of resistance to integration (Huntington 2004), Mexican immigration was constructed as a unique threat to the US, driving a particularly negative affective response among the population. In turn, rising shares of Mexican immigrants increased meta-contrast on the basis of nativity as a classifier, reducing that for race. As a result, Black Americans were recategorized as American and viewed more positively. Instead, Fouka & Tabellini (2022) show that the opposite was true for other groups primarily perceived as foreign, such as Asian Americans. Supporting the proposed theoretical mechanism, and the role of affective distance in recategorization, Fouka & Tabellini (2022) show that similarly sized inflows of Asian immigrants did not have the same effect as those of Hispanics, consistent with this group eliciting a less strong affective response from native

whites (evidenced by responses in the ANES).

4 Implications for politics

Section 3 outlined pathways through which immigration may affect identity choice and social categorization. These changes, in turn, manifest as shifts in behavior: group identification and the categorization of others influence preferences and beliefs, thereby affecting voter choices, political responses, and equilibrium outcomes. In this section, we consider how such identity-mediated processes may help explain two major developments in the politics of Western democracies—previewed in Section 2—that are linked to immigration and have garnered significant attention from economists, political scientists, and the public alike: namely, the rise of right-wing populism (Section 4.1) and the realignment of voters and parties along a socio-cultural axis that has supplanted the traditional economic divide between left and right (Section 4.2).

4.1 Right-wing populism

Section 2 showed that immigration is correlated with rising support for right-wing populist parties and increasing nationalist and anti-welfare party policy positions. A growing literature in political economy and political science identifies a causal link between immigrant and refugee inflows and the success of right-wing populists across various European countries.¹⁷ One notable example is work by Dustmann et al. (2019), which examines the impact of refugee migration on natives' voting behavior in Denmark. Exploiting the quasi-random allocation of refugees across municipalities between 1986 and 1998, Dustmann et al. (2019) find that refugee inflows increased support for anti-immigrant parties. Interestingly, not only far-right but also center-right parties gained from the inflow of refugees, while moderate and radical left-wing parties lost political support.. Halla et al. (2017) find similar effects in the case of Austria. Using a version of the classic shift-share instrument, and including community and election year fixed effects, the authors show that immigration

¹⁷For a meta-analysis, see Cools et al. (2021) who, however, conclude that existing research may reflect publication bias.

increased the vote share of the right-wing *Freedom Party of Austria* (FPO)—a party that was marginal in 1980, but whose vote share in the 2013 national elections was above 20%. These effects are quantitatively large: according to the estimates in Halla et al. (2017), the inflow of immigrants explains about 10% of the regional variation in support for the FPO.

How do we make sense of the fact that immigration has favored right-wing parties that not only support immigration restrictions, but also advocate for a limited welfare state? This pattern may be surprising when only economic and not psychological channels are considered: since most Western countries receive many low-skilled immigrants, any effect of immigration on labor market competition should primarily affect low-skilled natives.¹⁸ These voters, traditionally left-leaning, could have in turn demanded more, rather than less redistribution rather than turning to right-wing anti-welfare parties.

Identity can account for this pattern. First, if native populations perceive immigrants as an outgroup, they may become opposed to redistribution because they do not want immigrants to benefit from it. Unwillingness to interact with outgroups is one of the explanations proposed by the literature that finds diversity to undermine public goods (Alesina & Giuliano 2011) and is consistent with findings in Alesina et al. (2023). The underlying assumption for this explanation is identity-based: people see themselves as members of social groups, they are more willing to share resources with their ingroup, and immigrants, particularly those who are more culturally distant, are likely to be classified as an outgroup. Goodhart (2004) identified this is a likely mechanism for what he termed the “progressive’s dilemma.” The erosion of welfare state support when resources are shared with more diverse groups poses a challenge for the left, which is traditionally more cosmopolitan than the right. Rising numbers of foreigners could further bolster the advantage of the right in capitalizing on immigration, by triggering group threat (Section 3.3) and worsening anti-immigrant sentiment.

In addition to the above mechanism, identification may also change endogenously in response to immigration, as laid out in Section 3.2. With endogenous identity, immigration

¹⁸In the US, the skill distribution of immigrants is relatively polarized, with immigrants disproportionately concentrated at both the low and high ends of the skill spectrum (Lewis 2011, Orrenius & Zavodny 2018). In Western Europe, instead, immigrants are on average less skilled than native-born workers, though there is substantial variation across countries (Dustmann & Frattini 2011).

reduces the extent to which low-skilled natives identify with the working class and increases their identification with the nation. As a result, populist right-wing parties, which emphasize national identity and oppose redistribution, become more appealing to these voters. This would be consistent with experimental evidence that people are willing to vote for redistributive tax regimes that work against their material interest in order to benefit their social group (Klor & Shayo 2010). It is also consistent with the fact that support for right-wing anti-immigrant parties is concentrated among lower-educated voters (Gethin et al. 2022).

The link between immigration and right-wing populism discussed so far is one that works through preferences. Additional, belief-based channels may compound this connection. Results in social psychology show that group identification manifests in stereotypical thinking about groups (Tajfel & Wilkes 1963, Mackie 1986). This reflects a form of biased beliefs, where individuals form perceptions of groups by overweighting attributes that are distinctive of (i.e. occur relatively more frequently in) the group. Individuals who identify with the nation may therefore hold particularly negative stereotypes of immigrants. Alesina et al. (2023) document that, consistent with this observation, natives who oppose immigration often think that immigrants are poor and represent a burden for the state. Such (mis)perceptions reinforce any opposition to redistribution driven by national identification.

An identity-based explanation for the rise of right-wing populism seems particularly compelling in light of the evidence, in both political economy (Alesina & Tabellini 2024) and political science (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2014), that opposition to immigration is driven more by sociotropic and cultural than by economic considerations. Research shows that, against what would be expected based on concerns about labor market competition, workers of all skill levels tend to prefer highly skilled immigrants (Hainmueller & Hiscox 2010) and that priming lack of cultural, as opposed to economic, assimilation has a more negative influence on immigration attitudes (Sniderman et al. 2004). Furthermore, the fact that immigration tends to be thought of more as a cultural than economic threat is consistent across time and context. In the US during the Age of Mass Migration, Tabellini (2020) finds that immigration triggered cultural and political backlash, despite its overall positive economic effects. This evidence on the primacy of cultural considerations suggests that identity responses to immigration are particularly likely to drive voters' political behavior.

