


REVIEW ARTICLE

# Misperceptions about Immigration: Reviewing Their Nature, Motivations and Determinants

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## Abstract

Across Western democracies, immigration has become one of the most polarizing and salient issues, with public discourses and individual attitudes often characterized by misperceptions. This condition undermines people's ability to develop informed opinions on the matter and runs counter to the ideal of deliberative democracy. Yet, our understanding of what makes immigration so prone to misperceptions is still limited – a conundrum that this review seeks to answer in three steps. First, we take stock of the existing evidence on the nature of misperceptions about immigration. Secondly, we borrow from diverse bodies of literature to identify their motivational underpinnings and elaborate on how the protection of group identity, the defence of self-interest and security concerns can lead to distorted perceptions of immigration. Thirdly, we highlight relevant determinants of misperceptions at the level of both contextual influences and individual predispositions. We conclude that misperceptions about immigration are ubiquitous and likely to remain a key element of immigration politics.

**Keywords:** misperceptions; immigration; motivated reasoning; bias; identity; threat

*'The only useful approach is to discover why they can swallow absurdities on one particular subject while remaining sane on others'.*  
(George Orwell 1945)

## Introduction

Issues of immigration have become crucial to political contestation in Western democracies, with many people holding polarized views that are embedded in perceptions rather than reality (see, e.g., Blinder 2015; Cornelius and Rosenblum 2005; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020). These perceptions are often erroneous or fallacious, ranging from overestimations of the number of immigrants living in one's country (see, e.g., Herda 2010; Sides and Citrin 2007) to complex conspiracy theories about the purported replacement of native Europeans with Africans or Middle Easterners (see, e.g., Gaston and Uscinski 2018). Such misperceptions have gained an important foothold in the public sphere, pervading online culture (Ganesh 2018; Graham 2016) and right-wing populism (Bergmann 2018; Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay, 2017), contributing to polarization, and undermining people's ability to form reasonable and balanced opinions on the matter. It is thus hardly surprising that these misperceptions have repeatedly been identified as a key determinant of policy preferences and political behaviour (see, e.g., Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva 2022; Rodriguez-Justicia and Theilen 2022; Semyonov, Rajiman and Gorodzeisky

2008; Sides and Citrin 2007), as well as a major obstacle to democratic deliberation and evidence-based policy making (Ruhs, Tamas and Palme 2019). More specifically, the distorted trope of an ‘immigrant invasion’ has contributed to disruptive events, such as the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency (Gavin 2018). Yet, we still lack a systematic account of these misperceptions, their prevalence and their underlying drivers.

This review article offers a comprehensive overview of the scholarly research on misperceptions about immigration, which is fragmented and dispersed across several disciplines and research areas: political scientists, sociologists and communication scholars focus on their determinants and consequences for society; psychologists are mostly interested in their underlying cognitive and emotional mechanisms, or in the phenomenon of prejudice; and economists examine how they deviate from the ideal of informed and enlightened agency. Taking this range of perspectives into account, our review covers three central aspects of misperceptions about immigration: their *nature*; the *motivations* to hold them; and their *determinants*. We first take stock of the misperceptions to be found in the literature and distinguish between three categories related to the *properties*, *effects* and *governance* of immigration. Then, we examine the motivational undercurrents of selective information seeking and biased information processing. Drawing on research about immigration attitudes and the theory of motivated reasoning, we identify the *protection of identity*, the *defence of self-interest* and *concerns about security* as issue-specific motivations for the bias against immigrants. In a third step, we discuss contextual and individual factors that have been found to determine misperceptions. We conclude by summarizing the key insights of our review and making suggestions for future research.

### Varieties of Misperceptions about Immigration

People rely on mental images to make sense of the social and political realities that surround them in their everyday lives. Whenever they think of a phenomenon like immigration, they think of a mental representation of what immigration means or is supposed to mean (Blinder 2015). If this representation does not correspond to the empirically observable reality, we speak of it as a misperception, that is, a belief that is ‘false or contradicts the best available evidence in the public domain’ (Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler 2017: 128). Misperceptions manifest themselves in an abundance of ways, for example, as unfounded rumours and suspicions, prejudices, conspiracy theories, and misestimations. Still, they share the epistemic trait of being neither supported by the best available evidence, nor rooted in a mere lack of information. After all, they stem from being misinformed, that is, holding an objectively false belief about the answer to a question, rather than uninformed, that is, having no answer at all (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Consequently, we may define misperceptions about immigration as *evidently false beliefs about immigration*.<sup>1</sup> While biases against immigration have a long history, survey evidence on public misperceptions has only been collected for a few years, and primarily in Europe and the United States (for a list of empirical studies, see the Online Supplementary Material). In the following, we distinguish between three distinct categories of misperceptions found in the general public<sup>2</sup> to derive conclusions about their nature and prevalence.

