Attitudes toward Immigration:
Theories, Settings, and Approaches

Peter Thisted Dinesen and Frederik Hjorth

Department of Political Science
University of Copenhagen

This chapter reviews key themes and trends in the study of immigration attitudes in the political science literature spanning two decades. It begins with a data-driven examination of key trends in studies of attitudes toward immigration in top political science journals from 1996 to 2020, showing trends in terms of the quantity of studies, theoretical perspectives, empirical settings, and methodological approaches. The chapter then presents a narrative review of the literature, highlighting theoretical and methodological innovations as well as identifying gaps and pertinent questions to be addressed. It concludes by pointing to some promising directions for future research in the study of immigration attitudes.

Keywords: immigration attitude, attitude formation, political behavior, prejudice, ethnic diversity, refugee crisis

Immigration is among the most hotly debated and polarizing political issues in Western societies. This has recently been exemplified by three milestone events in which immigration featured prominently: the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, the 2016 Brexit referendum, and the 2016 US presidential election. These events have underlined the salience of immigration in the public consciousness and its potency as a political fault line. Because of the electoral and political salience of immigration, immigration attitudes are likely to affect key phenomena of interest in behavioral political science, including, but not limited to, vote choice and turnout, political trust and efficacy, as well as non-electoral forms of political participation. Hence, understanding the forces shaping individuals' attitudes toward immigration and immigrants is a fundamental question in behavioral political science.

Taking this as its point of departure, this review summarizes key findings from the rapidly growing literature on the causes and correlates of immigration attitudes. More specifically, we first present quantitative evidence on key trends in the study of immigration attitudes from a content analysis of relevant articles from prominent journals. This makes for a systematic assessment of recent developments in the field. Second, we provide an up-to-date narrative review of the state of the art of the literature, which adds to previous reviews by covering a wider set of explanations for immigration attitudes (e.g., the effects of terrorism on immigration attitudes).[1]

We delimit our review in a number of ways. We focus narrowly on attitudes related to immigration (a policy attitude) or immigrants (a group attitude).[2] Hence, we omit conceptually related attitudes such as those toward other ethnic or racial out-groups, although there will in some cases be an overlap (e.g., attitudes toward specific ethnic immigrant groups). While we focus on attitudes as a crucial antecedent of political behavior, we also highlight studies using behavioral measures of immigration attitudes. Our primary population of interest is natives in a given country,

although we will also review some research focusing on the population in general (i.e., natives as well as already settled immigrants). Finally, it is important to note that rather than an exhaustive review of all research on immigration attitudes, we highlight key contributions and works that we see as representative of the literature more generally.

As a backdrop for our review, we build on earlier frameworks in noting that the generic mechanism underlying most explanations is that of perceived "threat" from immigration or immigrants (Ceobanu and Escandell 2010). Such threat can be associated with various situational stimuli and/or perceived to a greater or lesser extent depending on dispositional characteristics of the individual. Here, we follow the convention in the literature of referring to different types of stimuli as "threats", but we stress that they are perceived and do not necessarily correspond to actual threats. As we elaborate on in the review, some studies distinguish between different types of threat, most prominently between material (primarily various forms of economic threat) and cultural (e.g., threats to national or cultural identity), and the specific operationalization of threat varies across studies.

We proceed as follows. In the next section, we provide a quantitative overview of articles focusing on immigration attitudes in top political science journals from 1996 onward, structured around empirical settings, methodological approaches, and theoretical perspectives. We then turn to a narrative review, assessing trends in the literature more qualitatively. Here, we also highlight theoretical and methodological innovations as well as identify gaps and pertinent questions to be answered in the existing literature. We conclude by briefly summarizing our findings.

Change and Continuity in Studies of Immigration Attitudes

To motivate and contextualize our review, we begin by mapping key trends in studies of attitudes toward immigration across two decades. We do so by hand-coding and analyzing articles published in top political science journals from 1996 to 2020. Our initial sample consists of articles containing relevant keywords from the journals American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science, Journal of Politics, British Journal of Political Science, Public Opinion Quarterly, International Organization, Political Behavior, and Political Psychology. Our focus on top outlets is motivated by an interest in the most cited and most widely exposed political science scholarship on attitudes toward immigration. By focusing on top outlets, we thus do not consider scholarship from more specialized, less widely cited journals. However, our sampling strategy should capture the set of studies most likely to have reached a wide political science readership. Furthermore, to the extent that top journals select on quality, our sample should return relevant studies of the highest quality.

To retrieve relevant articles from our list of top journals, we began by submitting a request to JSTOR Data for Research, a service provided by the digital library JSTOR to provide researcher access to article metadata. We requested metadata including article abstract for any article in the listed journals containing variations of the words "attitude" or "immigration" in the full text. We read the abstracts of these articles to determine whether they examine some type of explanation of attitudes toward immigration. We coded articles matching this criterion as relevant. Since the JSTOR data only cover articles until 2013 for some journals, we include articles from 2014–2020 by searching manually within these journals using the same search terms. After excluding irrelevant articles and including relevant articles from the manual search, we ended up with a sample of 109 articles, the content of which we proceed to hand-code.

Number of Studies

Before describing our coding strategy in more detail, Figure 1 presents a bar plot of the number of articles in our hand-coded data set by year.
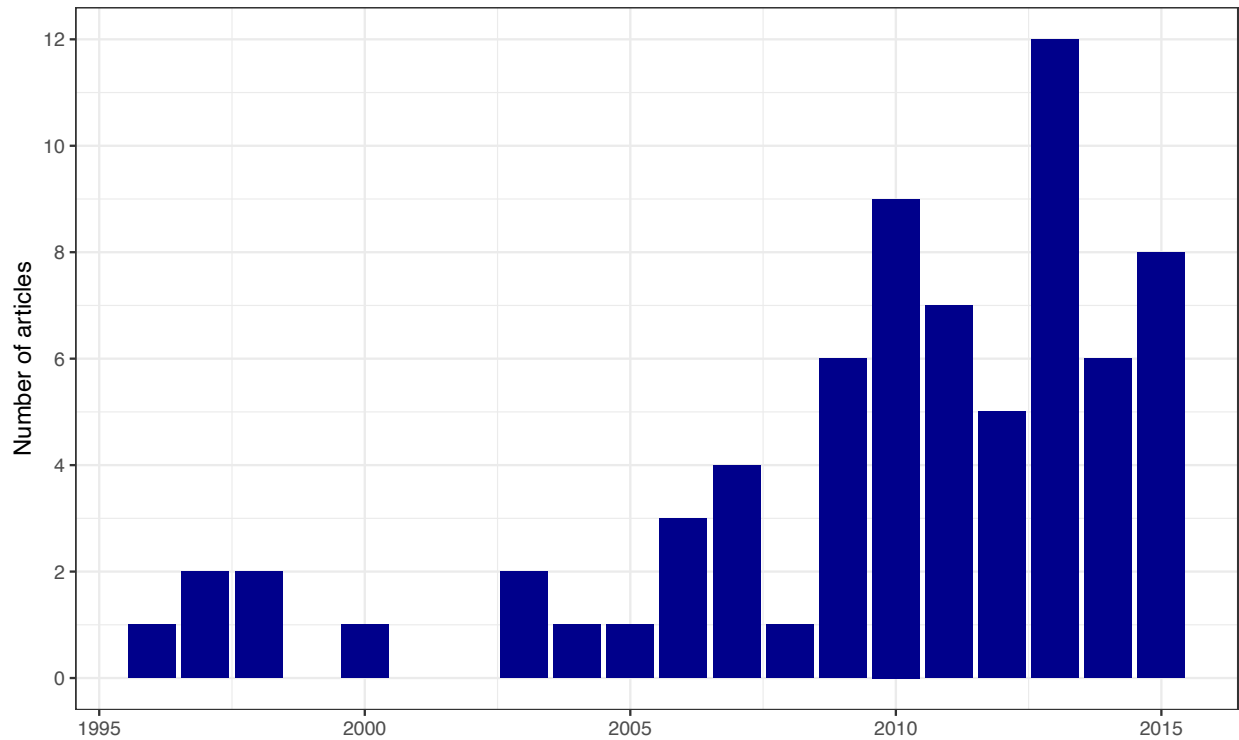
Figure 1. Number of articles about attitudes toward immigration in top political science journals by year, 1996–2020. Note that data from 2020 are incomplete.
Source: Manual coding based on data from JSTOR Data for Research and online journal archives.

