WILEY

The hidden majority/minority consensus: Minorities show similar preference patterns of immigrant support as the majority population

Sabrina J. Mayer[1,2] ⊕ | Christoph G. Nguyen[3] | Jörg Dollmann[1,4] ⊕ |
Susanne Veit[1] ⊕

[1]Cluster Data-Methods-Monitoring, DeZIM-Institute, Berlin, Germany

[2]Department for Political Science, University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany

[3]Otto-Suhr Institut, FU Berlin, Berlin, Germany

[4]Mannheim Centre for European Social Research MZES, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany

Correspondence
Sabrina J. Mayer.
Email: Sabrina.mayer@uni-bamberg.de

Abstract

The acceptance of new arrivals has become an important topic regarding the social cohesion of the receiving countries. However, previous studies focused only on the native population's drivers of attitudes towards immigrants, disregarding that immigrant-origin inhabitants now form a considerable part of the population. To test whether the drivers for the willingness to support immigrants are the same for natives and immigrants and their descendants, we rely on a vignette study conducted in a representative German online panel (*N* = 3149) which contains an overrepresentation of immigrant-origin respondents. We presented participants with three vignettes of potential immigrants, varying, amongst other factors, economic prospects, safe and war-ridden countries of origin (to capture deservingness), as well as religious identity. While we find that minority members are generally slightly more welcoming towards immigrants than majority members, at their core are the same factors that drive attitudes to immigrants in both groups: economic cost, cultural similarity, and deservingness. However, we observe differences at the margins: Immigrant-origin respondents take into account economic prospects to a lesser degree than majority members do, and

by trend, they are less likely to distinguish between immigrants from war-ridden and safe countries of origin. Furthermore, we can show that the preference for immigrants with the same religious identities not only occurs among majority members but also among minority members.

KEYWORDS
Germany, immigrants, minorities, support, vignette study

1 | INTRODUCTION

While refugees fleeing Ukraine and Syria have rekindled attention on large-scale migration flows, understanding the drivers of immigrant support has been an important social and academic question more generally. Previous studies have focused on universal patterns of preferences, both within (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014) or across countries (Bansak et al., 2016; Cowling et al., 2019). These studies converged on major factors such as an individual's religion, immigrants' ability to contribute economically, as well as the supposed deservingness of immigrants fleeing from war or persecution (Bansak et al., 2016; Czymara & Schmidt-Catran, 2017; Hager & Veit, 2019; Lazarev & Sharma, 2017). However, few existing studies have adequately considered the increasing diversity of European societies. Our paper addresses this important puzzle and asks, based on previous studies on drivers across societal and political groups (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014), whether there is also a hidden consensus on the drivers of immigrant support among majority and minority members by relying on an experimental study with a random sample of natives and immigrants with sufficient numbers that allow for generalization to the whole population.

The causes of support for immigrants among the majority are relatively well established. Culture matters, as people generally prefer immigrants who are more similar to themselves (Hamidou-Schmidt & Mayer, 2021; Koopmans et al., 2019). This is often linked to religious identity, as Muslim immigrants to Western Europe face a systematic bias compared to non-Muslims (Bansak et al., 2016; Böhm et al., 2018; Hedegaard & Larsen, 2022; Liebe et al., 2018). Economic prospects similarly matter: Supposed economic burdens and fears of a lack of economic integration negatively affect support, whereas labour-market competition fears have only a negligible effect on support (Bansak et al., 2016). Finally, deservingness is a universal and powerful determinant for supporting immigrants. Immigrants who are considered not to be responsible for their own misfortune—that is, those fleeing war or persecution—are more likely to be accepted than those fleeing economic hardship (Bansak et al., 2016; Czymara & Schmidt-Catran, 2017; Hager & Veit, 2019).

The existing studies mentioned above rarely theorise majority and minority differences, and they have not been able to recruit sufficient numbers of minority respondents to provide an adequately powered test of between-group differences.[1] We thus do not know yet whether the same dynamics drive ethnic minorities' support for immigrants, which would also help clarify existing dynamics. For instance, the anti-Muslim bias captured in many previous studies could also be driven by a general preference for a shared religious identity whose comprehensive scope could not be detected in majority Christian countries. Even though there are many theoretical approaches to interethnic relations and intergroup attitudes, there is no single theory that dominates the field. We thus draw on different explanations. In general, we propose that immigrants are more likely to feel a group-based empathy towards other immigrants. This is because disadvantaged individuals are often faced with discriminatory experiences in the socialisation process, which better enables them to relate to other minorities and to imagine themselves in the others' position (Adida et al., 2018; Sirin et al., 2017).

