Brexit, COVID-19, and attitudes toward immigration in Britain

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Abstract
Objective: A key issue in Britain’s referendum on European Union membership was the free movement of labor into Britain, with Brexit “Leavers” having more negative attitudes toward immigrants than “Remainers.” Such anti-immigrant attitudes are driven by feelings of threat. The coronavirus pandemic presented a new threat in the context of ongoing Brexit negotiations. This paper examines how the COVID-19 pandemic affected anti-immigrant attitudes and how these effects differ between Leavers and Remainers.

Methods: Using an online survey in Spring 2020 of 3,708 individuals residing in the UK, we experimentally test the effect of priming COVID-19 thoughts on anti-immigrant attitudes, and examine whether this effect varies by Brexit identity.

Results: We show that COVID-19 may exacerbate anti-immigrant attitudes among Leavers while having little effect on Remainers.

Conclusion: These findings support the idea that the coronavirus pandemic might have presented a new, viral, threat that heightened anti-immigrant attitudes among certain political identities.

The outcome of the United Kingdom’s 2016 referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) was influenced by strong and highly salient public attitudes toward immigration. As a now large literature on the Brexit vote makes clear, public opposition to immigration into Britain from EU member states and/or negative attitudes about the perceived effects of immigration on the country were among the strongest drivers of public support for “Leave” (for reviews of this evidence, see Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Kaufmann, 2019). Such anti-immigrant attitudes are driven by perceived threats. On the other hand, research since the referendum has pointed to the decreased salience of immigration and a “softening” of public attitudes toward immigrants and immigration (Ford, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2021).

In this article, we ask how the new threat of the recent coronavirus pandemic might affect anti-immigrant attitudes, in the context of the Brexit negotiations, ongoing at the time of the pandemic’s start. Coming against the backdrop of Brexit and a protracted national debate about immigration, could the outbreak of COVID-19 heighten anti-immigrant attitudes? Conversely, given that migrant workers...
have been a prominent story of the pandemic—with many overseas nurses and doctors dying during the crisis—could this further encourage a softening of public attitudes as noted by the studies listed above? Finally, how do these potential effects differ by those that identify as Brexit “Remainers” and “Leavers?” In answering these questions, we explore the effect of a viral threat on immigration attitudes and heterogeneity in that effect, on the basis of political identities. Below we review the current understanding of the role of perceived threats from immigrants on anti-immigrant/immigration attitudes and support for Brexit. We then outline our expectations regarding the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on anti-immigrant/immigration attitudes among Remainers and Leavers. We then describe the design of and the results from a survey experiment conducted to test those expectations.

In recent years, there has emerged a vast literature on the drivers of anti-immigrant and anti-immigration sentiment (see, for overviews, Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). A central element in many explanations is the role of perceived threats, especially “realistic” threats and “symbolic” threats, both to the social identity group (ethnic, class, etc.) an individual belongs to and to the individual themselves (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison, 2009).

Symbolic threats include threats to one’s national culture, values and “way of life” and emphasize the role of social identity groups and/or symbolic concerns. Realistic threats result from conflict over scarce resources (e.g., jobs, government benefits, housing) and valued goods—political and economic power, but also the group’s well-being more broadly (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison, 2009). They can concern the material self-interest of individuals, or the group as a whole. Realistic threats can also include the perceived threat of disease and contamination (Faulkner et al., 2004; Navarrete and Fessler, 2006). Recent research suggests that immigrants can trigger the behavioral immune system (Aarøe, Petersen and Arméneaux, 2017)—psychological mechanisms that “detect cues connoting the presence [threat] of infectious pathogens in the immediate environment” (Schaller and Park, 2011).

In general, threats to the group (sociotropic threats) have been found to be strong predictors of anti-immigrant/immigration sentiment (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior, 2004; Quillian, 1995). In contexts in which such sociotropic threats increase, negative sentiment is said to increase. Accordingly, research shows that (sub-)national economic conditions (e.g., employment rates, affluence, recessions), differences in the size of immigrant groups and sudden increases in the flow of immigrants (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014) impact anti-immigrant and anti-immigration attitudes. Although these conditions have not necessarily translated into increased support for radical right parties (Amengay and Stockemer, 2019), scholars have argued that in Britain these conditions played a role in increased support for Brexit.