The plot clearly conveys increasing interest in attitudes toward immigration in top political science journals over time. Beginning with an uptick in 2006-2007, the study of attitudes toward immigration shows a distinct, sustained increase from around 2010. In fact, of the 109 articles

included in our analysis, 76 were published in 2011 or later. Hence, the overall picture is one of sharply rising attention to attitudes toward immigration in top political science journals.

Theoretical Perspectives

We begin by considering the distribution of theoretical perspectives on the causes of immigration attitudes, building on the "threat" framework outlined in the introduction. Here, we distinguish between four broad types of theoretical perspectives, inspired by Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior's (2004) dispositional-situational distinction. On the one hand, we code studies as explaining immigration attitudes in terms of predispositions: (ostensibly) stable individual-level value or political orientations. On the other hand, we code studies in terms of three different types of situational explanations: information, emphasizing informational stimuli such as frames in communication; spatial context, emphasizing perceived group threat induced by geographical proximity to immigrant populations; and immigrant characteristics, emphasizing heterogeneity in the types of immigrant to whom attitudes are directed.

Some studies inevitably fit into more than one category: for example, we assign Hopkins (2010, 2011a), arguing for the joint role of media salience and context, to both the information and spatial context categories. Similarly, we assign Sides and Citrin (2007), who study the role of symbolic predispositions alongside the role of the country-level immigrant population, to the predispositions and spatial context categories. Still, most studies fit within just one category. In this and the following analyses, we present the distribution of categories over time: an "early" period covering the years 1996–2009 and a "late" period covering 2010–2020. Figure 2 depicts trends in theoretical explanations. Note in this and the following figures that while the relative frequency of a given category (type of explanation, etc.) varies between the two periods, all

categories are receiving increasing attention in absolute terms due to the marked increase in studies focusing on immigration attitudes.
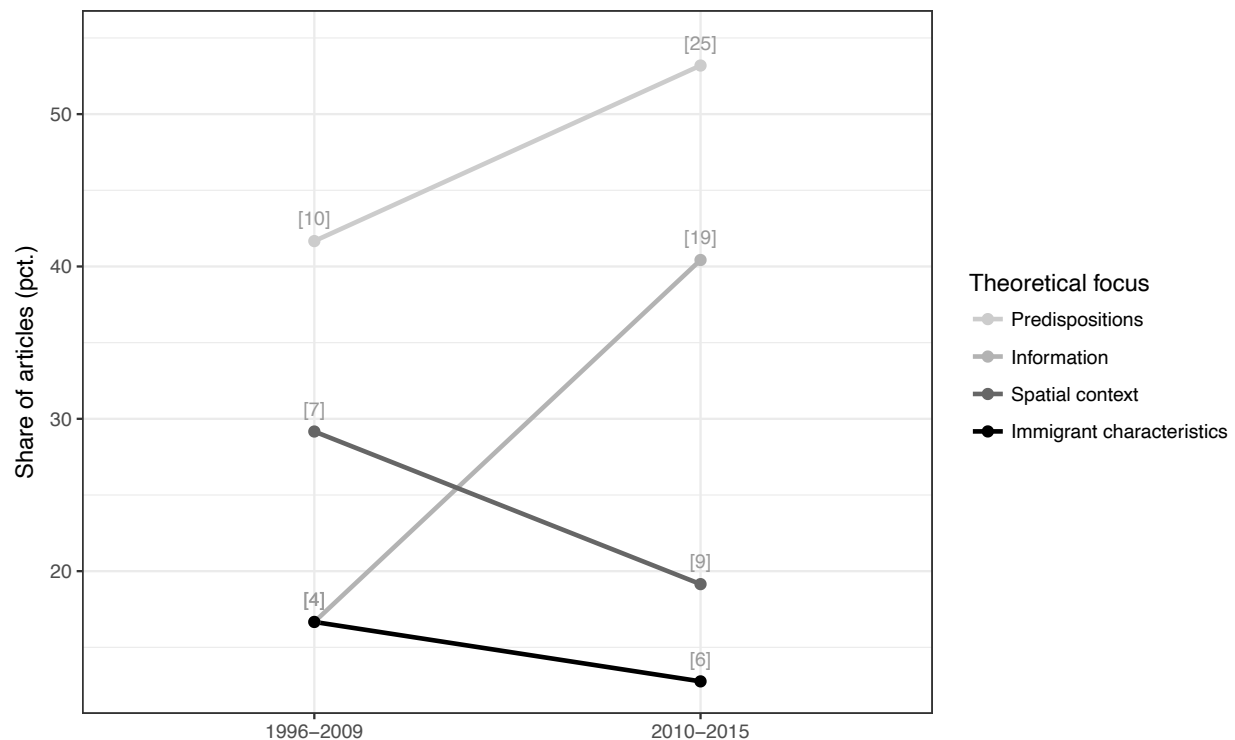
Figure 2. Theoretical perspectives for articles about attitudes toward immigration in top political science journals by time period. A few articles could not classified as representing one of the four perspectives. The theoretical categories are not mutually exclusive, so individual articles may be assigned to more than one category. Consequently, the shares may not sum to 100%. Article counts are shown in brackets.
Source: Manual coding based on data from JSTOR Data for Research and online journal archives.

In both the early and late periods, the predominant theoretical perspective is that of predispositions. Needless to say, this broad class of explanations masks considerable heterogeneity. Still, the dominance of predispositional explanations highlights an important stylized fact about immigration attitudes: a large portion of the overall variation in immigration attitudes reflects relatively stable individual differences in broader sociopolitical orientations that are predictive of

immigration attitudes. The most striking change evident from Figure 2 is for the role of informational explanations, a perspective applied in 17% of studies in the early period, but 40% of studies in the late period. As we elaborate on in the section on methodological approaches, we suspect a key driver of this trend is the rise of experimental approaches in political science.

