

## Immigration and Populism

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Since 2016, the rise of populism has become a top political and economic issue in the US and Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily crowded out populism from the public debate; the major failure of populist leaders to address the epidemics even hinted at the possibility that the populist surge has peaked. However, the 2020 U.S. presidential election showed that populism is alive and well. Even though Donald Trump lost the election, he received almost half the vote – and obtained 70 million votes, more than any candidate in any previous U.S. presidential election.

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For many today's populists, immigration is the top issue on the policy agenda. Brexit supporters wanted to take back control over U.K.'s immigration policy from Brussels. Trump's 2016 campaign promised building a wall on the border with Mexico. Immigration is the priority issue for France's Marine Le Pen, Germany's AfD, and Hungary's Victor Orban. Populists refer to both economic and identity arguments related to immigration. Some populist politicians argue that immigrants take the natives' jobs; others suggest that

immigrants do not work and instead rely on generous welfare benefits. The culture/identity arguments state that immigrants do not share the host countries' values and/or refuse to follow their social norms.

Immigration is certainly not the only explanation for the recent rise of populism. In a recent survey of the research on the issue (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2020), we discuss several other factors. We show that globalization, automation, the shock of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis and subsequent austerity also mattered. We also argue that the spread of mobile broadband internet and social media have contributed to the rise of populism as well. Yet, a large number of studies do point to the importance of both economic and cultural aspects of immigration.

### Recent research on immigration and populism

The recent work on the impact of increasing immigration on the growing support for populism can be divided into three interrelated strands. First, there is an empirical literature on the relationship between the rise of immigration and populist vote. Second, there is a theoretical and descriptive literature on the impact of immigration on the choice of social identity and transformation of dimensions of political conflict. Third, there is an



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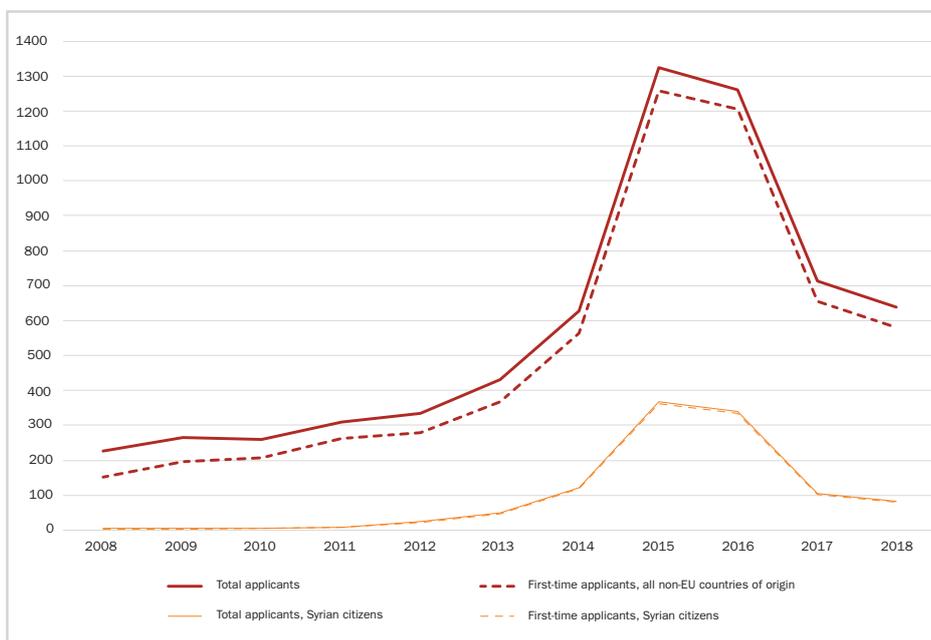
experimental literature on the impact of populist anti-immigrant narratives on beliefs and preferences – and the role of social media in spreading populist views.

The first body of work faces a major methodological challenge. Migrants rationally choose their destinations. There may be more immigration in locations with a more welcoming host population – leading thus to a negative correlation between immigration and support for populists. In order to measure the causal effects of immigration, researchers have adopted two main approaches. Some studies use quasi-random allocations of refugees across host locations. Others predict the arrival of new immigrants relying on previous settlement of immigrants from the same origin. In our survey, we discuss a large number of studies using both approaches and find that immigration does not necessarily need to fuel populism, in fact, the sign and size of its impact may vary depending on many factors. While a large influx of immigrants is likely to increase support for populists; a small one might lead to

the opposite result and *reduce* populist vote. Transit migration seems to fuel anti-migrant sentiment while settlement of (a relatively small number of) immigrants decreases populist vote. Skill composition of immigrants also matters – as the skilled and unskilled immigration has different implications for local labor markets and therefore different political effects.

