

The Political Consequences of Nativism: the impact of nativist sentiment on party support

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Abstract

Objective: Scholars have noted the increase in nativist sentiment in political debates in both the United States and across Europe. However, how these changes have affected voting behavior and political party support is less clear. In this paper, we ask how relevant nativist attitudes are when making voting decisions across party systems in the US and Europe. Are these sentiments pushing out other drivers of vote choice, and if so, what are the ramifications for democratic governance?

Method: We present hypotheses about the impact of nativist sentiments that follow logically from the theories on spatial models of politics and political economy models of politics. We use a series of multinomial logit models on survey data from Great Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United States to estimate the impact of nativist sentiments on support for political parties in 2016.

Results: We find support for all three of our hypotheses. Not surprisingly, there is a strong positive relationship between nativist sentiments and support for nativist parties. There is some variation, however, in terms of whether this increase in support nativist parties comes at the expense of ideologically-adjacent parties (as expected from spatial models of politics) or from parties of the left (as expected from political economy models of politics).

Conclusions: Nativist sentiments were major drivers support for political parties in 2016. Although more nativist sentiments drive voters in all cases examined towards nativist political parties, there is substantial variation across nations in terms of which parties lose support. The latter findings should be the focus of future studies.

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Introduction

Voting behavior remains a key part of democratic governance. With voters choosing the political parties that will decide and implement a governing vision, understanding what influences voters' decisions continues to be at the forefront of research on representation and governance. The rise of nationalist and nativist sentiment across the United States and Europe calls for an examination of how these attitudes may influence voters and their electoral decisions. How do calls for emphasizing the nation and its citizens affect voters' party choices during elections?

While political scientists have been interested in explaining the rise of nativist sentiment, there has been little research on whether these attitudes shape voters' partisan choices. Some research has focused on investigating the increase in voting for far right parties with links to anti-immigrant and nationalist attitudes ([Kitschelt and McGann 1997](#); [Mudde 2007](#); [Norris 2005](#)), while other work has started to question the emphasis on just the right side of the ideological spectrum at the expense of acknowledging broader pressures ([Alonso and Fonseca 2012](#); [Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008](#); [Thränhardt 1995](#)). Here, we build on this line of research, for we are interested in moving beyond just the far right-wing ideological segment of the party spectrum to investigating how these nativist sentiments have altered vote choices and by extension political party support across the ideological options.

With so much media and academic attention on people's opinions on immigration and immigrants, the assumption is that more people are either holding nativist attitudes and/or that parties or individual politicians are activating these interests in the political arena. While we do not focus on the mechanisms of activation of nationalist sentiment in this paper, we are interested in a possible outcome of this politicization: How does nativism affect voting behavior? If people's attitudes towards immigrants are changing, then what kind of voting patterns would we expect to find? Considering parties broadly within the governing system,

we ask, which political parties benefit or are hurt by this increased interest in national pride and citizenship?

These questions highlight how voting relationships may signal a larger pattern that goes beyond one or two countries. Originally, research on the activation of anti-immigration attitudes focused on countries with populist or far right parties with the assumption that these parties would push nativist opinions into political behavior at the polling booths. More recently, scholars have broadened the scope to include mainstream parties, showing how these sentiments can alter their behavior in reaction to the parties pushing the nationalist message (Alonso and Fonseca 2012; Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Odmalm and Bale 2015). Broadening the scope to include the full ideological spectrum of parties and discussing the cross-national patterns and shifts in nativist sentiment offer ways to achieve a more comprehensive perspective on the politics of nativism. Beginning these tasks, in this paper, we are interested in exploring how nativist sentiment influences voting behavior and by extension, party support. In order to link nativist sentiment and party support, we use individual level survey data from 2016 in France, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, and the United States. After showing the results for the influence of nativism from models of party support, we discuss how this may relate to anti-immigrant attitudes over time, highlighting the variation across countries. Ultimately, we conclude that, although nativist sentiments drive voters uniformly towards parties with nativist identities, there is substantial variation across countries in terms of which parties lose support.

