

## What makes people hostile to immigration?

In this essay, I will focus on demand-side factors to explain the hostility against immigration. Specifically, I argue that both cultural backlash and economic grievances offer powerful explanations for anti-immigration attitudes. The cultural backlash thesis highlights a reaction to the shift from materialism to post-materialism, wherein more traditional voters feel alienated by increasing multiculturalism and liberal cultural values. Economic grievances can cause the competition for scarce resources—such as jobs or housing—which leads economically insecure individuals to view immigrants as threats. Although in the UK this correlation appears relatively weak, I demonstrate that using the interaction between unemployment and the presence of immigrants correlates more strongly with anti-immigration sentiment. After all, it would make no sense to feel materially threatened by immigrants if there are no immigrants.

### *Post-materialism*

The cultural backlash theory (Norris and Inglehart 2019) argues that rising anti-immigration sentiment in Western democracies is a reaction against long-term cultural changes. Because of the economic affluence since the 1960s, there has been a shift from materialist values – such as economic security and physical safety – toward post-materialist values, which prioritize values such as self-expression, multiculturalism and environmentalism (Inglehart 2007). This shift has been especially pronounced among younger – who grow up in a more affluent society –, more educated, and urban populations. However, not all groups have embraced these changes.

The reason that individuals who are more educated and live in urban areas are more in favour of postmaterialist values such as multiculturalism is probably because of socialization. If someone goes to university, they meet lots of people from very

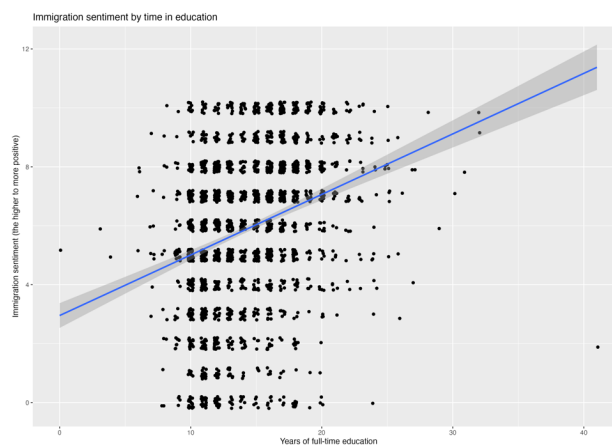


Figure 1

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When interpreting a multivariate model, the effects are conditional on the other variables in the model. The figure isn't very helpful. It would also be good to see more commentary on the substantive significance of the variables and to see some clearly stated hypotheses before the main analysis.

different backgrounds. As a result, they are able to tolerate them more easily. The same argument can be made for individuals from urban areas: urban areas are usually more diverse. To illustrate this, see Figure 1 for a regression between immigration sentiment and years of full-time education (the plot is jittered). There is a clear upward trend, the longer one spends in education, the more pro-immigration they become.

Cultural backlash theory argues that older, less-educated, rural, and more traditional individuals feel alienated by these changes in society. They perceive the growing emphasis on diversity and equality as a threat to their traditional values. For these groups, immigration is a threat to their identity.

#### *Economic grievances*

Anti-immigration sentiment can also be explained by economic grievances. Individuals who are economically insecure – due to joblessness or low income – are more likely to see immigrants as competitors for scarce resources such as jobs, houses, or social benefits. Native workers might feel their job prospects threatened by immigrants, especially in low-skilled labour markets.

The logic behind this is group competition theory, which suggests that people become more hostile to outgroups when they believe their own group's access to economic resources is threatened. Immigration intensifies these fears, especially during periods of economic downturn. Populist and far-right parties often tap into these fears by linking immigration to job loss, housing shortages, or declining welfare services.

In my analysis, I will use unemployment as my key variable to capture the effect of economic grievances. While this is not a perfect proxy — since individuals may feel economically vulnerable even when employed — it remains a very good indicator of economic strain. To improve my analysis, I will later consider whether economic grievances are primarily activated when there is also a visible migrant population.

#### *Analysis*

To test these theories, I do a regression analysis using European Social Survey (ESS) data in the UK. The ESS contains a wide range of individual-level variables that are useful for analyzing immigration attitudes. For this analysis, the dependent variable is based on the question: "Would you say that the UK's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?" I selected this variable because it most generally captures anti-immigration attitudes. I will treat it as a continuous variable even though it is actually an ordinal variable. A lower score indicates that it is undermined, a higher score that it is enriched.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Is the UK's cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants?
Age	-0.014* (0.008)
Is it important to follow traditions and customs? (lower means more important)	0.279*** (0.078)
How emotionally attached to the UK?	0.072 (0.044)
How religious are you?	0.116*** (0.042)
Years in full-time education	0.166*** (0.033)
Any period of unemployment and work seeking within last 5 years? (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.507* (0.263)
Were you born in the UK (1=yes, 0=no)	-0.946** (0.387)
City vs. countryside	-0.555 (0.907)
City vs. suburban	-0.138 (0.468)
City vs. town	-0.567 (0.441)

City vs. village	-0.252 (0.486)
Constant	3.755*** (0.854)
Observations	498
R <sup>2</sup>	0.155
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.136
Residual Std. Error	2.529 (df = 486)
F Statistic	8.103*** (df = 11; 486)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

In the model, I include predictors that align with both the cultural and economic theories of anti-immigration attitudes. First, age, traditional values, and unemployment are negatively associated with anti-immigration sentiment. Each additional unit of them corresponds to a 0.014, 0.279, and 0.507 decrease in immigration attitudes, respectively. And the coefficients are, respectively, weakly, highly, and weakly significant. This supports the theory about cultural grievances and economic grievances. However, because unemployment only shows a weakly significant correlation, I will later improve my analysis.

