



Immigration and public support for the Swedish welfare state

Can strong welfare states persist in the face of large-scale migration? A contentiously debated theory within the social sciences states that native populations are unwilling to support government spending that mainly benefits immigrants. This can have negative consequences for the democratic legitimacy of the welfare state, as immigrant status, poverty, and welfare dependency have become increasingly linked. Contributing to this debate, this policy brief addresses the following questions: Does unemployment among immigrants harm majority support for the Swedish welfare state? How does contact with immigrants in neighborhoods and at workplaces affect attitudes toward government spending among native-born Swedes? This policy brief summarizes findings from a Sweden-wide representative survey on attitudes towards immigration, government spending, and related topics. The findings are previously published in the author's dissertation (Stockholm University, 2017).

Does immigration affect public support for the welfare state?

For many years, international migration has been a contentiously debated issue in Swedish politics. Nine percent of Sweden's population are immigrants; nearly

70 percent of them originate from countries outside the European Union (Eurostat, 2021). One particularly thorny issue is the fact that immigrants face higher risks of poverty and unemployment compared to people born in Sweden. In 2019, 15.7 percent of the foreign-born labor force (people aged 15 to 64) were out of paid work, while

the same was true for only 3.9 percent of the native workforce (OECD, 2019).

Unemployment and consecutive dependence on the welfare state do, of course, have very tangible and lasting consequences for immigrants themselves. However, in the long run, society at large can be affected as well, since empirical evidence from various countries suggest that welfare states can lose popular support if their programs are perceived to mainly benefit immigrants. But why should that be the case?

One of the most well-established insights in social psychology is that we find it hard to share with people who are different from ourselves. Of course, people differ in many ways from one another. Yet, when it comes to markers of difference that make us recognize people as “others” in our everyday lives, skin color, language, and religiously or culturally distinct attire are among the most important, simply because they are most easily discernable. But why do we mind visible differences? What we really do is use visible differences as cues for things we cannot see or predict. If we are confronted with people who look like us, we simply assume that they will also behave like us and, for instance, share their resources when we share ours with them. This is not to say that judging trustworthiness, fairness and so on by visible markers such as skin color is a good strategy. It is simply a shortcut the human mind takes when making instant choices when there is limited information available. The good news is that reflection, as well as regular contact with people who are different from ourselves can, under the right conditions, allow us to overcome prejudicial assumptions based on visible differences.

The notion of reciprocity—giving something to get something—also plays a role when it comes to how members of the native majority evaluate whether immigrants should benefit from welfare resources. Previous research has shown natives to be less supportive of government spending on immigrants if immigrants are (or are at least

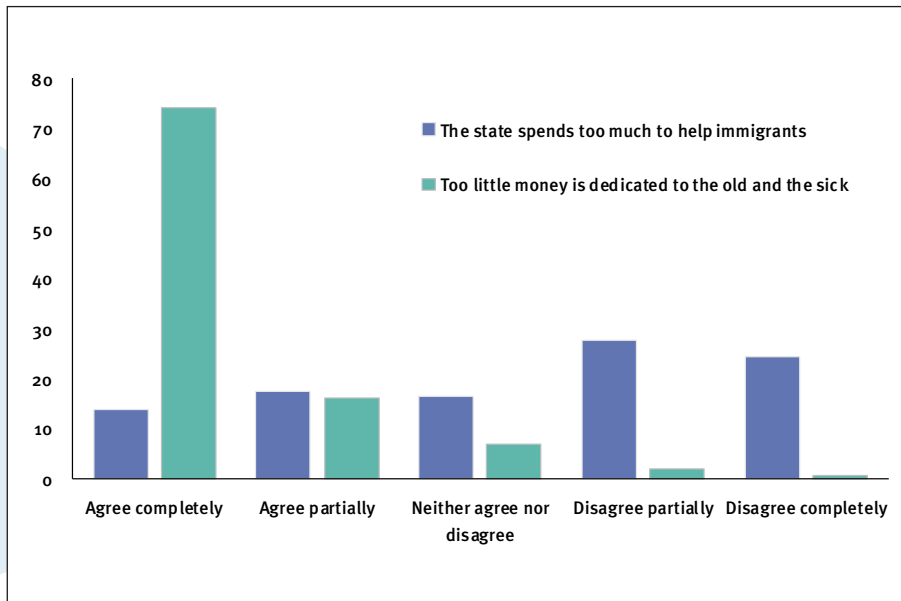
perceived to be) overrepresented among the recipients of welfare (e.g., due to unemployment). This seems to affect popular support for programs where welfare receipt is not tied to previous contributions in particular. Problematically, at least some groups of immigrants will necessarily remain overrepresented among the recipients of welfare, if they find it much harder to get paid work compared to natives. This appears to be the case in Sweden as well as in many other countries within the EU (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2017). The reasons for this are numerous and well-researched, ranging from language barriers and mismatched or inadequate education to administrative difficulties in the accreditation of foreign qualifications and discrimination in hiring.