Nativism and Political Party Support

When considering the politics that surrounds nativist sentiment, there is much attention on far-right and anti-system parties. With their anti-immigrant and/or anti-establishment messages, these parties appear to attract a range of supporters. A key aspect of this work has been to explain the rise of these parties, and to this end, researchers have linked the

parties' messages and policy agendas to the attitudes of their supporters, seeking to explain the varying support for these parties across countries and time (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer and Carter 2006).

One theme commonly found in research on the electoral fortunes of far right parties continues to be that they attract supporters with anti-immigrant opinions (Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie 2000; Cutts, Ford and Goodwin 2011).¹ Since these extreme right parties tout a variety of anti-immigrant and populist messages, scholars have been interested in connecting these messages with their supporters' attitudes. Arzheimer (2009), for example, links the salience of issues in far right parties' manifestos with their electoral supporters and concludes that this support is based on shared social and attitudinal factors that go beyond mere protest voting. In this respect, the attraction of these parties parallels that of mainstream parties—a matching of supporters' preferences with parties' campaign visions. While this paper does not delve into explaining anti-immigrant attitudes (SEE OUR PAPER IN THIS ISSUE?), researchers have explored this “chicken and egg” quandry—do far right parties arise because of the salient matching sentiment or do they cause it to become salient? Regardless of the direction, research has consistently shown a relationship between voters' preferences and their choice of specific parties.

Another angle when explaining the rise of far right parties and their support has been a sense of national identity. Mudde (2007) talks of populist right wing parties as being “nativist” in the sense that they argue for retaining the superiority of the native state. More recent research has investigated how nationalist stances relate to voting preferences for these parties, as well as noting that national pride and other nativist sentiments are related to supporting the far right (Lubbers and Coenders 2017). Nativist opinions and anti-immigrant attitudes may be related to a similar “us versus them” mentality, thereby, reinforcing the

¹Although the effect varies depending on the generosity of welfare policies, Arzheimer (2009) finds that rising immigration can increase the likelihood of voting for a far right party.

choice of a far right party.² Regardless of the causes of nativism, there is a clear expectation that individuals with more nativist sentiments will tend to support political parties with nativist platforms:

Hypothesis 1: Nativist sentiments will be positively related to support for political parties with nativist platforms.

Moving beyond explaining the shifting fortunes of far right parties has led researchers to investigate how their messages affected other political parties in the electoral system—with a focus on mainstream right and left parties (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008; Odmalm and Bale 2015). If the nativist or anti-immigrant stances of those parties were viable electoral visions, then how do these appeals to voters affect the electoral strategies of traditional parties? For example, Alonso and Fonseca (2012) argue that when far right and populist parties use immigration as a campaign tool, the issue also becomes salient for mainstream left wing parties. In fact, they find that even without extreme far right parties, immigration becomes an issue for both the mainstream right and left wing parties, highlighting how anti-immigration is not just a far right party position.³ Meguid (2005) finds that when far right niche parties politicize immigration, mainstream parties from both sides will alter their policy stances in response.⁴ Given the assumption that nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment has increased in importance across countries, the shift in this research to including the fortunes of mainstream parties broadens the focus beyond niche parties.

While the literature on political party support for far right parties has emphasized the influence of anti-immigrant and nativist sentiment on their rise, the question remains how

²The literature on voting for far right parties overlaps with psychology when discussing how personality traits relate to voting patterns. For example, Bakker, Rooduijn and Schumacher (2016) argue that low scores on agreeableness are related to voting for populist parties. Spierings and Zaslove (2017) and Hartevelde et al. (2017) both highlight how men are more likely to support far right parties, because of socialization or personality traits, respectively.

³Abou-Chadi (2016) shows a similar relationship, although he places his argument within a niche party story.

⁴Akkerman (2015, 63) suggests caution when assuming that the far right immigration stance has pushed the policy agendas of mainstream parties: “It is possible that the electoral success of the radical right is a symptom rather than a cause.”

these opinions are affecting vote choice across the various parties ([Arzheimer 2018](#)). Although scholars may think of these parties as “owning” the anti-immigrant issue, the inclusion of the topic in the political debate may influence voting for mainstream parties, as well ([Van der Brug 2004](#); [Bélanger and Meguid 2008](#)). Therefore, an increase in nativist sentiment may be relevant across the party spectrum, not just to supporters for far or extreme right parties.

