

# Anti-immigrant attitudes in context: The role of rhetoric, religion and political representation

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## **Abstract**

This thesis directs attention to how attitudes towards immigrants evolve under different contextual circumstances. Unlike previous research that primarily focuses on contextual factors related to the availability of material resources, the included studies explore the influence of less tangible aspects of our surroundings, brought together under the term immaterial contexts. Three kinds of immaterial contexts are in focus: political representatives' use of nationalistic rhetoric, the parliamentary presence of the extreme right, and the religious context. The studies examine the direct effects of these contexts, but also how individuals' beliefs, loyalties, and experiences interact with the contextual factors to shape peoples' attitudes. The thesis takes a comparative approach where countries serve as the main contextual unit. Data on attitudes and other individual features are gathered from the European Social Survey 2002-2012. To be able to analyze these data in the same model as used for country-level data, the thesis applies multi-level models.

The findings support a theoretical expectation that immaterial contexts influence anti-immigrant attitudes. How people perceive immigrants and immigration can be traced to political and religious aspects of their surroundings. Also, it is found that individuals are not passive recipients of contextual influences as their reactions depend on their preferences and experiences. While political representatives influence anti-immigrant attitudes, these effects are strongly conditional both on features of the representatives themselves, and on characteristics and experiences of individuals. For example, individuals respond to political rhetoric by traditional political parties but are not influenced by the same kind of message if conveyed by a party belonging to the extreme right.

The thesis is an attempt to widen the very notion of contexts in empirical research, and as such, it is a contribution to the literature on anti-immigrant attitudes. It shows that anti-immigrant attitudes depend not only on material circumstances, but also on immaterial circumstances tied to the political and religious arena. Further, the thesis demonstrates how combining the theoretical perspectives of group threat theory and framing theory implies greater possibilities to conceive of the link between contexts and attitudes, as well as improved theoretical tools to understand when and why such effects do not occur. It signals that research on immaterial contexts is necessary to further advance the comparative scholarship on anti-immigrant attitudes and reach a deeper understanding of how such attitudes emerge and evolve.

## **Keywords**

Anti-immigrant attitudes, immaterial contexts, political framing, political parties, religious context, Europe.

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