Note that immigration is one of several factors that have contributed to the rise of right-wing populism in recent decades—but one that interacts with and compounds other forces.¹⁹ Globalization and import competition in Western countries have also been shown to boost support for protectionist, anti-immigrant parties (Colantone & Stanig 2018*b*) and also to increase nativist attitudes (Colantone & Stanig 2018*a*). Though this evidence does not contradict the independent effect of immigration on the rise of the populist far-right, it points to more complex interdependencies. As discussed by Colantone & Stanig (2018*a*), trade exposure may worsen immigration attitudes due to fear of competition by immigrants among people who lose their jobs or concerns about welfare congestion and immigrants' contribution to the worsening of local economies. To this, one could add identity channels. Import competition and resulting job loss worsens individuals' perceived status, which may drive nationalist identification and associated negative sentiment towards foreigners. It is also likely that anti-immigrant attitudes worsen as individuals attempt to improve their ingroup's relative status ranking by lowering the status of a reference outgroup, even if there is no direct competition between the groups. Such status-based mechanisms align with findings that perceived status correlates with support for populist parties (Gidron & Hall 2017). In many instances, working-class individuals negatively impacted by economic shocks may simultaneously experience a higher exposure to immigrant diversity, which further heightens identity cleavages centered around native-immigrant differences (Gest 2016).

4.2 Changing political cleavages

One of the major political developments of the second half of the 20th century, and particularly the decades after 1980, is the changing nature of political cleavages and the emergence of a new dimension of political polarization, which centers around social and cultural rather than economic issues. Party manifesto data and findings from the literature discussed in Section 2 suggest that ideological divergence between right- and left-wing parties on ques-

¹⁹Many explanations for the rise of right-wing populism have been proposed and found empirical support in the literature, from technological change (Frey et al. 2018, Petrova et al. 2024) to globalization and trade (Colantone & Stanig 2018*a*, Autor et al. 2020) to economic insecurity triggered by the Great Recession and austerity policies (Algan et al. 2017, Fetzer 2019).

tions related to national identity and multiculturalism has increased in Western democracies at the same time as the surge in refugee inflows.

Identity can explain polarization along the cultural dimension. Bonomi et al. (2021) build a model that relies on SCT. They begin from the assumption, elaborated on in Section 3.3, that people adopt salient social identities, which are those that maximize group meta-contrast. If concerns about immigration are considered to be purely “cultural” and not economic—consistent with the conclusions of literature in economics and political science (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2014, Alesina & Tabellini 2024)—then immigration is an exogenous shock that magnifies cultural (relative to economic) differences and increases the meta-contrast of culture as an ideological cleavage. Individuals will then identify with their cultural group rather than with their class.

Social identification via meta-contrast is the first premise for generating polarization on cultural issues. The second assumption builds on the findings in social psychology that group identification drives stereotypical thinking. Belief polarization following a heuristic that accentuates distinctive attributes of the outgroup (as formalized in Bordalo et al. (2016)) generates a divergence in the policy views of conservatives and progressives.²⁰ In this framework then, immigration catalyzes a shift in salience of cultural identity, which moves individuals to identify as conservatives or progressive rather than rich or poor, and slant their beliefs towards the group’s stereotype. Cultural polarization and conflict ensues.

Empirical evidence from the UK provided by Shamsi (2024) supports Bonomi et al. (2021). Shamsi (2024) predicts local immigration flows using a Bartik-type instrument that exploits the location of industries and variation in the industry specialization of Eastern European immigrants who entered the UK after the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. He finds that immigration increased the vote share of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and support for Brexit, and reduced the vote share of Labour. Shamsi (2024) also shows that these shifts coincided with increased salience of cultural cleavages and rising cultural polarization. To measure this empirically, he constructs indices of attitudes on

²⁰This assumption is supported by evidence that people hold misperceptions about immigrants that are biased in the direction dictated by their political identity. Right-wing survey respondents are more likely to perceive a higher number of immigrants (Grigorieff et al. 2020) and more positive economic circumstances of immigrants relative to natives (Alesina et al. 2023).

culture and redistribution for individuals in the British Election Study and conducts a clustering exercise of these attitudes for each local unit (local authority) in the UK along two dimensions, one cultural and one economic. He then measures relative polarization in the cultural vs economic dimension using the ratio of the change between 2002-3 and 2014-15 in the centroid of the cultural cluster over the change in the centroid of the economic cluster. Higher values in this Culture-Redistribution Centroid Ratio indicate higher polarization along cultural relative to redistributive attitudes. Using this ratio as a dependent variable, Shamsi (2024) finds that relative cultural polarization increased in local authorities that experienced a larger immigration shock.

One question that remains open in Bonomi et al. (2021) and Shamsi (2024) is whether the cultural cleavage that becomes salient is narrowly centered around immigration—labelled a cultural issue—or it encompasses other issues related to minority, gender, and LGBTQ+ rights. Shamsi (2024) defines the index of cultural attitudes based on principal component analysis of views on many issues, but it is unclear how much each of these issues contributes to polarization relative to the contribution of immigration attitudes alone. An immigration shock may polarize identities around issues of immigration and multiculturalism, but the relation between this cleavage and other cultural issues on which progressives and conservatives differ is not explored in the aforementioned studies.

A second open question relates to the characteristics of voters who sort on either side of the cultural divide. Polarization along the cultural dimension follows a specific pattern, with high-education—but not necessarily high-income—voters increasingly supporting progressive policy agendas and low-income and education voters becoming more conservative (Gethin et al. 2022). This pattern is generated in Bonomi et al. (2021) by assuming a positive correlation—empirically present in ANES data—between higher income (education) and support for progressive policies, but this correlation could be endogenous to immigration’s impact on different groups of voters. As mentioned above, and if divisions along the socio-cultural dimension are mainly driven by polarization on immigration-related issues, the conservative orientation of low-income and education voters is easy to rationalize via cognitive and status channels as in Shayo (2020). Studies seeking to better understand the contribution of immigration to cultural polarization could do more to link immigration’s effects on different groups of voters to their identity shifts and positions on

cultural issues.