Empirical Setting

To get a sense of the geographical distribution of published studies, we coded the empirical setting of each paper. We define three categories in our coding scheme: US, for studies focusing on immigration attitudes in the United States; Europe, for studies focusing on European countries; and other, for studies in any other context. We present the results for studies' empirical settings in Figure 3.
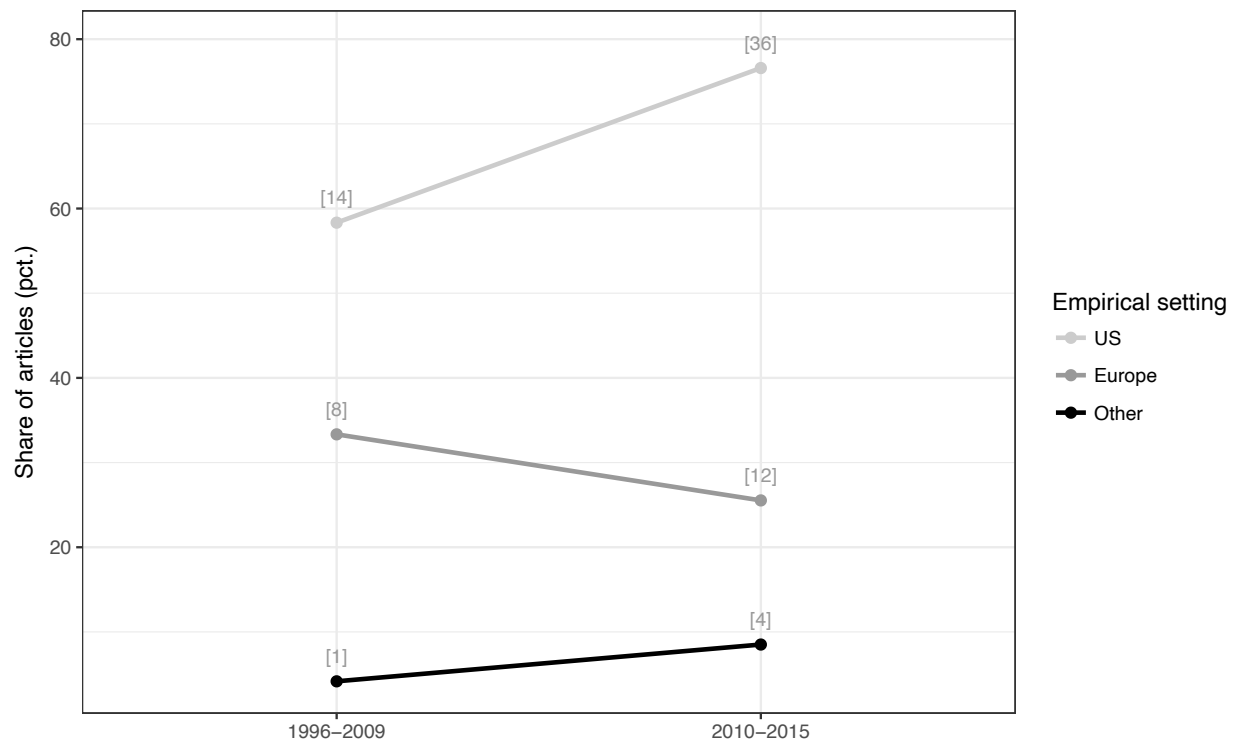
Figure 3. Empirical setting for articles about attitudes toward immigration in top political science journals by time period. Coding categories are not strictly mutually exclusive, so individual articles may be assigned to more than one category. Consequently, the shares may not sum to 100%. Article counts are shown in brackets.
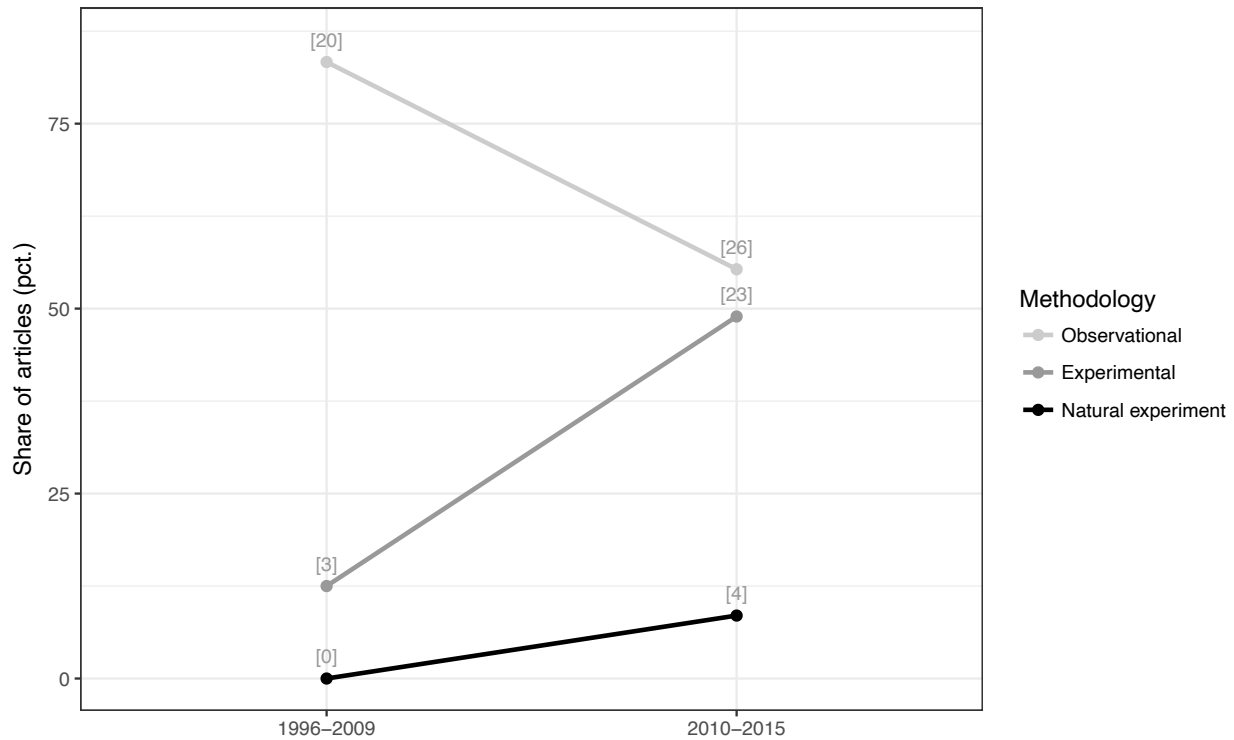*Source: Manual coding based on data from JSTOR Data for Research and online journal archives.*

As shown in Figure 3, the United States is the primary setting of studies of immigration attitudes, featuring in 62% of studies, with studies situated in European contexts a clear second. In total, 91% of studies in the sample are of immigration attitudes in the United States, Europe, or both and no other context. This number even somewhat overstates the extent of geographical and cultural diversity among studies as most studies in European contexts focus on another anglophone country, the United Kingdom.

In the early period, just a single study in our data is situated outside the United States or Europe: Mughan and Paxton (2006), a study of immigration attitudes among Australian voters. In the late period, seven studies analyze contexts outside of the United States and Europe: Wright (2011) (a cross-country study based on the International Social Survey Programme's survey); Sibley et al. (2013) (New Zealand); Iyengar et al. (2013) (Australia, Canada, Japan, and South Korea); Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan, and Courtemanche (2015) (Turkey and Israel); Gaikwad and Nellis (2017) (India); Ramsay and Pang (2017) (Singapore); and Valentino et al. (2019) (an eleven-country sample). These few studies are exceptions to the rule that the study of immigration attitudes is the study of Americans' and Europeans' immigration attitudes. The study of attitudes toward immigration in other contexts is virtually uncharted territory in top political science journals. Consequently, this is a topic in need of future research.