A first category of misperceptions relates to the *properties of immigration*. Perhaps the most prominent is immigration innumeracy, that is, the systematic overestimation of the population share of immigrants living in a particular country, region or neighbourhood (see, e.g., Citrin and Sides 2008; Herda 2010; Herda 2019; Lundmark and Kokkonen 2017; Steele and Perkins

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that we confine this review article to misperceptions about international migration and thus exclude misperceptions about internal migration or, more generally, ethnic or religious minorities, who are often conflated with immigrants. Evidence suggests that misperceptions about such minority groups are also widespread (see, e.g., Nadeau, Niemi and Levine 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Specific groups may deviate from these general public perceptions. Perceptions of government officials, for example, have been found to be more accurate than those of the average citizen (Lee et al. 2021).

2019).<sup>3</sup> This innumeracy is common across Western democracies but has also been evidenced elsewhere, for example, in Latin American and East Asian countries (Ipsos 2015), South Africa (Gordon et al. 2020) and Turkey (Herda 2015a).<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, people overestimate the size of immigrant flows (Blinder and Schaffner 2020) and the number of immigrants entering their country relative to those heading for other countries (Sides and Citrin 2007: 486).

Misperceptions have also been found for qualitative properties of immigration, such as the demographic composition and socio-economic characteristics of immigrant populations. These include equating immigration with permanent settlement and immigrants with refugees (Blinder 2015), overestimating the religious, cultural or geographical distance of immigrants vis-à-vis the native population (Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva 2022; Herda 2015b), and erroneously thinking of them as poorer and less educated than they actually are (Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva 2022). Furthermore, people misperceive the reasons why immigrants leave their countries of origin in the first place. They consider access to welfare benefits as the primary motivator (Dixon et al. 2019; Zimmermann 2019) and either disregard or downplay the need for humanitarian protection (Mancini et al. 2020; Pedersen and Hartley 2017; Skinner and Gottfried 2017). It is thus not surprising that people overestimate the relative share of those moving for humanitarian and family reasons but underestimate the relative share of those moving for education and work (Blinder 2015).

A second category of misperceptions concerns the *effects of immigration* – its economic, cultural and security-related impact – on host societies. Regarding the economy, many view immigration as a burden and immigrants as soldiers of fortune with whom they must now share their hard-earned wealth (Caplan 2007; Johnston and Ballard 2016; McLaren and Johnson 2007). Economists have repeatedly refuted this sentiment, underscoring the welfare-enhancing effects of immigration instead (see, e.g., Dustmann and Preston 2019; Johnston and Ballard 2016; Kemeny and Cooke 2018). A similar gap between perceptions and evidence exists with respect to whether immigration is detrimental to wages (Bansak, Simpson and Zavodny 2021; Scheve and Slaughter 2001) and employment (McLaren and Johnson 2007): empirical economic research has found negligible, if any, effects in either case (see, e.g., Battisti et al. 2018; Beerli et al. 2021; Friedberg and Hunt 1995; Manacorda, Manning and Wadsworth 2012; Ottaviano and Peri 2012). These misperceptions are complemented by misattributions: immigrants are held responsible for job losses, even if the latter originate in structural disruptions, such as trade liberalization and technological change (Wu 2021). Moreover, perceptions of the fiscal consequences of immigration (Markaki and Blinder 2018; Martinsen and Rotger 2017) and the number of immigrant welfare recipients are subject to a strong negativity bias (see, e.g., Ekins and Kemp 2021). For instance, despite the positive fiscal impact of immigration to the UK (Dustmann and Frattini 2014), perceptions of immigrants lowering the quality of public services are prevalent (Duffy and Frere-Smith 2014).