Anti-immigration attitudes and threat perceptions have consistently been found to have been stronger predictors of support for Leave than economic factors, such as income or employment status. For example, Goodwin and Milazzo (2017) find that citizens who felt the most strongly negative about immigration and its effects were more likely to vote Leave. Hobolt (2016) found that support for Brexit was not only concentrated among less well educated and older voters but among those who “expressed concerns about immigration and multiculturalism.” Curtice (2017) found that this vote was driven strongly by a sense that EU membership was damaging Britain’s “distinctive sense of identity,” of which the perceived threat from immigration was central. Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017) similarly found that negative attitudes toward immigration influenced broader perceptions of risk: individuals who felt negatively about immigration were not only more likely to vote Leave but when making their decisions were also less likely to perceive Brexit as a risk.

British Election Study (BES) researchers have argued that large-scale immigration became one of several significant external “shocks” for British voters, alongside others such as the post-2008 global financial crisis (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). The shock of large-scale immigration not only increased the salience of this issue but also heightened electoral volatility and provided a market for anti-immigration challenger parties such as the populist UK Independence Party and then, in 2019, its successor, the Brexit Party (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). After controlling for the effect of overall migration and other variables, Goodwin and Heath

1 Older versions of intergroup threat theory also included threats resulting from intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes (Stephan et al., 2005: 3).
(2016; see also Colontone and Stanig, 2018) find that local districts that experienced a rapid increase in levels of EU migration over the preceding decade were more likely to endorse Brexit.

Interestingly, post-Brexit anti-immigrant (Schwartz et al., 2021) and anti-immigration sentiment (Ford, 2018) have softened again among both Leavers and Remainers. Schwartz et al. (2021) attribute this softening to a greater sense of control over immigrant flows among Leavers and a distancing from accusations of xenophobia and racism among both Leavers and Remainers. However, the sudden outbreak of COVID-19 signaled the arrival of yet another big external “shock,” potentially leading citizens once again to feel under threat. Feelings of threat from the pandemic may, for example, take the form of realistic threats regarding access to healthcare and government support, symbolic threats to one’s (pre-COVID) way of life, or might result from negative stereotypes suggesting individuals with a particular heritage are responsible for spreading the virus. Research on past infectious diseases shows that individuals often attribute the spread of the disease to the characteristics and actions of out-groups (Eicher and Bangerter, 2015) as a way of controlling anxiety with respect to the disease (Joffe, 1999). In the case of COVID-19, that could be the characteristics and actions of those of Chinese and/or Asian heritage, where the disease is thought to have originated, or of Italian or Spanish heritage, where the disease (at the time) was viewed as spreading faster than other parts of Europe. These feelings of threat have the potential to inflame anti-immigrant attitudes. Even prior to the pandemic, research suggests that those with high disgust sensitivity viewed immigrants as a potential pathogen threat, motivating anti-immigration sentiments (Aaroe, Petersen and Arceneaux, 2017). Importantly, the resulting anti-immigrant attitudes need not be restricted to particular out-groups (e.g., Chinese or Spanish) but can be directed at low status out-groups in general (Cadinu and Reggiori, 2002). For instance, sudden threatening events such as terrorist attacks (Das et al., 2009) or an outbreak of large-scale rioting (de Rooij, Goodwin, and Pickup, 2015) have been shown to heighten prejudice toward out-groups generally, regardless of whether out-group members were identified as perpetrators in the attack or as participants in the riots. It is also possible that the increased fear of death that the pandemic may have created has made individuals more sensitive to threats, both symbolic and realistic (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison, 2009). In other words, those who already felt that immigrants represent a threat to their resources, culture and way of life may be even more sensitive to these feelings during the pandemic.

A key role in whether events are perceived as threatening and result in negative attitudes toward minority groups is played by elites, the media, and framing (Valentino, Brader, and Jardina, 2013; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay, 2008; Eicher and Bangerter, 2015; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014:233–4; Osborn, Sosa and Rios, 2020). Although COVID as a threat was widely communicated through the media, there were also stories in the media about migrant nurses and doctors fighting on the front lines against coronavirus and in some cases dying. Such stories have the potential to decrease anti-immigrant attitudes. In March 2020, it was widely reported that migrant doctors, nurses, and paramedics would have their visas extended so that they could “focus on fighting coronavirus.” The next week, it was reported that eight migrant doctors had died in the UK as a result of tackling coronavirus and in early April 2020 Prime Minister Boris Johnson publicly thanked the migrant nurses and doctors for saving his life. In the same month, it was revealed that while people from Black, Asian or other minority racial/ethnic backgrounds comprise 44 percent of all healthcare workers in the National Health Service, 72 percent of healthcare workers who had died while helping patients on the front lines came from these backgrounds. In sum, one of the dominant

