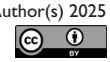
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# The wages of ethnic power: Socioeconomic status, group threat, and anti-immigrant attitudes in Western Europe

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## Abstract

Group threat theories explain anti-immigrant attitudes as emerging from threats to the perceived or actual power of one's ethnic group. Studies also show that individual-level socioeconomic status (SES) is negatively correlated with attitudes toward immigrants, where SES is often conceptualized as an individual-level variable which relates to an individual's experience of economic competition or general political orientation. Here we argue that the effect of SES is conditional on an individual's ethnic group's power. Using data from the European Social Survey and Ethnic Power Relations datasets, we examine how interactions between ethnic group power and individual SES shape attitudes toward immigrants across 16 Western European countries. We find that majority group members generally exhibit more anti-immigrant attitudes than members of minority groups. SES is negatively correlated with anti-immigrant attitudes, generally, but especially for majority group members, where lower-SES individuals have the most anti-immigrant attitudes. At the highest levels of SES there are almost zero differences in anti-immigrant attitudes between majority and minority group members. Our results highlight the need to look to how the "psychological wages" of ethnic group power are influenced by individual SES.

## Keywords

Anti-immigrant attitudes, ethnic power, group threat, intergroup relations, Western Europe

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## Introduction

How does social position produce anti-immigrant attitudes? Following Blumer (1958) and Quillian (1995), sociological explanations of anti-immigrant attitudes have focused on group threat, which in Blumer's (1958) terms shifted focus "away from individual lines of experience" and toward the individual's sense of their group's position in power and status struggles vis-à-vis other ethnic groups (p. 3). According to group threat theory, perceived threats to a racial or ethnic group's relative power fuels prejudice against outgroups. Blumer's (1958) contention that shifting the study of racial prejudice would "yield a more realistic and penetrating understanding of race prejudice" (p. 3) has been dramatically borne out. In the decades since Blumer's essay, social scientists have demonstrated that majority groups respond to the rising power of minorities and immigrants with increased prejudice in hundreds of studies across a range of contexts and using a variety of methodologies (e.g. Blalock, 1967; Brown, 2010; Quillian, 1995; Schlueter and Scheepers, 2010; Semyonov et al., 2006).

Despite the explanatory power of Blumer's original formulation of group threat, however, scholars have recently begun to show that people interpret threats to their group's position in power and status struggles in light of their own "individual lines of experience" or socioeconomic status (SES). Some studies suggest that low-SES majority group members tend to have higher levels of prejudice toward outgroups (Du Bois, 2013 (1935) Enos and Gidron, 2018; Louie and DeAngelis, 2023), but do not analyze the effects of status for minority groups. Other studies examine the effects of SES on outgroup prejudice for both majority and minority groups, but do not allow the effect of SES to differ across those groups (Gorodzeisky and Glikman, 2018; Semyonov et al., 2023). Thus, it is not clear whether lower social status *generally* produces outgroup prejudice or if it interacts with group power to produce prejudice for majority groups only. Since minority groups generally experience greater threat to their group's power (Bobo and Hutchings, 1996), it may be that SES has a greater buffering effect on outgroup hostility for members of minority groups.

We ask how ethnic power and SES interact to produce anti-immigrant attitudes using data covering 16 Western European countries. We focus on Western Europe since these countries are the main destination for migrants (Eurostat, 2024) and ethnic majority groups in Western Europe are relatively more economically privileged (Heath and Cheung, 2007). Since international attitude surveys do not include explicit measures of ethnic power, here we couple explicit measures of ethnic power from the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset (Vogt et al., 2015) with waves 6 (2012) to 10 (2020) of the European Social Survey (ESS) to show how ethnic power and SES differences explain attitudes toward immigrants. In line with previous research, we find that members of majority groups are more likely than minority groups to hold negative attitudes toward immigrants (Küpper et al., 2010; Lukk, 2024; Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius and Pratto, 2001) and individuals with lower SES tend to hold more anti-immigrant attitudes overall (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2018; Pichler, 2010). Our novel finding is that, although lower SES is also associated with more anti-immigrant attitudes for members of minority groups, SES has stronger effects on the attitudes of majority group members. The interaction between SES and group power is such that, at the highest levels of individual SES, differences between majority and minority group members in anti-immigrant attitudes nearly disappear. We conclude that the interaction of ethnic group power and individual-level SES is one factor producing pro- or anti-immigrant attitudes.

## Group power, individual SES, and anti-immigrant attitudes

### *Group power and threat*

Sociological explanations of prejudice toward outgroups have focused on group threat, the key insight of which is that individuals internalize a sense of their own group's position vis-à-vis other

groups, and develop prejudice as a result (Blumer, 1958). Because individuals see group membership as part of their own identity, they interpret threats to the group as if they were threats to themselves (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

Early theorization of group threat was limited to the attitudes and perspectives of majority group members. In Blumer's (1958) initial essay formulating the group threat hypothesis, for example, he explicitly delimited his discussion to prejudicial "feelings in the case of a dominant racial group" (p. 4). Group threat theory was then developed by Blalock and others to explain how White racist attitudes and violence increased in response to increasing Black social and political power (Blalock, 1967; Reed, 1972; Tolnay et al., 1989). Following Quillian (1995), migration scholars have adapted group threat theory to explain how established groups react to immigration, showing how such groups develop anti-immigrant attitudes when immigrants pose threats to their political, economic, or racial dominance (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2016; Hawley, 2011; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001).

Much of the foundational research on anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe is focused on the perspectives of majority group members, and either explicitly excludes members of minority groups from their samples (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2016; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014), or implicitly assumes that survey samples are only of majority groups (e.g. Quillian, 1995). Newer empirical research on anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe has increasingly studied the immigration attitudes of minority groups within single-country studies, and these studies have typically found that members of minority groups are more welcoming to immigrants than members of majority groups (Gorodzeisky and Glikman, 2018; Semyonov et al., 2023). These newer studies typically include measures of SES as controls but have not examined how the effect of SES may vary across groups.

Drawing on group threat theory and empirical studies across different contexts, we formulate two hypotheses about the differences between majority and minority group members' attitudes toward immigrants. First, members of majority groups are more likely than minority group members to support group-based hierarchies by justifying discriminatory and xenophobic attitudes toward outgroups to consolidate the presence of group-based hierarchies from which they benefit (Küpper et al., 2010; Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius and Pratto, 2001). Lukk (2024), for example, shows that majority group members are more likely to support ethnonationalism. Meanwhile, the intergroup solidarity literature also suggests that minority group members tend to exhibit lower levels of anti-immigrant attitudes because their own experiences with migration and integration enable them to find more common ground with new immigrant groups (Abdelhadi and O'Brien, 2020; Meeusen et al., 2019; Sirin et al., 2016). In addition, scholars have argued that linked fate, or the perception that one's own well-being is tied to the broader group's status, may also explain why minority group members express solidarity with immigrants (Dawson, 1994; Gay et al., 2016). For instance, Jones (2019) provides an illustrative example of this dynamic in *The Browning of the New South*, where African Americans and Latinos, despite historical tensions, formed coalitions through their shared experiences of marginalization and exclusion. This solidarity, whether rooted in shared migration experiences or a broader sense of linked fate, suggests that anti-immigrant attitudes may be more common among majority group members, while minority groups may show greater empathy and support for immigrants due to these common struggles.

Thus, we hypothesize that anti-immigrant attitudes may be more common among majority group members:

**H1a:** Majority group members are more likely than minority group members to hold anti-immigrant attitudes.

On the other hand, Bobo and Hutchings (1996) extend Blumer's (1958) theory on group power and argue that prejudice toward outgroups is largely shaped "by a group's feelings of racial alienation within the larger social order" (p. 951). Because they are more subjected to oppression and unfair treatment, minority group members are more likely to perceive other groups as threatening. Bobo and Hutchings (1996) suggest that African Americans, followed closely by Latino and Asian respondents respectively, have the highest tendency to report racial alienation and develop threat perceptions toward other groups, whereas non-Hispanic whites are the least likely group to do so. Similarly, Abascal (2015) shows that Blacks in the United States, when primed with Hispanic population growth, are just as exclusionary toward immigrant groups as Whites. During the 1900s in the US context, the literature also reports high levels of prejudice and hostility between immigrants of differing European origins (e.g. Moses, 2017). In the context of Europe, Meeusen et al. (2019) argue that established immigrant groups do not *necessarily* show more positive attitudes toward newer immigrant groups (see also: Wimmer, 2018). Although Turkish and Moroccan immigrants tend to show more sympathy toward new migrant groups if they perceive those migrants have been unfairly treated by their own government, they also tend to have more anti-immigrant attitudes if they perceive themselves as less advantaged in the labor market (Meeusen et al., 2019). Thus, we present the alternative hypothesis that anti-immigrant attitudes may be more common among minority groups members:

**H1b:** Minority group members are more likely than majority group members to hold anti-immigrant attitudes.

## *Individual SES and group threat*

In recent studies of group threat, SES is often treated as an individual-level control variable. Here we consider how individual-level SES may intersect with group power to influence the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes. We develop three hypotheses.