Extant political science theories offer two somewhat competing sets of expectations about the impact of nativist sentiments on voting behavior. On the one hand, there is the body of work beginning with [Downs \(1957\)](#) that has argued that the spatial positioning of parties is the major driving force in terms of which parties compete for the support of any one voter. This theoretical argument has been supported by a large number of works following in this Downsian tradition (e.g. [Adams 2001](#), [Adams, Merrill III and Grofman 2005](#)) that have focused on how the ideological maneuverings of competing political parties result in shifts in the cutpoints between ideologically neighboring parties. Because political parties very seldom leapfrog each other ([Budge 1994](#)), meaning that they switch positions on an ideological scale, this indicates that any increases in support for nativist political parties are likely to come at the expense of the political parties in their immediate ideological neighborhood. Thus, this results in our second hypothesis that depends on ideological proximity:

Hypothesis 2: Nativist sentiments will be negatively related to support for political parties that are next to nativist parties on their nation’s left-right scale.

On the other hand, because so much of nativist appeal is focused on the political-economy consequences of immigration, and in particular, on the effects that it has on competition for jobs, there has been a substantial literature arguing that nativism will resonate more strongly with working class voters. This, then, would pose a threat to the support for traditional left-wing political parties ([Oesch 2008](#); [Mayda 2006](#); [Scheve and Slaughter 2001](#); [Lubbers and Scheepers 2001](#); [Betz 1994, 1993](#)). This leads us to our final hypothesis that relies on supporters’ labor market positions:

Hypothesis 3: Nativist sentiments will be negatively related to support for political parties on the left side of their nation’s left-right scale.

It is worth noting that Hypotheses 2 and 3 are not exactly rival hypotheses, since it is possible to find support for both of them.

In this paper, we study electoral party support in order to investigate the link between nativist attitudes and voting for parties across the ideological spectrum. Our interest lies in uncovering how anti-immigrant opinions relate to party support for mainstream and extremist parties, highlighting the cross-national variation in support for far right parties, as well as the country differences in nativist sentiment.

Results: Nativism and party support

In order to advance our knowledge of how nativism has affected voting behavior across countries, we estimated a set of models of individual-level party support specified as:

$$\text{Party Support} = f(\text{Nativist Sentiment} + \text{Ideology} + \text{Economic Evaluations} + \text{Demographics})$$

for France, Germany, Great Britain, Sweden, and the United States using data from the 2016 Ipsos Global Trends Survey.⁵ For our dependent variable, we used responses to a standard question that asked respondents for whom they would vote if there were an election in their country. We included in our models all political parties for which at least ten respondents reported they would vote. For our main independent variable of interest, we used factor scores from individuals’ responses to a battery of four questions designed to measure nativist

⁵These online surveys were conducted from December 28th, 2015 through April 16th, 2016 via the Ipsos Online Panel System.

sentiments.⁶ We also included measures of each individual’s self placement on an 11 point left-right ideology scale, every one’s evaluation of the state of the nation’s economy, as well as measures of individuals’ gender, income, education, and age. We estimated these party support models using multinomial logit models for each country except for the United States for which we estimated a binomial logit model, because there were only two political parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, that had 10 or more respondents indicating that they would support them.⁷

In order to compare the influence of nativist sentiment on support for political parties both within and across countries, we follow a strategy proposed by [Duch and Stevenson \(2005\)](#). After estimating each national model of party support separately, we calculate the predicted probability of each individual in each nation voting for each party if her factor score from responses to the nativism battery were the least nativist (0) and the most nativist (1). For these calculations, we held all independent variables other than “Nativist Sentiment” constant at their observed values.⁸ We then calculated the marginal effects of this shift from least-nativist to most-nativist sentiment on each individual’s probability of voting for each political party, and [Figure 1](#) displays these estimated marginal effects with 95 percent confidence intervals.

