

## Xenophobia and Immigrant Contact: British Public Attitudes toward Immigration

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Abstract: How does the presence of immigrants or minorities in a local community affect racial and xenophobic attitudes? Synthesizing public opinion, economic, and demographic data from the United Kingdom, we explore this question. By taking advantage of cross-sectional variation in minority populations, we develop and test hypotheses concerning the causal relationships among the presence of immigrant populations and xenophobic sentiments. We find that larger immigrant populations dampen xenophobic attitudes, supportive of the contact theory. In clarifying this relationship, we contribute to ongoing debates over contact theory.

## Introduction

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, immigrants comprise 10.1% of the UK population, amounting to a foreign-born population of nearly 6.1 million.<sup>1</sup> Given its large higher education sector and the spate of low-wage workers from the newest European Union members in Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth countries, net immigration to the UK reaches 190,000 people per year.<sup>2</sup> Given this steady influx of immigrants, a precarious economic situation, physical insecurity in the wake of the 2005 London bombings---perpetrated to a large degree by a group of British-born young men of Pakistani origin---and a current and heated debate over a proposed amnesty bill for the approximately 720,000 illegal immigrants in the UK, public attitudes toward immigrants and the politics of immigration policy have become a salient and electorally potent issue.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its tradition of liberal politics, the British public is consistently more suspicious of immigrants than its counterparts throughout Europe. In the 2008 Eurobarometer, 35% of British residents polled perceived immigration as one of the biggest problems facing the country, compared to a European Union-wide average of 11%. In the 2008 *Transatlantic Trends* study, 62% of UK respondents viewed immigration as “more of a problem” than an opportunity for the country, a greater proportion than in any of the other six countries where the survey was conducted.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, 52% of Britons, again the highest proportion in the survey, view immigrants as an economic threat, taking jobs from UK-born workers. UK residents also expressed strong opposition to ceding control over immigration policy to the European Union.

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<sup>1</sup> *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration*. “Key Findings.” [http://www.transatlantictrends.org/trends/doc/TTI\\_2008\\_Final.pdf](http://www.transatlantictrends.org/trends/doc/TTI_2008_Final.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> “Coming or going?” *The Economist*, October 23, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> “All sins forgiven?” *The Economist*, March 12, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> *Transatlantic Trends*. France, the Netherlands, Poland, Italy, Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom are the seven countries surveyed for the annual report.

The British also had the highest level of opposition to social benefits for immigrants of all other European countries.

Recent British policy toward immigrants has seemingly followed this skeptical and unwelcoming sentiment. *The Economist* noted in 2008 that “The government has already made it harder to gain citizenship by introducing tests on language and culture, though this has been done in the name of improving social cohesion rather than keeping numbers down. A cross-party group of MPs is talking of a four-year time limit for immigrant workers, after which they would have to apply to stay on via a second points system, limited by quota.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to paint the British public as particularly and unequivocally xenophobic. To wit, in the same *Transatlantic Trends* survey, a majority of the British believed that Muslim immigrants – a particularly sensitive issue in light of the purported connection between Muslim extremism and the 2005 London subway bombings – “have a lot to offer British culture.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the UK has previously offered amnesty to illegal immigrants and is in the midst of debating whether to do so again. Perhaps most notably, the British government, even while making citizenship more difficult to attain, has not actively sought to halt the flow of migrants into the country.

In the UK, as elsewhere, the manner in which changing demographics affect public attitudes toward immigrants and other races are not well understood. Therefore, extending previous research on immigration and the role of entrepreneurial elites in France (Digiusto and Jolly 2009), in this paper we explore how interaction with immigrant populations shapes public opinion in the UK. In particular, we consider the contact theory, and its theoretical rival, as the starting point for understanding the dynamic between increasing immigrant populations and

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<sup>5</sup> “Coming or going?” *The Economist*, October 23, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> *Transatlantic Trends*, 22-23.

public opinion. According to Allport's contact theory, increased contact with immigrants ought to undermine xenophobic sentiment. From the perspective of Forbes' alternative theory, however, growing immigrant populations might create a more salient target for entrepreneurial politicians to exploit, thereby increasing xenophobic or racist attitudes. Unfortunately, though, much of the research on the European context does not adequately test these theories, as it focuses either on the state as unit of analysis, thereby ignoring intra-national variation in immigrants, or individual-level analysis, thereby ignoring the context altogether.