Our first hypothesis is that SES may generally buffer group threats—regardless of an individual's group's power, those with higher SES may feel less threatened by immigrants because they are generally privileged in their interactions with outgroups. Individuals with higher SES, such as those with higher educational attainment, income, and occupational prestige can avoid negative aspects of intergroup contact, through, for example, income segregated neighborhoods (Erdoğan, 2018). Survey research, often conceptualizing SES as a control variable, has consistently found that indicators of SES are negatively associated with anti-immigrant attitudes (e.g. Enos and Gidron, 2018). Individuals with higher levels of education are less likely to have negative attitudes toward immigrants (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Quillian, 1995). Individuals with higher economic security are also less negative toward immigrants (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2018; Pichler, 2010; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001; Semyonov et al., 2008), as are those in higher status occupations (Kunovich, 2013; Polavieja, 2016).

Thus, we hypothesize that

**H2:** Individuals with lower SES are more likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes than those with higher SES.

Although individuals with higher SES may generally be less likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes, recent research suggests that the effects of SES on outgroup hostility may be contingent upon an individual's ethnic group's power. Majority group members with lower SES, in particular,

may be more motivated to identify in opposition to immigrants to claim and emphasize a privileged racial or ethnic identity. Although largely ignored in studies of group threat, Du Bois (2013 (1935)) originally made this claim in relation to poor White Americans in *Black Reconstruction*. For Du Bois, whiteness acted as a "public and psychological wage," giving poor Whites significant social status tied to their identification as "not-Black." He used this argument to describe the symbolic benefits—such as social status, public deference, and a sense of superiority over Black people—that White workers in the American South derived from their racial group membership despite their material deprivation. Likewise, lower-SES White Americans may highlight their whiteness to distance themselves from minorities and affirm membership in the high-status majority, offsetting their relative socioeconomic disadvantage (Louie and DeAngelis, 2023).

Because most survey studies focus on majority group members—with many samples consisting primarily or entirely of them—findings linking individual SES to anti-immigrant attitudes may only hold for majority populations. If the "psychological wages" of ethnic dominance offset low SES, as they do for White Americans, individual SES should have a larger impact on anti-immigrant attitudes than for majority members, since minorities lack a high-status identity to fall back on (Küpper et al., 2010; Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius and Pratto, 2001).

On the other hand, studies also suggest that members of established minority groups with lower SES can develop prejudice against more recent immigrant groups (Šedovič and Dražanová, 2023). Low-SES minority group members might also show higher levels of prejudice than low-SES majority group members because of a perceived need to differentiate themselves from recent immigrant groups. In France, for instance, minority group members with the lowest SES are the most likely to reclassify themselves as "French by birth" (Caron et al., 2023). Individual SES might also serve as a more important status buffer for members of minority groups since they experience higher levels of group threat (Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Lukk, 2024: 16). Since cross-national surveys do not contain explicit measures of minority/majority status, however, interactions between ethnic power and SES have only rarely been incorporated into cross-national survey research (for an exception, see: Lukk, 2024). Thus, we formulate two competing hypotheses:

**H3a:** The negative effect of SES on anti-immigrant attitudes will be stronger for majority group members than for minority group members.

**H3b:** The negative effect of SES on anti-immigrant attitudes will be stronger for minority group members than for majority group members.

## Data and variables

Although theories of group threat typically focus on ethnic power differences as an explanation for outgroup-attitudes, cross-national surveys typically do not include explicit measures of ethnic group power. Many studies implicitly assume that survey respondents are from majority groups, in other cases identifiable minority groups are dropped from the samples. It is difficult to understand how power itself shapes attitudes, however, if there is no comparison with less powerful groups, and impossible to say how individual SES may interact with group power. Our key methodological innovation here is to couple the ESS which contains individual-level measures of demographics, SES, and attitudes with the EPR dataset which contains measures of an ethnic groups' access to political power within the country (Vogt et al., 2015).

While these countries differ in their immigration histories and group compositions, our aim is to assess whether patterns between group power, SES, and anti-immigrant attitudes are consistent across the countries in Western Europe. This type of cross-national design enhances the external

validity of our findings by testing whether these relationships hold across a wide range of different settings. As we discuss in the following sections, both the main and supplementary analyses suggest that our results largely hold across diverse national contexts.

The ESS is a cross-nationally representative survey of individuals that has been carried out every 2 years across Europe. We use data from ESS survey waves 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10, which span the years of 2012 to 2020. Our analytic sample focuses on Western European countries, which include: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden.[1] These waves cover the time period where European countries experienced a marked increase in asylum applications, partially due to the Syrian Civil War and increased repression following the Arab Spring in the Middle East (Connor, 2016). These waves also witness a rise of anti-immigrant parties across Europe and the increasing salience of immigration as an issue (Dennison and Geddes, 2019), even as pro-immigrant sentiment generally appears to be rising modestly across the population (Banai et al., 2022).

## Dependent variables

We constructed our dependent variable using three questions from the ESS that capture public attitudes toward immigrants of different origins. These questions begin with the baseline prompt, "Now some questions about people from other countries coming to live in [country]." Respondents are then asked to respond to the following three statements:

1. *Majority Ethnicity*: "Now, using this card, to what extent do you think [country] should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as most of [country]'s people to come and live here?"
2. *Different Ethnicity*: "How about people of a different race or ethnic group from most of [country] people? Still use this card."
3. *Non-EU Immigrants*: "How about people from the poorer countries outside Europe? Use the same card."

with respondent answer options including 1 = "Allow many to come and live here," 2 = "Allow some," 3 = "Allow few," and 4 = "Allow none." For the main analyses, we combined these three items by summing them into a single composite measure of anti-immigrant attitudes (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). The resulting scale ranges from 3 (most accepting) to 12 (least accepting). As shown in Appendix 5, we conducted separate analyses using each of the three items as individual dependent variables, rather than the composite index, and found highly similar results.

## Independent variables

*Ethnic group power (majority group).* To measure survey respondents' ethnic group, we construct a dummy variable to indicate whether they belong to the majority ethnicity in their country of residence. To decide which ethnicity was the majority within a country we began with the EPR dataset, which classifies ethnic groups within countries according to their political power. The EPR reports the politically significant ethnic groups and their levels of influence concerning governmental authority across all countries spanning the timeframe from 1946 to 2021 (Vogt et al., 2015). In this dataset, ethnicity is characterized as a shared sense of community rooted in the perception of common lineage and cultural bonds and an ethnic group is deemed politically significant if it has been officially represented by a political organization at the national level or if its members have been

subjected to political discrimination instigated by the state (Vogt et al., 2015). This definition does not necessarily imply equivalence between representation and discrimination; rather, it reflects that a group is politically salient to the state—either through formal inclusion in governance or targeted exclusion from it.[2]

Information on participants' ethnic group affiliation, as defined in the EPR, is not directly available within the ESS surveys. To overcome this, we merged group-level data from the EPR with individual-level ESS data by leveraging survey responses on parents' place of birth, first and second languages spoken at home, religious denomination, geographic region, and self-perceived ethnic belonging (see Gorman and Seguin, 2018; Wimmer, 2013 for similar data harmonization strategies). In this way, we matched each respondent to the corresponding EPR group power value from the same year in which their country was surveyed in the ESS. This strategy allowed us to systematically identify not only immigrant-origin populations but also historically marginalized groups—such as Roma or Basques—who may not be captured through traditional demographic variables alone.

Specifically, we identified majority groups as those groups which the EPR classified as *Dominant, Monopoly*, or *Senior Partner.* In general, the classification of majority groups is straightforward: for example, Germans in Germany, French in France, and Italians in Italy are coded as majorities. For some countries, however, the identification of majority groups reflects the internal composition of politically dominant subgroups rather than a single national majority. In Belgium, for example, both Flemish and Walloon are classified as majorities, while in Switzerland, EPR codes Swiss Germans as the majority group given the country's internal linguistic structure, where German speakers form the largest and most politically influential linguistic community. In most cases we found this classification to be sufficient, particularly for majority group members. However, in cases where immigrant-origin minorities are not fully captured, we supplemented the EPR with additional country-specific information to ensure these groups are accurately coded as minority groups in our models. For instance, in some countries (e.g. Ireland or Germany), the EPR identifies only one category named "IRRELEVANT." This indicates that the country has no ethnic cleavages in its formal political processes because only one ethnic group holds significant political power. Nevertheless, this does not mean an absence of ethnic power differences, as the dominant ethnic group forms the basis for all major political parties in these cases. Thus, we coded individuals in such countries as belonging to the majority group if they were part of the dominant ethnic category, and to the minority group otherwise. For example, in the case of Germany, Germans were coded as majority group members, whereas all other ethnic groups in Germany such as Turks, Poles, Italians, and Russians were coded as minorities.