Methodological Approaches

As a final category, we consider studies' methodological approaches, which we coded according to a three-category scheme: observational, for studies using observational data without researcher manipulation or exogenous sources of random variation in the independent variable(s); experimental, for experimental approaches; and natural experiment, for studies exploiting plausibly random variation in a phenomenon explaining immigration attitudes. Figure 4 presents the distribution of methodological approaches over time.

Figure 4. Methodological approaches for articles about attitudes toward immigration in top political science journals by time period. Coding categories are not mutually exclusive (an article may apply multiple approaches), so individual articles may be assigned to more than one category. Consequently, the shares may sum to more than 100%. Article counts are shown in brackets.
Source: Manual coding based on data from JSTOR Data for Research and online journal archives.

In the early period, observational approaches dominate the study of immigration attitudes: twenty studies use an observational approach, three use an experimental one, and zero rely on natural experiments. The three experimental studies in the early period are, each in its own way, innovative studies that pave the way for later experimental work: Sniderman et al. (1996), comparing support for policies targeted at immigrants vis-à-vis African Americans; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004), comparing attitudes toward immigrants of various national backgrounds; and Brader,

Valentino, and Suhay (2008), studying how group cues affect anxiety and immigration restrictionism.

The period from 2010 onward shows the impact of the "credibility revolution" in social science (Angrist and Pischke 2010; Samii 2016) on political science studies of immigration attitudes: from 2010 onward, a study of immigration attitudes is more likely to use a credible causal inference strategy—through either an experiment or a natural experiment—than to rely on observational data. Several of the experimental studies in the late period use survey experiments to manipulate explanatory factors that are difficult to disentangle using observational data (e.g., Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010). The late period also sees the advent of studies using natural experiments, relying on exogenous variation from the 9/11 attacks (Hopkins 2010), Spanish-language ballots (Hopkins 2011b), information on citizenship applications (Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013), and proximity to protests (Branton et al. 2015) or refugees (Hangartner et al. 2019).

We suspect that the rise in experimental approaches helps explain the increased focus on informational explanations shown in Figure 2. The increased methodological attention to causal inference combined with rapidly falling costs of conducting internet-based surveys on online labor markets like Amazon's Mechanical Turk have enabled a burst of experimental studies of the effects of informational treatments on immigration attitudes. The association between the two trends is evident in our data: about one-fifth of non-experimental studies are about informational factors, whereas more than half of the experimental work focuses on the role of information, a statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 16.8, \ p < .001$).

While the heightened standards for credible causal inference in political science are surely a welcome development, the accompanying increase in informational explanations illustrates the

theoretical distortions that may arise when some questions translate more easily and affordably into research designs than others. To the extent that methodological concerns have driven the increased attention paid to the role of information in shaping immigration attitudes, it may have had the unintended effect of crowding out theoretically important questions for which credible causal inference is more challenging. For example, this may be the case for studies of the role of spatial context, where experimentally manipulating the independent variable is notoriously difficult or costly. The relatively few cases of field experimental (Enos 2014) or natural experimental (Hopkins 2010) studies of the effect of spatial context on immigration attitudes are valuable exceptions to this trend. The gains from more research in this vein are likely higher than those from additional survey experiments on informational treatments.

In sum, the rise of experimental and natural experimental approaches since 2010 represents a significant shift in typical methodological approaches and testifies to how rapidly evidentiary standards in empirical political science writ large have shifted over a decade. Having surveyed trends in the literature on the formation of attitudes toward immigration in a quantitative fashion, we now turn to a qualitative review.

The Origins of Immigration Attitudes

In this section, we review evidence on how threats associated with various situational stimuli shape immigration attitudes. To structure the review, we classify studies according to the theorized source of threat posed by immigrant groups. We roughly follow the classification scheme used in the quantitative review, although not all covered studies fit the scheme straightforwardly. We begin with predispositional explanations, followed by explanations focusing on spatial context,

information and media coverage, and, lastly, economic and cultural threat associated with various immigrant characteristics.

Predispositions

The predispositional perspective is heavily influenced by psychological research, and our conceptualization covers a range of different predispositions posited to influence immigration attitudes.

Similar to other attitudes, immigration attitudes have been hypothesized to spring from more general political principles (e.g., political ideology) or values (Feldman 2003). While this has rarely been the primary object of a given study, a large number of analyses have shown that anti-immigration attitudes tend to be associated with more conservative political ideology across a number of settings (e.g., Citrin et al. 1997; Chandler and Tsai 2001; Burns and Gimpel 2000; Mayda 2006; Sides and Citrin 2007; Wilkes, Guppy, and Farris 2008). More recently, a number of studies have scrutinized the role of values more broadly defined. Newman et al. (2013) and Wright, Levy, and Citrin (2016), for example, both find that the value "humanitarianism" is related to more pro-migration attitudes in the United States, and Wright, Levy, and Citrin (2016) find a similar pattern for "egalitarianism." Across a range of European countries, Davidov, Schmidt, and Schwartz (2008) and Davidov and Meuleman (2012) find that the value dimensions "self-transcendence" and "conservation" in the human value inventory of Schwartz et al. (2001) are positively and negatively correlated, respectively, with pro-immigration attitudes.

A different branch of the literature has looked at the association between personality traits (or closely related predispositions) and attitudes toward immigration. Three studies look at the role of personality as measured by the Big Five model, in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Switzerland,

respectively (Gallego and Pardos-Prado 2014; Dinesen, Klemmensen, and Nørgaard 2016; Ackermann and Freitag 2015). They all find that being higher on the trait "openness to experience" is associated with more positive views on immigration, whereas scoring higher on the trait "conscientiousness" is associated with more negative attitudes. "Agreeableness" is generally associated with more positive immigration attitudes and the opposite is the case for "neuroticism." The evidence with respect to "extraversion" is more ambiguous. This indicates that personality traits are tied to immigration attitudes in a similar and theoretically sensible way across different developed countries. Newer studies have begun exploring how the Big Five traits operate in conjunction with perceived situational threats. In line with expectations, Dinesen, Klemmensen, and Nørgaard (2016) find that those low on "agreeableness" and those high on "conscientiousness" respond more strongly to the educational level of immigrants and the economic threat this invokes. Similarly, Danckert et al. (2017) show that "openness to experience" moderates the effect of encounters with immigrants on immigration attitudes (see the following section, Spatial Context).

Other studies have focused on specific, politically consequential personality traits. Newman, Hartman, and Taber (2012, 2014) find that individuals with stronger social dominance orientation—the disposition to see group relations as hierarchical, with one's own group at the top—express more negative immigration attitudes. However, if cues indicate that immigrants accommodate to the majority culture, the role of social dominance orientation is drastically diminished (Newman, Hartman, and Taber 2014). There is more mixed evidence for the role of authoritarianism, a disposition related to the need for conformity to traditional social norms. Newman, Hartman, and Taber (2014) find that "right-wing authoritarianism" is negatively correlated with pro-immigration attitudes in the United States, whereas Wright, Levy, and Citrin (2016) find limited evidence for such a relationship. Related to the findings for other traits,

Johnston, Newman, and Velez (2015) find that authoritarianism interacts with local context in the United States (on spatial context, see the following section). Finally, Harell, Soroka, and Iyengar (2017) show that various dimensions of "locus of control" correlate with anti-immigrant sentiments such that those who believe that they themselves or society as a whole is in control of immigration are less aversive to immigration. Conversely, those who tend to think that immigrants are individually responsible for their own lives are on average more negative toward immigration.