### **Contact Theory**

By engaging these questions, we follow a well-established research tradition that began with social psychologist Gordon Allport's study of what has come to be called "contact theory." In *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), Allport outlines his theory that interaction among disparate groups in the pursuit of common goals "undermines mutual stereotypes" and thereby fosters understanding, integration, and peaceable relations (Byman 1998-1999, 720). According to the theory, interaction reveals inter-group similarities and forges new ones, overcoming the differences and skepticism that engender conflict and violence (Brown and Lopez 2001, 281). Subsequent development of the contact hypothesis focuses less on Allport's emphasis of groups' "common humanity" and more on their relative status, authority, and goals (Brown and Lopez 2001, 282). According to the most common variants of the contact hypothesis, convergence among group status and objectives reduces conflict and promotes intergroup cooperation.

Throughout the contact theory literature debate continues as to whether the supposed pacifying effect of recognized similarities operates solely at the individual level. According to this more skeptical account, rather than attenuating conflict, contact at the group level actually

increases tension (Forbes 1997; Brown and Lopez 2001, 284). For H.D. Forbes, Allport and his followers' optimistic conclusion overlooks the countervailing effects that cultural interaction might precipitate (Forbes 1997, 146). Specifically, "[c]ontact which depends upon proximity and incentives reduces cultural differences and leads to assimilation while, at the same time, it produces more efforts to preserve (or even strengthen) intergroup differences and increases ethnocentrism which then reduces contact" (Ross 1998, 393). In his review of Forbes' effort to develop an alternative to Allport's thesis, Ross argues that a key – and omitted – variable is how leaders and political institutions draw on perceived intercultural differences to gain advantage, either working to bridge group divisions by emphasizing commonalities or instead stoking their followers' desires to protect their identity and framing the other group as a danger (Ross 1998, 394). Recent work on ethnic riots in India demonstrates precisely how much political elites can shape and manipulate public attitudes and behavior (Wilkinson 2004).

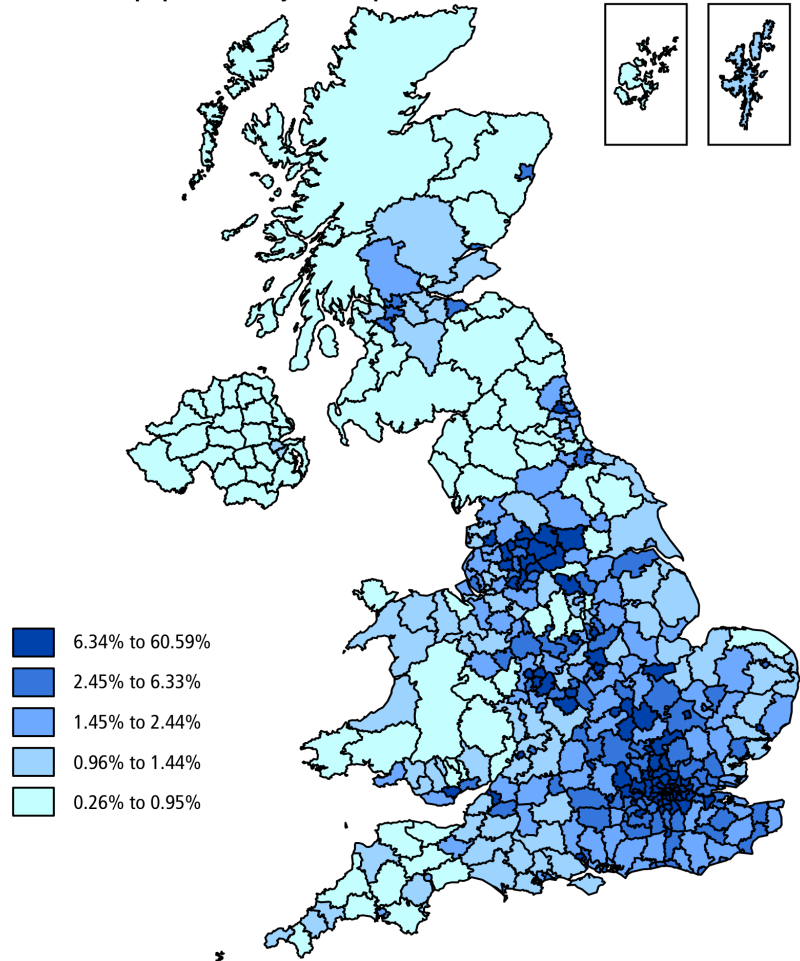
In earlier studies, conducted primarily in the late 1980s and early 1990s, National Front support in France at the department level correlates to the size of the foreign-born population. Such results seem to contradict the optimistic assertions of contact theory. In these same studies, however, the relationship between foreign-born residents and support for the radical right begins to break down at lower levels of aggregation, offering support for contact theory (Mayer 1995, 102; Kitschelt 1995, 103). Indeed, in our own research, we find that greater levels of immigrants at the department level reduce individual-level xenophobia among French voters (DiGiusto and Jolly 2009).