The groups in our majority category are also numerical majorities in the participating countries of ESS. However, there are meaningful differences between minority groups. As discussed above, several immigrant-origin groups (e.g. Turks in Germany) are not necessarily captured by the EPR, and many of the EPR's distinct minority group categories (e.g. "Powerless" or "Discriminated") are not consistently present across Western Europe or include very small numbers of respondents. Given these constraints, a binary majority–minority classification offers a more feasible and consistent approach for comparative analysis across 16 countries and facilitates cross-national comparisons over time.

We measure survey respondents' objective majority/minority status because subjective measures of majority/minority status might also measure group threat, as a sense of the rising power of minorities might prompt some majority group members to say they feel like a minority (Hochschild, 2018). Nevertheless, we replicate our results with a subjective measure of minority status from the ESS (see Appendix 4).

## Individual-level SES

To measure the impact of SES, we created an index variable using the individual-level ESS data on the respondent's education, income, and occupational status. Below, we first introduce each of those variables and then discuss how we operationalize such variables to construct our index variable.

*Education.* We use the *eisced* variable from the ESS to measure survey respondents' level of education. Education, in this context, reflects the level of formal schooling and is relevant due to its well-established association with openness to diversity and political tolerance (e.g. Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Jackman and Muha, 1984; Karpov, 1999). This variable is based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), which is a statistical framework developed by UNESCO to standardize measures of education across contexts with varying educational systems. In the ESS waves, each respondent is asked to provide their highest level of education by using the standardized categories ranging from less than lower secondary (ES-ISCED I) and lower secondary (ES-ICED II) to lower tertiary education (ES-ISCED V1) and higher tertiary education (ES-ISCED V2). The *eisced* variable is highly correlated with total years of education ($r = 0.76$). We do not use the years of education variable in our main analysis because it does not necessarily correspond to meaningful categories of educational attainment. Moreover, we observe many notable outliers in the distribution of this variable, over 85 respondents claim that they have greater than 35 years of education for instance. Nevertheless, as a robustness check we replicate our main analyses in Appendix 1 Figure 4 using years of education as an alternative measure with substantively identical results.

*Income.* Our measure of income *hinctnta* is standardized as the decile of households' total net income relative to co-residents within the country of the respondent in any of the survey waves under ESS. This type of estimate is well-suited to test the group position argument because individuals tend to value relative, as opposed to absolute, income levels when considering their relative social status (Darity, 2022). In this variable, "1" refers to those in the lowest income group (1st decile), and "10" represents those in the highest income group (10th decile).

*Occupation.* Occupation stands as one of the primary factors, tightly linked with both education and income, defining one's individual-level SES and prestige. Although occupational complexity is rarely included in studies of attitudes, there is a vast literature suggesting that the skill and complexity level of occupations is an important component of SES (e.g. Kontogiannis et al., 2019; Le Grand and Tåhlin, 2013). We constructed a measure of occupational complexity by merging occupational categories from the index of International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-08) to the occupations listed for each respondent in the ESS waves. The ISCO-08 offers a novel categorization of occupations based on skill levels, which is determined by the complexity and variety of tasks and responsibilities required to perform within an occupation (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2012). According to this classification, *Occupation* is an ordinal variable with "1" indicating those that are in low-skilled occupations while "2" and "3" referring those that are in medium- and high-skilled occupations, respectively. For example, professions such as scientists, doctors, and chief executives are coded as "3" because such occupations typically involve carrying out activities that demand intricate troubleshooting and decision-making, drawing from a diverse set of theoretical and factual expertise within a specialized domain. On the other hand, such professions as mining laborers or sales and service workers are coded as "1."

*SES index.* Since each of these variables has different value scales, we first standardize them based on their z-scores, and then sum these z-scores to create our index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$). Using

these components aligns with standard practices in survey research, where income, education, and occupation are often employed as proxies for both SES and social class—particularly given that the ESS does not provide a unified class variable. While these variables are technically ordinal, it is common in the literature to treat them as approximately interval for index construction, as they capture meaningful socioeconomic gradients (e.g. Diemer et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2022; Kraus and Stephens, 2012). Given that these variables may have different individual effects, we replicate our results using each of our SES variables separately (see Figures 5 and 6). We also replicate our results with a different approach to converting our ordinal measures to interval, and this produces nearly identical results to the main analysis (see Appendix Figure 7).

### *Controls*

We include several controls taken from the ESS. *Urban* captures respondents' domicile, with "1" and "0" referring to those living in urban and rural areas, respectively. *Migration Background* is a dummy variable, with "1" corresponding to those that are either first- or second-generation immigrants. *Female* represents sex, with "1" and "0" referring to females and males, respectively. *Age* is a continuous variable estimated by subtracting the year of birth for each participant from the respective survey year. We also include year fixed effects to control for period-specific changes in attitudes in each ESS wave.

## Analytical strategy

We estimate a series of linear regression models with country fixed effects to examine how ethnic group power and individual-level SES interact to shape anti-immigrant attitudes. This approach allows us to isolate within-country variation and control for all unobserved and time-invariant country-level characteristics. We include country-specific intercepts and cluster standard errors at the country level to account for intra-country correlation in responses.

Throughout these models, our primary analytic focus is on the interaction between SES and majority/minority group status. To ensure comparability across predictors and interpretability of interaction terms, we standardize all independent variables using z-scores. To handle missing data, we apply multiple imputation via chained equations, generating 10 imputed datasets and transforming all variables prior to imputation (Von Hippel, 2009). The average missingness across variables is 5.62 percent, with household income having the highest at 19.62 percent. For robustness, we also estimate all models using listwise deletion, which yields substantively similar results.

Additional robustness checks—including models using SES components separately, models controlling for national attachment, subgroup analyses of historically marginalized groups, and region-level fixed-effects models using NUTS codes—are presented in the appendix.

## Results

Table 1 below shows descriptive statistics for our data. Descriptively, our data vary in ways that we would expect based on existing literature (Abdelaaty and Steele, 2019; Küpper et al., 2010; Šedovič and Dražanová, 2023). In the three items constituting our main dependent variable, anti-immigrant attitudes are least common when respondents are asked about allowing immigrants from the country's ethnic majority group, higher when asked about non-majority EU immigrants, and highest when respondents are asked about immigrants from "the poorer countries outside of Europe" (see Table 1). Using our composite index, Figure 1 shows that anti-immigrant attitudes are more common among majority groups who have higher levels of negative attitudes toward immigrants than

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

| Variable | Mean | Std. Dev. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Anti-Immigrant Items* | | | | |
| Majority Ethnicity | 2.021 | 0.795 | 1 | 4 |
| Different Ethnicity | 2.259 | 0.848 | 1 | 4 |
| Non-EU Immigrants | 2.333 | 0.879 | 1 | 4 |
| *Ethnic Group Power* | | | | |
| Majority Group | 0.792 | 0.406 | 0 | 1 |
| *Individual-Level SES* | | | | |
| SES Index | 0.269 | 2.383 | –5.2 | 4.4 |
| Highest level of education | 3.924 | 1.926 | 1 | 7 |
| Household Income | 5.430 | 2.781 | 1 | 10 |
| Skill Level of Occupation | 2.359 | 0.640 | 1 | 3 |
| *Controls* | | | | |
| Year | 2016.047 | 2.834 | 2012 | 2020 |
| Urban | 0.622 | 0.485 | 0 | 1 |
| Migration Background | 0.186 | 0.389 | 0 | 1 |
| Female | 0.515 | 0.499 | 0 | 1 |
| Age | 49.849 | 18.771 | 14 | 114 |

SES: socioeconomic status.

minority groups across all 16 Western European countries in our sample except in Iceland and Sweden. Finally, SES correlates negatively with anti-immigrant attitudes for all three items constituting our main dependent variable.[3]

Figure 2 presents results from our main country-level fixed-effects regression model. In line with the previous literature, anti-immigrant attitudes are less common among women, increasing with age, lower among those living in urban areas, and those with a personal migration background ($p < 0.01$ for all results). In the model, lower SES is associated with more anti-immigrant attitudes ($p < 0.001$), lending support to H2. The individual components of the SES index (education, income, and occupational complexity) are also generally predictive of anti-immigrant attitudes in the expected directions (see Figures 5 and 6 in the appendix).

The main coefficient for the majority group indicator is positive and significant ($p < 0.01$ for both coefficients), suggesting that ethnic majority group members were less accepting of immigrants. Supplementary analyses examining each item separately show that majority group members were specifically less accepting of immigrants from different ethnicities and poorer countries outside of Europe, but that there were no significant differences between majority and minority group members for attitudes toward immigrants of the majority ethnicity (see Figures 11 and 12). Overall, these findings lend support to H1a, that majority group members are less accepting of immigrants.