The framework in Bonomi et al. (2021) centers on the demand side of identity-driven polarization, modeling how individuals adopt salient social identities in response to exogenous shocks like immigration, and how this shift distorts beliefs via group-based stereotypes. Gennaioli & Tabellini (Forthcoming) extend the framework introduced in Bonomi et al. (2021) by also endogenizing political supply. They model parties as strategic actors historically connected to different social groups, which use policy platforms and propaganda to influence voter identities and beliefs. When cultural cleavages become salient, parties shift their emphasis from redistribution to cultural issues and engage in stereotype-based messaging that intensifies identity-based polarization. This interaction between voter demand and party strategy helps explain why cultural conflict not only emerges but persists and deepens over time, as in the case of the US, where polarization has continued to rise in recent years.

By incorporating parties into the identity framework, Gennaioli & Tabellini (Forthcoming) also provide a more comprehensive explanation for patterns of voter realignment. In their model, a shift from class to cultural identity reduces conflict over redistribution while increasing cultural polarization. This enables right-wing parties to attract culturally conservative, lower-class voters, even when those voters would traditionally support redistribution—offering a theoretical foundation for the empirical patterns in Gethin et al. (2022). Moreover, party propaganda is asymmetric: parties benefit more when their core voters are culturally aligned and responsive to their messaging. For example, conservative propaganda (e.g., anti-immigrant rhetoric) reinforces ingroup beliefs and provokes progressive backlash, further polarizing the electorate. In this way, Gennaioli & Tabellini (Forthcoming) show that political supply does not simply respond to identity shifts—it amplifies and sustains them.

Empirical findings by Colussi et al. (2021) are supportive of the mechanisms in Gennaioli & Tabellini (Forthcoming). Colussi et al. (2021) exploit Ramadan in Germany as an exogenous salience shock that amplifies differences between (native) Christians and (foreign-origin) Muslims, increasing meta-contrast for cultural identities. In elections that take place after Ramadan, the vote share of both right- and left-wing parties increases in municipalities that have mosques, reflecting cultural polarization. Colussi et al. (2021) pro-

vide suggestive evidence that this pattern is driven by counter-mobilization of the left as backlash to right-wing anti-Muslim messaging.

It should be noted that endogenous social identification, as in the framework presented in Section 3.2, can also contribute to the lower salience of redistributive conflict in recent decades. If rising immigration erodes class identification among lower-class voters, lowering support for redistribution, then the variance of redistributive preferences within the nation should decrease, limiting polarization along the economic dimension. A prediction of rising polarization along a cultural axis follows less straightforwardly from that framework, as (low-skilled) immigration does not make upper-class voters less nationalist. However, small modifications could likely generate this prediction. For instance, in Shayo (2020), a group's status only depends on individuals' objective attributes and not on who identifies with a group. If this were not the case, higher nationalism among low-class voters might erode the nation's status and lead upper-class individuals to choose higher-status identities to which they, but not the poor, have access (e.g., globalism). To our knowledge, the power of such status distinction mechanisms to explain ideological sorting has not been explored to date.

While we have focused here on immigration's ability to explain ideological realignment around cultural issues, the mechanisms we highlighted also link immigration to other changing cleavages that have political implications. By redefining salient dimensions of division in a society, immigration may change policy attitudes in subtler ways than just raising the salience of immigrant-native divides. The study by Fouka & Tabellini (2022) discussed above shows that Mexican immigration reduces the salience of race and leads to recategorization of Black Americans as an "American" ingroup. This change manifests in policy preferences: higher shares of Mexican immigrants lead white Americans to report higher support for affirmative action and anti-discrimination in federal employment for Black people. This result has two implications. First, political cleavages around pre-existing ethno-racial divisions may become less salient as a result of immigration. Second, anti-immigrant and nativist attitudes may actually move together with more progressive attitudes in other cultural dimensions (such as race) in response to immigrant inflows. This complicates the view that all cultural issues form an undifferentiated bundle and that a shock increasing polarization on one such issue (e.g., immigration) will always shift atti-

tudes on other issues as well.

Changing social cleavages as a result of immigration may also manifest in voting outcomes. Hessami & Schirner (2024) exploit the rule-based allocation of refugees to German municipalities after 2016, and find that a higher share of refugees increases the vote-share of immigrant origin candidates. The effect is primarily driven by candidates from Eastern and Southern Europe. Since these groups share many attributes with native Germans that differentiate them from Syrian arrivals (white or non-Muslim), the result is consistent with a mechanism of reclassification similar to the one examined by Fouka et al. (2022) in the US for white European immigrants.

5 Moderators

Several additional processes can moderate the effects of immigration on identity change and social categorization by influencing both cognitive and affective pathways of identification. In this section, we focus on two such processes that have received attention in the empirical literature: contact and the two-way process of value and norm adoption between immigrant and natives.

5.1 Contact

The contact hypothesis is an influential theory in psychology first formulated by Gordon Allport (Allport 1954). This theory posits that intergroup contact can reduce prejudice between minorities and majorities under specific conditions. The conditions for successful contact are fairly restrictive, requiring among others equal status of the groups, the pursuit of a common goal and sanctioning by institutional authorities, criteria which are often hard to satisfy, especially in the context of immigration. Nonetheless, despite some limitations concerning the generalizability of contact's effects across contexts (Mousa 2018), a long line of research in social psychology and other disciplines provides evidence broadly confirmatory of this hypothesis (Pettigrew & Tropp 2006, Paluck et al. 2019, Lowe 2021).

