

Surprising Relationships Between Battery-Based Ideological Scales and Attitudes to Immigration in the UK

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Abstract

This paper studies the ideological underpinnings of ‘Sociotropic’ attitudes towards the impact of migrants in the UK using three attitudinal scales from the 2019 BSA; specifically, attitudes to the perceived impact of migration on ‘The Economy’ and on ‘Culture’. Both Multiple Linear Regression and Logistic Regression results are mostly consistent with previous literature and alternative measures of migration attitudes, with a notable exception being with regards to the unique impact of a ‘Right Wing Authoritarian’ (RWA) ideology, which is found to have a marked opposite effect to that usually found in the literature. The paper offers two potential explanations for this difference; one due to general differences in variable construction and one due to a potential construct validity problem from ambiguous question wording. Results were broadly similar whether the ‘Sociotropic Attitude’ was economy-based or culture-based. The paper also provides a novel methodology in measuring the interplay between multi-level ideology and political attitudes, while offering new and meaningful secondary empirical findings, particularly with regards to the relative strength of ‘anti-welfare’ attitudes and the relative weakness of supposed ‘left-right’ ideological measures.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Sociotropic Analysis

Immigration is consistently found to be one of the most salient issues to the UK public, frequently picked up by UK respondents when asked about important issues ahead of, for example, ‘housing’ and ‘The NHS’ (Allen and Blinder, 2016, p.3). Until very recently, the public balance leant towards perceiving immigration as more negative than positive (ibid, p.8).

A common hypothesis in both public discourse and the academic study of immigration attitudes is that negative sentiment is driven in large part by self-interest. Labour market competition theory, for example, makes a neoclassical-based argument that the competition created from an increase in labour supply depresses wages and therefore causes those most affected to have more negative attitudes towards immigrants. Here, negative attitudes come from a concern that immigration will negatively impact one’s own economic situation. However, literature has consistently found that economic self-interest and concerns about labour market competition have little to no significant impact on relevant attitudes, for both explicit measures of economic self-interest or proxies such as income or overall economic vulnerability. Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010), for example, vary immigrants’ skill levels and test various groups’ attitudes between them, finding that immigrant skill levels similar to one’s own do not predict level of negative sentiment.

Instead, attitudes to immigration are largely comprised of Sociotropic concerns; ‘civic concerns about broad economic and cultural implications on the nation as a whole, not on the basis of personal circumstances’ (Solodoch, 2020, p.1). This is separate from self-interest in that respondents evaluate the impact on a society rather than on their own economic or social situation. Most research into OECD immigration attitudes has focussed on respondents’ attitudes to preferred quantity of immigration, (often grouped in 3 as ‘more’, less’ or ‘the same’). There has been far less exploration on what determines attitudes towards the perceived impact of migration on ‘Sociotropic’ climates. Arguably measuring immigration attitudes simply by preferred level is only ‘one dimension’ and not the most ‘relevant politically (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014, p.14). The underpinnings of attitudes towards immigrants’ perceived impact is also worth exploring. In addition, due in part to the

(empirically unjustified) dominance of labour market-based theories, the focus within Sociotropic concerns has largely been on attitudes to the economy, with other concerns as a ‘residual’ – indeed, Hainmueller and Hopkins explicitly emphasise the need to differentiate between Sociotropic concerns (ibid, p.18). However, I am not aware of a study that treats these Sociotropic concerns as an outcome variable in a non-descriptive way.

The questions in the BSA surrounding migration – namely, the split into ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ (see methodology for exact wording) – have formed the basis of a number of studies. Allen and Blinder (2016)’s paper mostly maps the attitudes over time using descriptive statistics and found that attitudes have in the last few years decidedly more positive to both the ‘culture’ and ‘economy’ questions. McLaren and Johnson (2007) find that answers to the questions themselves, unsurprisingly, strongly predict preferred migration level.