The interaction coefficient between our SES index and majority group indicator is consistently negative and significant in our model ($p < 0.001$). This lends support for H3a, that the effects of SES on anti-immigrant attitudes are stronger for majority group members. Figure 3 is the marginal effect plot for this interaction.[4] It demonstrates that the marginal effect of majority group membership is higher for lower levels of SES, with the effect size declining as SES becomes higher, such that for the highest SES respondents there does not appear to be any meaningful effect of ethnic group membership. To further illustrate this, among low-SES respondents (index = –3.5 — representing individuals in approximately the bottom 1–2 percent of the socioeconomic distribution, with very low levels of education, income, and occupational complexity), the predicted

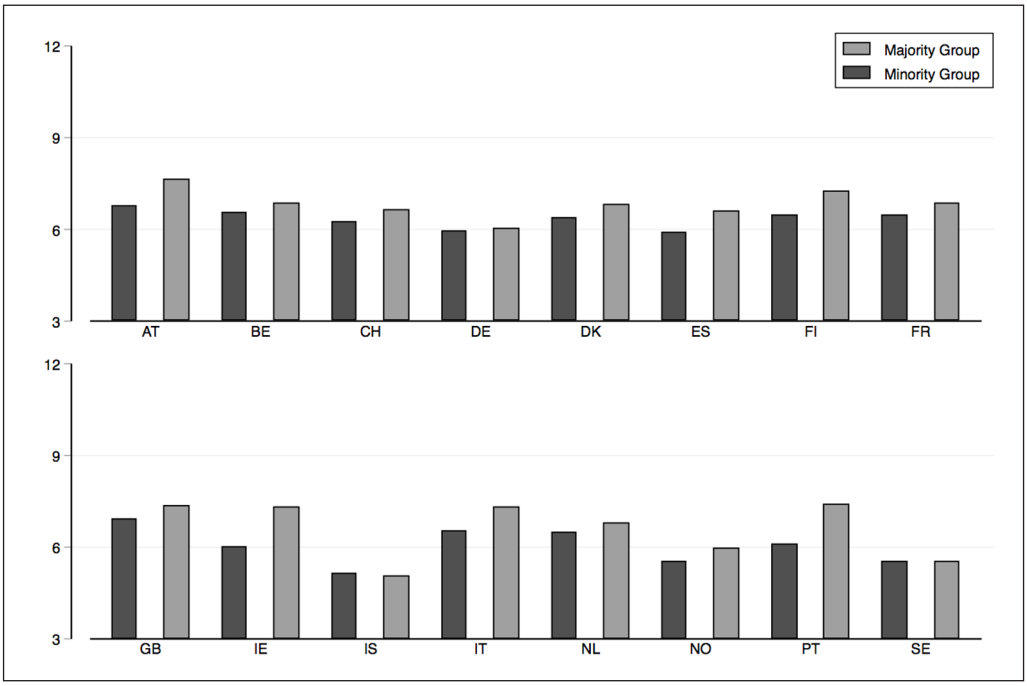



**Figure 1.** Mean values of the anti-immigrant index by each participating country.
*Note*: The confidence intervals have been removed due to their minimal size, which renders them visually indistinguishable.

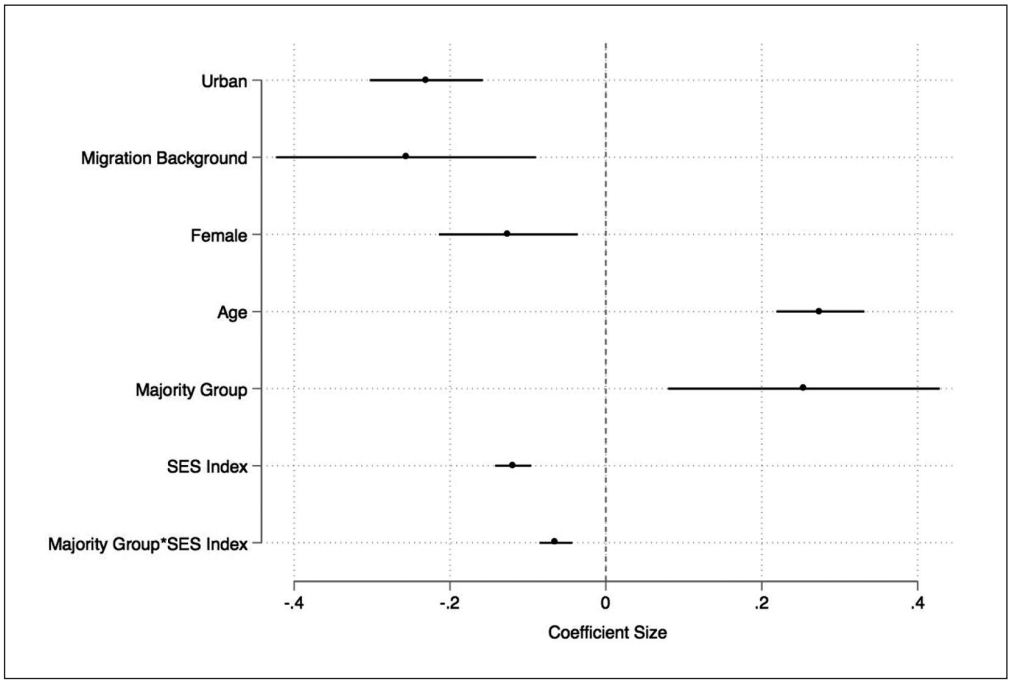



**Figure 2.** Coefficient plot for country fixed-effects regression model.

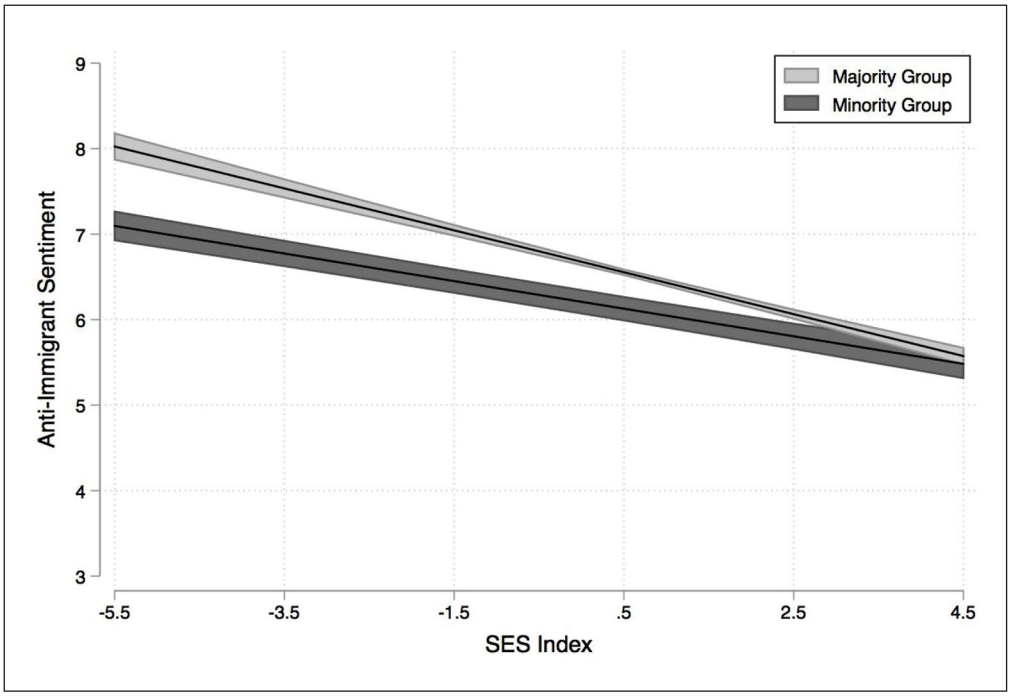



**Figure 3.** Estimated effect of the interaction between ethnic group power and individual-level SES on anti-immigrant attitudes.

anti-immigrant score is approximately 7.53 for majority group members and 6.77 for minority group members, yielding a gap of about 0.76 points. This difference is roughly equivalent to a respondent answering about one category more restrictively on one of the three questions that make up our dependent variable (for example, moving from "allow many" to "allow some" immigrants on one item).

Among high-SES respondents (index = 4.5 — corresponding to individuals in approximately the top 1–2 percent of the socioeconomic distribution, with very high levels of education, income, and occupational complexity), both majority and minority group members report substantially lower and nearly convergent levels of anti-immigrant attitudes (5.57 for majority, 5.48 for minority). While these differences are modest in absolute terms, they are substantively meaningful at lower-SES levels, where majority group members express somewhat higher exclusionary attitudes. The convergence at higher SES underscores the moderating role of SES in shaping the association between group status and anti-immigrant attitudes.