In the literature on dispositional sources of immigration attitudes, one particularly prominent debate has been over the relative role of ethnocentrism—a generalized disposition to evaluate all out-groups negatively relative to in-groups (Kinder and Kam 2009)—versus group-specific attitudes. Key to this debate is the question of the degree of nuance with which individuals form attitudes toward immigration. One of the first studies to examine this question is that of Burns and Gimpel (2000) in the United States. They find that those who harbor more negative stereotypes (regarding intelligence and work ethic) about blacks and Hispanics are more negatively inclined toward immigrants, whereas similar stereotypes about whites are correlated with more positive immigration attitudes. This speaks in favor of ethnocentrism—that is, indiscriminately negative evaluations of out-groups, in casu blacks and Hispanics—taking precedence over group-specific stereotypes. Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) also find some support for the role of ethnocentrism in their conjoint experiment. More specifically, they find that individuals with more ethnocentric predispositions put more emphasis on immigrants' country of origin—an indicator of cultural difference/similarity—and less on their occupation. However, most of the recent evidence speaks in favor of group-specific stereotypes as explanation for immigration attitudes. Valentino, Brader, and Jardina (2013), for example, find that negative affect toward Latinos rather than ethnocentrism per se shapes immigration attitudes. Similarly, Levy and Wright (2016) show that Latino affect

and, to a lesser extent, affect toward whites are the only group-specific attitudes that explain attitudes toward paths to citizenship for immigrants among non-Hispanic whites in the United States. Also speaking against the importance of undifferentiated ethnocentrism, Hopkins (2015) finds that the effect of exposure to out-group cues depends on the specific match with stereotypes.

Finally, a more recent literature seeks to explain dispositional differences in immigration attitudes in terms of evolved psychological threat management systems. Aarøe, Petersen, and Arceneaux (2017), replicating and extending Faulkner et al. (2004), show that contamination disgust—an emotion regulated by the behavioral immune system to avoid contamination (a risk that is misattributed to members of identifiable out-groups)—is associated with negative immigration attitudes.

As evidenced by the long list of dispositions shown to predict immigration attitudes, there is considerable evidence for the dispositional perspective. As such, the logical next step within this tradition is not to examine the role of further dispositions but rather to synthesize the results from existing studies to understand which dispositions matter more and, not least, the circumstances under which specific dispositions are more consequential. This question is in itself complicated by the fact that dispositions and the attitudes they are purported to explain are typically both measured using the same instrument (survey data), which in turn induces common method bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003). To minimize this concern, dispositions should be measured with statements unrelated to immigration attitudes—in fact, preferably unrelated to attitudes in general (for valuable considerations on this in relation to authoritarianism, see Feldman and Stenner [1997]). Even when such measurement issues are a minor concern, it is of course difficult to give any observed relationship between dispositions and (immigration) attitudes a causal interpretation. Therefore, it

is arguably more fruitful—along the lines of previous studies—to devote further efforts to understanding how a given disposition is primed in the presence (or absence) of a given threat.

Spatial Context

A large, distinct line of research has examined the effect of immigrant concentration in natives' local residential context on immigration attitudes. Two generic theories about group relations yield contrasting predictions regarding the effect of living in proximity to immigrants. Conflict theory (or group threat theory) predicts that residential exposure to out-groups (i.e., immigrants) results in hostility due to conflict over material resources (Key 1949) and, in some versions, over cultural identities (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Contact theory, in contrast, predicts that interaction with immigrants, under certain facilitating conditions, reduces negative stereotypes about this group and thereby promotes more positive immigration attitudes (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998).

This literature has generated a proliferation of findings with no definitive overall pattern in the observed effects, as highlighted in a recent meta-analysis (Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes 2017) of the relationship between immigrant group size and anti-immigration attitudes. Most estimates suggest a positive relationship (i.e., higher immigrant concentration is associated with more prejudice), but more often than not, the relationships are statistically insignificant. However, the meta-analysis also reveals notable heterogeneity in the observed relationship across study characteristics. For example, positive relationships emerge more frequently in analyses using cities or census tracts/block groups as contextual units compared to those using counties and more often in European countries than in the United States or Canada (Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes 2017, 236). Related to this, some studies of spatial context go so far as to use entire countries as individuals' geographical context (e.g., Quillian 1995; McLaren 2003; Semyonov, Raijman, and Gorodzeisky

2006). In fact, these constitute around half of the results analyzed in Pottie-Sherman and Wilkes (2017). While between-country differences in immigration attitudes are clearly interesting, these studies are generally poorly suited to test theories of conflict or contact given the very high level of aggregation, which in turn makes it difficult to infer anything about actual local experiences with different ethnic groups (see Dinesen and Sønderskov [2015] for an illustration of this point). Furthermore, given the few observations at the contextual level (countries) and the high correlation between size of an immigrant population and other related variables, it is notoriously difficult to isolate the effect of a given contextual-level variable.

The inconsistency in observed relationships may be partly explained by the diverse approaches and foci of previous studies. Instead of examining the first-order relationship between immigrant group size and immigration attitudes, many studies examine the conditionalities of this relationship—for example, when and for whom a given type of context matters. One line of research has scrutinized the type of immigrants in question. For example, Hood and Morris (1997) find that whereas the size of the Asian population in US counties is associated with more positive attitudes toward immigration among Anglo-Americans, there is no relationship with the share of Hispanics. In a related vein, the same authors find that the share of documented immigrants in a county is associated with more positive immigration attitudes among Anglo-Americans, whereas the (estimated) share of undocumented immigrants is negatively associated with pro-migration attitudes. In an analysis of Texas counties, Rocha et al. (2011) find that it is not the share of Latino immigrants that provokes native opposition among Anglo-Americans but rather the native-born Latino population (i.e., ostensibly descendants of earlier Latino immigrants).

All of these studies indicate that a sensitivity to the immigrant population in question is key for understanding the effect of spatial context on immigration attitudes. A related line of research

focuses not on the type of immigrant living in a given context at a given time but rather on the dynamics of population change over time. In the United States, Hopkins (2010, 2011a) and Newman et al. (2013) show that more rapid changes—in combination with initial stocks of immigrants (Newman et al., 2013) and the national salience of immigration (Hopkins, 2010, 2011a)—lead to more negative attitudes toward immigrants.

A recent set of studies examine how context works in conjunction with individual predispositions and values to shape immigration attitudes—thus illustrating the intersection with the dispositional explanation. Hawley (2011) and Karreth, Singh, and Stojek (2015) examine the interaction between contextual demographic composition and political ideology in US counties and regions in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, respectively. They argue that partisans respond differently to the potential threat induced by living among immigrants, with conservatives displaying more threatened and liberals less threatened responses. Both find that ideological polarization over immigration increases with (changes in) the share of immigrants in a given context. Hawley (2011) finds that this is mainly driven by Democrats becoming more pro-immigration in contexts with a higher concentration of immigrants (consistent with the contact hypothesis), while Karreth, Singh, and Stojek (2015) find that the effect is primarily driven by right-wing individuals becoming more restrictionist in such contexts.