1.2 Immigration Attitudes and Ideology

Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014) describe political ideology as an ‘understudied’ potential driver of attitudes to immigration and its impact. A paper by the BSA themselves mentions that views on migration are likely to be ‘influenced by... ideological values’ but do not study it in detail (Ford and Heath, 2019). Semyonov et al (2006) attempt to measure the effect on vote for anti-immigrant parties, finding that right-wing ideology has become an increasingly significant predictor of voting for said parties. However, while Brooks et al found thirty studies on migration attitudes that included ideology as an independent variable, in none was ideology the central research focus (Brooks et al, 2016). Some do at least discuss ideology, however; Hanson et al (2001) find that those who self-identify as ‘conservative’ are more than 10% more likely to support immigration restrictions than even those who identify as ‘centrist’.

Several studies find that right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) specifically is a uniquely strong driver of anti-immigrant sentiment, often as a result of perceived ‘cultural threat’. Peresman et al (2021) study right-wing authoritarianism explicitly and find that it is by far the strongest predictor of immigration attitudes, and to have a particularly strong effect for immigrant groups seen as culturally distant.

Chapter 2

Methodology

This paper uses the R programming language and ggplot2 for its visualisations. It utilises survey questions and data from the 2019 British Social Attitudes Survey. The 2019 BSA contains two highly appropriate questions in measuring specific ‘Sociotropic’ concerns, each of which measure attitudes towards immigrants’ impact on the economy and on the country’s culture respectively, and rather precisely:

1. Is migration generally good/bad for [the] economy?
2. Does migration generally undermine/enrich British cultural life?

Respondents are asked to respond using an eleven-point (0-10) Scale. This is treated as a continuous variable for the purposes of analysis, allowing for multivariate linear regression (BSA, 2019). Three dependent variables were constructed; one for Q1, one for Q2, and one 0-10 scale whereby scores from the two questions were added together and divided by 2 to get an overall score out of 10, measuring attitudes to immigration averaged over both questions. These scales were then re-coded such that a higher score measures more negative attitudes. The survey does not ask respondents to self-report their political ideology. Instead, it uses an ‘ideological battery’ of questions whereby each ideological scale is the average score (out of 5) of respondents’ answers to the 6-7 questions in that scale. The Cronbach’s alpha for these figures on all three scales – left-right, libertarian-authoritarian and welfarism – exceeds 0.7. The scale comes from Heath and Evans (1996). The BSA’s approach to missing values in their ideological indexes is to move those with too many missing answers (3 or more for Left-Right and 4 or more for Lib-Auth), and, for those with fewer missing values than this, use mean imputation and recode those who answered ‘Don’t Know’ to the midpoint of the scale – here, 5 – and ‘Refused’ to that respondent’s mean set of valid answers (BSA, 2019).

In approaching my dependent variable – Sociotropic attitudes – I have treated missing values in as close to the spirit of this as was possible. I have recoded ‘Don’t Know’ answers to the value ‘5’, and excluded the four individuals who have refused to answer both the migration questions. One individual refused one question but not the other. I have set the respondent’s missing ‘Culture’ value to the same value as that of their ‘Economic’ score.

I performed a variety of factor analyses on this large set of ideological questions and confirmed that the three

scales' questions load consistently into their existing groups, providing some additional evidence that the ideological scales may well be in analytically useful categories. However, the mere existence of distinct factors provides little more than evidence of their internal consistency, not that they are optimal measures for specific ideologies. It is possible that the measures could be internally consistent but not valid – i.e. not usefully capturing the mechanism they are supposed to be measuring. This will be discussed later.