Table 2 reports country-by-country estimates, where we re-estimate the full model separately for each country. In this way, we assess whether the patterns observed in our main model hold across different national contexts, thus addressing concerns about generalizability and external validity. Table 2 shows that the majority group coefficient is positive and significant in half of the countries, indicating higher anti-immigrant attitudes among majority group members; in five others the coefficient is not significant, and in Germany it is negative. The SES index is consistently associated with lower anti-immigrant sentiment across nearly all countries, suggesting that higher SES is generally linked to more favorable views toward immigrants. Finally, our main result, the interaction between majority group status and SES is negative and statistically significant in most

**Table 2.** Country-by-country regression results with controls included.

| Country | Majority | SES Index | Majority × SES |
|---|---|---|---|
| Austria | 0.552*** | –0.158*** | –0.010 |
| Belgium | 0.106 | –0.092** | –0.146*** |
| Switzerland | 0.281*** | –0.152*** | –0.030 |
| Germany | –0.188* | –0.137*** | –0.050** |
| Denmark | 0.014 | –0.065 | –0.107* |
| Spain | 0.429*** | –0.103*** | –0.079*** |
| Finland | 0.838*** | –0.158*** | –0.021 |
| France | 0.202* | –0.109*** | –0.117*** |
| Ireland | 0.489*** | –0.105*** | –0.071* |
| Iceland | –0.251 | –0.110* | –0.024 |
| Italy | –0.141 | –0.048 | –0.074* |
| Netherlands | –0.019 | –0.126*** | –0.052* |
| Norway | 0.132 | –0.082** | –0.047† |
| Portugal | 0.467** | –0.040 | –0.085* |
| Sweden | –0.178 | –0.125*** | –0.027 |
| United Kingdom | 0.276*** | –0.150*** | –0.047* |

SES: socioeconomic status.
***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$, †$p < 0.1$.

(7) countries, but non-significant in five countries. These effects are most pronounced in the core Western European countries such as France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Taken together, these country-specific models reinforce the external validity of our main models.

## *Robustness checks*

We conducted robustness checks for two possible threats to the validity of our arguments. First, it is possible that national identification levels mediate the effects of SES on attitudes toward immigrants. For example, Sniderman et al. (2004) find that threats perceived toward national identities are more likely than threats perceived toward economic factors to trigger anti-immigrant attitudes among majority groups. Regarding the context of our study, Wimmer (2017) demonstrates that individuals belonging to ethnic groups that lack political representation in the central government tend to exhibit lower levels of national pride compared with those integrated into the political mainstream. In addition, historical instances of ethnic conflict and contemporary power-sharing agreements can diminish confidence in the long-term durability of political representation, consequently attenuating feelings of national pride (Wimmer, 2017). Therefore, it might be the case that the prevalence of anti-immigrant attitudes among lower-SES majority group members works through their national identification patterns. Only some of our survey waves included a "national attachment" variable (it is not available in ESS6-7), which measures the level of emotional attachment that survey respondents have to their nation. We therefore left national attachment out of our main results, but in a robustness check with national attachment as a control for the available survey waves, we find substantively nearly identical results. We discuss the details of this analysis in Appendix 2 (see Figure 8).

Second, since our main analyses include both immigrant-origin minorities and historically established minority groups, one potential concern is that differences between majority and minority groups may be partly driven by the larger representation of recent migrants within minority groups. Although our models control for individual and family migration history, we conduct an

additional robustness check focusing specifically on historical minority groups with no recent migration history to explore whether our findings are sensitive to this issue. These historically minority groups retain a minority status through reconfiguration of international borders and changes in the order of sovereignty. For example, throughout history, the Basque Country has experienced a significant number of changes in sovereignty and control. It was historically divided between different kingdoms and regions, including the Kingdom of Navarre and various Spanish and French territories. The Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659 formalized the division of the Basque Country, which paved the way for the current status of Basque people in France and Spain. In addition, some historical minority groups, such as the Welsh and Scots in the United Kingdom, and Swiss French and Italians in Switzerland, have not sought complete independence but have initiated separatist movements aiming for the recognition of their national minority status by the participating countries (Anderson, 2018; Orgad and Koopmans, 2022). These historical minority groups might exhibit different attitudinal patterns from those of newer minority groups as the historical and cultural rootedness may cause their attitudes toward recent migrants to align more closely with those of the majority group. To assess this, we examine anti-immigrant attitudes among long-established ethno-linguistic minority groups in Western Europe, many of which have been integrated into these societies prior to the establishment of their modern states (Appendix 3 Figure 9). We find similar results to our main analysis when only comparing these historical minority groups with majority groups.

Finally, Appendix 5 presents models using region-level fixed effects based on NUTS regional codes. These models—estimated separately for each anti-immigrant item—also yield comparable results, further confirming our main findings (see Figures 11 and 12).

## Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated how individual SES interacted with ethnic group power to produce anti-immigrant attitudes. To do so, we combined survey data from the ESS with data on ethnic group power from the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset, allowing us to compare the attitudes of both minority and majority group members toward immigrants in 16 different countries in Western Europe between 2012 and 2020. In line with previous research, we found that members of majority groups across Western Europe are more likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes than minority group members, and that individuals with higher SES were generally less likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes. However, the effect of SES on anti-immigrant attitudes is much stronger for majority group members than it is for minority group members—low-SES members of majority groups hold the most anti-immigrant attitudes, but anti-immigrant attitudes decline much faster for members of majority groups as SES rises. In fact, the gap in anti-immigrant attitudes between majority and minority group members all but disappears among the highest SES individuals in our sample.

Our key finding is that group threat is not simply a function of a group's position in their country's power politics, but also how an individuals' location in the SES structure of their society shapes how they perceive or value their ethnic group's power. Thus, our findings contribute to an emerging body of literature conceptualizing individual and group status as interacting and compensating for one-another (Caron et al., 2023; Lukk, 2024). We find majority group members with lower SES are more likely to express outgroup hostility. This pattern is consistent with Du Bois' early observation of what he termed the "wages of whiteness," though since we do not measure group identification, whether these differences are due to increased group identification among low-status majority group members is an important open question for future research (Du Bois, 2013 [1935]; Louie and DeAngelis, 2023).

Just as research on group threat has increasingly studied more complex configurations of racial power (e.g. Abascal, 2015), group threat research in the future should pay special attention to the configurations of ethnic group power and social class position. Future comparative research should also consider how group power interacts with individual factors such as economic hardship (Abdelaaty and Steele, 2019; Semyonov et al., 2006) to produce anti-immigrant attitudes. In addition, future work could explore the distinct roles of income and education in shaping anti-immigrant attitudes. Although both income and education are negatively associated with anti-immigrant attitudes in our models, they may operate through different underlying mechanisms. For example, education is often linked to values such as openness and political tolerance, whereas income may shape concerns related to material interests and economic security. Consistent with this distinction, prior research suggests that these two components of SES may have divergent effects on political behavior and attitudes (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Kitschelt and Rehm, 2019). Finally, future work should examine whether similar status dynamics operate in less affluent or non-Western contexts, where both group boundaries and material insecurity may shape group threat processes in distinct ways. Future research could also investigate how the relationship between group status, SES, and anti-immigrant attitudes evolves over time as more waves of longitudinal survey data become available.

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## Data availability statement

All data used in this study are derived from sources in the public domain. These include the following datasets:

- European Social Survey: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/
- Ethnic Power Relations: https://icr.ethz.ch/data/epr/core/

## Notes

1. We exclude post-communist and post-Soviet countries (e.g. Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Croatia) from our analyses because factors such as recent border changes, political transitions, and differences in the conceptualization of immigrant status complicate valid cross-national comparisons of anti-immigrant attitudes (e.g. Ceobanu, 2011; Semyonov et al., 2006). We also exclude Greece due to its consistent outlier status, exhibiting substantially higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment than other European countries (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2016).
2. In most contexts, "ethnicity" as captured by the EPR does not align with the notion of "race," that is most familiar to American observers. For example, in the United States, relevant ethnicities often correspond to racial groups defined by the US Census, such as Blacks, Whites, Latinos, Asians, and others. However, in France, these groups are French, Roma, Basques, and Corsicans, which are ethnic rather than racial categories. These highlight the diversity in the interpretation of ethnicity across different regions, and the EPR dataset considers a wide range of factors when identifying those country-specific groups. We also replicate our results later with a measure of subjective minority status in the ESS (see Appendix 4).
3. Correlation coefficients of SES with majority ethnicity, different ethnicity, and non-EU immigrants are respectively: –0.274, –0.272, and –0.234.

4. Since multiple imputations often result in inaccurate confidence interval estimates (Royston, 2004; Von Hippel, 2007), we chose to produce margin plots using the listwise deletion approach. As our results were consistent between the multiple imputation and listwise deletion methods, this approach ensures more reliable confidence intervals.
5. Correlation coefficients of national attachment with education, income, and occupation skills are as follows, respectively: –0.020, 0.019, and 0.026.
6. German Federal Statistical Office (n.d.).