Whether motivated by quick responses to outward difference or concerns about reciprocity, majorities’ inclination to care more about the welfare of “their own” is a well-established empirical finding, in Sweden and elsewhere.

My dissertation is in part based on a Sweden-wide representative survey we conducted to study attitudes of the majority population towards immigrants and the welfare state. The survey sample comprised 2,282 individuals, about 1,500 of whom were “natives”, i.e., born in Sweden to two Swedish parents.

In our analyses of this data, we find that the vast majority of native respondents supports increased spending on the sick and the elderly. However, attitudes toward spending on immigrants are much more diverse. While about 14 percent agree completely that “the state spends too much to help immigrants”, the same holds true for as many as 74 percent of those reacting to the statement that “too little money is dedicated to the old and the sick”. While virtually none of our native-born respondents disagree with the statement that the government spends too little on the sick and the old, almost half of them disagree or disagree strongly with the claim that too much is spent on immigrants (all in Figure 1).

Figure 1: Preferences for government spending (XENO Survey, 2013)



Note: Row percentages for all 1,517 native survey respondents.

Neighborhoods and workplaces as shapers of public opinion

There is an important assumption underlying concerns about the consequences of immigrants' often-lacking economic integration for public support for the welfare state: members of the native majority are informed about whether – and to what extent – immigrants are indeed benefiting from government spending. Usually, this kind of information reaches people through two main channels, third-party reports (e.g., news media) and personal observation.

A number of studies have shown that native Swedes who live in municipalities with larger immigrant populations

are less likely to support generous welfare policies (cf. Dahlberg et al, 2012; Eger, 2010). Authors have often argued that this is accounted for by media reports about immigrant poverty and unemployment, which tend to refer to the situation in larger areas such as cities, municipalities, or entire regions of the country.

Building upon this research, we were interested in studying the pathway of personal experience. Thus, in our survey, we did not only gather information about respondents' support vs. rejection of different kinds of government spending, but we also collected data about the presence of different groups of immigrants in our respondents' neighborhoods of residence and workplaces. We chose neighborhoods and workplaces because this is where most adults spend most of their time. Moreover,

since humans have been shown to be prone to generalize from their personal experience to life in general, impressions formed in highly frequented spaces such as neighborhoods and workplaces should be especially important.

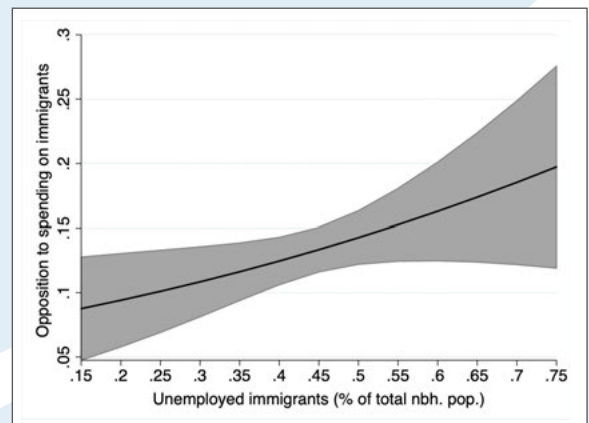
Figures 2, 3, and 4 show how natives' probability of opposing government spending on immigrants (our dependent variable) changes with three of the neighborhood characteristics we considered in our statistical analyses. As expected, we find that native respondents are significantly less supportive of government spending on immigrants if they have spent more time living in neighborhoods with larger unemployed immigrant populations. Looking at Figure 2, we see that the probability of being completely opposed to government spending on immigrants increases from 9 to about 19 percent, i.e., 10 percentage points, as the share of unemployed immigrants residing in a neighborhood rises from 15 to 75 percent (representing the minimum and maximum levels of immigrant unemployment we observe in our sample). But how should we regard this effect in terms of its size? To get an idea of the size of the effect we can compare it to that of two other central neighborhood variables in our statistical model: the percentage of households with incomes below the poverty line and the percentage of university-educated neighbors.

In Figure 3, we see that shifting the neighborhood share of poor households from 0 to 25 percent (again, our sample's minimum and maximum values for this variable) actually lowers the probability of full opposition to government assistance for immigrants by 15 percentage points (from 18 to 3 percent). This is in line with previous research: Economic disadvantage has been linked to greater self-interest in and hence support for the welfare state, but not to more negative attitudes toward migration (cf. Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989). In fact, research has found wealthier individuals to be more critical of migration due to concerns about migration's fiscal impact (i.e., the higher a person's income, the higher her tax burden and the greater her concern with how taxes are spent; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014).