Within each country panel in [Figure 1](#), we arrange the marginal effects from left to right using left-right scores for each political party from the latest ratings of the Manifestos Project ([Volkens et al. 2018](#)). From the first panel in [Figure 1](#), we can see that in France, an increase in nativist sentiment leads to a massive increase in the predicted probability of an individual voting for the Front National (labeled as “FN” in our figures and from here on). This leads to a decreased predicted probability for all of the other parties included in our model with the largest decreases predicted for the Republicans, the one party to the right of the

⁶More details on this battery can be found in Appendix A.

⁷The full results from these models are presented in Appendix B.

⁸[Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan \(2013\)](#) make a convincing case for using observed values rather than average values or other scenario-based values for inferences from models of limited dependent variables.

FN.⁹ Moving to the second panel, in Germany, an increase in nativist sentiment leads to an increase in support for the far right Alternative für Deutschland (Afd). Similar to the results for France, we find that this increase in support for the AfD leads to a loss for the party closest to them on the right side of the ideological spectrum, the center-right Christian democratic alliance (CDU/CSU). Interestingly, statistically significant predicted losses on the left side of the ideological spectrum in Germany only occur for the Greens; the predicted probability changes for the liberal-centrist FDP, the Social Democrats (SPD), and the far left Linke are all statistically indistinguishable from zero. In the third panel, we observe that in Great Britain an increase in nativist sentiment is associated with an increased predicted probability of voting for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The result for the other major party of the right in Great Britain, the Conservatives, is positive, although it is just shy of what would conventionally be accepted as “statistically significant.”¹⁰ The gains on the right side of the British ideological spectrum come almost uniformly at the expense of parties on the left and center, with only the predicted probability of supporting the Scottish National Party (“SNP”) remaining unchanged. The results for Sweden in the fourth panel show that an increase in nativist sentiment leads to a very large and statistically significant increase in the predicted probability of support for the Sverigedemokraterna (“Sweden Democrats”). The only party with a significantly decreased probability of support from this nativist shock in Sweden is the Västernpartiet (Left). Finally, the remaining panel of Figure 1, showing results for the US indicates that an increase in nativist sentiment leads to a large increase in the predicted probability of supporting the Republicans and a large decrease in the predicted probability of supporting the Democrats.

⁹It is worth noting that at the time of the 2016 Ipsos Global Trends survey, the new political party founded by now President Emmanuel Macron, La République En Marche, had not yet been formed. It will be quite interesting to see the results of a party support model when it is included.

¹⁰As we mentioned above, the estimated marginal effects presented in Figure 1 are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals. This is consistent with a two-tailed expectation, and the usual 5 percent alpha value. If we used 90 percent confidence intervals, appropriate with a directional expectation and an alpha of 5 percent, the resulting marginal effect for the Conservative party would be statistically significant at conventionally accepted levels.