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## Appendix 1

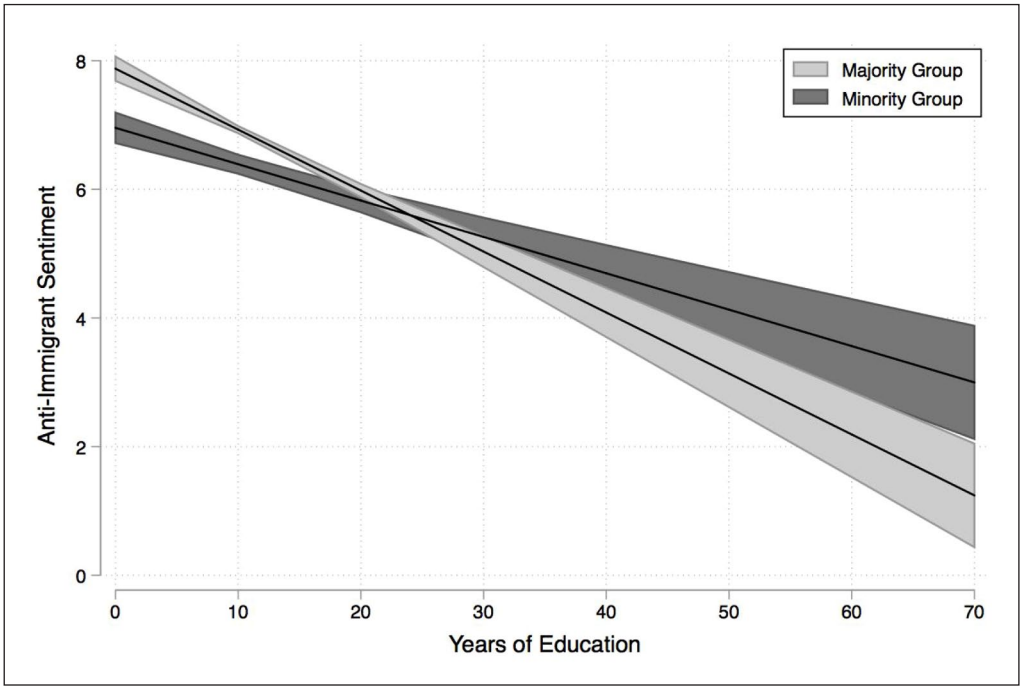



**Figure 4.** Replication of Figure 3 using years of education instead of ISCED levels.
*Note*: The divergence between groups at the upper end of the education scale is driven by a very small number of highly educated individuals within minority groups. Only around 1 percent of minority respondents report more than 25 years of education.

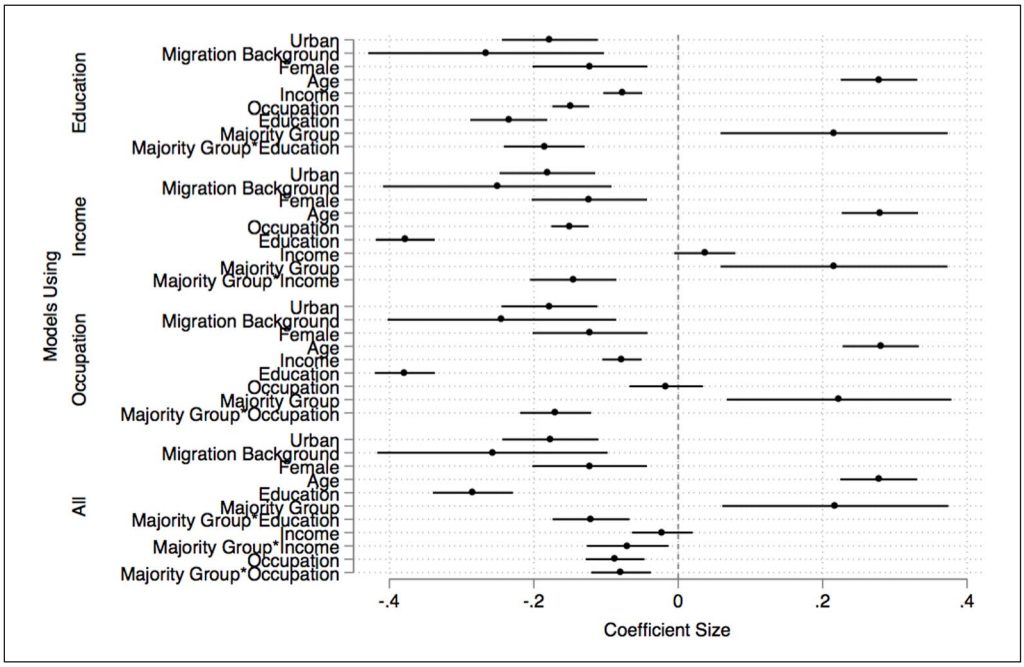



**Figure 5.** Replication of Figure 2 using each individual-level SES variable, separately.

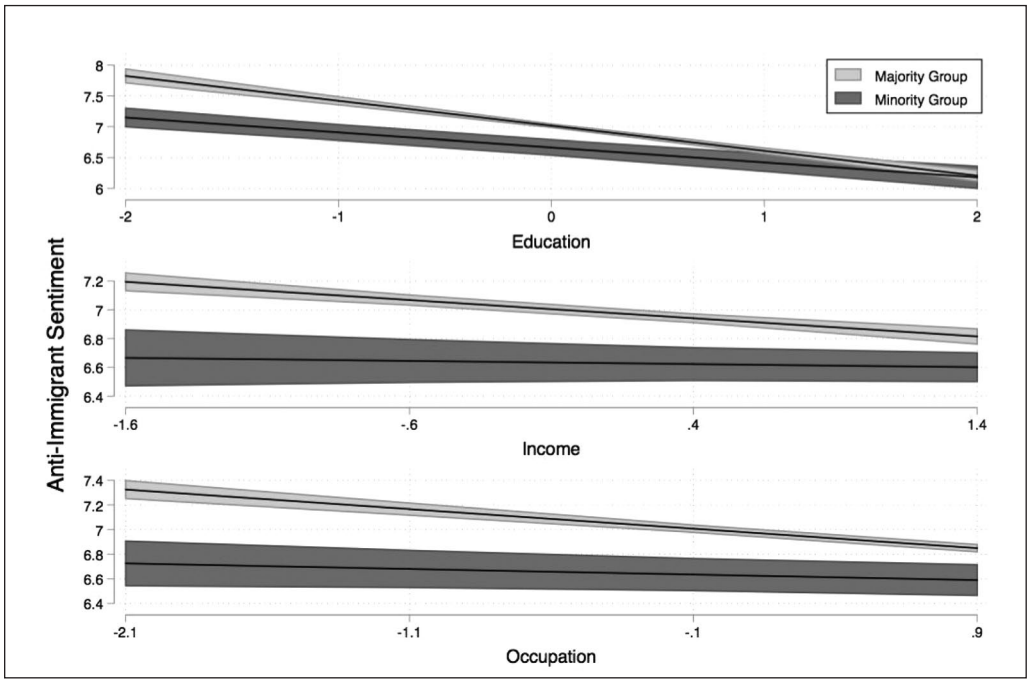



**Figure 6.** Replication of Figure 3 using each individual-level SES variable, separately.

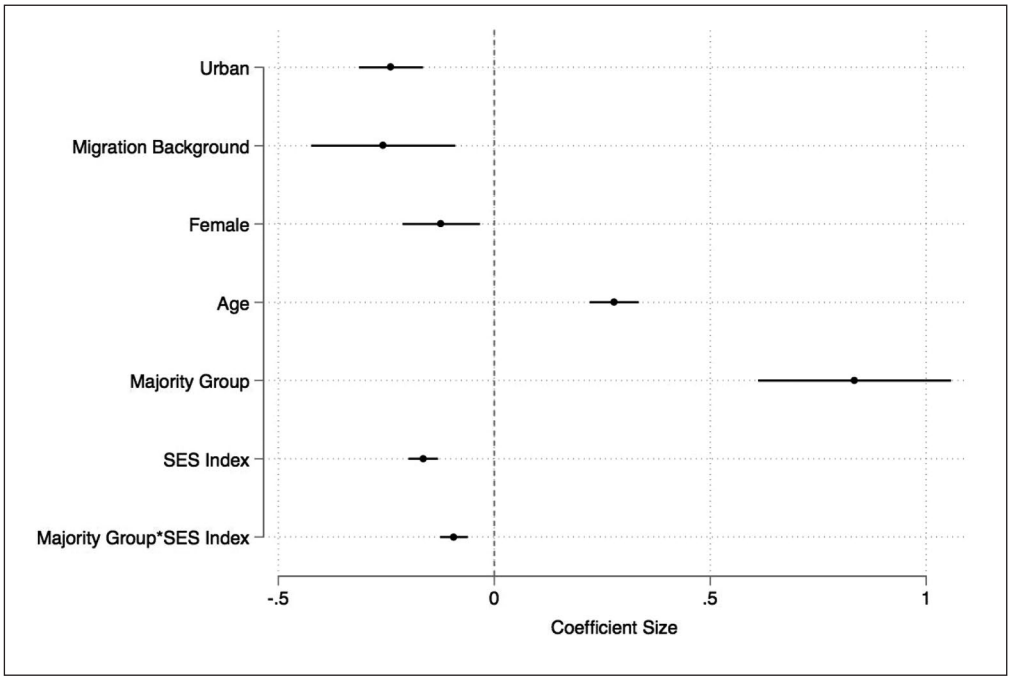



**Figure 7.** Replication of Figure 2 with alternative SES index based on ordinal categorization (low, middle, high).

## Appendix 2

### *National attachment*

To investigate the impact of nationalism, we added the variable "National Attachment" into our main models and replicated them in Appendix 2 Figure 8. This variable entails asking respondents about their emotional attachment to their country and is measured on a continuous scale from 0 (indicating "No emotional attachment") to 10 (indicating "Very strong emotional attachment"). We exclude national attachment from the main analysis because it is only available in the last three survey years (i.e. 2016, 2018, and 2020).