In the domain of culture, immigrants and ‘migrantized’ minorities (most notably, Muslims) are often perceived as culturally distant, accused of defying integration efforts (see, e.g., Kalkan, Layman and Uslander 2009; Panagopoulos 2006) and distrusted for their alleged lack of loyalty to their host societies (see, e.g., Helbling et al. 2017; McLaren and Johnson 2007). Lastly, the link between immigration and security deserves to be highlighted. Throughout Europe, people believe that immigration increases crime – a perception that exists independently of their country’s real crime levels (Ceobanu 2011). Accordingly, people tend to overestimate the share of crimes committed by foreigners (see, e.g., Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky 2008; for Britain, see also

<sup>3</sup>The degree of immigration innumeracy ranges from single-percentage differences to a multiple of the actual immigrant share. Comparative research on Western democracies suggests that average estimations are about twice as large as the reality (see, e.g., Citrin and Sides 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Israel and Saudi Arabia, which have rather high immigrant shares, are rare exceptions: Ipsos (2015) found that people in both countries tend to slightly underestimate the share of immigrants.

Stansfield and Stone 2018), the share of the prison population that foreigners comprise (IPSOS 2018; Rumbaut and Ewing 2007) and the share of immigrants involved in criminal gangs (Moore-Berg, Hameiri and Bruneau 2022). **Terrorism** is also commonly associated with immigration (Skinner and Gottfried 2017), but, again, there is little evidence of a direct link between them (Helbling and Meierrieks 2022).

A third category of misperceptions deals with issues of *immigration governance*, such as the belief that Western governments hide their real immigration agendas and suppress unpleasant facts. For example, a 2018 cross-national survey had a significant share of the European population (ranging from about 13 per cent in Portugal to 48 per cent in Hungary) suspecting that the truth about immigration levels is hidden by their governments (YouGov 2018). Similarly, more than half of all respondents in the UK and the United States are convinced that unvarnished information about the real costs of immigration is deliberately withheld from the public eye (Gaston and Uscinski 2018: 5). Other misperceptions in this category relate to immigration control: people overestimate the share of immigrants that enter and stay in their countries without holding a legal permit (Blinder and Jeannet 2017; Ekins and Kemp 2021; Eurobarometer 2018), as well as the share of immigrant children who have been transnationally trafficked (Moore-Berg, Hameiri and Bruneau 2022). Furthermore, many assume that a large number of unauthorized immigrants vote in elections (Ekins and Kemp 2021) – a misperception that became particularly widespread in the context of the 2020 US presidential race.

Some of these governance misperceptions even morph into sophisticated conspiracy theories, according to which governmental and non-governmental actors are controlled by ruthless globalist elites that use immigration to alter the ethnocultural composition of their societies (see, e.g., Bergmann 2018; Davey and Ebner 2014, Gaston and Uscinski 2018). On this explicitly conspiratorial reading, governments are suspected not only of obscuring the unpleasant realities described earlier, but also of deliberately rendering their formerly monocultural countries multicultural. Such theories can take on a life of their own and serve as the foundation of far-right narratives, such as the ‘Great Replacement’ – a term that denotes the idea that autochthonous Europeans are being ‘replaced’ with immigrants from Africa and the Middle East (see, e.g., Bergmann 2018; Önnersfors 2021). Once only found at the political fringes, many of these conspiracy elements have been increasingly mainstreamed into current right-wing politics. Similarly, instruments of international immigration governance, such as the Global Compact for Safe and Orderly Migration (GCM), are presented as cases of sovereignty being dismantled and mass immigration being imposed through the backdoor. These efforts have reaped remarkable success: false claims about the GCM, originally promoted by a smattering of anti-immigration activists in 2018, have caused some European governments to withdraw their initial support for the GCM and others to waver in theirs.

This overview illustrates that misperceptions about immigration are diverse in character and prevalence. The literature also suggests that, once adopted, they are often persistent and stable, driving people to go to considerable lengths to protect their beliefs (Druckman, Fein and Leeper 2012). Duffy and Frere-Smith’s (2014) study shines a light on this tendency, showing that many survey participants not only overestimate the number of immigrants in their country, but, upon being informed of the correct numbers, also insist on their estimates being accurate and the official data being false. In other words, people are prone to believe in second-order misperceptions as well, that is, misperceptions that exist in order to defend or legitimize others. Related to this phenomenon, yet distinct from it, is a lack of awareness regarding the proliferation of misperceptions. Research from the United States indicates that most people are ignorant of how common anti-immigration biases are in society (see, e.g., Earle and Hodson 2020; McConahay, Hardee and Batts 1981) and how much they themselves are affected by the prejudices these biases evoke (West and Eaton 2019).