One essential characteristic of this paper is that it uses a very different measure of 'right wing authoritarianism' (RWA) than other literature. This paper uses interaction terms, tested both as dummies and as a numeric interaction term. The BSA groups ideology in 3 e.g. 'Left', 'Neither', 'Right' and the main regression includes all 3 as interactive dummies so as not to maintain information about those in the centre specifically, though the focus of analysis is on comparing left with right and authoritarian with libertarian. Incidentally, coding 'Right' and 'Authoritarian' as dummies relative to all other categories does not substantially change interpretation of results. RWA as measured in previous studies generally utilises the criteria of Funke (2005) or a modified version thereof. Rather than measure the term using ideological scales, Funke separates out 'conventionalism', 'authoritarian submission' and 'authoritarian aggression', themselves characteristics of the combined scale of Altemeyer (1981). This definition does not emphasise clusters of political attitudes, instead referring more to psychological states.

This is important for several reasons. Firstly, the left-right scale asks almost entirely about economic inequality; the scale's creators state that it would be more accurate to call it 'socialist vs laissez-faire' (Heath and Evans, 1996). They ask questions such as 'Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers', and 'There is one law for the rich and one for the poor'. Agreeing with these statements positions a respondent as left wing. I think it is possible that these questions capture a populist sort of anti-immigration sentiment – that big businesses, insulated from society, are importing cheap foreign labour at the expense of others. A more 'right-wing' attitude will therefore not necessarily be strongly associated with anti-immigrant sentiment as defined here (indeed, 'right wing' makes up less than 10% of the respondents according to this scale, implying that many individuals are likely misidentified). This will be discussed in more detail later.

Secondly, I notice that the substance of the libertarian-authoritarianism scale alone is itself rather consistent with the conception of right-wing authoritarianism in previous literature. Take item 7 from the 1996 Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale, which Funke states taps into all three of his attributes: "Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our fore-fathers [conventionalism], do what the authorities tell us to do [submission], and get rid of the 'rotten apples' who are ruining everything [aggression]." (Altemeyer, 1996, cited in Funke (2005), p.6). These three components map almost uncannily well onto the substance of Heath and Evans' (i.e. the BSA's) libertarian-authoritarianism scale. It contains questions such as 'Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values' [conventionalism], 'Schools should teach children to obey authority' [submission] and 'For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence' [aggression]. I aim to see whether empirical results differ using my scale average-based regression approach as opposed to the psychology-based approach in some past literature. The paper tests three hypotheses: H_1 : Authoritarian ideology will be associated with negative attitudes towards immigrants H_2 : The effect of authoritarian ideology will be stronger for

our ‘culture’ question than our ‘economy’ question. H_3 : ‘Right-wing authoritarianism’ may have a uniquely strong impact over and above the individual scale scores.

Finally, I take inspiration from Peresman et al (2021) by including an explicit measure of racial prejudice/ethnocentrism which itself strongly predicts negative sentiment towards immigrants. The closest the BSA has to this is self-reported racial prejudice. The potential for bias in this will be discussed later, but it is the best measure through which, a la the concerns of Solodoch (2020), one can get around the ‘theoretical similarities’ of Sociotropic and ethnocentric theories to attitudinal research into migration attitude and isolate an ‘ethnocentrism’ component. I also include controls for education level, age, sex, and a dummy created for ethnic minority status. All variables went through the VIF (variance inflation factor) test for multicollinearity and none had values that were cause for concern.

2.1 Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Relationships

An ‘authoritarian’ relative to a libertarian on average scores 2.84 points out of 10 higher on the scale measuring negative perceived impact of migration on the economy. This rises to 3.52 points for the scale measuring negative perceived impact of migration in undermining UK culture. All these four results were highly statistically significant. These ideologies plus ‘welfarism’ alone have a collective R^2 of 0.23.

Ideology	Economy	Culture	Difference
Libertarian	2.02	1.69	+0.33 Economy
Neither	3.62	3.64	+0.02 Culture
Authoritarian	4.86	5.21	+0.35 Culture

Table 2.1: Mean Negative Attitude Score (0-10) by Lib-Auth Ideology

However, a bivariate linear relationship between left-right ideology and Sociotropic Attitudes is non-existent for all three dependent variables. Additionally, those in the ‘left wing’ group tend to form a disproportionate number of those with the most positive and the most negative perceptions of migration’s impact. I performed some quantile analysis and found that those conceptualised as scoring high enough across the left-right questions to be labelled ‘left wing’ make up around 40% of respondents; however, they make up over 60% of both the highest 5% and lowest 5% of scores on our variable measuring average Sociotropic attitudes to migrants, with similar results when stratifying by type of Sociotropic question. (Note: while the ordering of Left-Neither-Right means implies the possibility of a quadratic relationship, including a relevant squared term in multivariate results did not change results).

