

US Centre Summer PhD Research Grant Report

“Protect our women”: The effects of gendered anti-immigration messages

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Abstract: What happens when politicians and parties start justifying anti-immigration policies with women’s protection and women’s rights? I argue that such gender-immigration messages make anti-immigration views and parties more acceptable and popular. To test this, I conducted survey experiments, varying whether respondents are exposed to a gender-immigration message, an immigration message, a gender message or no message. I find that gender-immigration messages can increase the acceptability of anti-immigration views, particularly among female voters. These findings show that gender equality rhetoric can be used by political actors to normalise anti-immigration views. Talk about “protecting our women” can be a powerful legitimising device for anti-immigrant agendas.

Summary

How do anti-immigrant positions and politicians go from extreme to mainstream? And what has gender got to do with it? In this research project, I explore how radical right-wing politicians and parties make themselves feel and appear more mainstream and acceptable, especially to women. I argue that radical right-wing politicians have started framing immigration as a “women’s issue”, systematically linking anti-immigration messages to gender equality and the protection of women. A good example of this is a 2018 statement by Donald Trump: “Women don’t want them [immigrants] in our country. You look at what the women are looking for: they want to have security”. Using a pilot survey experiment conducted in Germany (n=385), I have shown that gendered anti-immigration messages are indeed powerful catalysts of political behaviour, and encourage women in particular to express higher anti-immigration sentiment and support for the radical right. In line with symbolic mainstreaming theory, I argue that this is mainly because combining previously unacceptable anti-immigration policies with gender equality rhetoric makes anti-immigration positions and parties feel and appear more acceptable. Gender-immigration messages legitimise anti-immigration rhetoric through presenting it as a defense of a highly acceptable, liberal democratic value.

To test these ideas, I conducted two pre-registered priming survey experiments in Germany and Norway, as well as a pilot study in Germany. In Study 1 (Norway 2020) and Study 2 (Germany 2021), I vary whether respondents see a gender-immigration message, an immigration message, a gender message or no message. The design adopted thus allows me to cleanly isolate the effect of combining a gender equality message with an anti-immigration message.

I find that in Study 1, gender-immigration messages increase the acceptability of anti-immigration views above and beyond a simple immigration message, gender message or no message while in Study 2 (Germany 2021) a message about violence against women without any mention of immigration is enough to make women, compared to men, more accepting of anti-immigration views. This shows just how enmeshed gender equality rhetoric and anti-immigration messages have become in this context. Talking about violence against women, gender equality and women’s safety in this context can function as a xenophobic dog whistle once these discourses become established within the public realm.

This research project makes three contributions to our wider understanding of radical right politics and immigration attitudes. Firstly, how do anti-immigration views go from extreme to being perceived as mainstream? This study provides experimental evidence to an important and growing discussion about how anti-immigration views become normalised and accepted. Secondly, how do elite actors, such as parties and politicians, shift social norms around immigration? While much research has explored demand-side or external explanations focusing on shifts in voter preferences or overall societal changes in norms, this paper focuses on how parties themselves might try to manipulate how acceptable anti-immigration views perceived to be.

Thirdly, this paper is contributing to these two questions by explicitly adopting a gender lens to the study of immigration attitudes and social norms. What motivates women in particular to openly express anti-immigration positions? This paper tackles the first two questions at the specific example of anti-immigration messages paired with statements to uphold gender equality, to ensure women's safety and to protect women's rights. Examining how the radical right's immigration discourse affects perceived acceptability of anti-immigration positions and voting behaviour also sheds light on the broader questions of how elite discourse influences social norms, political attitudes and behaviour. While a gender lens to studying the radical right has traditionally stressed the absence of women and gender issues in these movements and parties, this project shows that these actors can also use gender rhetoric to their advantage. Even small and gradual changes in how acceptable anti-immigration positions are perceived to be can have long-term consequences for political behaviour, and citizens' expectations of politicians and parties. If the boundaries around what constitutes acceptable discourse bend, this also has harmful effects on behaviours in-and outside the political realm, such as discrimination and hate speech. Mainstream actors and politicians should take note of how powerful gendered anti-immigration statements can be in making women in particular more accepting of anti-immigrant rhetoric, and work on creating equally powerful counter-narratives to these frames.