It must be noted, however, that misperceptions are difficult to measure because we often cannot be sure whether we are measuring real beliefs or, rather, on-the-spot judgements elicited by

the survey-response process (Zaller 1992).<sup>5</sup> For this reason, survey questions about misperceptions may measure non-beliefs or expressive responding rather than the sincere opinions of respondents (Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). Bearing these limitations in mind, we can nevertheless derive some conclusions from the evidence presented so far, most notably, that misperceptions are common across a great range of issues and countries, and thus appear to be an innate characteristic of how people reason about immigration. However, this does not imply that they are equally widespread everywhere: we know that the spatial variance of innumeracy levels is significant, with Scandinavia at the bottom and Latin American countries at the top of the scale (see, e.g., Aalberg and Strabac 2010; Eurobarometer 2018; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020; Herda 2018; IPSOS 2015).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, misperceptions are also subject to changes over time, with immigration innumeracy being on the rise in the United States (Herda 2019) but anti-immigration biases decreasing in Canada (Wilkes and Corrigan 2011).<sup>7</sup> Despite this great variability, misperceptions about immigration are directional and not random deviations resulting from blind guessing or a lack of information. They skew towards highlighting aspects of immigration deemed threatening, dangerous or harmful, and thus carry an inherent *negativity bias*. Put differently, they paint the picture of immigration in far darker colours than reality warrants.

### Motivations for Misperceptions about Immigration

Following this inquiry into the nature and prevalence of misperceptions about immigration, the second part of this review systematizes their underlying motivations. Based on Zaller's (1992, 6) understanding of beliefs as a 'marriage of information and predisposition', a growing literature views human reasoning as guided by the inclination to favour interpretations of the world that align with one's pre-existing beliefs and sentiments (Jerit and Zhao 2020; Kunda 1990; Taber and Lodge 2013). This is even true for situations where such interpretations come at the expense of logical consistency or factual accuracy (see, e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2019) because the desire to arrive at their preferred conclusion takes precedence. Consequently, some researchers have argued that *directional motivated reasoning* is the default way in which humans seek and process information and form beliefs (Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler 2017; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006).

Whether they do so in practice should depend on the purpose that is most salient in their minds during information processing (Groenendyk and Krupnikov 2021), which implies that the form and frequency of misperceptions should vary across different issues and sub-issues (Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler 2017; Riek, Mania and Gaertner 2006). This has sparked calls for a closer examination of the conditions and motivations at the issue level (see, e.g., Bayes et al. 2020; Druckman 2012: 206). In the case of immigration, the salience and emotional charge of the issue have been highlighted (Cornelius and Rosenblum 2005, 103; Johnston and Ballard 2016), yet the question of specific motivations that arise from the nature of the issue remains unanswered.

Our review combines insights from the literature on immigration attitudes with theoretical accounts of motivated reasoning and is premised on the distinction between natives and immigrants as two distinct social groups (Berry 2001; Brader, Valentino and Suhay 2008; Green,

<sup>5</sup>For a list of survey items that measure misperceptions about immigration in general social science surveys, see the Online Supplementary Material.

<sup>6</sup>The degree of innumeracy can be conceived of as the relative or absolute difference between the perceived and the real share of the immigrant population. When taking relative difference as criteria, misperceptions are more pronounced in countries with low immigration levels, such as those of Eastern Europe (see Eurobarometer 2018).

<sup>7</sup>The lack of panel data limits our ability to explain how misperceptions develop over time. However, a panel survey by Meltzer and Schemer (2021) on immigration innumeracy suggests that misperceptions only change at a slow pace.



Sarrasin and Fasel 2015).<sup>8</sup> It further builds on a comprehensive body of literature which suggests that the modal response of natives to immigrants is to feel threatened (for overviews, see Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Stephan and Stephan 2000), up to the point where merely thinking of immigration is already sufficient to stimulate a sense of threat (Homola 2020).<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, group-centric threat sentiment, that is, the fear of suffering negative consequences from the presence of immigrants, is assumed to be the common reaction of natives to immigration. This view of immigrants as a threatening out-group has been linked to xenophobic prejudices and stereotypes (see, e.g., Esses et al. 2005). It generates and nourishes a negative affective state that leads to motivated reasoning, inasmuch as people are guided by threat perception and in-group favouritism, rather than by the striving for factual correctness (see, for example, Boyer 2021; Erisen, Lodge and Taber 2014; Gadarian and Albertson 2014).