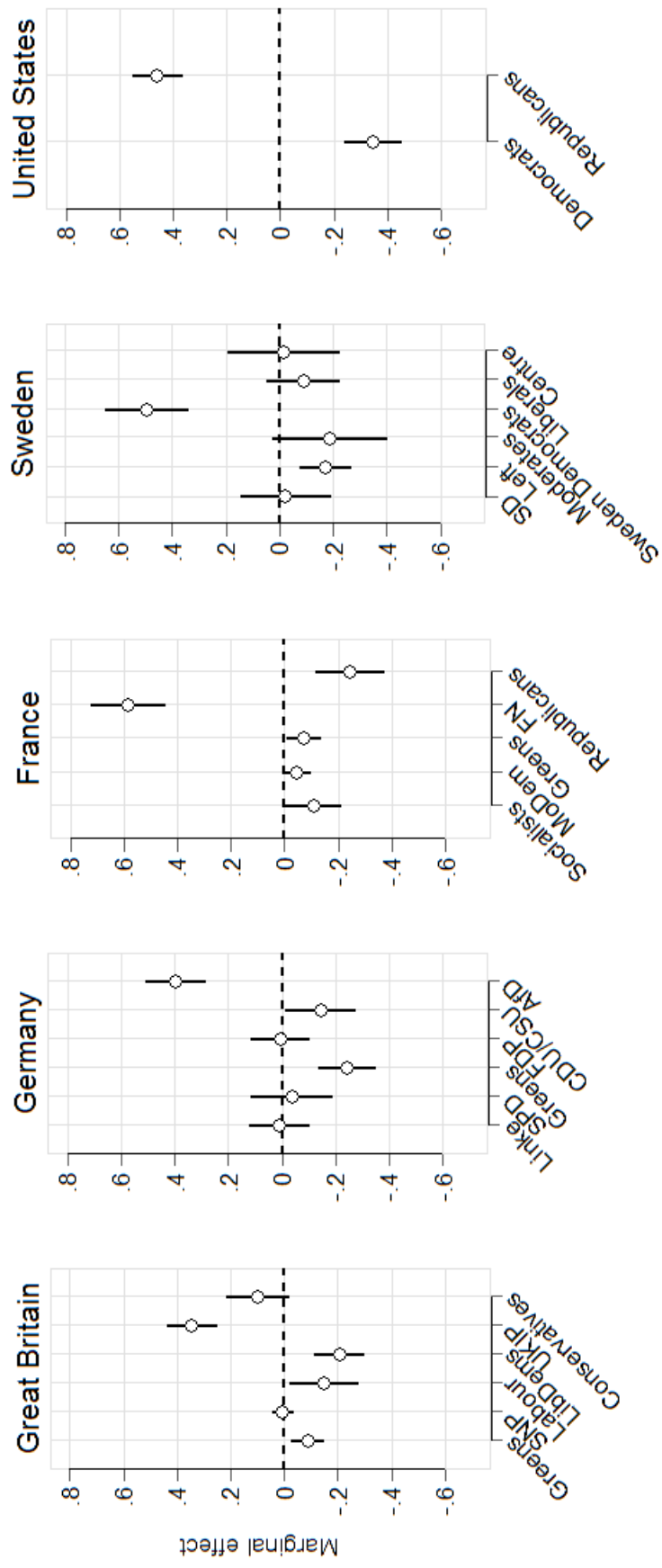


Figure 1: Marginal Effects of Nativism

Together, the results in Figure 1 provide unambiguously strong support for Hypothesis 1: individuals expressing more nativist sentiments are significantly more likely to support political parties that make strong nativist appeals. In terms of Hypothesis 2, we also find fairly strong supportive results. In Great Britain, we see that as expected from Hypothesis 2, the Liberal Democrats lose support, but the result for the other party adjacent to the nativist UKIP, the Conservatives, is positively related to more nativist sentiments. In Germany, we also see a significant decrease in support for the AfD's one ideological neighbor, the CDU/CSU, and France provides substantial support for Hypothesis 2 with significant losses for the two parties, the Greens and the Republicans, that are adjacent to the FN. In Sweden, we see results in the direction predicted by Hypothesis 2, losses for the Moderates and the Liberals, but these effects are not statistically significant by conventional standards. The results from the US do support Hypothesis 2; however, this is pretty unremarkable, given there are only two political parties competing for support. Results for Hypothesis 3 are supportive but a bit more ambiguous. Moving from left to right in Figure 1, we see the expected significant negative effects for three of the four parties on the left in Great Britain, for one of the three in Germany, for all three in France, for one of the three in Sweden, and for the one party in the United States.

In order to better compare these results across countries, in Figure 2, we group them by three party types: parties of the mainstream left, the mainstream right, and parties for whom nativist views were a major part of their identity in 2016.¹¹ Within each party

¹¹The classification of mainstream left and right parties is pretty straightforward in almost all of these countries. In Sweden, there is no single party of the right that could easily be called the mainstream right party. Indeed, the fractionalization of the vote on the right side of the ideological spectrum in Sweden, compared to the relative dominance by the Social Democrats on the left, has been a major contributing factor to the success of the Social Democrats. We chose the Moderates for the label of mainstream right in Sweden because, among the coalition of four parties from the right known as “the Alliance,” it had the largest support at the time of our survey. The classification of nativist parties is very straightforward in France, Germany, and Sweden—being an anti-immigration party is at the core of the identity for the Front National, the AfD, and the Sweden Democrats. In Great Britain, one could argue that UKIP's *raison d'être* is opposition to their nation's membership in the European Union; however, a large part of this opposition is focused on the free movement of people from other member states into Great Britain. Although it is certainly the mainstream party of the right in the United States, the Republicans in 2016 with Donald Trump as their Presidential candidate also had a strong nativist component.