A related literature looks at how ethnic context interacts with personality traits. Parallel to the work focusing on dispositions in themselves, this line of work is premised on the idea that individuals with certain personality traits are predisposed to perceive immigrants in the surrounding context as a threat. Johnston, Newman, and Velez (2015) find that when experiencing larger increases in county-level Hispanic population, Americans high in authoritarianism perceive increased cultural threat from immigration, whereas those low in authoritarianism experience

reduced cultural threat. In a similar vein, Danckert et al. (2017) find that the Big Five personality trait "openness to experience" (Mondak et al. 2010) moderates the negative effect of (perceived) neighborhood immigrant concentration on immigration attitudes in Denmark. However, the negative effect is only significant for individuals in the lowest decile of "openness to experience." Finally, Danckert, Dinesen, and Sønderskov (2017) look at the effect of living among non-Western immigrants in the immediate residential context conditional on political sophistication of (native) Danes. They hypothesize that more politically sophisticated individuals, defined as individuals attentive to and knowledgeable about politics, have more developed political attitudes and rely more on mass mediated information, leading them to abstain from using cues from the local residential context, whereas less sophisticated individuals are more prone to use this context in the absence of other information sources. In line with this prediction, they find positive (contact) effects on pro-immigration attitudes of residential proximity to non-Western immigrants but more strongly (and statistically significant) for those with low political sophistication.

While the main focus in contextual studies has been on individual-level moderators, a couple of innovative studies have examined how the national media environment interacts with local contextual demographics. In his pathbreaking work, Hopkins finds support for what he coined the "politicized places hypothesis," which predicts that the negative effect of (changes in) local immigrant composition on pro-immigration attitudes is stronger when the topic of immigration is nationally salient as indicated by media coverage (Hopkins 2010, 2011a). Hopkins (2010) finds support for the politicized places hypothesis in both the United States and the United Kingdom using rather local measures of residential context as well as monthly data on media coverage. Interestingly, Schlueter, Meuleman, and Davidov (2013) test a similar model in Spain but, contrary to Hopkins, find that the effect of local context is weaker when immigration is more salient in the

national media (and vice versa). However, compared to Hopkins' study in the United States, this study has the drawback of using more aggregate contextual data, namely regions in Spain (of which there are only seventeen in the data).

Most recently, studies have begun examining the political consequences of the highly uneven spatial distribution of refugees coming to Europe during the 2015 refugee crisis. Hangartner et al. (2019) find that exposure to refugee arrivals increases hostility to refugees and immigrants among Greek island residents. Similarly, Dinas et al. (2019) find that refugee arrivals on Greek islands increased support for the extreme-right party Golden Dawn—showing that the refugee crisis had not only attitudinal but also behavioral consequences.

Going forward, the expansive literature on the influence of local immigrant populations on attitudes toward immigrants should continue the endeavor to understand when negative (conflict) and positive (contact) responses emerge. Yet, at this point, directing more efforts toward the notoriously difficult, yet highly pertinent, issue of identifying credible causal estimates of ethnic context is warranted. As exemplified by recent studies by Enos (2014, 2016), well-crafted field experiments and clever natural experiments can greatly help with regard to causal identification. If no experimental or quasi-experimental variation in context is available, using panel data along the lines of Hopkins (2010, 2011a) and Danckert et al. (2017) would also provide an improvement over most previous studies in terms of causal identification. Finally, another pressing issue in the literature on the effects of immigration context on immigration attitudes is that of accurately specifying and measuring the context in which these effects can be expected to operate. Ceteris paribus, we would expect the ethnic composition of more disaggregate (local) contexts to better reflect actual exposure to immigrants and therefore be better suited to examine at least one central (albeit not the only) underlying mechanism.

Information, Events, and Media Coverage

Since immigrant populations typically constitute small minorities of host societies, the assumption in most of the existing literature on immigration attitudes has been that natives are predominantly exposed to information about immigrants and immigration through mass media coverage. In an argument representative of this line of work, Brader, Valentino, and Suhay (2008, 960) reason that since "Americans tend to be poorly informed and uncertain about immigration," "much of what they learn comes through the mass media." Although the dominance of media in the average citizens' informational diet can be overstated (see Hjorth [2020] for a critique of "elite-centric" theories of immigration attitudes), media coverage is undoubtedly an important component. It is important to stress that news media not only influence public attitudes by neutrally transmitting information about immigration and integration of immigrants. They also elicit emotional reactions by framing immigration in certain ways. Further, they also report on salient societal events (e.g., terrorism) that in turn are linked to attitudes toward immigration. In this section, we review research on a number of the pathways through which news media, and the information they convey, influence immigration attitudes.

Early studies of the role of media coverage used observational approaches. For example, Abrajano and Singh (2009) find that Spanish-language media sources produce more pro-immigration coverage and that their bilingual readers (who could therefore also choose English-language media) are more pro-immigration than consumers of English-language media coverage. While this is suggestive of a media effect, the possibility of self-selection into media outlets by prior immigration attitudes makes a causal interpretation of the association unjustified. Later studies address this problem by looking at trends in media coverage and partisanship at the macro level, muting individual self-selection as a concern. Using this approach, Abrajano, Hajnal, and

Hassell ([2017](#)) find that in the United States, more newspaper coverage of immigration is associated with shifts toward the Republican Party among white Americans, which they interpret as evidence of a restrictionist shift in attitudes. Dunaway, Branton, and Abrajano ([2010](#)) find a similar result for the salience of immigration as a political issue, with stronger agenda-setting effects among respondents in border states.

A related line of study examines macro-level media coverage of immigration and aggregate concern over immigration using time-series data. Results are generally mixed, pointing to highly contingent effects. Using monthly data on newspaper coverage in Germany from 1993 to 2005, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart ([2009](#)) found that the overall immigration coverage was essentially unrelated to perceiving immigration as a problem. However, the visibility of immigrant actors in the news negatively affected immigration concern, suggesting that the public becomes more pro-migration when immigrants are covered more intensively in the media. Moreover, more positive coverage of immigration translates into less immigration concern. Finally, related to some of the research reviewed in the previous section, they also find that the tone of news coverage of immigration interacts with immigration inflows and asylum applications, specifically indicating that a more negative tone generates more concern in times of higher immigration/more applications for asylum in the country. Extending this study, McLaren, Boomgaarden, and Vliegenthart ([2018](#)) analyze the relationship between media coverage and aggregate immigration concern in the United Kingdom using monthly time-series data on newspaper coverage. They show that increased coverage of immigration in British newspapers is associated with an increased concern. This, however, is driven by coverage by right-leaning newspapers. Parsing out specific issues related to immigration, they find that a focus on the economy and education animates immigration concern in the British public, whereas a focus on crime or legal processes does not.

Like the study of political communication writ large, the study of media effects on immigration attitudes has increasingly made use of experiments to get more causally credible estimates of media effects. In an early experimental study, Brader, Valentino, and Suhay (2008) find that citizens express more negative immigration attitudes when exposed to a negatively framed article about immigration but much more so when the immigrant portrayed is Latino (compared to European). This "group cue" effect is not unique to the US context: using a similar design, Hjorth (2016) finds that Swedish respondents exhibit much stronger negative reactions to a culturally distant immigrant (from Bulgaria) compared to a culturally proximate one (the Netherlands). The experimental literature on group cues provides compelling evidence that media portrayals of immigrants can prime stereotypes about immigrants and in turn affect immigration attitudes.