Quillian (1995), however, argues that contact alone does not determine intergroup attitudes. Instead, the state of the economy is a crucial intermediate variable between intergroup contact and the potential for conflict. According to his cross-national study, racial or ethnic

prejudice arises when an individual perceives a threat – operationalized as contemporary economic conditions and the relative size of the migrant population – to his in-group (Quillian 1995, 586; see also Weldon 2006, 339 note 13). In her examination of the EU public’s attitudes toward new members, and Turkey’s candidacy in particular, McLaren (2007) echoes the importance of this causal sequence. She concludes contact with immigrant populations drives hostility toward Turkish and other candidates’ accession to the EU (McLaren 2007, 259). In her individual-level analysis, however, McLaren presents a nuanced causal argument to explain the source of this hostility. Rather than “rational economic self-interest” as a response to the threat of economic competition from immigrants, an individual’s perception of threat to his group generates hostility, “regardless of the degree of personal vulnerability to job loss or dependence on social security benefits” (McLaren 2007, 258, 272-273). For both Quillian and McLaren, therefore, it is perceptions of collective threat that drive attitudes toward out-groups, not contact between individuals or their personal economic circumstances.

These interesting findings suggest a number of hypotheses pertaining to contact theory and xenophobic attitudes, many of which we begin to explore below. For our purposes, though, one limitation to both Quillian and McLaren’s important studies is their focus on the state as the level of analysis. As a result, their analyses overlook the meaningful variation in intergroup contact and economic factors at the sub-state level. In other words, even if Allport’s mechanism is at work, we may not find evidence at the national level of analysis, as immigrants are not distributed uniformly or randomly. Indeed, in the United Kingdom, the average share of non-white residents in UK regions is 5.4%, with a minimum of 2% (Scotland) and maximum of 28.8% (Greater London). Drawn from the 2001 census, Figure 1 demonstrates this variation.

Non-White population: by area, April 2001



Source: Census, April 2001, Office for National Statistics; Census, April 2001 General Register Office for Scotland; Census, April 2001, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency  
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Figure 1. Non-White population: by area, April 2001

According to Allport's contact theory, increased contact with immigrants ought to undermine xenophobic sentiment and, by extension, support for political appeals premised on ethnocentrism. From the perspective of Forbes' alternative theory, however, growing immigrant populations might create a more salient target for entrepreneurial politicians to exploit. A fair test of these competing hypotheses must account for this geographic variation. In our empirical analysis, we address the contradictory hypotheses that emerge from the various understandings of contact theory and its alternatives, stated here as Hypothesis 1.

*Hypothesis 1. Following the contact theory (Forbes theory), as local non-white populations increase, xenophobic attitudes will decrease (increase).*

## **Data**

We compiled our dataset from three main sources: the 2001 British Election Survey (Clarke et al. 2003), the 2001 UK and Scottish Censuses (Office for National Statistics 2009; General Register Office for Scotland 2009), and the Eurostat Regio database (Eurostat 2009). The 2001 British Election Survey (BES), a pre- and post-election cross-section survey, furnishes the public opinion data with which we construct indicators of xenophobia – our dependent variable – as well as various socioeconomic control variables. The survey polled 3,035 registered voters (electors), drawing from a representative sample of gender, age, profession, and geographic region. The BES only asked 2,007 of these electors the four xenophobia questions, yielding our sample. The 2001 BES collected data via self-completion questionnaires and face-to-face interviews between 8 June and 30 September 2001.

For two reasons, the 2001 BES is especially useful as a research domain. First, the timing corresponds to the most recent census, allowing us to match each respondent with the most



accurate estimate of the region's diversity. Second, the survey asks multiple questions regarding attitudes toward immigrants. Each question has a different emphasis, and allows for triangulation on the main theoretical concept of xenophobia.