Ideology	Economy	Culture	Difference
Left	4.16	4.28	+0.12 Culture
Neither	3.97	4.13	+0.16 Culture
Right	4.11	4.37	+0.26 Culture

Table 2.2: Mean Negative Attitude Score (0-10) by Left-Right Ideology

The third table shows multiple insights. Firstly, that those grouped as ‘authoritarian’ tend to have in relative terms more negative attitudes towards immigrants’ impact on culture. Secondly, that those grouped as ‘authoritarian left’ in fact perceive immigrants the most negatively, while libertarian left respondents few immigrants the most positively.

Ideology	Average	Economy	Culture	Difference
Auth Left	5.23	5.08	5.38	+0.3 Culture
Auth Right	4.94	4.67	5.20	+0.53 Culture
Lib Left	1.64	1.76	1.52	+0.24 Culture
Auth Left	4.11	4.37	2.28	+0.61 Culture

Table 2.3: Mean Negative Attitude Score (0-10) by Ideological Sub-Group

2.2 Multivariate and Interaction Results

H_1 : *The effect of authoritarian ideology will be strongly associated with negative attitudes towards immigrants.* When an interaction effect for right-wing ideology and authoritarianism is included, in all cases, of the three ideological scales, the impact of being on the ‘authoritarian’ end of the scale relative to the libertarian end is still the strongest effect. The left-right term has zero effect without the interaction term, but becomes significant in all cases except ‘economy’ once the interaction term is introduced, for both grouped and numeric ideological scales.

H_2 : *The effect of authoritarianism will be stronger for the ‘culture’ question than ‘economy’.*

The size of the ‘authoritarian’ coefficient is around half a point greater when measuring cultural Sociotropic attitudes compared to economic. However, the 95% confidence intervals of the coefficients overlap, and the overall picture is that the extent of negative perceptions are broadly similar no matter what the Sociotropic topic. H_3 : *‘Right-wing authoritarianism’ may have a uniquely strong impact over and above the individual scale scores.*