The LSE US Centre PhD Summer Research grant played a pivotal role in making this research possible. Without the generous financial support by the US Centre, the core study in this research project - a well-powered survey experiment using the latest methods in experimental political science - would not have been implemented. The LSE US Centre Summer Research Grant was used to pay a reputable German panel provider, Respondi, to field the survey to a representative sample of N=3002 adults in May 2021.

Appendix - Results overview

Two survey experiments were used to test what effects gendered immigration messages have on voters. Within the survey experiment, respondents first read a short text, and then answered a set of survey questions on their vote intention, immigration attitudes and how acceptable they think it is to see something negative about immigrants. Overall, I find evidence in favour of the argument that gender-immigration messages increase the acceptability of anti-immigration views.

Y: Is it acceptable to say something negative about immigrants? 0-10, 10=Very acceptable

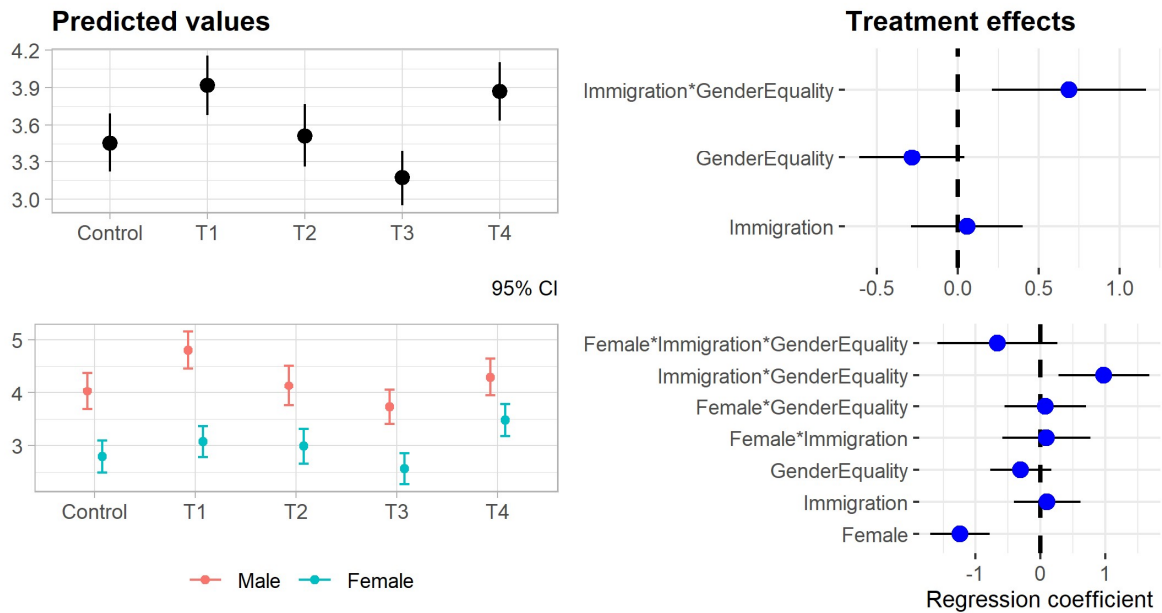


Figure 1 Gender-immigration messages make voters more accepting of anti-immigrant positions (Study 1)

The graphs on the left-hand side of the panel depict the mean values for acceptability of anti-immigrant views according to treatment group. Participants in T1 were exposed to a gender-immigration message, participants in T2 were exposed to an anti-immigration message, and participants in T3 were exposed to a gender equality message, while participants in the Control group did not read any text before answering the outcome questions. In Study 1, the gendered immigration message had a significant positive effect on respondents' perceived acceptability of anti-immigrant statements (see Figure 1). After reading the combined gender equality and anti-immigration message, respondents were more likely to say that it is acceptable to say something negative about immigrants. The effect represents a sizeable effect of a 0.24 Standard Deviation increase in the acceptability of anti-immigrant statements.