One channel through which contact may operate is by reducing the affective distance of the outgroup from the ingroup, as familiarity and positive affect are closely associated (Bornstein 1989, Harmon-Jones & Allen 2001). This would reduce the salience of attributes

that differentiate immigrants from natives—such as language or religion—and limit recategorization. Alternatively, positive contact may provide information to the ingroup about attributes of the outgroup, highlighting potential similarities which would reduce perceived distance. Additionally, contact may allow ingroup members to update their beliefs about the outgroup, counteracting stereotypical thinking, which tends to overweigh attributes of the outgroup less frequently encountered within the ingroup (Bordalo et al. 2016).²¹

Several studies provide evidence that positive contact reduces negative views of immigrants and salient ingroup-outgroup distinctions.²² Steinmayr (2021) finds that municipalities in Austria which accommodated asylum seekers for an extended period of time after the migrant crisis of 2016 saw a reduction in the vote share of the far-right. Consistent with the conditions set out by Allport, in these municipalities, local authorities and NGOs actively facilitated interactions between immigrants and natives, while financial assistance for asylum seekers was provided by the state, limiting competition for jobs and local resources. Instead, Austrian municipalities which did not conform to these conditions, but only experienced massive inflows of transient refugees, saw an increase in support for the far-right. These conclusions are supported by Vertier et al. (2023) who find that the presence of migrant centers that facilitated contact between asylum-seekers and natives in France reduced voting for the far-right National Front between 2012 and 2017. Bursztyn et al. (2024) examine the long-term effects of contact with immigrants in the US context: relying on an identification strategy that interacts time-variant attractiveness of locations with waves of migrants of different ancestry arriving in each time period, they find that a higher share of foreigners from a specific ancestry group increases donations by European-ancestry individuals to that group's country. Focusing on Arab Muslims, they show that prolonged contact with that group decreases prejudice and increases knowledge of the group and of Is-

²¹Contact may also work through non-psychological channels, reducing tensions between immigrants and natives and thereby limiting identity salience. For instance, Rohner et al. (2013) provide a microfoundation for contact theory based on intergroup transactions and reputation. Favorable conditions for intergroup interaction limit the possibility that negative signals are sent, which could reduce trustworthiness and increase the likelihood of intergroup conflict.

²²For an exception, see Zhou & Lyall (2025), who find no improvement in attitudes of locals towards internally displaced migrants in Afghanistan after six months of contact as part of a collaborative vocational training program. This highlights limitations to successful contact in wartime settings when ongoing conflict sustains tensions between migrants and locals, in line with the restrictive scope conditions of the original theory by Allport (1954).

lam, consistent with a role for both affective and cognitive mechanisms in driving contact's effect.

Calderon et al. (2023) also provide evidence for both affective and informational belief-updating channels mediating contact between white and Black Americans during the Second Great Migration. Between 1940 and 1970, more than 4 million Black Americans left the US South for urban areas in the North and the West of the country (Boustan 2016). Calderon et al. (2023) show that the migration of Southern Black Americans to counties outside the South drove support for the civil rights movement and votes for the Democratic Party, effects which were driven by both Black and white Northerners. These effects were more pronounced in counties with higher economic growth, and therefore less economic competition between migrants and locals. They were also stronger in counties with more manufacturing employment, where labor unions actively promoted Black-white solidarity and working class identification.

These heterogeneous patterns are consistent with the scope conditions of the contact hypothesis. Calderon et al. (2023) also provide evidence for an information-based mechanism. As Gunnar Myrdal noted in 1944, at the onset of the Great Migration, at least some Northern white residents did not “understand the reality and the effects of such [Southern] discriminations,” and for this reason “[t]o get publicity is of the highest strategic importance to [Black people]” (Myrdal 1944). Consistent with this idea, Calderon et al. (2023) find that counties with more Black migrants were more likely to report on Black lynchings that occurred in the South in their local newspapers, likely contributing to sensitization of whites on racial injustice in the South.

Beyond contact, several studies highlight the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing perceived or affective distance between migrants and locals. In Mozambique, Barros (2025) finds that joint community meetings—where internally displaced persons (IDPs) engaged in discussions with host communities—effectively improved IDPs' integration outcomes and reduced locals' discrimination against them. Perspective-taking interventions are another approach to reducing perceived or affective distance and have been shown to improve attitudes toward migrants (Adida et al. 2018). In Turkey, Alan et al. (2021) find that an educational program designed to foster perspective-taking among students in ethnically mixed schools increased prosocial behavior and reduced violence in interactions

between Turkish and Syrian refugee children. Barsbai et al. (2023) show that a simple intervention—showing employers a family photo—significantly reduced mistreatment of Filipino domestic workers in Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong by lowering perceived social distance.

5.2 Assimilation and cultural transmission

The cognitive process of self-identification with and recategorization of groups relies on differences in attributes between immigrants and natives. According to Shayo (2020), immigration decreases identification with groups that share attributes with immigrants, while SCT posits that it increases the salience of unshared attributes, turning them into prominent social cleavages. While the attributes of immigrants have so far been taken as fixed, several of them are in fact malleable and may change, both mechanically as a function of time in the destination, and endogenously as responses to natives' changing identities and classifications.

Assimilation reduces perceived distance and may mitigate some of the identity effects of immigration discussed earlier. Whether immigrants assimilate, at what rate, and which factors affect assimilation are questions treated by large literatures in economics and sociology and which we do not attempt to treat thoroughly here.²³ On the one hand, immigrants assimilate both economically and culturally, as documented by several empirical studies (Vigdor 2009, Aleksynska & Algan 2010). Assimilation generally operates over the longer-run or across generations. For instance, Abramitzky et al. (2020) find that immigrants, both historically and today, take about 20 years to close by half the cultural gap with natives, as measured by an index of first name foreignness based on the empirical distribution of names.

However, Fouka & Serlin (2024) show that immigrants may change their attributes even in anticipation of migration, which pushes towards cultural homogenization and a lower salience of distinct identities even in the short run.²⁴ In addition to this force, rates of as-

²³For partial reviews, see Bisin & Verdier (2011) for studies of assimilation in economics, Drouhot & Nee (2019) in sociology and Fouka (2023) in political science.