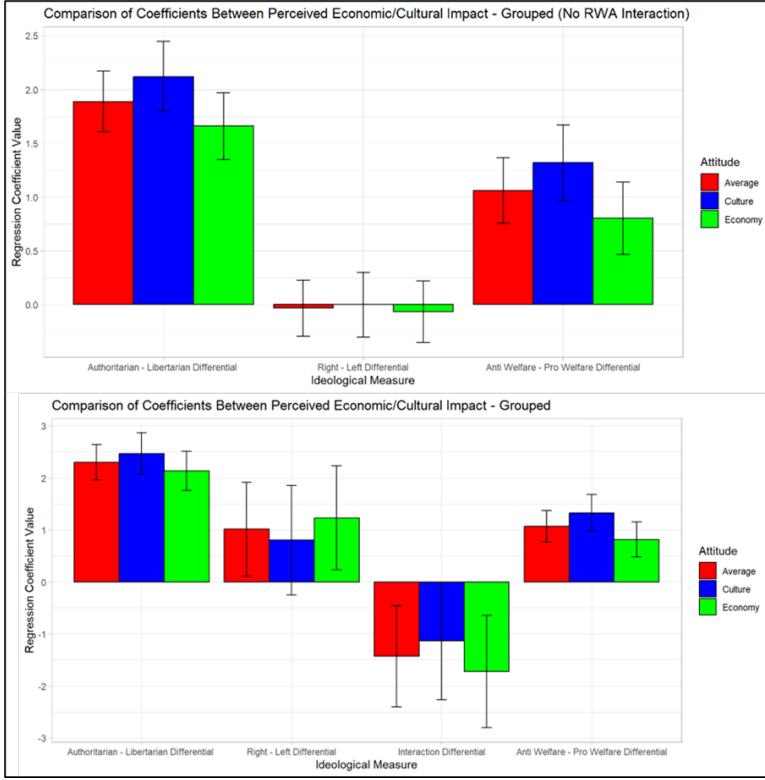


Figure 2.1: Visualisation of Regression Results

On numerous occasions, the literature has found that right-wing authoritarianism specifically is the strongest ideological predictor of negative attitudes towards migrants (Peresman et al, 2021; Cohrs and Stelzl, 2010). However, when interacting the left-right and libertarian-authoritarian variables, our results consistently found not only the lack of a positive coefficient, but a significant negative effect of the interaction term – one which dominates the left-right coefficient in absolute value. For those with a libertarian ideology, a more left-wing individual is likely to be more pro-immigration. For those with an authoritarian ideology, a left-wing person is likely to be more anti-immigration.

2.3 Logistic Regression

The dependent variable was recoded into a dummy variable, where a score of 6 or greater in the negative attitudes 0-10 score is interpreted as a ‘negative attitude’ (the BSA’s analyses also label those on the negative side of the ‘neutral’ point as ‘negative’). Notable coefficients remained statistically significant and with the expected signs in the authoritarian and welfarism cases. However, left-right ideology returned to a state of statistical insignificance. Similarly, the interaction term had a small but not significant negative effect, likely as left-right differences stem largely from spread (i.e. left wing respondents more at extremes), which is captured in part by my linear regressions but not with a binary dependent variable split across at the midpoint.

Chapter 3

Discussion and Conclusions

3.1 Discussion

Given the nature of the scales, as discussed above, it is unsurprising that someone who believes that big business and the rich are unfairly sheltered from and ambivalent towards the concerns of everyday workers would be particularly negative about the perceived impact of migrants, and that a support for laissez-faire economic activity would code a more sympathetic attitude towards free movement of labour. I believe it is possible that part of the explanation comes from how questions are read. An anti-immigration respondent might read the question ‘Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers’ and agree because they see ‘workers’ as natives harmed by immigration. Someone more sympathetic might see ‘workers’ as everyone, including immigrants. Therefore, in a sense, as e.g. ‘ordinary workers’ are not clearly defined, respondents might be almost answering different questions. However, the interaction term complicates this somewhat. There is something about the specific combination of authoritarian and ‘left’ ideology over and above other ideological combinations that drives negative perceptions of immigrants. The best theory I have is that it measures an overall sort of strong nativist populism, where the combination measures a sentiment to both society and the ‘everyday worker’ that may imply a particularly intense, holistic type of populism if both held together. As a post-hoc test I included a dummy a respondent ‘consider[ing] themselves British’ – an imperfect proxy admittedly – but this did not change the interaction coefficient. The larger effect of anti-welfare ideology on ‘culture’ is also surprising, given that welfare is primarily an economic policy, and the mechanisms should be explored in further research. The general effect could be from what Garand et al (2015) call an ‘immigrationalisation’ of welfare; a process through which respondents with a negative view of immigration might began to associate welfare more with immigrants, creating a mindset in which attitudes to immigration inform attitudes to welfare – rather than vice versa. Another possibility is that those who are ardently anti-welfare perceive immigrants as themselves being burdens on the welfare state, and this either proxies or correlates with a perception of immigrants being burdens on society more generally. This alone would not explain the culture-economy disparity, however.