As theoretically predicted, in Study 1 the effect of the gender-immigration message is driven by the stark contrast with both the simple gender equality message, and the simple anti-immigration message. Receiving the gender equality message (T3) (compared to the Control) made respondents feel it is less acceptable to say something negative about immigrants. The immigration message by itself (T2) had a small positive effect on perceived acceptability of anti-immigration statements. Combining these two messages into a gendered anti-immigration statement made respondents feel it is more acceptable to say something negative about immigrants. The effects of the gender equality message are thus highly contextual: presented by itself, it motivates respondents to see anti-immigration rhetoric as less acceptable. Paired with a standard anti-immigration message, a gender equality message has

the opposite effect: it makes respondents feel that saying something bad about immigrants is more acceptable, and helps to legitimise anti-immigrant views.

Y: Is it acceptable to say something negative about immigrants? 0-10, 10=Very acceptable

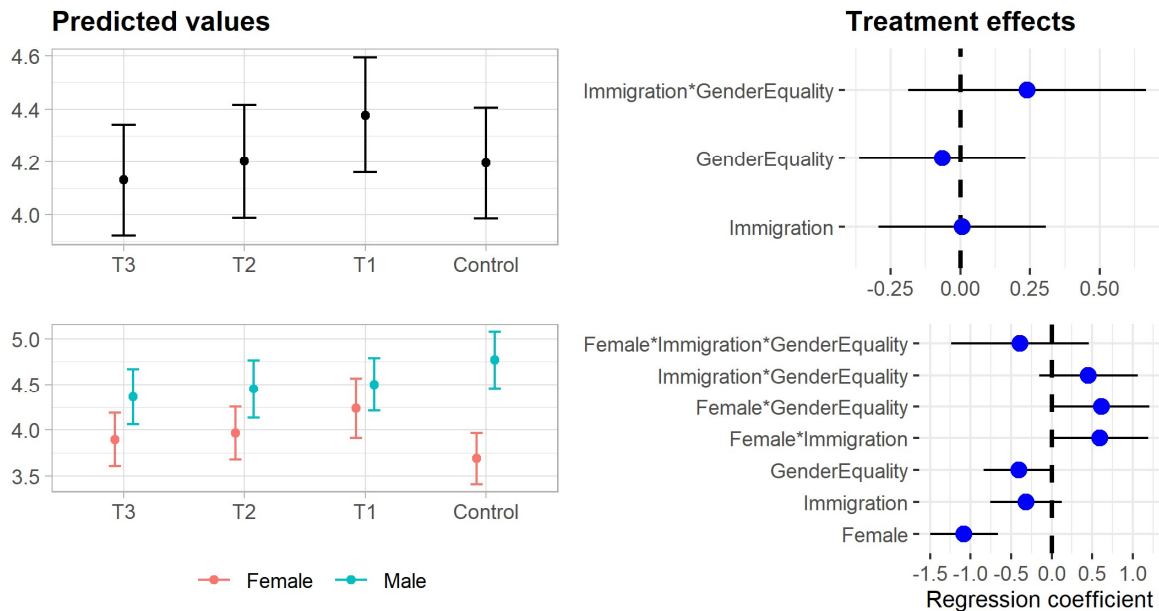


Figure 2 Gender-immigration messages make women, compared to men, think it is more acceptable to say something negative about immigrants (Study 2)

In Study 2 (Germany 2021), the interaction effect between the gender message and the anti-immigration message is not significant (see Figure 2). However, a political statement about violence against women without any mention of immigration is already enough to make women feel it is more acceptable to say something negative about immigrants. This shows just how enmeshed gender equality and women's protection issues have become with anti-immigration concerns in this context.