²⁴This is true for voluntary migrants, but not necessarily of the forcibly displaced, suggesting that refugee inflows may have more pronounced effects on identification and categorization than economic migration.

similation are frequently found to be higher for immigrant groups that come from poorer countries (Manning & Roy 2010, Abramitzky et al. 2020), which may also be more culturally different and for which initial perceived distances are likely higher. Finally, evidence suggests that immigrant groups assimilate along observable markers of difference specifically to avoid prejudice and discrimination that results from their classification as outgroups (Fouka 2019, Saavedra 2021, Jaschke et al. 2022). All these channels in combination work to limit the salience of nativism and other cleavages based on the distinct characteristics of migrants.

On the other hand, assimilation may not always happen or it may not help soften immigrant-native cleavages and associated salient identities. Evidence from the so-called epidemiological approach (Fernández 2011) finds significant persistence of attitudes and behaviors across immigrant generations, with origin-country variables having predictive power for outcomes of second-generation immigrants in destination countries. One force that could explain this pattern is cultural transmission. Immigrant parents may value their cultural traits and desire to pass them on to their children, which has been shown theoretically by Bisin & Verdier (2001) to counteract cultural homogenization and preserve minority identities. Empirical evidence supports this idea (Bisin et al. 2004). This mechanism implies not only preservation of difference between immigrants and natives, but even a likely backlash and magnification of this difference when assimilation is externally imposed (Fouka 2020). An additional mechanism relates to the returns from assimilation. Immigrants may change their attributes in the hope of improving natives' attitudes, but such attempts are not always successful. When certain attributes become salient outgroup markers, assimilating on other attributes may not change categorization. In a field experiment in Germany that measures discrimination behaviorally as the rates of providing help to an individual in need, Choi et al. (2021) show that linguistic assimilation does not remove the bias of native Germans towards Muslims in a context in which religion is a more salient cleavage than language for social categorization. Rationally anticipating this, immigrants may choose not to assimilate, thus increasing perceived distance or they may even respond to discrimination by developing oppositional identities (Bisin et al. 2011). Both the decision to assimilate and the effects of assimilation on native identity and categorization remain open topics for research.

While the literature on assimilation focuses on changes in identity markers of immigrants, immigration may also result in changes in the characteristics and the preferences of natives. Horizontal transmission of traits can occur in either direction, and empirical evidence suggests that norms and behaviors may spread from incoming populations to local groups (Miho et al. 2024). Bazzi et al. (2023a) present a framework, also discussed in more detail in Bazzi & Fiszbein (2025), to explain when and how migrants reshape the culture and ideology at destination. Their conceptual model identifies two main conditions for migrant influence: (i) ideological intensity—defined as the strength of migrants’ commitment to their norms and identities—and (ii) the malleability of local power structures, which determines the opportunities for influence. When these conditions are met, cultural influence can occur through three distinct channels: direct interpersonal spillovers, mobilization via civil society organizations, and institutional leverage through positions of authority.

Applying this framework to the case of the post-Civil War Confederate diaspora—Southern Whites who migrated outside the South after the Civil War—Bazzi et al. (2023a) show that a small but ideologically intense group of migrants can exert far-reaching influence when they settle in areas with weak existing institutions and gain access to public authority. Specifically, Bazzi et al. (2023a) use a shift-share methodology to show that counties in the US West and North that received more white Southern migrants between 1870 and 1900 had more Confederate memorials, more lynchings of Black people, and a higher number of chapters of supremacist organizations such as the KKK at the beginning of the 20th century. Bazzi et al. (2023b) complement the previous paper by examining the consequence of Southern white migration between 1900 and 1940 for political preferences. Using the same methodology as Bazzi et al. (2023a), Bazzi et al. (2023b) find that counties that received more white migrants during the early 20th century experienced more conservative voting patterns in later years—a trend that persisted up until 2020. Consistent with a mechanism of identity transmission, Bazzi et al. (2023b) provide evidence that exposure to white Southern families increased neighbors’ likelihood to give their children Biblical names, which were common among Southern whites.

Giuliano & Tabellini (2020) document similar effects in the context of European immigration to the United States between 1900 and 1930. Giuliano & Tabellini (2020) note that European immigrants moving to the US after 1900 had been exposed to the nascent wel-

fare state in their countries of origin (Flora 1983), as compared to previous migrants and their descendants who were already living in the US at the time. As a consequence, European immigrants may have brought with them a left-leaning political ideology and stronger support for redistribution. Using a shift-share instrument and constructing an index of exposure that counts the number of years spent by any individual immigrant in the country of origin since the introduction of the first welfare reform, Giuliano & Tabellini (2020) find that US born individuals living in counties that received more historical European immigrants who had been more exposed to social welfare reforms at home have stronger preferences for redistribution, hold a more liberal ideology, and are more likely to vote for the Democratic Party. Consistent with a mechanism of horizontal transmission, Giuliano & Tabellini (2020) show that these effects are stronger in places where immigrants and natives were more likely to have inter-group contact (proxied for by intermarriage and residential integration). Moreover, in line with the transmission of ideology (and not just preferences), Giuliano & Tabellini (2020) also show that immigration increased the propensity of native parents (of native parentage) to name their children after prominent socialist figures.

6 Heterogeneity

As already made clear in Section 3, the effects of immigration on identity choices and salient identity cleavages depend on several factors. Differences between immigrants and natives in attributes related to class, race or income determine perceived distances and identity choices; differences in skills may influence identification through labor market competition and relative status channels; and affective distance, together with shared attributes determines which social cleavages will become salient. In this section, we highlight some additional dimensions of heterogeneity that are likely to be important and operate through more than one of the mechanisms described in Sections 3 and 5. Considering how these dimensions vary across contexts can help generate predictions about the impact of immigration on social cleavages and political outcomes in new settings. This extends the conclusions of the previous section to countries beyond wealthy Western democracies, where the profiles and shared attributes of immigrants and local populations differ from those observed in Europe and North America.