Alternative Specifications and Robustness Checks Regressions were ran using numeric, 3-group (e.g. ‘left’,

‘neither’, right’) and binary ideology variables. The direction of results was the same in all instances although by design stronger for the grouped ideology coefficients as they measure two ends of a spectrum rather than a 1-unit increase. Results were run with income as an independent variable. Income – specifically economic anxiety and economic vulnerability – is often cited as a driver of negative attitudes towards immigration, linked strongly with theories of self-interest discussed above. Every measure of income had over a quarter of values missing and it is possible that those refusing or not knowing may not resemble the distribution of other respondents. Other explanatory variables in the analysis such as unemployment are likely able to capture economic vulnerability to an extent, and education is a partial if imperfect proxy for income. Incidentally, in this case, including household income decile in the regression produced almost identical results to excluding it. Breusch-Pagan tests found mild heteroscedasticity present, and when main models were run with heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors, results were almost identical once again.

3.2 Limitations

Perhaps the most significant piece missing from the 2019 BSA is a differentiation between immigrant skill level. Literature often not only stratifies by this but finds it to be an essential driver of attitudes; Brooks et al (2016), for example, run an experiment with ‘country of origin’ of immigrant varying by control and treatment group, finding that conservatives are much more sensitive to country of origin than liberals. The BSA is conducted through interview (BSA, 2019). This makes it particularly vulnerable to a degree of Social Desirability Bias, ‘the tendency for some subjects to respond to items in a socially desirable or acceptable direction rather than giving their true feelings’ (Spector, 1992, p.1). Janus (2010) finds that a more ‘direct’ influences responses substantively against negativity, with the strongest effect for the college-educated. Similarly, it is likely that those self-reporting prejudice may be more prejudiced than the average ‘truly prejudiced’ person, and some prejudiced people will select into the ‘non-prejudiced’ group. The direction of the bias on the coefficient cannot be determined from our data, depending on not only relative sizes of the groups but the specific characteristics of the (unobservable) individuals whom wrongfully reported. Furthermore, this paper attempts measure the ideological underpinnings of attitudes to migrants, not underlying psychology that might inform both. It is generally agreed in the political and social psychology literature that psychological traits not observed in the BSA, such as the propensity towards perceiving things as ‘threats’, strongly underpin attitudes to migrants. Additionally, while while ideology potentially ‘causes’ opinions in how it can ‘affect and guide’ said opinions, effects should be interpreted cautiously as the direction of causality is complicated (Hanson et al, 2001, p.80). In part ideology is a summary statistic for a collection of views and that it is (in part) a consequence of a given attitude. Similarly, being around those of a certain ideology may create ‘echo chambers’ that in turn introduce one to selective talking points, further ‘intertwin[ing]’ dependent and independent variables (Meltzer, 2021).

3.3 Conclusion

Political ideology is strongly associated with how one perceives the ‘Sociotropic’ impact of migrants – both in terms of impact on the culture of the UK and on its economy, even when controlling for the racial prejudice that may underlie anti-immigrant sentiment. By far the strongest predictor of anti-immigrant sentiment is an ‘authoritarian’ ideology.

The paper has also illustrated the importance of looking at the exact construction of measures in context. The BSA’s left-right index was created in the 1990s very specifically as an attempt to solve the unreliability of ideology self-reports. This means that it has to be interpreted very carefully in the context of 21st century immigration attitudes. The coefficient on ‘right-wing authoritarian’ shows that the combination of the two ideologies in fact mitigates negative attitudes while past research shows it to increase them. If the authoritarian-libertarian scale alone captures RWA as defined by Altemeyer and Funke – which this paper argues it does – that would imply that the coefficient on the interaction term may be small or significant. However, it is in fact significantly negative.

Arguably the strongest conclusion this paper can draw, therefore, is methodological; that operationalisation of ideological terms can be different to the point where results regarding exactly the same term can be completely opposed in name, and yet still theoretically consistent in substance. It may be more accurate to describe the quintessential anti-immigrant person in the UK as having an ideology in which both big businesses and welfare recipients are exploiters to be treated with derision, but the honest, traditional but financially underprivileged everyman – likely defined as a non-immigrant - is regarded as in need of protection.