In addition to highlighting the role of media cues, Brader, Valentino, and Suhay (2008) present evidence suggesting that group cues are effective at changing immigration attitudes because they evoke anxiety (a negative emotion) and not because they alter perceived threat (i.e., a more cognitively based mechanism). Building on this work linking anxiety with immigration attitudes, Gadarian and Albertson (2014) find that more anxious individuals are more likely to accept threating information about immigration and discount less threatening information. Albertson and Gadarian (2015) present a comprehensive theoretical account of how anxiety interacts with opinion on immigration and other relevant issue domains.

While these studies demonstrate that the tone or framing of immigration as an issue is important in its own right, media also shape immigration attitudes by conveying information about real-world events. Terrorist attacks—highly salient events—have been shown to shape immigration attitudes in several studies. Hopkins (2010) shows that the 9/11 attacks activated

group threat from local immigrant populations. Branton et al. (2011) show that anti-Latino sentiment became much more strongly linked to immigration attitudes in the aftermath of 9/11, suggesting that the post-9/11 media environment primed social identities in relation to immigration. Using a design exploiting the co-occurrence of terrorist attacks and cross-national survey fieldwork, Legewie (2013) shows that Spaniards expressed much more restrictionist immigration attitudes in response to the 2004 Madrid bombings. The observed effects of the Madrid bombings were much weaker among respondents in other European countries, as were European responses to the 2002 attacks in Bali. This latter finding suggests that although transmitted through mass media, the effects of terrorist attacks on immigration attitudes primarily manifest themselves in the targeted countries. Furthermore, subsequent to 9/11, it is interesting to ask how the recent wave of terrorist attacks directly or indirectly implicating immigrants may shape immigration attitudes. On the one hand, one may expect that anti-immigration sentiments flare up even more strongly in the aftermath of subsequent attacks due to a sensitization to terrorism. On the other hand, one might also hypothesize diminishing returns of continued terrorism in the sense that the marginal effect of an additional attack on immigration attitudes is likely to be more negligible as terrorism becomes more "normalized." The findings of no change in immigration attitudes in France after the Paris (2015) and Nice (2016) attacks by Brouard, Vasilopoulos, and Foucault (2018) indicate support for the latter conjecture; but more research scrutinizing these hypotheses in more detail simultaneously studying the consequences of several terrorist attacks would be a worthwhile endeavor for future studies.

Individual Economic Threat

A threat from immigration to tangible resources pertaining to the individual—personal finances in particular—has arguably been one of the most extensively studied explanations for immigration attitudes. While such threats can manifest themselves in different ways, the threat associated with labor market competition has by far received the most attention. The underlying mechanism is straightforward: immigrants are potential competitors for natives' jobs, thereby imposing costs on natives in terms of potential job loss and lower wages due to greater labor supply (for a critical discussion of the validity of this assumption, see Hainmueller and Hiscox [2007]).

The first studies of the labor-market competition hypothesis examined this conjecture relatively crudely by using (low) education, occupation, and/or wage as proxies for exposure to immigrants on the assumption that most immigrants are low-skilled and therefore likely competitors for jobs with these groups. Building on cross-sectional data, a number of earlier studies found relatively strong evidence for the labor-market competition hypothesis through a negative correlation between education or skill level and immigration attitudes (Citrin et al. 1997; Chandler and Tsai 2001; Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Mayda 2006; O'Rourke and Sinnott 2006), or, much less consistently, a positive association between personal economic concerns (e.g., experience of financial stress) and negative attitudes toward immigration (Burns and Gimpel 2000; Sides and Citrin 2007).

Yet, as highlighted by Hainmueller and Hiscox (2007, 2010), natives' education or skill set is at best a very crude proxy for susceptibility to labor-market competition. According to the labor-market competition hypothesis, natives should only be opposed to immigrants with skills similar to their own. That is, opposition to immigration should be skill-specific as immigrants with other skill sets may be a net benefit, for example by lowering wages and therefore ultimately producing

cheaper local goods. Testing this implication empirically, there is essentially no evidence for the labor-market competition hypothesis. More specifically, natives prefer more highly skilled, specifically better-educated, immigrants independent of their own skill/educational level. This has been shown convincingly using cross-national cross-sectional survey data (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007), survey experiments (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Iyengar et al. 2013; Dinesen, Klemmensen, and Nørgaard 2016), and conjoint analyses (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015) in the United States and a range of other countries. Most recently, Naumann, Stoetzer, and Pietrantuono (2018) show in a survey experiment conducted before and after the European refugee crisis that highly skilled migrants remain preferred over low-skilled migrants irrespective of natives' skill levels.

Without questioning the limited success of the labor-market competition hypothesis overall, recent studies have tried to uncover the conditions under which this explanation may nevertheless operate. Focusing on specific occupational sectors in Europe, Dancygier and Donnelly (2013) show that when sectoral economies are declining (specifically following the Great Recession), a higher influx of immigrants to the sector is associated with more negative attitudes toward immigration among natives employed in this sector. Interestingly, the opposite is observed in times of sectoral expansion, where migrant inflows are followed by more positive immigration attitudes.

In a similar vein, Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo (2013) show that opposition to a specific immigration policy (specifically H-1B visas, i.e., temporary entry permits primarily for tech workers) does emerge among those populations likely to face competition with immigrants admitted under this policy (specifically tech workers in the United States). This finding is particularly striking given that both the immigrant group and the native group in question are highly educated—something that is otherwise strongly associated with more pro-immigration

views. Based on this finding, Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo (2013) argue that labor-market competition is generally not prevalent in the general population and therefore that threatened responses are unlikely to emerge using nationally representative surveys. However, when focusing on specific populations for whom the competition is prevalent and their self-interest from opposing immigration therefore strong (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990), relatively marked effects may emerge.

The overall conclusion from the literature is that labor-market competition generally plays a rather limited role in shaping attitudes toward immigration. Yet, under specific circumstances, in which the labor-market threat from immigration becomes highly tangible, the labor-market competition hypothesis does seem to have some leverage. The literature on the labor-market competition has developed to become both theoretically and methodologically sophisticated. It is especially noticeable how—in line with the broader trend shown in the quantitative analysis—experiments now feature very prominently in this literature. This stronger experimental focus, together with a continued focus on the conditionalities of when labor-market competition effects emerge, is a logical path for this line of the literature to follow in future studies.

Societal Economic Threat

As was the case for individual economic threat, explanations in terms of societal economic threat focus on tangible resources; but rather than egotropic considerations over one's personal finances, they reflect sociotropic concerns over the economic impact of immigration on society in general. From this perspective, natives oppose immigration because immigrants are believed to put a financial strain on the welfare state in terms of being unemployed, committing crime, or using various public services. This opposition may stem from a preference for not burdening public

budgets or more nativist concerns (i.e., exclusion of out-group members from rights to welfare services). In the latter case, there is arguably a substantial overlap with perceived cultural threat. The implication of sociotropic concerns is not only that natives will oppose immigration if it represents a net cost but also that they will favor immigration if it is perceived as a net benefit. This is especially important when comparing responses to immigrants with different characteristics.