The literature about immigration attitudes finds that the experience of cultural, economic and security threats can cause different reactions to immigration (see, e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Homola and Tavits 2018; Sniderman, Hagendoorn and Prior 2004). The nature of the threat can be individual (egotropic) or collective (sociotropic), with different types of threat fulfilling different psychological functions and triggering different cognitive and behavioural responses (see, e.g., Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan and Lahav 2015; Gorodzeisky 2013; Sniderman, Hagendoorn and Prior 2004). This implies that the multidimensional nature of threats and their effects must be kept in mind. Over the following paragraphs, we review the literature to determine how cultural, economic and security threats motivate misperceptions about immigration.

### *The Cultural Threat: Social Identity*

Immigration issues are often linked to debates about sociocultural identity, in which immigrants, their descendants and their communities assume the position of a salient out-group (see, e.g., Burns and Gimpel 2000; Hopkins 2010). In most of these cases, perceptions of cultural threat stem from concerns that immigrants reject the values of the host society and violate its social norms (Stephan and Stephan 2000). Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of social identity, according to which people identify with social groups and share the belief that their in-group is positively distinct from out-groups, can explain such concerns: in order to forge a strong and durable group identity, it is helpful to emphasize intra-group differences that denigrate the out-group and cast one's in-group in an exceedingly positive light.

Perceptions of cultural threat are therefore likely to evoke motivated reasoning, with people rejecting accurate information if it poses a psychological threat to their self-concept and group identity (Kunda 1990; Nyhan and Reifler 2019). The more one attaches their personal identity to a social group – such as an ethnicity or a nationality – the more attention they will pay to threats to said group and the more inclined they will be to believe information that foments feelings of out-group threat (Herrmann 2017). In this regard, misperceptions about immigration can provide individuals with something useful to protect their identity and boost their self-esteem as the gap between themselves and the out-group becomes manifest (Brewer 1991; Hewstone, Rubin and Willis 2002; Sherman and Cohen 2006). Hence, the cultural threat motivates misperceptions about the properties of immigration, for instance, that immigrants adhere to strange and incompatible norms and lifestyles (Helbling et al. 2017; McLaren and Johnson 2007).

<sup>8</sup>Some researchers argue that sorting people into different social groups already elicits cognitive biases (see, e.g., Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 2002). Bursztyn and Yang (2021) find that misperceptions about out-groups are systematically larger than about in-groups.

<sup>9</sup>The sense of immigrant threat does not need any objective foundation, but can stem from subjective perceptions alone (Stephan and Stephan 2000).

### **The Economic Threat: Group Competition**

The second threat can be traced to the suspicion that immigration may adversely affect one's access to scarce goods. This idea is embedded in what is commonly referred to as 'realistic conflict theory', that is, the in-group's belief that out-groups are direct competitors in the struggle for limited resources (LeVine and Campbell 1972; Quillian 1995; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky 2008; Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison 2009). Realistic conflict theory posits that rational individuals strive to secure their own and their in-group's material welfare and, as a result, tend to perceive the presence of competing out-groups as threatening (see, e.g., Bobo 1988). Applied to immigration, the native in-group aspires to preserve its privileged economic position and to protect it against immigrants who lack the same institutional access and entitlements. According to evidence from Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva (2022), merely thinking about immigration already reduces people's willingness to share resources with others. In practice, this defence of material interest is most pronounced in such fields as education, housing or public services, where resources and opportunities are scarce, and immigrants are perceived as putting additional strain on the system (Esses et al. 2001). Yet, it is worth noting that group competition is not limited to material goods, but can extend to non-material power resources like social status and participatory rights as well (see, e.g., Dancygier 2010). More so than purely material benefits, the latter are traditionally regarded as privileges of the native population, or those who, by virtue of their birth, constitute the sovereign people that politics ought to represent.