group, we see a range of estimated marginal effects. Starting with the first panel, we observe that all mainstream parties of the left lose support as individuals become more nativist, and these marginal effects are statistically significant at conventionally-accepted levels in France, Great Britain, and the United States. The second panel in Figure 2 reveals that the range of estimated marginal effects is greatest across parties of the mainstream right, with some parties losing significant amounts of support and others experiencing gains. Although a systematic accounting of the messages of individual political parties is beyond the scope of the present paper, it is worth noting that the two mainstream right parties predicted to gain votes from nativism, the Conservatives in Great Britain and the Republicans in the United States, each had substantial anti-immigrant components to their political messages in 2016. Turning to the third panel in Figure 2, we find that, as expected, nativist parties are the biggest beneficiaries of an increase in nativist sentiment. Across all five nations, these changes in predicted probabilities are statistically and substantively significant.

Discussion

As discussed in the previous section, we clearly found evidence that in 2016 nativist sentiments were powerfully associated with party support in 2016 for the five countries for which we estimated models. These links between parties and opinions could occur for various reasons.¹² For instance, has there been an increase in nativist sentiment or have these attitudes become more salient for voters? If opinions have changed so that more individuals hold more nativist viewpoints, then researchers would expect to see a corresponding rise in voting for parties sharing those attitudes. Alternatively, if the level of nativist sentiment in the population has remained steady, the increased attention to those attitudes could be related to voters' party choices. This rise in salience would affect party support, given that

¹²Given the overlap between populism and nativist sentiments, see [González and Young \(2017\)](#) for a discussion of the rise of populism.