Since previous studies have already shown that the assumed economic burden, rather than direct labour-market competition, drives the rejection of immigrants (Bansak et al., 2016; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014), we first theorise

that all respondents prefer to support immigrants who can integrate easily economically (H1a). However, according to Sirin et al. (2017) it is plausible that this preference is weaker among minority respondents due to the higher group-based empathy towards other immigrants (H1b) (but see Strijbis & Polavieja, 2018). Second, following previous studies that highlight the importance of ascribed deservingness (Bansak et al., 2016; Hager & Veit, 2019), we expect robust country-of-origin effects which show that immigrants from war-ridden countries are more likely to be welcomed (H2a). As with economic prospects, this effect may also be weaker for minority respondents due to a more generally empathetic evaluation of immigrants and the hardships they face (H2b).

However, other studies also provide evidence that immigrants tend to construct their identity by drawing boundaries between themselves and other immigrant groups, often based on social status, migration time point (established vs. newcomers), or based on religious identity (Hamidou-Schmidt & Mayer, 2021; Strijbis & Polavieja, 2018). We thus argue that religion is an identity used to draw powerful distinctions (Lazarev & Sharma, 2017), and we expect that all respondents prefer to support immigrants with a shared religious identity (H3a). This preference should not differ between majority and minority respondents (H3b).

2 | DATA AND METHODS

We tested our hypotheses in a survey experiment as part of the German DeZIM.panel's third wave, a register-based online probability panel survey with an overrepresentation of specific immigrant groups which was fielded between March 31 and May 15, 2022. The design-weighted data is representative for the German population aged 18–67 with and without an immigrant background (Dollmann et al., 2022). All members of the panel were invited to participate and 3388 finished the survey (response rate: 61.3%). Our groups of interest consisted of the majority members (N = 2080) and minority members (N = 1079) which themselves—or at least one parent—were born abroad. Due to the sample selection, the 10 largest groups in the data are, besides the majority population, respondents originating from Turkey, Poland, Syria, Russia, Italy, countries from former Yugoslavia, Czech Republic, Iran, Iraq, Ukraine and Greece, although all immigrant groups—by design—had a probability above zero to be included in the initial sample. The majority and minority population in our analytical sample differs only marginally when comparing them on different sociodemographic characteristics like gender, education, and employment (see Online Appendix, part B, Table 1, see Table 5 for a more detailed break down).[2]

To assess the perceived acceptance of immigrants to Germany, depending on the country they were fleeing from, we employed a 4 x 3 x 2 x 2 x 2 factorial design including the most important drivers from the literature. Each respondent received three vignettes that randomly varied hypothetical immigrants' religious identities (Christian, Muslim, atheist), economic prospects (low, high), and, as a proxy for deservingness, the country of origin, with Ukraine and Syria being more deserving than Serbia and Egypt.[3] To gain some control about the potentially confounding impact of countries' geographic and cultural distance, we varied the distance within both groups of countries; with Syria and Egypt being geographically and culturally more distant countries than Ukraine and Serbia. We also varied known confounders such as gender and number of children (two accompanying minor children, none).

For each vignette, we measured on a 7-point rating scale whether survey participants would support each person in the vignettes for permanent residency. Shared religious identity was coded as 1 when the religion of the respondent (Muslim, Christian or atheist) matched the religious characteristic of the vignette. For our analysis, we conducted robust OLS regressions with respondent clustered standard errors and design weights to correct for oversampling. Full item descriptions and notes on the study design are reported in the Online Appendix, part A, C and D. The full analysis code and an anonymised replication dataset can be found on OSF.[4]