Perceptions of economic threat are likely to evoke motivated reasoning based on group-specific self-interest<sup>10</sup> and binary categories of deservingness: the deservingness of immigrants is discounted while that of natives is validated (see, e.g., Quist and Resendez 2002). We may consequently deduce that the more a person believes that group competition endangers their distributive interests, the more likely this person is to form misperceptions linked to the economic effects of immigrant presence. A particularly notable kind of misperception for which this effect can be observed are zero-sum beliefs, such as the lump of labour fallacy, that is, the assumption that the labour market is a zero-sum game with a steady number of jobs. Victims of this fallacy believe that immigrants can only thrive at the expenses of natives (or other immigrants) since they are only imagined as job takers and not as job creators (Esses et al. 2001).<sup>11</sup>

### **The Security Threat: Public Safety**

The third threat relates to issues of public safety as immigrants, especially those from Muslim-majority countries, are often thought to be associated with crime and terrorism (see, e.g., Fasani et al. 2019; Helbling and Meierrieks 2022; Huysmans 2006; Lahav and Courtemanche 2012; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009). For example, Semyonov, Gorodzeisky and Glikman (2012) analyse survey data from 21 European countries and find a strong correlation between people's fear of crime and the share of non-Europeans living in their neighbourhood. Using a quasi-experimental design, Ajzenman, Dominguez and Undurraga (2021) similarly show that a surge in immigration increased Chileans' fears of crime but did not raise the actual crime rate. In many countries, immigrant communities are also believed to undermine the rule of law and defy integration efforts (see, e.g., Fitzgerald, Curtis and Corliss 2012; Givens, Freeman and Leal 2008) – a narrative that culminates in the imagery of parallel societies and no-go areas from which state authorities have long retreated (see, e.g., Gruner 2010). The security threat is thus twofold, as it concerns matters of both personal and collective security.

<sup>10</sup>It should be noted that there is no a priori reason to assume that misperceptions rooted in the defence of one's self-interest do really serve this purpose (Elster 2016, 157). Instead, they may even prevent people from fostering this goal.

<sup>11</sup>Equating immigration with unemployment is a common strategy of the far right to exploit grievances and mobilize voters (see, e.g., Givens 2005).

Like in the other cases, perceptions of security threat may evoke motivated reasoning that leads people to misperceive the actual association between immigration and security risks.<sup>12</sup> Empirical research has provided evidence for the assumption that concerns about immigrant crime are crucial for the formation of anti-immigration attitudes (see, e.g., Ceobanu 2011; Fitzgerald, Curtis and Corliss 2012; McLaren and Johnson 2007), and more so if they are accompanied by broader feelings of insecurity and powerlessness. The latter likely reinforce in-group identification since the in-group is perceived as providing needed protection against the hostile outside world; a case in point are **terrorist attacks, which have been found to foster resentment against immigrants** (Helbling and Meierrieks 2022). Although the security threat has received less scholarly attention than its economic and cultural counterparts, it has become increasingly investigated since the 11 September 2001 attacks and the subsequent securitization of migration (Huysmans 2006).

### Determinants of Misperceptions

In the third and final part of this review, we assess the contextual and individual factors identified as conducive to misperceptions about immigration. What do we know about the contexts in which they flourish, the predispositions that determine individual susceptibility and the prospect of corrections?

At the contextual level, one can find several analytical foci, with researchers highlighting the influence of the mass media, political elites and macroeconomic conditions. Concerning the mass media, which has the potential to, at the same time, distort perceptions and enlighten about social reality, the literature shows a clear tendency: most media reports on immigration are negative and depict immigrants as a menace to society (for an overview, see Eberl et al. 2018). Such content is likely to corroborate threat perception and bolster inaccurate beliefs. In a framing experiment, Blinder and Jeannet (2017) found that media depictions of immigration affect the accuracy of the British public's perceptions of immigrants. In the same way, an over-representation of 'foreign crime' articles in an Austrian newspaper led to greater misperceptions among its readership (Arendt 2010). These effects may depend, in part, on the type of media people get their information from; consuming newspapers and online news has been linked with a decrease in misperceptions, whereas the opposite effect has been found for social media and television (Aalberg and Strabac 2010; Herda 2010; Meltzer and Schemer 2021). In sum, there is strong evidence that the mass media's framing of immigration shapes our beliefs about the issue.