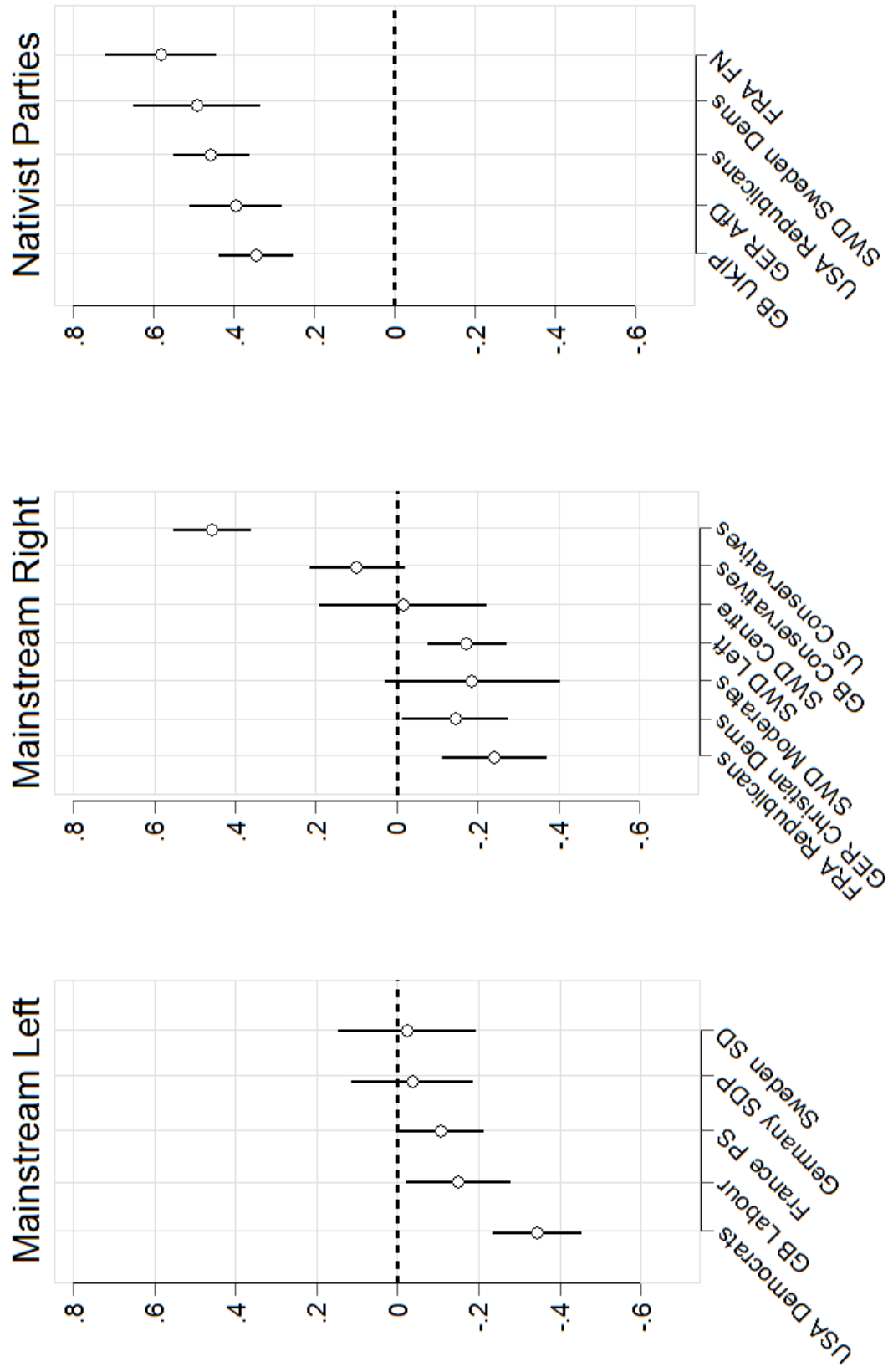


Figure 2: Marginal Effects

anti-immigrant stances could push and pull voters to various parties, depending on their attitudes toward the topic and the importance of the issue for them.

Using data for five countries and three decades, we investigate nativist sentiment over the time period from the 1990s to 2016. These data come from 3 waves of the World Values Survey and the 2016 Ipsos Global Trends Survey. In both sets of surveys, respondents were asked whether they agreed, disagreed, or neither agreed nor disagreed with the following statement: “When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to people of this country over immigrants.” Figure 3 shows the country averages for this nativist scale, illustrating that the mass public’s attitudes on immigrants and nationalism can vary both between countries and over time. For example, Germany, the U.K., and the U.S. all have on average nativism scores that show their publics tilt more favorably toward nativist opinion, and over time, these have not shifted by much. Alternatively, Swedes have the most negative stance on nativism, but they have witnessed a significant change recently that shifts them in the direction of agreeing with more anti-immigrant opinion. The French public has the largest shift—from neither agreeing nor disagreeing with nativist stances in the 2000s to significantly holding positive views on nativism in 2016. Given the discourse in many countries that emphasizes a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, it is interesting to note here that Figure 3 shows that in a majority of countries the level of opinion is not significantly different from previous decades. In 2016, for all countries but Sweden, we find that on average, publics agree with nativist opinions. But the story surrounding political parties, immigrant policies, and voters, may be one about party competition and electoral strategy rather than changes in nativist sentiment.

This knowledge that nativist sentiment has been somewhat stable in a number of these countries, while the media discourse has highlighted the rise of anti-immigrant attitudes and policies, points to the possibility of a story about issue salience and voting. With scholars noting how mainstream parties also have turned to anti-immigrant stances and policies in strategic ways ([Alonso and Fonseca 2012](#); [Odmalm and Bale 2015](#)), the issue may be more