6.1 Characteristics of immigrants

Besides skill, income and other attributes that differentiate immigrants from natives and may heighten national identification among the latter, certain immigrant characteristics may play a particularly important role in moderating identity responses. One such characteristic is the distinction between refugees and economic migrants. Evidence from conjoint experiments across 15 European countries in the aftermath of the 2016 migrant crisis shows that the public has a strong negative bias against people who migrate for economic reasons as compared to those who leave their countries to avoid ethnic, religious or political persecution (Bansak et al. 2016). Because of this lower affective distance of asylum seekers relative to economic migrants, refugee inflows are less likely than similarly sized migration flows to heighten group boundaries, triggering nativism and negative attitudes toward (new and old) migrants. This prediction aligns with descriptive evidence that Ukrainian refugee inflows following the Russian invasion did not worsen Europeans' views of asylum-seekers, regardless of the origin background of the latter (Bansak et al. 2023).

Similarly, other immigrant attributes that trigger particularly intense perceptions of threat due to historical or other contextual reasons are more likely to activate group identities and create salient cleavages. One such attribute is religion. A large share of the foreign-born in European countries is of Muslim background, and the negative bias of Europeans against Islam and Muslim immigrants and refugees is well documented (Adida et al. 2016, Bansak et al. 2016).²⁵ This response partly acts through religious differences increasing perceived distance and nativist reactions.²⁶ But there is reason to believe that difference is not the only channel at work and that inflows of e.g. Buddhist or Hindu migrants would not trigger as negative a response by Europeans as Muslim immigration. Due to historical conflict between Islam and European Christianity, Muslims have been constructed as a particularly threatening outsider (Ochsner & Roesel 2024). This group is

²⁵According to a 2016 Pew poll, the share of the total population that is Muslim in Northwestern Europe ranges from 3.2 in Luxembourg to 8.8 percent in France. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>.

²⁶In the reverse context of a Muslim-majority country, Alrababa'h et al. (2021) find that Jordanians, who are predominantly Sunni Muslims, are less willing to host Syrians who are Alawite Muslims or Christians. They also find that religion plays a larger role in shaping willingness to host than any other economic or social characteristic of the refugees.

therefore of higher affective distance than than other religiously different immigrant groups, raising the salience of religion as an attribute that maximizes meta-contrast. This might also have implications for the recategorization of other groups. The prediction following from a framework relying on meta-contrast is that, in the aftermath of Muslim immigration, the public may view more positively immigrant groups—such as Southern Europeans in the North of Europe—that are not Muslim. Conversely, non-immigrant Muslim groups may also face increased negative perceptions. Hangartner et al. (2019) find evidence for this in the context of Greece. In the aftermath of the 2016 migrant crisis, higher exposure to Syrian refugee inflows worsened locals' attitudes towards Greece's indigenous Muslim minority.

Finally, beyond individual attributes, the size and diversity of immigrant inflows also influence identity dynamics. Whether immigrant inflows consist of one homogeneous group from a single origin background or multiple smaller groups from diverse origins will play a role for group divisions in society. One channel works through immigrants' own identification. To see this, consider the framework in Section 3.2, but now from the point of view of an immigrant rather than a native. A more fractionalized immigrant population reduces the perceived distance between individual immigrants and other social groups (such as class or race) that might otherwise unify immigrants into a cohesive group distinct from natives.²⁷

In addition, diversity of immigrant origins is likely to affect the incentives of immigrants to assimilate into a common national identity. Bazzi et al. (2019) provide empirical evidence on this from the context of Indonesia, a highly ethnically diverse society. They exploit the Indonesian government's transmigration program in the 1980s, which led to quasi-random settlement of migrants in a way that generated variation in both fractionalization and polarization across communities. Higher fractionalization increased national identity measured as the propensity to speak the national language, Bahasa Indonesia, at home. On the contrary, higher polarization decreased nation-building. The results are rationalized in a model in which national identity is costly to obtain, but a higher likelihood of intergroup interactions—increasing in fractionalization, but decreasing in polarization—increases the benefits to a common identity.

²⁷The definition of fractionalization we have in mind is that of the probability of two randomly selected individuals belonging to the same group (Alesina et al. 2003).

Anderberg et al. (2024) reach a similar conclusion in a study of biases of immigrant and native students in Germany. Leveraging quasi-random assignment of students to classrooms and using an incentivized investment game, they show that bias is highest in classrooms that are culturally polarized, namely contain one large native and one large Muslim immigrant group. Immigrants and natives in fractionalized classrooms display significantly lower bias. Anderberg et al. (2024) also find lower bias in classrooms with non-cultural polarization, in which the large immigrant group is not Muslim. Together, the findings of Bazzi et al. (2019) and Anderberg et al. (2024) suggest that both the size distribution and specific distinguishing attributes of immigrant groups matter for how immigration affects identity among both immigrants and natives. Exploring these mechanisms further by integrating theories of identity (Shayo 2020) with insights on polarization and fractionalization in conflict (Esteban & Ray 1994, Esteban et al. 2012) presents a fruitful direction for future research.

6.2 Characteristics of natives

A key moderator of immigration's identity effects may be locals' underlying values and preferences. Graham et al. (2009) and Enke (2020) document variation in the moral foundations—the types of values that people use for making moral judgements—across liberals and conservatives in the US. Conservatives are more likely than liberals to rely on *binding* foundations, which place more emphasis on the group rather than the individual as a locus of moral judgements. As a result, conservatives are more likely to support border control policies (Enke et al. 2023) and may respond to any inflow of immigrants with a higher salience of ingroup-outgroup distinctions. One way to understand this response is in terms of affective distance: because binding moral foundations emphasize both loyalty to the ingroup and a greater respect for tradition, the arrival of outsiders will trigger higher perceptions of threat among moral conservatives, increasing the salience of nativity and other distinct immigrant attributes in ingroup-outgroup categorization.