Political elites, in their capacity as influential actors who shape discourses and perceptions, are a second contextual factor that has drawn considerable scholarly attention. In view of widespread concerns about immigration, they may have electoral incentives to stoke fears, posture as adopting tough stances on the issue (Lutz 2021) and exaggerate its negative effects (Golder 2003). In doing so, they seek to capitalize on the status of immigrants as outsiders onto whom the public can project their fears and anxieties (Cochrane and Nevitte 2014; Dinas and van Spanje 2011). Heizmann and Huth (2021) provide evidence for such a dynamic on the macro level; they find that perceptions of economic threat are more likely to emerge in countries where political parties adopt a more hostile rhetoric towards immigrants. Meanwhile, at the micro level, experimental studies from the United States show that elite cues of immigrant threat trigger anxiety (Brader, Valentino and Suhay 2008) and elite polarization on immigration reform reinforces the role of partisan reasoning (Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus 2013).

The assumption that macroeconomic conditions have an impact is derived from group threat theory: the worse the state of the economy, the greater the native population's perceptions of immigrants as competitors (see, e.g., Quillian 1995). However, the evidence seems a little more ambiguous. While cross-sectional studies indicate that perceptions of immigrants' societal impact

<sup>12</sup>Coping with insecurity has been identified as a key function of motivated reasoning and a key element of modern-day conspiracism (see, e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Imhoff and Bruder 2014).



are more negative in countries with poor economic performance (see, e.g., Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky 2006; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky 2008), recent longitudinal research finds that the attitudinal effect of major economic shocks is restricted to those in the formative years of young adulthood (Cotofan, Dur and Meier 2021; Kustov, Laaker and Reller 2021). Still, the perceived state of the economy remains a better predictor of immigration views than objective economic conditions (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Heizmann and Huth 2021; Sides and Citrin 2007).

In addition to these contextual factors, individual traits, such as personal predisposition and contact with immigrants, may also affect people's susceptibility to misperceptions. One key element here is ideology: those who identify as right-wing or hold right-wing convictions (for example, tradition over progress, authority over equality and control over openness) are more prone to misperceptions about immigration, especially to such that highlight the negative social impact of immigrants (see, e.g., Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva 2022; Heizmann and Huth 2021; Herda 2019; Johnston and Ballard 2016; Meltzer and Schemer 2021; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky 2006). Nonetheless, some experimental studies have found that individuals across the ideological spectrum succumb to motivated reasoning on immigration to a similar extent (Lind et al. 2022; Washburn and Skitka 2017). This paradox can be resolved by accounting for the different character of people's ideological tenets. Right-wing ideologies rest on more exclusionary conceptions of identity, emphasize group antagonism and thereby facilitate the perception of immigrants as members of a hostile out-group (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Blinder and Lundgren 2019; Jost et al. 2003). Accordingly, individuals with right-wing views are more likely to feel threatened by the social reality of ethnocultural diversity and to develop misperceptions in response. Aside from ideology, education also seems to be an important determinant, with higher education levels being associated with more accurate perceptions about immigration (see, e.g., Aalberg and Strabac 2010; Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva 2022; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020; Heizmann and Huth 2021; McLaren and Johnson 2007).

A third explanatory factor relates to one's own immigration experiences and contact with immigrants. Individuals who have themselves migrated demonstrate greater immigration innumeracy (Aalberg and Strabac 2010), as do ethnic minority members (Herda 2010), residents of more diverse neighbourhoods (Herda 2010; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky 2008) and, albeit to a lesser degree, natives who count immigrants among their friends and co-workers (see, e.g., Herda 2010; Lundmark and Kokkonen 2017). Conversely, those who live in *countries* with more immigrants display lower innumeracy (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2020; Herda 2013). Being exposed to immigrants in everyday life may thus contribute to overestimating their share, while living in a society with high levels of immigration predisposes individuals to more accurate perceptions.

Finally, we ask whether misperceptions can be corrected through targeted interventions. In general, the empirical evidence indicates that people are reluctant to update their beliefs when they are presented with accurate information (see, e.g., Duffy and Frere-Smith 2014). Studying misperceptions in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, Rolfe et al. (2018) provided participants of UK focus groups with evidence about the actual economic effect of immigration only to find that their perceptions remained unchanged. Jørgensen and Osmundsen (2022) used a survey experiment to show that while Danish citizens update their beliefs about immigrants' population share, welfare dependency and crime rates, they reinterpret this new information to make it consistent with their pre-existing immigration preferences. Hopkins, Sides and Citrin (2019) came to a similar conclusion for the United States, but Grigorieff, Roth and Ubfal (2020) found that information treatments have a significant correctional effect that may even last for several weeks (see also Carnahan, Bergan and Lee 2021; Haaland and Roth 2020). Given these mixed results, simple information treatments may not be the most effective method to correct misperceptions, but they can still reduce support for anti-immigration policies if combined with an empathy treatment (Moore-Berg, Hameiri and Bruneau 2022). Other studies point