Expectedly, the number of years in full-time education is positively associated with pro-immigration attitudes: each additional year in full-time education corresponds to a 0.166 increase in the sentiment that immigration enriches culture. This aligns well with what has been previously said, that education socializes individuals into more cosmopolitan, tolerant worldview.

Religiosity, contrary to expectations, is positively associated with more favourable attitudes toward immigration. This finding may be context-specific — for example, in the UK, more religious individuals may be part of minority faith communities who hold more inclusive attitudes, or it could reflect religious teachings that emphasize compassion and hospitality. This goes against the assumption that religiosity necessarily aligns with social conservatism or exclusion.

Interestingly, nationalism — proxied by emotional attachment to the UK — does not significantly predict immigration attitudes. This could be due to the way the variable is measured; emotional attachment does not necessarily translate into exclusionary nationalism. Similarly, none of the rural–urban variables show significant

associations. The expectation that more rural individuals would be more anti-migration is not supported by this data.

Finally, the variable indicating whether the respondent was born in the UK shows a strong and statistically significant effect: those born in the UK are substantially more likely to express anti-immigration views. This likely reflects the higher baseline identification with the native in-group and less personal or familial experience of migration. Immigrants or children of immigrants may be more empathetic or personally invested in the issue, leading to more favourable views. Being born in the UK corresponds to a 0.946 increase in anti-immigration sentiment and this correlation is highly significant.

Overall, the regression confirms several key hypotheses: cultural values and education are powerful predictors of immigration sentiment, while economic insecurity — as measured through unemployment — has a weaker but still notable effect. Some variables, like religiosity, behave differently than expected. This analysis suggests that both cultural and economic grievances matter — but cultural factors appear to dominate in the UK case.

#### *Immigration levels and unemployment*

In the previous regression focusing solely on the UK, unemployment was only weakly associated with anti-immigration sentiment. This suggests that economic insecurity alone does not fully account for negative attitudes toward immigration. As Golder (2003) argues, the effect of economic hardship on attitudes toward immigrants may depend on context — specifically, the presence of immigrants who could be perceived as economic competitors. If unemployment exists in a context with very low levels of immigration, citizens may not see immigrants as the source of their economic struggles. Conversely, when high unemployment coincides with high levels of immigration, individuals may be more likely to scapegoat immigrants as contributing to job scarcity.

To test this argument empirically, I ran an interaction model including both the individual-level experience of unemployment and a country-level measure of immigration share. For this analysis, I expanded the dataset to include all European countries in the ESS Round 9 and used Eurostat data to construct a variable measuring the proportion of non-European foreign-born individuals in each country's population in 2018 (the year of the survey). I then created an interaction term between personal unemployment experience and the non-European

immigration share to capture whether the effect of unemployment depends on the national immigration context.

Immigration sentiment<sub>i</sub> =  $\alpha + \beta_1 * \text{Unemployment}_i + \beta_2 \text{Immigration share}_i + \beta_3 * (\text{Unemployment}_i * \text{Immigration share}_i)$  ... (and all the other factors which I already explained)

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Is cultural life undermined or enriched by immigrants?
Any period of unemployment and work seeking within last 5 years? (1=yes, 0=no)	2.932*** (0.677)
Non-European inhabitants/total population	-20.907*** (5.065)
Age	0.001 (0.002)
Is it important to follow traditions and customs? (lower means more important)	0.795*** (0.089)
How emotionally attached to your country?	0.307*** (0.025)
How religious are you?	0.176*** (0.017)
Years in full-time education	-0.019 (0.016)
Were you born in this country? (1=Yes, 0=No)	-0.867** (0.413)
City vs. countryside	-1.095* (0.661)
City vs. suburbs	-1.076** (0.512)
City vs. town	-0.183 (0.380)

City vs. village	0.333 (0.385)
Unemployment:Immigrant share	-34.654*** (7.665)
Constant	5.412*** (0.780)
Observations	12,192
R <sup>2</sup>	0.039
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.038
Residual Std. Error	14.913 (df = 12175)
F Statistic	30.888*** (df = 16; 12175)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

This confirms what Golder argues. The coefficient for the interaction term is -34.654 and is highly significant. However, it must be noted that in this case, the unemployment by itself is also already statistically significant because I use the whole dataset and not just the UK.

Other predictors behave largely as expected. Traditional values, nationalism (as measured by attachment to country), and religiosity are all positively associated with more favourable views on immigration, which again challenges the assumption that religiosity and nationalism inherently produce cultural backlash. Education, in this broader European sample, loses its statistical significance, suggesting that its effect may be more context-dependent than previously assumed.

In conclusion, the shift from materialism to post-materialism has caused a cultural backlash which correlates with an increase of the level of anti-immigration sentiment. And unemployment, especially when there are enough immigrants so that they actually compete for jobs with the native population, also causes an increase in anti-immigration sentiment because people feel threatened that the immigrants are going to steal their jobs or housing.

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