3 | RESULTS

Figure 1 summarises our main results for the mechanisms driving immigrant support among the majority and ethnic minorities. Specifically, we show the main effects of our treatment variables, separated for the majority and minority
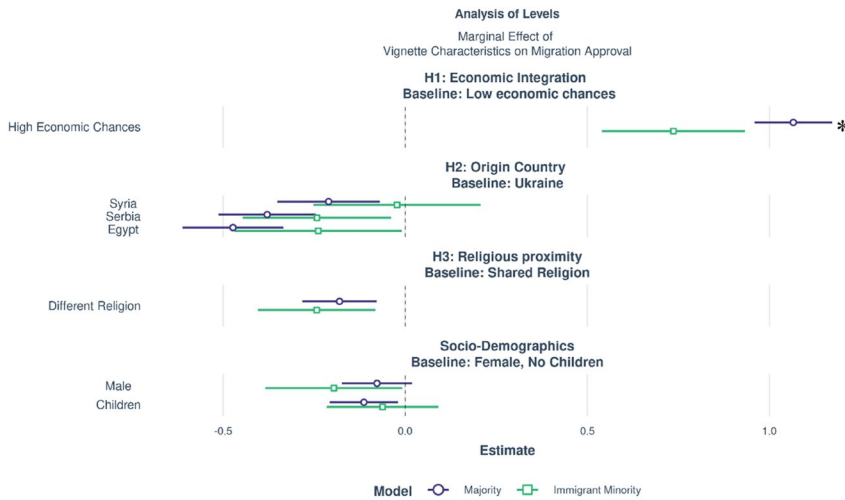
FIGURE 1 Marginal effects of vignette characteristics on immigrant approval by respondent majority/immigrant minority status. Results of robust linear model with respondent clustered standard errors, weighted by design weights. Stars indicate significant ($p < 0.05$) difference between groups. Full regression results and a more detailed figure can be found in the Online Appendix, part E. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

population. The main effects are largely consistent with existing studies: Respondents prefer to support immigrants who have good prospects of economic integration (H1a), come from countries currently affected by war (H2a), and who share their own religious identity (H3a).

Moreover, we also analysed between-group differences. We find only one significant group difference. While both groups prefer an immigrant with good prospects of economic integration, the relative effect is significantly less pronounced for minority respondents, thus supporting hypothesis 1b. Second, contrary to our expectation for hypothesis H2b, we find no significant differences between majority and minority respondents concerning country of origin and associated deservingness, although the main effects are different and the slight penalty that a potential Syrian refugee has vis-à-vis a Ukrainian refugee is not present for minority respondents. Last, as expected, we find no evidence that religious homophily is unique to the majority population. Rather than a specific anti-Muslim bias, we find that respondents across groups significantly prefer immigrants who share their religious identity, thus supporting hypothesis H3a.[5]

4 | DISCUSSION

As European societies become more diverse and more influenced by immigration, the question of how an individual's own immigrant background influences their evaluation of future immigrants becomes ever more pressing. Our study reveals that the German majority and those of immigrant-origin hardly differ in the weight they attach to religious similarity and deservingness. However, we do find some evidence that immigrant minorities in Germany attach less weight to the economic prospects of new immigrants. Nevertheless, our survey time point could affect the results as the heightened salience of the war situation in Ukraine could lead to extremely high levels of perceived deservingness, resulting in exaggerated statements of solidarity. Unfortunately, we did not measure ascribed deservingness, so future studies will need to show the robustness of our findings. In addition, our results on deservingness might not translate into everyday life experiences, as people might not distinguish between reasons for (forced) migration when treating people of colour.

Our findings have important implications. Most importantly, by taking advantage of our heterogeneous study sample, we show that the anti-Muslim bias reported in previous studies (e.g., Bansak et al., 2016) might actually reflect

a more general religious intergroup bias, where majorities and minorities alike express a tendency to support immigrants who share the same religious identity. However, whether this phenomenon is a universal one or limited to certain national contexts needs to be addressed in future research. Second, our findings suggest that the economic considerations of the costs and benefits of the integration of new immigrants are the decisive factors in attitude formation towards new immigrants. This holds true for residents who belong to the so-called majority as well as for immigrant-origin residents. At the same time, attitudes of immigrant-origin residents are significantly less strongly influenced by economic considerations. These findings are in line with previous studies on the more (unconditionally) empathetic nature of minorities towards other minorities (Sirin et al., 2017), but may as well be influenced by the on average lower economic status of minorities and the associated higher risk for direct labour market competition. Third, our results demonstrate that deservingness is a rather uniform force whose effects on attitudes do not differ between the majority and the minority population. We do not observe a systematic favouritism—for example, of predominantly Christian countries—by the German majority, but rather a more general and coherent assessment of immigrants' need for support depending on whether the country of origin can be considered a safe country or not.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF.io at https://osf.io/yw658/?view_only=33ac3e66fafb49719aa8ec936a80dfc5.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Was not needed because research was conducted in a pre-existing panel structure for which respondents gave consent.