Overall, the results on the sign and magnitude of the impact of immigration on populist vote are consistent with Allport’s “contact hypothesis”: the prejudice towards a minority group is less likely to emerge if both majority and minority groups have repeated interaction, share equal status, and work towards common goals.

The second strand of research literature shows how the salience of immigration issues changes the nature of political cleavages in the main receiving countries. The political conflict in these countries used to be a unidimensional one based on class: the left would support high taxes and redistribution; the right



**Figure 1:**  
**Asylum Applications in the EU-28 by Non-EU Citizens (thousands)**

Source: Eurostat, Guriev and Papaioannou (2020, Figure 14).

would be against redistribution and taxes. In recent decades, however, two other dimensions became at least as important: open (pro-globalization) vs. closed (protectionism and nationalism), and conservative (protecting traditional identity) vs. liberal (gender equality and minority rights). Starting with Moses Shayo, economists tried to understand the emergence and transformation of social – and therefore political – identities using sociological research on formation of social groups. This approach implies that the salience of an issue leads to forming social identities that take different positions on this issue. Recent theoretical and descriptive work has shown that the increased salience of globalization and immigration resulted in new political cleavages (open vs. closed and conservative vs. anti-discrimination), in polarization of political preferences and in the rise of populism.<sup>1</sup> Increase in polarization is not limited to that of preferences; there is also growing polarization of factual beliefs. As individuals choose a social group to be a member of, they also switch to media diet common for the members of this group. Therefore, different groups do not only disagree on their ideology – they also disagree on facts.

## Tools to beat populists on their own ground

The third literature tries to understand the role of populist rhetoric on anti-immigration attitudes and beliefs.

Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva recently conducted nationally representative surveys on the share, composition and economic circumstances of immigrants in Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, the U.K., and the U.S. They show that there are large misperceptions: the public overestimates the degree of immigration, the share of Muslims among immigrants, the immigrants' unemployment rate and the extent to which immigrants benefit from the welfare system. They run a randomized experiment that shows that treating the participants with true information on immigration causes changes in beliefs and behavior (political preferences and donations to charities). They also show that, in terms of correcting anti-immigrant stereotypes, a 90-second video on a “day in a life of an actual immigrant” is more effective than neutral factual information.

A similar experiment was conducted in France. It consists in providing participants with actual quotes from Marine Le Pen (the leader of the main far-right party in France) on immigration – and with fact-checking of those quotes. It shows Le Pen's misleading statements are highly persuasive – resulting in biased beliefs on immigration and in a stronger intention to vote for Le Pen. Fact checking improves factual knowledge of voters but it does not affect support for Le Pen. This is consistent with the results of Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva that fact-checking presenting numerical evidence is less effective than anecdotal stories with human touch.

<sup>1</sup> The recent decades have witnessed a major increase in cross-border trade – from 40 percent of global GDP in 1980s to 60 percent in 2008. An important contributor to this growth was China's entry to the WTO in 2001 that led to fast growth of Chinese imports in developed countries. Immigration has also grown substantially. While the world's average share of foreign-born population remains constant at around 3 percent, the share in advanced economies has increased by 5 percentage points in 1990-2015, – from 10 to 15 percent in North America, and from 6 to 11 percent in Europe. A particularly salient event was the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe (see Figure 1).

## Takeaways and policy implications

The recent research on the link between immigration and the rise of populism implies that this relationship is multifaceted and heterogeneous. Immigration does not always lead to an increase in support for populists. The main takeaway from this analysis is that Allport's "contact hypothesis" generally holds – if immigrants and refugees are settled and integrated, the attitudes toward them are more positive and anti-immigration parties are less likely to gain votes. On the contrary, exposure to transit migration usually does not generally result in cooperation with the native population hence reinforcing prejudice and increasing support for populists. The intensity of migrant flows also matters: large scale influxes are more likely to create an impression that the system is failing to manage immigration and integrate migrants and refugees – hence providing fertile soil for anti-establishment politicians.

These findings support the view that in order to reverse the rise of populism, mainstream politicians should invest in the integration of immigrants and refugees. It is also important to

reduce the likelihood of large migrant influxes. This has direct implications for the development agenda: the main receiving countries should assure peace and promote economic development in sending countries.

The other important takeaway from the research on populism is the key role of the public debate. In recent years, populists have outperformed the mainstream politicians in promoting their narratives (and their own versions of facts), especially on social media. It is crucial to stand up to populists in the public debate, in particular, online. Fact-checking the populists' claims is necessary but not sufficient. There is a need for innovative approaches to political communication and engagement, for example, deliberative democracy. In order to address cultural and redistribution issues, some societies have successfully used citizens' assemblies and social conventions. In the case of immigration policy, these are unlikely to arrive at consensual solutions; however, they may at least elucidate the trade-offs and prevent a further polarization of beliefs.

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