### **Dependent Variable(s)**

Using the BES public opinion and demographic data, we construct variables to measure political and social attitudes as well as a variety of demographic and socioeconomic control variables. To gauge xenophobia, we draw from the BES' battery of questions about social attitudes. We focus on variables that question respondent attitudes toward immigrants, yielding four measures of xenophobia to serve as dependent variables; variable names are in parentheses.<sup>7</sup> In this analysis, we focus on four questions that tap into xenophobia: whether immigrants increase crime rates (immigrcrime), whether immigrants are generally not good for Britain's economy (immigbadecon), whether immigrants take jobs away from people who were born in Britain (immigtakejobs), and whether immigrants do not make Britain more open to new ideas and cultures (immigbadculture). For each sentence, the survey asked respondents to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements. We recoded these variables so that higher scores are more xenophobic (e.g., for the first dependent variable, higher score means that the respondent strongly agrees that immigrants increase crime rates), and the variables range from one to five.<sup>8</sup> For all four operationalizations of the dependent variable, our hypotheses yield the same predictions and we predict similar results in each regression model.

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<sup>7</sup> We welcome comments on which of these questions are the most appropriate measures for our concepts and/or how to synthesize these 6 questions, such as forming an index or using factor analysis.

<sup>8</sup> The response choices are strongly disagree (5), disagree (4), neither agree nor disagree (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5). In the original survey, two of the questions were coded in the opposite direction (so that lower scores are more xenophobic). For ease of interpreting and comparing the models for each dependent variable, we recoded them to be in the same direction.

Before discussing the multivariate regressions, we present some basic statistics on these four measures. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations.

Table 1. Summary Statistics for Xenophobia Variables

Variable	Mean	S.D.
Immigrants increase crime	3.15	1.08
Immigrants bad for economy	3.22	0.96
Immigrants take jobs	3.12	1.08
Immigrants bad for culture	2.67	0.96

Recall the scale goes from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5), so higher scores are more xenophobic. While the means and standard deviations are generally quite similar, the one non-economic question registers the lowest levels of xenophobia. This distinction suggests that we need to pay particular attention to the economic threat variables, in addition to the contact theory variable.

In addition to the summary statistics, the correlation coefficients suggest these four variables are measuring a similar concept.

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients for Xenophobia Variables

Variable	Crime	Economy	Jobs	Culture
Immigrants increase crime	1.0000			
Immigrants bad for economy	0.4190	1.0000		
Immigrants take jobs	0.5142	0.4716	1.0000	
Immigrants bad for culture	0.4403	0.5148	0.3875	1.0000

In this paper, we evaluate each dependent variable separately, but in future work, we will reconsider whether to aggregate these measures using an index or factor analysis.

## Independent Variables

The British Election Survey also provides a number of key independent variables. We incorporate respondents' self-placement on an eleven-point scale (0-10) to control for general political attitudes (ideology). For control variables, we include respondents' race (white), age (age), gender (female), education level (education>18), income (income), and whether they own a home (homeowner).<sup>9</sup> From previous work, we expect older male respondents to be more xenophobic. Education level, income, and homeowner account for a respondent's level of economic threat. We expect the higher educated, wealthier homeowners to perceive less threat from immigrants, particularly regarding job loss.

In addition, we include the respondent's department level unemployment rate (unemployment), drawn from the Eurostat Regio database, as a control for sociotropic economic concerns. We expect respondents who live in regions with higher unemployment to be less accommodating to immigrants.

From the 2001 national census, we extract data on the non-white population in each region, a key variable for testing our hypothesis related to contact theory. The original data categorizes residents in each region as white, non-white, along with more fine-grained breakdowns. In future iterations, we will also evaluate an alternative measure, percentage of people born abroad, along with the change from 1991 to 2001.

For this analysis, we focus on respondents nested within regions.<sup>10</sup> Including Scotland and Wales, but not Northern Ireland, there are eleven regions. Substantial variation in the number of non-white residents and xenophobic attitudes exists among these regions. Table 3

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<sup>9</sup> These controls are dummy variables, except for age (actual age) and income (12-point scale).

<sup>10</sup> Both the 2001 census and the BES can be disaggregated further into the 659 parliamentary constituencies. Considering the nature of the contact theory, we will consider using this level instead of the region. But before doing that, we need to further analyze the distribution of respondents across these constituencies to evaluate the validity of using that level of analysis.

presents these regions with percentage of non-white residents and average response on the *immigcrime* variable.