Another source of heterogeneity arises from the fact that successive waves of immigration diversify what is usually considered to be a homogeneous group of “natives.” In both the US and Europe, a sizable proportion of population are foreign-born or have foreign-born parents or grandparents. New waves of immigration will likely trigger different identity re-

sponses among this growing subpopulation. On the one hand, immigrant background is an attribute shared between new arrivals and existing immigrants and their descendants. This may reduce perceived distance and dampen nativist responses within this group. Indeed, studies show that priming ancestral immigrant or refugee experiences improves attitudes towards refugees and increases the salience of a common identity based on shared background (Dinas et al. 2021, Williamson et al. 2021). Using behavioral games in a school setting in Jordan, Barron et al. (2023) find that Jordanian children with Palestinian roots do not discriminate against Syrian refugee children, and that this behavior is correlated with their parents transmitting narratives of solidarity. Beyond their direct influence on cognitive categorization, shared attributes may enhance empathy and perspective-taking toward immigrants and asylum-seekers (Adida et al. 2018, Hartman & Morse 2020, Hartman et al. 2021, Andries et al. 2024).²⁸

Conversely, long-term foreign-born residents and their descendants may respond to immigration with heightened national identification and more negative views of newcomers. Immigrants may often be the closest labor market substitutes for other immigrants and therefore the most likely to face any negative effects of competition for jobs or housing (Borjas 1987, Ottaviano & Peri 2012).²⁹ Status channels are then likely to drive this group to identify with higher-status groups, such as the native majority. In addition, the salience of cleavages defined by attributes of new immigrants may have negative spillover effects on existing immigrant groups. Fouka & Tabellini (2022) find that the increased salience of nativity (as opposed to race) as a social cleavage in the aftermath of Mexican immigration in the US worsened attitudes towards foreign-origin groups besides Hispanics, such as Asians and Muslims. Fearing reclassification as an outgroup, existing immigrant groups may reinforce national identification and oppose immigration as a signal of assimilation. Although these opposing mechanisms remain underexplored, research in political science documents heterogeneity in immigrants' attitudes toward other immigrants and policy views on immi-

²⁸Locals with migrant background may also have instrumental reasons to support new immigration more than natives. In India, Gaikwad & Nellis (2017) show that minority communities are more likely to support immigration by co-ethnics because enlarging their group's size would translate in electoral gains.

²⁹Consistent with this argument, in the context of West Africa, Adida (2014) shows that fear of competition is one of the channels that lead to more exclusion of migrants when they share the ethnicity of the host population.

gration, which is largely consistent with these channels (Just & Anderson 2015, Neureiter & Schulte 2024). At the same time, Muslims and ethno-racial minorities in Europe are, on average, less likely than natives to support right-wing parties (Gethin et al. 2022).

6.3 Local conditions

Finally, immigration's effects on identity also depend on local conditions shaping interactions between immigrants and natives, as well as the integration trajectories of the former. One factor shown to be important is residential segregation. Although spatial sorting is endogenous to identity formation, it independently influences identification patterns and the development of social cleavages. One channel through which it works is reduced contact. Tarquinio & Villar Vallenias (2023) provide evidence on this effect. Relying on a shift-share instrument for identification, they find that segregation between South Asian and white British residents of the UK predicts lower contact in a variety of settings and also stronger group identities. South Asians in more segregated constituencies are more likely to identify as Asian rather than British and to perceive no commonality with British individuals. On their side, the white British in more segregated constituencies adopt more exclusive views of British identity which place higher importance on birthplace and British ancestry. Residential segregation may also shape assimilation rates both within and across generations. While more contact should promote similarity through changes in the preferences and behaviors of both immigrants and natives, research on cultural transmission paints a more complicated picture. Immigrant assimilation into majority traits may in fact be stronger in more segregated neighborhoods, as the threat of cultural loss intensifies parental investment into minority traits (Bisin et al. 2016, 2011). Residential mixing may then contribute to minority identity preservation and immigrant-native cleavages in the long run.

Segregation may also influence identity through its effects on immigrants' labor market performance and broader economic integration. Theoretically, immigrant enclaves have ambiguous effects on immigrants' economic outcomes. On the one hand, through the role of immigrant networks they facilitate job finding by means of referrals, as well as information acquisition about local conditions and even social norms in the destination. On the other, jobs found through immigrant employers may be low quality and reduce immigrants' occupational status and earnings in the long-run. Limited interaction with natives

may hinder socioeconomic integration and upward mobility for immigrants. A large literature on the effects of immigrant enclaves which relies on spatial dispersal policies used to allocate refugees in Europe and the US generally identifies positive, though heterogeneous, economic effects of enclaves (see Fouka 2023, for a review). Better economic outcomes may foster greater contact and integration over time. They may also translate into a lowering of affective distance, by reducing sociotropic concerns about immigrants being a burden to the economy and society (Hainmueller & Hopkins 2014).

More broadly, and besides segregation and enclaves, local conditions in immigrants' destinations are important moderators of identity conflict. For instance, both local unemployment rates as well as the average "quality" of co-ethnics—in terms of skills, education or other forms of human capital—have been shown to matter for immigrant economic outcomes, which might, in turn, affect the perceptions of natives (Åslund & Rooth 2007, Damm 2014). In addition, as suggested by the evidence in Calderon et al. (2023), local economic growth and muted local labor market competition may shape the scope conditions for positive contact and reduce perceptions of immigrants as an outgroup. In the context of forced displacement, studies also show that humanitarian aid may counteract any mechanisms that drive anti-refugee backlash, by improving economic outcomes for natives. This might be the case both when aid is allocated to host communities (Zhou et al. 2023) and when aid is provided directly to refugees, as refugees may compensate locals by stimulating demand for local services (Lehmann & Masterson 2020).

7 Concluding remarks

The past decades have witnessed unprecedented increases in immigration and refugee flows, particularly in high-income countries. These inflows have coincided with significant political shifts: the rise of right-wing populist parties, the erosion of support for redistribution, and a realignment of political cleavages along cultural rather than economic lines. At the same time, the composition of immigrant populations has become increasingly diverse in terms of origin, skills, and religion, further fueling debates around national identity and social cohesion.

This chapter integrated insights from social psychology and political economy to de-

velop a coherent framework for understanding how immigration affects identity, and how these identity shifts, in turn, shape political behavior. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), we highlighted two central mechanisms. First, immigration can alter patterns of self-identification among natives through cognitive and affective channels, by changing perceived similarity and relative group status. Second, immigration can trigger recategorization of social groups by shifting the salience of different identity dimensions—such as class, race, or nativity—depending on the composition and perceived threat of the incoming population.