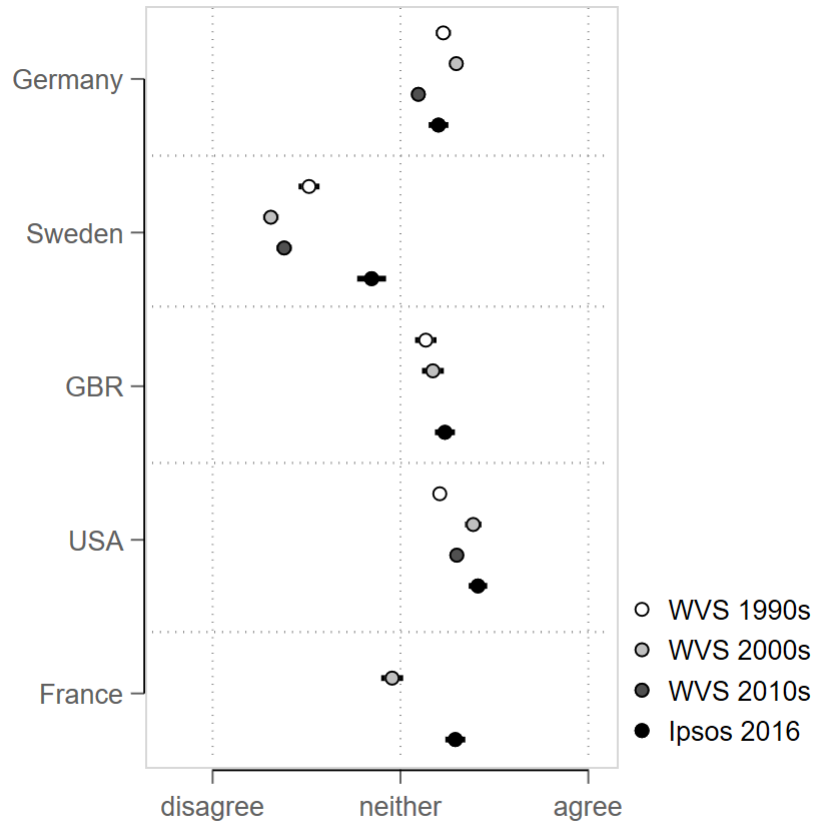


Figure 3: Nativism in 5 countries

about how parties activate the level of nativist sentiment during elections rather than how a rise in anti-immigration attitudes alters party support. While the attention has been on far or extremist right parties using nativist appeals to attract dissatisfied voters, Figure 3 indicates that the story of recent elections may be about parties (either mainstream or extremist) altering the salience of already existing anti-immigrant attitudes.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have found a collection of interesting findings about the relationship between nativist sentiments and voting behavior in five established democratic nations. Despite the substantial media coverage of nativist sentiments in 2016, we have observed that these sentiments have not substantially changed over the limited time period that we have. Instead, we see evidence that suggests parties may be activating these opinions in order to benefit their electoral outcomes.

Without data on nativism, elections, and voters over time, we are unable to point to a causal story of parties and voters; however, our results highlight an interesting relationship across countries that offers insights into how anti-immigrant and nativist tendencies play in the electoral arena. While far right (and at times mainstream right wing) parties benefit the most from nativist sentiment, we now see how these same attitudes tend to move voters away from their neighboring right parties. This is consistent with expectations from spatial models of politics. There are also some cases where nativist sentiments move support away from parties on the left, consistent with expectations political economy models. Building on these insights into how nativism can shift voters in the party system, the next step will be to look over time in order to understand how these relationships evolve over time.

Appendix A–Nativism measure

For our nativism measure, we used respondents’ reactions to the following four statements:

1. Immigrants take jobs away from real Americans¹³
2. Immigrants take important social services away from real Americans
3. When jobs are scarce, employers should prioritize hiring people of this country over immigrants
4. America would be stronger if we stopped immigration

Responses are as follows (numeric values in parentheses): “strongly disagree” , “disagree” (2), “neither agree nor disagree” (3), “somewhat agree” (4), “strongly agree” (5). The values for responses to these four items were then combined using principle components factor analysis. The four items load onto a single factor (Eigenvalue = 3.08; n=4,513), with loadings for the respective items all exceeding the traditional 0.70 cutoff.

Appendix B–tables of model results

TO BE ADDED

¹³Appropriate nation-specific identifiers were substituted for the terms in italics.

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