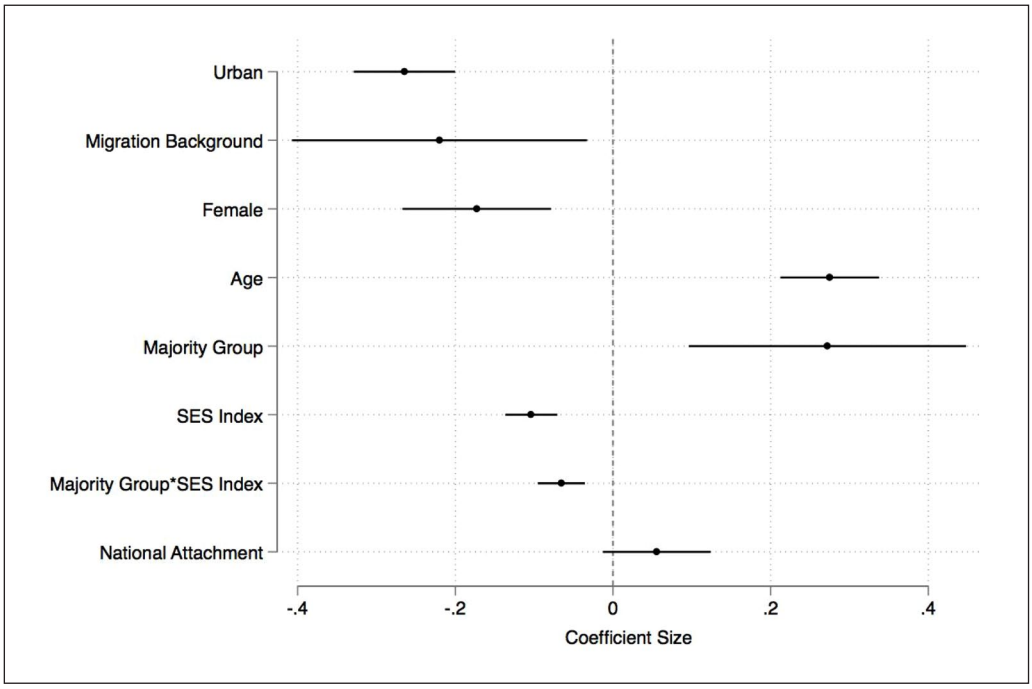



**Figure 8.** Replication of Figure 2 after the inclusion of *National Attachment* in the models.

Figure 8 shows that including national attachment does not substantively change our main results. The coefficients for ethnic group power, socioeconomic status, and their interaction remain statistically significant and consistent in direction and magnitude. Interestingly, national attachment itself does not exhibit a statistically significant association with anti-immigrant attitudes in these models. This suggests that nationalism is not a major confounding factor underlying the relationship between ethnic group power, SES, and anti-immigrant attitudes in our analysis.5 (Acevedo and Meseguer, 2022; Sniderman et al., 2004).

## Appendix 3

### *Historical minority groups*

In this section, we replicate our main models focusing specifically on historically rooted minority groups with long-standing local territorial claims. These groups were already included in our main analyses, but here we examine them separately to assess whether our broader findings hold within this more narrowly defined subset of historical minorities. Specifically, we identify the following groups as historical minorities among the 16 Western European countries in our sample according to the EPR: Swedes in Finland; Basques and Corsicans in France; Sardinians and Aostans in Italy; Basques, Catalans, and Galicians in Spain; Swiss French and Italians in Switzerland; and Scots and Welsh in the United Kingdom. We exclude groups that primarily reflect immigrant-origin populations or more recent demographic shifts.

Figure 9 shows that the results remain highly consistent with our main findings. The main effects of majority group status and SES both remain statistically significant. The interaction between majority group status and SES also continues to be significant, indicating that the effect of SES on anti-immigrant attitudes is stronger for members of majority groups.

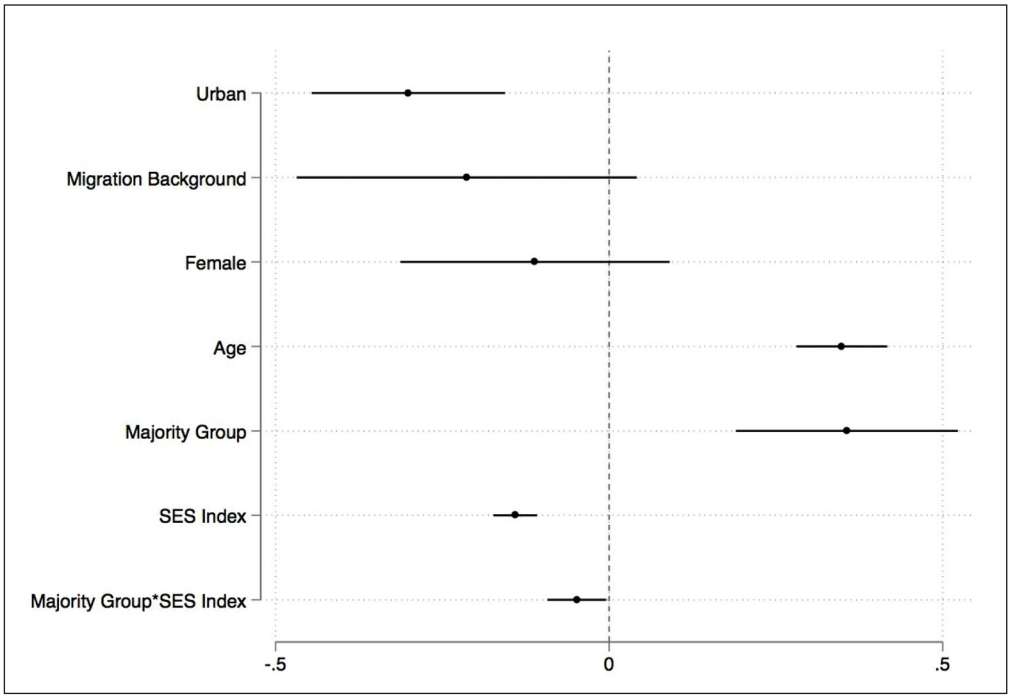



**Figure 9.** Replication of Figure 2 only comparing historical minority groups with majority groups.

## Appendix 4

### *A subjective measure of ethnic power*

We replicate our analyses with subjective measure of ethnic power available in the ESS dataset. In ESS, respondents are asked "*Do you belong to a minority ethnic group in [country]?*" with answer options "Yes" and "No." We did not use this measure in the body of the article for a few reasons. Subjective measures like these may not always line up with objective measures of group power, as members of majority groups may identify as minorities when they feel threatened. There are several inconsistencies with this question which suggests it may not accurately capture group power. For instance, 16,192 respondents state that although they have a migration background, they do not belong to a minority group, and 9,222 of these respondents are first-generation immigrants. And this situation can be found across almost all participating countries. This question also only reports whether someone belongs to a minority group, which may include numerical minorities which are nevertheless politically powerful. Finally, the question was not available in wave 10.

Regardless of potential issues with the subjective measure, Figure 10 demonstrates that our main results remain consistent when using this alternative coding. Both the main effect of SES and its interaction with group position remain statistically significant, while the main effect of majority group status is somewhat smaller and not conventionally significant ($p = 0.06$) Similar to our main and alternative analyses, the results show that individuals with lower SES are more likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes, and that this SES effect is stronger among majority group members.