Empirically this perspective has been examined in one of two ways. Early studies examined the association between retrospective evaluations of the national economy and support for immigration using cross-sectional data (Citrin et al. 1997; Sides and Citrin 2007). These studies have shown the predicted relationship—more negative evaluations of the national economy are associated with stronger anti-immigration sentiments. The other line of research examining the role of sociotropic evaluations infers these motivations based on how natives react to immigrants with different characteristics. Because certain characteristics are believed to be more beneficial for the receiving society—higher education and in-demand skills in particular—a universal preference for better-educated or higher-skilled immigrants is interpreted as support for such sociotropic concerns.

As noted in the previous section, it is a near-universal finding that better-educated/higher-skilled immigrants are preferred across the board. Furthermore, in absolute terms, natives typically prefer more, rather than fewer, of this group. The preference for better-educated/higher-skilled immigrants has been found in a number of countries in both observational studies (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007) and studies based on various survey experiments and conjoint analyses (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015; Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Margalit 2015; Iyengar et al. 2013; Dinesen, Klemmensen, and Nørgaard 2016; Sniderman,

Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004). The strong consensus regarding the importance of sociotropic economic concerns paired with the weak support for the labor-market competition hypothesis highlights that natives' opposition toward immigrants is motivated by financial concerns but primarily that of the national as a whole rather than egotropic self-interest.

The biggest challenge for this line of research to confront is perhaps to distinguish materialist sociotropic motives from that of cultural threat (see the next section). Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004) highlight this issue clearly: being motivated by the well-being of co-nationals falls close to more culturally oriented threats around national identities.

Cultural Threat

Contrary to personal or societal material concerns, the cultural threat explanation focuses on the importance of group identities and their distinctiveness. According to this class of explanations, humans derive self-esteem from group membership, specifically that of their nation, and therefore have a need for positively differentiating their own group from other groups (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004; Tajfel and Turner 1979). This in turn entails hostility toward members of distinct out-groups (immigrants), who are seen as threatening by virtue of challenging the dominance of majority (native) culture.

The cultural threat hypothesis has received extensive support in previous studies. Like other explanations, it was originally examined in observational studies based on cross-sectional survey data. These studies find a strong positive relationship between restrictive immigration attitudes and negative attitudes toward multicultural practices or policies (e.g., toward language) and interpret this as evidence supporting a cultural threat explanation (Citrin et al. 1997; Chandler and Tsai 2001; Sides and Citrin 2007).

In addition to the limitations inherent to observational data, these studies can run close to becoming tautological, explaining one attitude by another set of attitudes. For example, Sides and Citrin (2007) find that anti-immigration attitudes can partly be explained using an individual's "cultural identity," measured as agreement with the statement "It is better for a country if almost everyone shares the same customs and traditions" (p. 485). As predicted, agreement with this item correlates very strongly with anti-immigration attitudes. But rather than a causal relationship between distinct psychological phenomena, the correlation may simply reflect two separate measures of the same underlying attitude.

Because of this ambiguity in observational approaches, subsequent experimental studies of cultural threat are a significant step forward in this literature. These studies compare natives' responses to (groups of) immigrants with experimentally manipulated characteristics, some of which are argued to be cultural markers (e.g., country of origin or language skills). Like the observational studies, these studies generally find strong evidence for the importance of cultural threat. For example, in an early study in this line of research, Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004) find that natives primarily base their opinions of immigrants on how well they fit in culturally in the Netherlands (more specifically, speaking Dutch and having a good chance to fit in to Dutch culture). Although secondary to the importance of their level of education, Dinesen, Klemmensen, and Nørgaard (2016) find that Danes prefer Western, and thus ostensibly more culturally similar, immigrants. Rooij, Goodwin, and Pickup (2018) present a recent replication and extension of Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004), once again finding strong evidence for the role of cultural threat.

Using the Implicit Association Test to elicit measures of cultural threat less sensitive to social desirability bias compared to explicit measures, Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo (2013) similarly find

strong experimental evidence for the effect of cultural threat on immigration attitudes. Using conjoint experiments in the United States, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) find limited effects of country of origin, except for immigrants coming from Iraq. However, as the authors note, this may also plausibly reflect a security concern given the two recent wars between the United States and Iraq and the general salience of terrorism after the 9/11 attacks. Focusing only on non-Western countries of origin, Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2017) find even smaller effects of country of origin in a conjoint experiment conducted in fifteen European countries.

Collectively, the literature points toward various forms of cultural threat being important for immigration attitudes. The biggest challenges for this line of research to confront are arguably 1) differentiating types of cultural threat, 2) distinguishing this from various types of sociotropic materialist threat, and 3) understanding the interplay between situational cultural threat and dispositions expected to be primed by such threat (e.g., ethnocentrism).

Outro: Three Directions Forward

In this review, we have summarized key themes and trends in the study of immigration attitudes from 1996 to 2020. Rather than restating points already made, we end our review by pointing to some promising directions for future research based on our reading of the existing literature. Though by no means exhaustive, they represent approaches and questions where we believe scholars will find ample opportunities for novel research.

First of all, there is a severe paucity of research on immigration attitudes in non-Anglo contexts. Top political science journals presently offer frequent, high-quality scholarship on immigration attitudes but rarely in non-Anglo contexts and almost never in contexts outside of western Europe. In today's "age of migration" (Castles and Miller 2009), Western, developed

countries are not alone in grappling with the contentious politics of immigration. Some of the insights gained from the existing literature may not apply straightforwardly in novel contexts, but the importance of distinguishing context-specific from universal dynamics of immigration attitudes is precisely why research in a wider array of contexts is needed.

Second, we stress the need for making more use of natural experiments. The recent spike in the use of experimental approaches to studying immigration attitudes is a welcome development, placing conclusions on much firmer footing in terms of causal inference. However, many laboratory or survey experiments suffer from limited ecological validity. Carefully selected natural experiments can combine credible causal inference with substantive relevance (Dunning 2012) and often allow researchers to study behavioral outcomes (e.g., Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013). In addition to existing work making use of natural experiments (e.g., Hopkins 2011b; Wallace, Zepeda-Millán, and Jones-Correa 2014), we suspect that waves of immigration such as the 2015 European refugee crisis may present researchers with potentially informative sources of as-if randomness. Hangartner et al. (2019) is but one highly interesting recent example of this promising strategy.

Lastly, the study of immigration attitudes operates in an era of increasing politicization of immigration. As we noted in the beginning, two of the most salient political events of recent years, the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential election, saw the issue of immigration brought to the center of national political conflict. Existing research already offers insights into how citizens respond to elite cues about immigration (e.g., Jones and Martin 2017) or partisan polarization over immigration (e.g., Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Still, the increasing centrality of immigration in political life raises new questions of how immigration attitudes interact with existing psychological predispositions, political group loyalties, and material interests. We

look forward to future studies of immigration attitudes tackling these and related highly pertinent

questions.

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Notes

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[1] Our summary builds on two excellent prior reviews of immigration attitudes, namely those of Ceobanu and Escandell (2010) and Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014). Since we are reviewing the same literature, there will be a natural overlap in the studies covered and the conclusions reached. However, given the rapid growth of the literature, there is a considerable amount of new evidence to cover.

[2] In the interest of ease of exposition and lexical variety, we refer to these interchangeably as "attitudes toward immigration" or "immigration attitudes" throughout.