Table 3. Xenophobia and Non-White Population,  
By Region

Region	ImmigCrime (Mean)	Non-White (%)
South-East	3.28	4.90
East of England	3.42	4.88
Greater London	3.10	28.85
South-West	3.14	2.30
West Midlands	3.30	11.26
East Midlands	3.28	6.51
Yorkshire & Humberside	3.35	6.52
North-West	3.13	5.56
North	3.13	2.39
Wales	3.13	2.12
Scotland	2.94	2.01

Scottish respondents registered the lowest levels of xenophobia on this question, and also have the lowest numbers of non-white population. But comparing the two columns yields little obvious connection for all the regions. And the correlation coefficient is merely 0.0252. Before concluding that contact has little or no effect, though, we will evaluate the effect in a multivariate model.

### **Analysis and Results**

Significantly, much of the research on xenophobic attitudes focuses on either individuals, ignoring context, or on aggregations at the state level, overlooking individual-level variation. The contact theory predictions hinge on exposure, or contact, to the ‘other.’ National aggregations simply cannot account for this spatial variation. Thus, whereas recent *FT/Harris* polls show that 86% of Germans and 61% of French citizens want immigrants to take citizenship and language courses (Barber 2007), these aggregate numbers cannot differentiate between

citizens with actual exposure to immigrants and those who are simply responding to fear of economic decline.

To evaluate the influence of non-white population on immigrant attitudes, we use ordinary least squares regression models.<sup>11</sup> To correct for a lack of independence within units, we run each regression with robust (Huber/White/sandwich) standard errors, clustered by region. This Stata option acknowledges that observations are independent across groups (regions), but not necessarily within groups, and thus improves the reliability of the standard errors.

We report results for the four models, with the robust standard errors in parentheses, in Table 4.

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<sup>11</sup> Since the dependent variables are 5-point survey questions, we also run ordered logit and attain similar results, including sign and significance of the coefficients. In the next iteration, we will also test the model with hierarchical linear models.

Table 4: Regressions of Attitudes Toward Immigrants

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Immigrants increase crime	Immigrants bad for economy	Immigrants take jobs	Immigrants bad for culture
	$\beta$ (robust S. E.)			
<i>Individual-level</i>				
Left/Right Ideology	0.094*** (0.011)	0.075*** (0.015)	0.078*** (0.013)	0.059*** (0.011)
White	0.644*** (0.99)	0.516*** (0.097)	0.468** (0.114)	0.579** (0.128)
Age	0.003* (0.002)	-0.009** (0.002)	-0.003* (0.002)	0.002 (0.001)
Female	-0.143** (0.046)	0.026 (0.042)	-0.034 (0.055)	-0.064* (0.031)
Homeowner	-0.071 (0.051)	0.025 (0.041)	-0.055 (0.045)	0.025 (0.039)
Income	-0.032** (0.010)	-0.008 (0.005)	-0.035*** (0.007)	-0.007 (0.006)
Education > 18	-0.580*** (0.082)	-0.456*** (0.059)	-0.630*** (0.055)	-0.496*** (0.064)
<i>Department-level</i>				
Non-White Population Share	0.017*** (0.002)	-0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.003)
Unemployment Rate	-0.107*** (0.021)	-0.019 (0.027)	-0.000 (0.026)	-0.024 (0.023)
Constant	2.680*** (0.232)	3.064*** (0.320)	2.816*** (0.215)	2.042*** (0.252)
N	1996	1996	1996	1996
R-squared	0.1648	0.0863	0.1151	0.0951

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients with robust (Huber/White/sandwich) standard errors, clustered by region (n=11), in parentheses. \*p<0.1, \*\*p<0.05, \*\*\*p<0.001.

In each version of the model, the primary explanatory variable of interest is “Non-White Population Share,” the proportion of non-white residents in a region.

In only one of the models, explaining whether immigrants are perceived as a crime risk, is the share of non-white population significant. Further, it is positive. This result runs counter to a comparable model in France where higher levels of immigrants decreases xenophobic attitudes (DiGiusto and Jolly 2009). In the simplest terms, a greater proportion of racial diversity in a region seems to exacerbate xenophobia and racial antipathies. This result provides contradictory evidence for Allport’s contact theory. Two caveats apply, though.

First, in fairness, the aggregation at the regional level is too high to conduct a proper test of the contact theory. In future iterations, we will try to maximize the leverage on this question by disaggregating the survey further into parliamentary constituencies. Also, the questions concern immigrants, but our proxy for contact is based on racial diversity, not immigrants. While it is intuitively plausible that these measures should have similar effect, they are not the same. So, again, in future work, we will use measures for proportion of immigrants rather than racial diversity.