out that more realistic portrayals of immigrants could have a positive effect on perceptual accuracy (Blinder and Jeannot 2017) or expound how narratives can be a powerful source of perceptions (Dennison 2021). Overall, it does not appear as if people can be easily swayed by exposing them to accurate information; for this reason, the most promising interventions focus on reducing affective immigrant threat.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the ‘way in which the world is imagined determines ... what men will do’ (Lippmann 1997, 25). Yet, the way in which people imagine immigration is often characterized by inaccurate beliefs and plain falsehoods. This article has offered the first systematic account of such misperceptions by reviewing their nature, motivations and determinants. We found that they are not only widespread and diverse, but also directional, that is, they are marked by a negativity bias and revolve around the threatening properties of immigration. We then identified three distinct immigrant threats that motivate this bias: a cultural threat to one’s identity and values; an economic threat based on inter-group competition; and a security threat to public and personal safety. Finally, our review cast light on the relevant determinants of misperceptions about immigration. We found that individual predispositions, such as right-wing views or low levels of education, as well as the influence of the mass media and political elites, explain their prevalence. We also found that misperceptions are mostly resistant to correction and that providing accurate information is largely ineffective in combating them. Reflecting the deep-seated concerns of many natives, they are likely to persist as a key element of immigration politics.

To conclude this review, there are both lessons to be learned and pathways for future research. Although the literature on attitudes towards immigration is vast and expanding, research dealing with perceptions and misperceptions still constitutes a minor and fragmented field. We believe that this fact leaves a wide intellectual territory uncharted, the exploration of which may allow us to gain relevant insights into the distinctive role immigration plays in political conflicts.

First, our review underscores that misperceptions about immigration are neither exceptional nor restricted to the fringes of society; rather, they seem to be the norm. Given their pervasive proliferation, it is even more surprising that there is no coherent body of research. In addition, many studies that measure perceptions bundle them with other attitudinal items (such as policy preferences) or use them only as an additional factor to explain immigration attitudes. We hence consider misperceptions (and perceptions in general) to be an essential but under-studied aspect of how people develop their attitudes, preferences and behaviours with respect to immigration.

Second, empirical research on misperceptions about immigration has become more common over time. Yet, some notable shortcomings in its scope and validity hamper the progress of the field. Most survey measurements only capture a very narrow range of misperceptions since question items are confined to innumeracy and neglect the many other forms of inaccuracies that exist. Moreover, there is only little longitudinal survey data that track misperceptions over time and almost no coverage beyond Western democracies. Additional research in these directions would allow us to better understand the different scope conditions of misperceptions. Lastly, in terms of methodology, most current measurement instruments fail to adequately capture the central distinction between *being uninformed* and *being misinformed*. Assuming the latter without empirical evidence entails the risk of overestimating the extent of misperceptions and misclassifying survey responses. Here, we recommend measuring either confidence in or the certainty of one’s beliefs to separate non-beliefs from actual misperceptions (see, e.g., Carlson and Hill 2021).

Third, questions of causality (whether misperceptions are antecedents or consequences of immigration attitudes) remain largely unresolved. Our review has identified immigrant threat as the underlying motivation for misperceptions that may, in turn, reinforce and consolidate this sense of threat. This vicious circle calls for additional research in the form of innovative

experimental studies that delve deeper into the causal dynamics and feedback effects at work. On a related note, a general lesson from the attitudinal literature is that different threats evoke different cognitive and emotional responses, yet we still lack this differentiation in research on misperceptions. Understanding these causalities would enable us to anchor the study of misperceptions in the broader literature and help us to design effective interventions to correct them.

Finally, our understanding of the effects of misperceptions on immigration politics are still limited. This bears potential for scholarship that explores how they shape the behaviour of both citizens and political elites: when do those in power attempt to correct misperceptions, and when do they harness them to pander to the electorate instead? Research has shown that many politicians employ anti-immigration rhetoric to address the concerns of their constituents but refrain from restrictive policies (see, e.g., Lutz 2021; Slaven and Boswell 2019). Future research should pay more attention to the political context and examine the ramifications of misperceptions for political communication, policy making and liberal democracy more generally.

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