ORCID

Sabrina J. Mayer https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6267-4391
Jörg Dollmann https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6152-3361
Susanne Veit https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9611-1105

ENDNOTES

[1] A notable example, based on a convenience sample, finds migrants more in favour of naturalisation in general but does not explore the impact of drivers across groups (Hedegaard & Larsen, 2022). Our power analysis (see Online Appendix, part G) shows that at least 3500 trial vignettes and at least 33% minority members in the sample are required to detect a medium-size between-group difference at beta = 0.8. This simulation also shows that traditional samples may struggle to detect even moderately large between group differences.

[2] The Online Appendix, part F, also reports further subgroup analyses for different origin groups, as well as differences in labour market status.

[3] This should not suggest that Egypt or Serbia are 'safe' countries and that migrants from these countries may not also be fleeing persecution or harm. However, we assume that due to the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Syria, public awareness of risk and thus perceptions of deservingness will be higher for these two countries.

[4] https://osf.io/yw658/?view_only=33ac3e66fafb49719aa8ec936a80dfc5.

[5] We find empirical evidence for a preference towards immigrants with a similar religious identity. This preference holds true for majority and minority respondents as well as for Christian, Atheist, and Muslim respondents. See Figure 3 and Table 6 in the Online Appendix.

REFERENCES

Adida, C. L., Lo, A., & Platas, M. R. (2018). Perspective taking can promote short-term inclusionary behavior toward Syrian refugees. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(38), 9521–9526. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804002115

Bansak, K., Hainmueller, J., & Hangartner, D. (2016). How economic, humanitarian, and religious concerns shape European attitudes toward asylum seekers. *Science*, 354(6309), 217–222. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aag2147

Böhm, R., Theelen, M. M. P., Rusch, H., & van Lange, P. A. M. (2018). Costs, needs, and integration efforts shape helping behavior toward refugees. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(28), 7284–7289. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1805601115

Cowling, M. M., Anderson, J. R., & Ferguson, R. (2019). Prejudice-relevant correlates of attitudes towards refugees: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 1(3), 124–149. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fey062

Czymara, C. S., & Schmidt-Catran, A. W. (2017). Refugees unwelcome? Changes in the public acceptance of immigrants and refugees in Germany in the course of Europe's immigration crisis. *European Sociological Review*, 33(6), 735–751. https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcx071

Dollmann, J., Mayer, S. J., Lietz, A., Siegel, M., & Köhler, J. (2022). DeZIM.panel—data for Germany's post-migrant society. *Jahrbucher für Nationalokonomie und Statistik*, 0(0), 93–108. https://doi.org/10.1515/jbnst-2022-0025

Hager, A., & Veit, S. (2019). Attitudes toward asylum seekers: Evidence from Germany. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. nfz023. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz023

Hainmueller, J., & Hopkins, D. J. (2014). Public attitudes toward immigration. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 17(1), 225–249. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-102512-194818

Hamidou-Schmidt, H., & Mayer, S. J. (2021). The relation between social identities and outgroup hostility among German immigrant-origin Citizens. *Political Psychology*, 42(2), 311–331. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12700

Hedegaard, T. F., & Larsen, C. A. (2022). Who can become a full member of the club?—results from a conjoint survey experiment on public attitudes about the naturalisation of non-EU migrants in Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 45(4), 433–455. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12232

Koopmans, R., Veit, S., & Yemane, R. (2019). Taste or statistics? A correspondence study of ethnic, racial and religious labour market discrimination in Germany. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(16), 233–252. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1654114

Lazarev, E., & Sharma, K. (2017). Brother or burden: An experiment on reducing prejudice toward Syrian refugees in Turkey. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 5(2), 201–219. https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2015.57

Liebe, U., Meyerhoff, J., Kroesen, M., Chorus, C., Glenk, K., & Laws, M. B. (2018). From welcome culture to welcome limits? Uncovering preference changes over time for sheltering refugees in Germany. *PLoS One*, 13(8), e0199923. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0199923

Sirin, C. V., Valentino, N. A., & Villalobos, J. D. (2017). The social causes and political consequences of group empathy: Causes and consequences of group empathy. *Political Psychology*, 38(3), 427–448. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12352

Strijbis, O., & Polavieja, J. (2018). 'Immigrants against immigration: Competition, identity and immigrants' vote on free movement in Switzerland. *Electoral Studies*, 56, 150–157. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2018.10.001

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.