Second, the contact theory variable is not significant in the other three models. While the first model suggests increased contact may exacerbate xenophobic sentiments, the other three models suggest caution is in order. In these models, at worst, an increased number of immigrants does not exacerbate racial tensions, and may alleviate them.

Similar to the French results, though, unemployment is surprisingly ineffective, given the common attribution of unemployment to immigrants. For Model 1, rising unemployment rates decrease xenophobia while they have no statistically significant effect. Again, this result is surprising, given the emphasis on immigrants and unemployment in so much elite rhetoric. But, as with the contact theory generally, perhaps the aggregate level of unemployment misses perceived vulnerability.

Turning to the individual-level variables, the first variable of note is whether the respondents are white. White respondents are far more likely to hold xenophobic attitudes, whether the questions concern crime, economy, or culture. While this result is perhaps not a surprise, it leaves little doubt that we must include it as a control variable.

Higher skilled or educated respondents, as measured by education, are consistently less xenophobic in their attitudes. The education variable is negative and highly significant in all

model specifications. These results are consistent with expectations from economic models, such as the Heckscher-Ohlin theory, which suggests that higher skilled citizens believe they have less to fear from more open trade and immigration regimes (Brinegar and Jolly 2005).

Income has a less consistent effect. As predicted, when significant, income has a negative coefficient, suggesting that poorer voters espouse more negative attitudes toward, in terms of crime and job loss. The income variable is negative but insignificant for the other two variables. The variable measuring whether the respondents own homes turns out to be insignificant as well.

Somewhat surprisingly, though, for the economic variables, age has a negative coefficient. The older respondents had less xenophobic attitudes toward immigrants vis-à-vis the economy and whether immigrants will take their jobs. This surprise is somewhat negated by the modest magnitude of the effect. Yet, for the crime variable, the opposite pattern exists, whereby older voters are more likely to think immigrants are a threat to increase crime.

More consistently, those who identify themselves as politically right of center hold less positive attitudes toward immigrants. This variable is positive and strongly significant in each of the models, thus echoing well-established findings in the literature on radical right parties.

Typically, in studies of xenophobia or radical right-wing voting (Kitschelt 1995, Mayer 2005), women are less likely to share these sentiments. In these UK models, gender is only significant in the crime and culture variables, suggesting there is no gender gap in xenophobic attitudes regarding the economy.

When looking specifically at Model 1, the interpretation of the variables and the magnitude of their effects become clearer. In Table 5, we report the maximum possible effect of a variable by comparing the maximum and minimum.



Table 5: Magnitude of Effects for Model 1

Variable	$\beta$	Scale	Max-Min
Left/Right Ideology	0.094	0-10	0.94
White	0.644	0-1	0.64
Age	0.003	12-98	0.26
Female	-0.143	0-1	-0.14
Income	-0.032	1-12	-0.35
Education > 18	-0.580	0-1	-0.58
Region Non-White	0.017	2-28.8	0.46
Unemployment Rate	-0.107	3.3-7.2	0.42

For Model 1, the dependent variable ranges from one to five, with five being “strongly agree” to the statement “Immigrants increase the crime rate.” The strongest independent variable, in terms of possible effect is ideology. The further toward the right wing, the more likely a respondent will strongly agree that immigrants increase the crime rate. Other individual-level characteristics, such as white and education, also have a strong magnitude.

Beyond these individual-level variables, the region’s share of non-white population has a large potential effect. Again, the caveats above apply. In addition, only two regions have greater than 10% racial diversity. But the result clearly warrants further investigation to test for validity.

## Discussion

As we continue to try to understand how immigration and contact affect voter attitudes toward immigration, we envision three main directions for future research. First, we need to more carefully identify and test for the interactions among our key explanatory variables. In particular, we intend to interact the immigration variable with socioeconomic variables to determine whether large immigration populations affect xenophobic attitudes differently in departments with large working-class populations, where immigrants compete with citizens for jobs, and higher-skill intensive departments, where immigrants provide a much needed boost of

labor. Second, we will test whether economically vulnerable citizens respond differently to changing demographic patterns. Real versus perceived economic and cultural threat is crucial to this investigation.

Finally, we will evaluate the immigration variable at lower levels of aggregation, and also consider other operationalizations. In this paper, we use racial diversity, or percentage of the region that is non-white. But percentage of immigrants may more directly correspond to our theoretical question. With these caveats and next steps in mind, these results suggest that in the British context, caution may be in order when evaluating race relations and immigration policy. Yet more work remains to be done.

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