In Figure 4, we see that if we instead increase the share of university graduates from 10 to 45 percent (from our sample's minimum to maximum) opposition to government spending on immigrants is lowered by 10 percentage points (from 14 to 4 percent). Previous research has linked higher levels of education to cultural values of universalism, the belief that the welfare state should not discriminate between immigrants and natives, which explains our finding (see (van der Waal et al., 2010 for a detailed discussion).

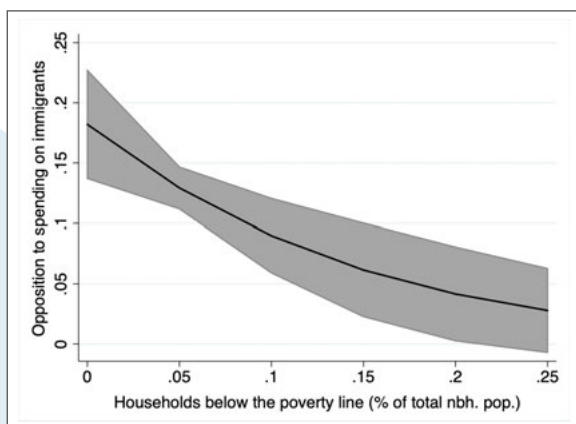
Considering the size of these results, the effect of immigrant unemployment in the neighborhood is very comparable to that of other statistically significant neighborhood characteristics that are not related to immigration, making all of them about equally important in their real-world implications. This is important to bear in mind when considering policy recommendations. While immigrant unemployment does indeed seem to be negatively associated with natives' willingness to share government resources, other variables, such as education, seem to have important positive effects in their own right.

Figure 2: Opposition to spending on immigrants and immigrant unemployment



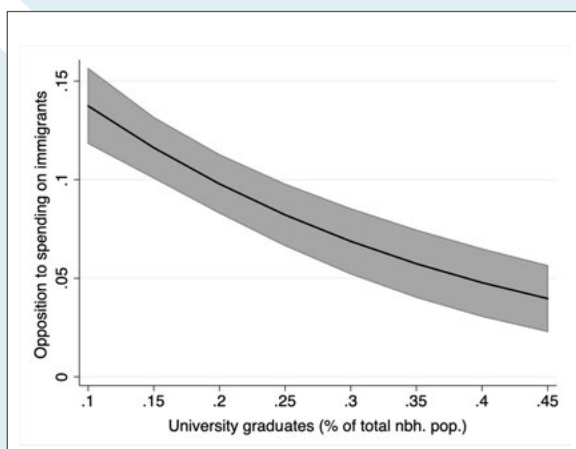
Note: Shaded area represents 95% confidence intervals for each estimate.

Figure 3: Opposition to spending on immigrants and neighborhood poverty



Note: Shaded area represents 95% confidence intervals for each estimate.

Figure 4: Opposition to spending on immigrants and neighborhood education



Note: Shaded area represents 95% confidence intervals for each estimate.

Looking at workplaces, we find that having immigrant colleagues does not affect support for government spending at a statistically significant level. However, the fact that we do not find the kind of negative relationship we see when looking at exposure to immigrant unemployment in neighborhoods is important in its own right. Previous research from other countries suggests that working with foreign-born colleagues can sometimes lead native majorities to oppose government spending on immigrants, because immigrants are seen as competitors for jobs and wages. However, since we do not find this negative effect of workplace sharing, lacking attachment to the labor market seems to be a bigger problem for native Swedes' solidarity with immigrants than potential competition for work. It also suggests that people's willingness to share is not only affected by factors like skin color, language, or religion, but also by reciprocity. If people from other countries work and contribute to the country's economy, members of the majority are likely more willing to share.

Policy recommendation

Our research provides additional support for the frequently voiced concern that lacking economic integration among immigrants can be detrimental to native majority citizens' solidarity with immigrants in need of government assistance. Previous studies have found a significant negative effect of ethnic diversity in Swedish municipalities on native majority support for the welfare state (though these findings are not undisputed, see e.g., Nekby and Pettersson-Lidbom, 2012). We find that the same holds when we model the association between the level of immigrant unemployment natives observe in their neighborhood and opposition to government spending on immigrants. At the same time, we find that sharing workplaces with immigrants does not have a statistically significant effect on native attitudes toward government spending on immigrants at all, providing no support for concerns about negative competition at the workplace.

In the light of our findings, we conclude that policies that work toward lowering barriers to labor market entry for

immigrants not only have the obvious potential to break the link between immigrant status and poverty, but also to enhance natives' solidarity with immigrants as well as maintaining public support for the Swedish welfare state.

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