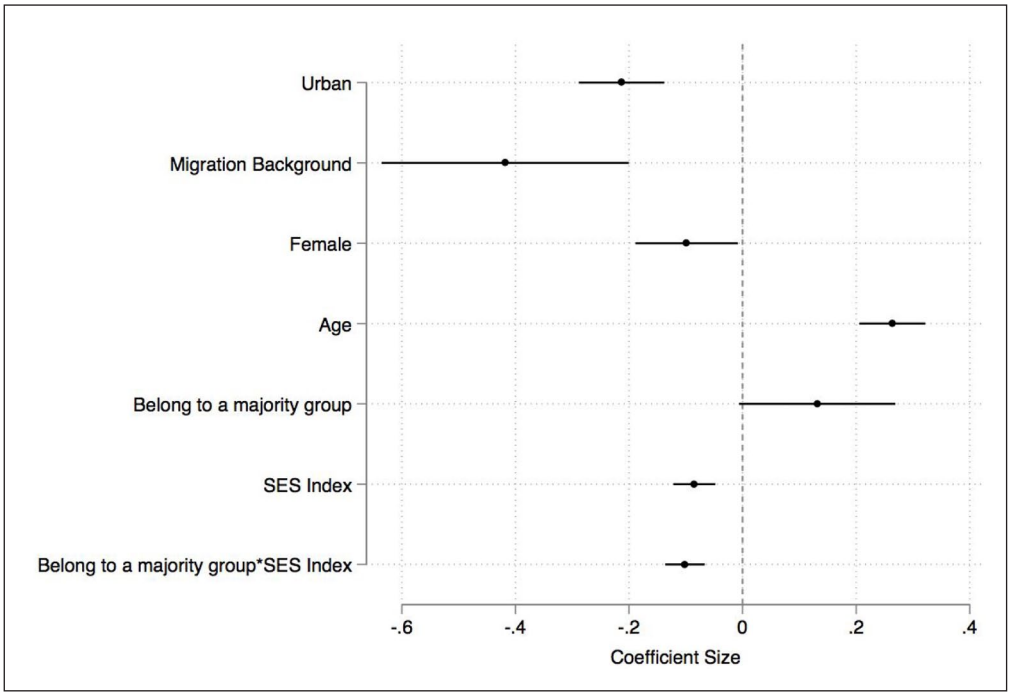



**Figure 10.** Replication of Figure 2 using the minority question in ESS.

## Appendix 5

### *Replication with region-level fixed effects*

The ESS waves include information about the geographical region of participants according to The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) level codes. Briefly, the NUTS classification is a hierarchical division of the European Union's territory. This system encompasses three distinct hierarchical tiers, namely NUTS-1, NUTS-2, and NUTS-3, facilitating the comparative analysis of statistical data across different regional levels within the EU. To explain the differences between such levels, for instance, NUTS-1 regions correspond to the federal states (*Bundesländer*) in Germany. Typically, the population of NUTS-1 regions across Europe falls within the range of 3 to 7 million inhabitants. NUTS-2 regions, on the other hand, tend to encompass populations ranging from 800,000 to 3 million inhabitants. In Germany, these regions align

with governmental divisions referred to as *Regierungsbezirke*. Finally, NUTS-3 regions generally encompass populations ranging from 150,000 to 800,000 inhabitants, and these regions typically correspond to districts known as *Kreise* or *kreisfreie Städte* in Germany.[6] While most of the countries in this dataset have information on respondents' location according to NUTS-2 levels, there are a few countries that share their participants' location according to NUTS-1 and NUTS-3 levels. We generally use NUTS-2 in our models, but use NUTS-3 when possible, and NUTS-1 when NUTS-2 is unavailable (see Table 3 below for detailed information on NUTS-level codes).

As a robustness check, we used these NUTS-level codes to include region-level fixed effects and estimate our main model separately for each of the three anti-immigrant questions. These models yielded results that are substantively consistent with our main analyses, as the interaction term is significant across all three models. The only difference is that the main effect for majority is not significant for the question on whether immigrants of the same ethnicity with the majority group should be allowed for entry.

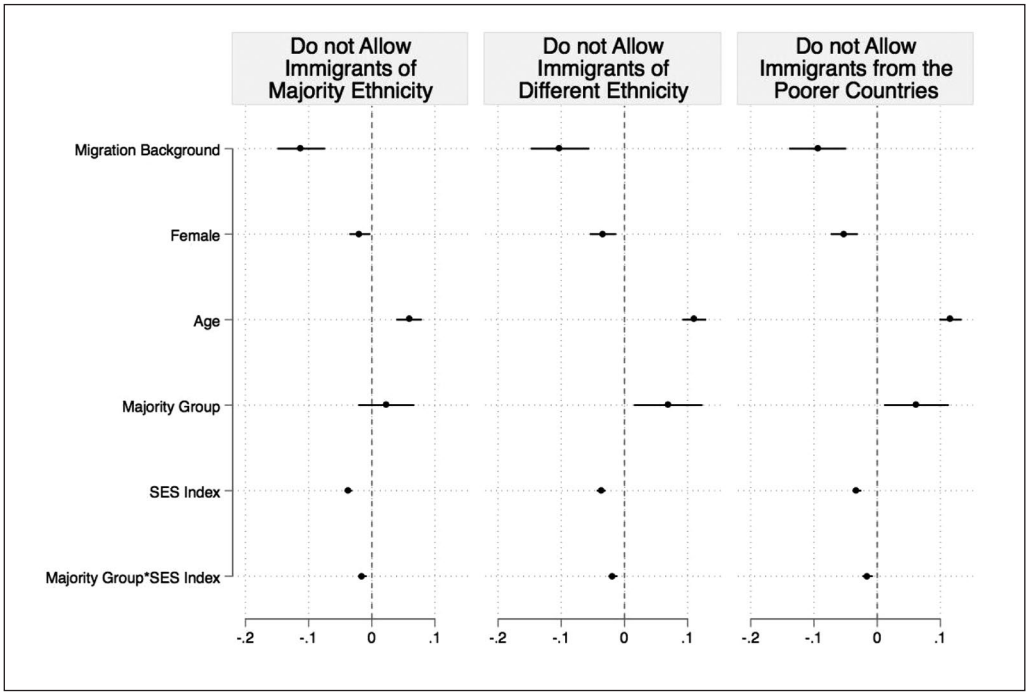



**Figure 11.** Replication of Figure 2 using region-level fixed effects with NUTS-levels.

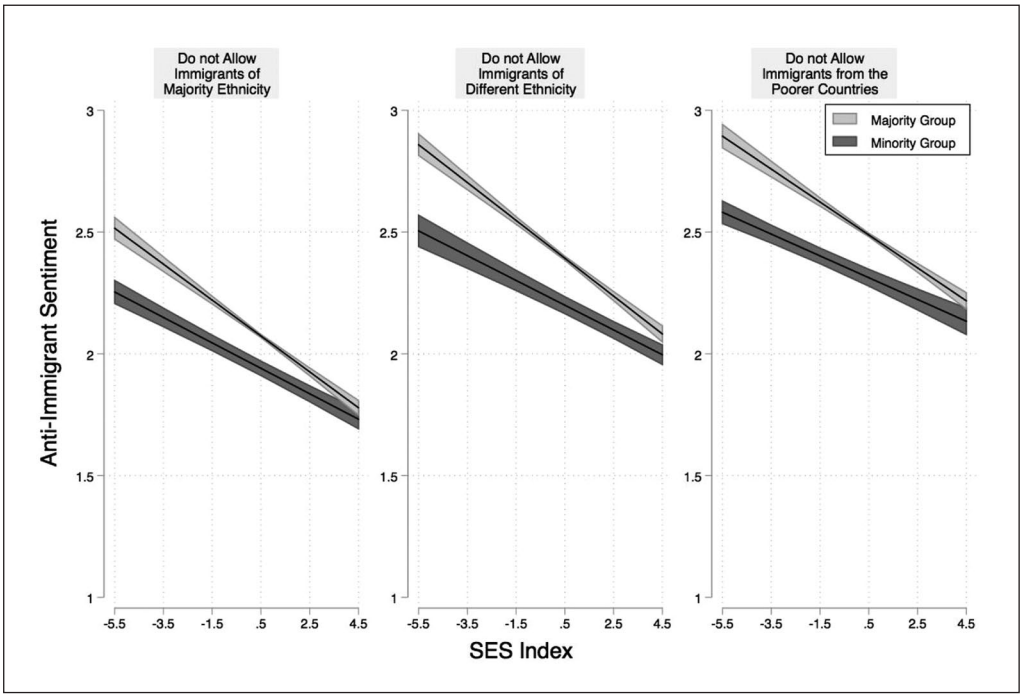



**Figure 12.** Replication for Figure 3 by using region-level fixed effects with NUTS-levels.

**Table 3.** NUTS-level codes.

| Country | NUTS-Level |
|---|---|
| Austria | NUTS-2 |
| Belgium | NUTS-2 |
| Switzerland | NUTS-3 |
| Germany | NUTS-1 |
| Denmark | NUTS-2 |
| Spain | NUTS-2 |
| Finland | NUTS-3 |
| France | NUTS-2 |
| Ireland | NUTS-3 |
| Iceland | NUTS-3 |
| Italy | NUTS-1/2 |
| Netherlands | NUTS-1 |
| Norway | NUTS-2 |
| Portugal | NUTS-2 |
| Sweden | NUTS-2/3 |
| United Kingdom | NUTS-1 |

NUTS: nomenclature of territorial units for statistics.