We discussed how these identity shifts can help explain key political developments. The rise of right-wing populism can be seen as a consequence of declining working-class identity and growing nationalist identification. This shift is especially evident among lower-skilled natives, who perceive the working class as more distant and lower in status due to immigration-driven dilution. These identity changes may lead individuals to prioritize group loyalty over material interests, supporting parties that are culturally aligned even if they oppose economic redistribution. Furthermore, immigration can act as a shock that amplifies cultural cleavages, fostering polarization and reducing the prominence of economic conflicts. Empirical studies across multiple contexts—from early 20th century America to 21st century Europe—support the idea that identity-based responses to immigration are central to understanding modern political realignments.

At the same time, our framework offers insights that extend beyond populism and polarization, and beyond the contexts of Europe and the United States. One implication of recategorization is that immigration can reshape political cleavages along dimensions that vary depending on the characteristics of immigrants and natives in a given setting. Inflows of immigrants who share ethnic or religious ties with local populations may weaken existing cleavages based on those identities. This may be especially relevant in sub-Saharan Africa, where ethnicity is a focal point of political competition and where increasing numbers of forced migrants from neighboring countries—many of whom are co-ethnics (Zhou 2021)—may erode ethnic ties and alter the structure of political contestation. Conversely, immigrants may introduce new divisions along dimensions where they differ from natives. This pattern has repeatedly emerged in historical contexts: Black internal migration in the United States shifted political competition toward racial rather than religious lines; in Eu-

rope, immigration redirected political conflict away from class toward cleavages based on religion and foreign origin. Our framework offers a basis for anticipating similar dynamics in diverse contexts. This is particularly pertinent given that the majority of displaced people since 2005 have been hosted by countries outside Europe and North America, and that several developing economies—such as India, South Africa, and Turkey—have attracted large numbers of immigrants as well.

Throughout the chapter, we have identified several avenues for future research. SIT and SCT yield nuanced, testable implications for the effects of immigration, many of which remain empirically underexplored. Most notably, although existing research shows that immigration reduces support for redistribution, there is no direct evidence that this effect is driven by increased national identification. Future work should expand on the suggestive evidence presented in this chapter regarding the positive relationship between refugee inflows and nationalism. Researchers can exploit resettlement or dispersal policies to leverage within-country variation in refugee presence. In addition, the analysis can be extended to economic migrants by combining shift-share instruments with quasi-natural experiments resulting from major changes in immigration regimes, such as the post-2004 expansion of the European Union.

Furthermore, many dimensions of heterogeneity remain untested. The effect of immigration depends on the social attributes and economic characteristics of both immigrants and natives, as well as the social categories that are relevant in each country context. For example, a key question in countries that have received successive waves of immigrants and refugees over the decades is how earlier generations of foreign-origin individuals will respond to new immigration and how they, in turn, will be recategorized.

One dimension of heterogeneity that deserves particular attention given its salience in the context of Christian-heritage democracies is religion. In both Europe and the United States, Muslim immigrants are often perceived as especially threatening, due in part to historical conflict, value differences, and media portrayals. As a result, Muslim immigration tends to provoke stronger identity-based reactions than immigration from other groups, even those that differ similarly in economic terms. This raises several important questions: does Muslim immigration influence how other immigrant groups are categorized? Historically, the mass migration of Black Americans to the U.S. North and West made it easier

for European immigrants to “become white” and fully assimilate into American society. In contemporary Europe, non-white refugees from majority-Muslim countries may similarly reshape the assimilation trajectories of Eastern European immigrants, who were initially met with hostility by natives in Western Europe.

Moreover, the religious composition of immigrant populations may influence not only nativist sentiment but also attitudes on seemingly unrelated issues, such as gender equality. When immigrants originate from countries with more conservative gender norms than those of the host society, natives may increase their support for gender equality as a way of distancing themselves from the perceived outgroup. This response could counteract the traditional association of far-right parties with conservative family values. These dynamics are visible in the evolving platforms of some European right-wing parties, which have increasingly emphasized European liberal values—including gender equality—in response to rising refugee flows and anti-immigrant sentiment. A similar trend appears in public attitudes, with citizens becoming more socially progressive on gender and LGBTQ+ issues when exposed to ethnic outgroups (Turnbull-Dugarte & Ortega 2024).

For studies that examine the rising importance of identity politics, immigration is often viewed as a purely “cultural” shock. While much evidence supports the primacy of cultural concerns when it comes to natives’ policy views on immigration, it is also clear that immigration has distributional material consequences for natives. Some subgroups benefit more than others, while evidence exists that the closest substitutes for immigrant labor, usually lower-skilled natives, may, in some instances, experience losses. Moreover, immigrants may exert pressure on house prices and compete for public resources with natives, impacts that are also unevenly distributed across groups. As discussed in this chapter, such material effects also impact patterns of self-identification and group categorization. The possible interactions between economic and cultural effects of migration can be more fully incorporated into models with a role for identity. Additionally, even when one considers immigration as a mainly cultural, rather than economic shock, its influence on different aspects of voters’ ideology could be conflicting. For example, as shown in Fouka & Tabellini (2022), immigration may simultaneously increase anti-immigrant sentiment and support for affirmative action for domestic minorities—two policy preferences that often do not align in parties’ platforms. Models of identity should incorporate these and additional insights.

Finally, the literature linking immigration to identity responses and political behavior has paid relatively little attention to the role of political elites. Politicians and parties are often studied either as drivers of exogenous shifts in the salience of immigrants and minority groups (Hopkins 2010, Newman et al. 2021, Müller & Schwarz 2023, Grosjean et al. 2023) or as amplifiers of identity shifts originating in the electorate (Gennaioli & Tabellini Forthcoming). Yet if voters' identities are malleable and responsive to salience shocks, strategic incentives arise for politicians to actively shape those identities. Elevating the salience of national identity and immigrant-native divisions may allow parties to weaken specific voting blocs—such as the working class—and advance policies that would otherwise be opposed by voters in the absence of identity-based considerations. Modeling and empirically examining these mechanisms would usefully complement the broader literature that focuses on voter preferences and behavior in response to immigration.

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