2 See Harell, Soroka, and Iyengar (2017) for a discussion of the role of perceptions of control.
3 Arguably, it spread just as fast in the UK.
4 There were stories in the media of coronavirus-related hate crimes in the UK and abroad.
5 De Rooij, Goodwin and Pickup (2015), for instance, show how an outbreak of rioting in the UK increased concerns about threats to British culture and about increased violence and vandalism in British society, and how this impacted hostility toward both Black British and East European minorities, and Das et al. (2009) use Terror Management Theory (TMT) to explain how (news of) a terrorist attack increases thoughts of death, which in turn leads to prejudice against out-groups. TMT has not been much used in political science but is well known in psychology. It posits that thoughts of death trigger a defense of our “internalized cultural worldview” and of that part of our self-esteem that is derived from belonging to a particular identity group—both key in providing a sense of psychological security—and which in turn leads to “negative reactions to others who subscribe to different worldviews” and/or who threaten this “group-identification-based self-esteem” (Greenberg et al., 2016:110–2).
media narratives of the outbreak in Britain focused on the sacrifice of doctors and nurses from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds. Research suggests that exposure to counter-stereotypical examples in news stories of members of racial and/or ethnic minority groups can increase favorable attitudes toward the minority group and policies that affect the group (e.g., Ramasubramanian, 2015).

The impact of threat perceptions on anti-immigrant attitudes is not expected to be uniform. Certain types of individuals are more likely to perceive threats and to display anti-immigrant sentiment (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2010). The effects of threat on immigration attitudes are expected to be heterogeneous across a population. The leave campaign during Brexit played on and reinforced Leavers’ feelings that immigrants threatened to take jobs from native Britons and were a threat to the “British way of life.” In the context of Brexit negotiations, it would presumably not be difficult for the spread of an infectious disease to further prime feelings of threat. This might be by exacerbating pre-existing perceptions of immigrants as a pathogen threat or by making individuals more sensitive to out-group threats generally (symbolic and realistic). Further, regarding the positive coverage of immigrants in the news media, we would expect motivated reasoning to lessen any impact this might have on Leavers’ attitudes. Motivated reasoning with respect to partisan identities is well established (inter alia, Anderson et al., 2004; Evans and Andersen, 2006; Evans and Pickup, 2010) and Hobolt and Sorace (2020) demonstrate motivated reasoning linked to Brexit identities. Theories of motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge, 2006) suggest Leavers will be predisposed to filter out positive messages about immigrants’ role in fighting coronavirus, given these messages are inconsistent with prior Brexit beliefs (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley, 2020). It is more likely that the coronavirus will increase the perception of immigrants as a threat among Leavers. This is far less likely among Remainers who were unaffected by the “immigrants as threat” messaging during Brexit. Meanwhile, positive messages regarding the role of immigrants in the fight against coronavirus are consistent with the prior beliefs of Remainers and so have the potential to produce more positive immigration attitudes among this group. Further, research has shown that threat can actually increase positive behaviors toward out-group members among those who wish to appear unprejudiced (Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison, 2009: 52).

We hypothesize that the negative effects of COVID-19 on immigration attitudes in the context of Brexit negotiations are most likely to occur among Brexit Leavers and positive effects are most likely to occur among Remainers. Note that we are not arguing that the Brexit identity—identifying as a “Leaver” or “Remainer”—is a causal moderator. Rather, we are arguing that because the Brexit identity has become such a central aspect of British politics (maybe more so than partisanship; Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley, 2020) and so highly aligned with perceptions of and sensitivity to threats from immigrants, it is an effective way of capturing pre-existing attitudes, values and sociodemographic characteristics that are likely to lead to heterogeneity in the effects of COVID-19 on immigration attitudes. It is not just membership in a Brexit identity group itself but the norms, values and other attributes that constitute that identity that lead to effect heterogeneity.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The data were collected through an online survey fielded between March 14 and April 15, 2020 ($N = 3,708$). The sample was drawn from Vox Pop Labs’ online panel of approximately 35,000 individuals residing in the UK. This online panel was recruited through the 2016 Eurometer project and respondents were prestratified on the basis of region, age, sex, and vote. Like many online panels, the respondents are likely

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6 Brexit identities bias individual perceptions of the economy, and these biases are exacerbated when individuals are reminded of Brexit.

7 Note: The survey which included the experiment described below was designed to measure the differences between Leavers and Remainers in their preferences regarding the Brexit negotiations and this intent was preregistered. However, the questions regarding COVID-19 and the subsequent experiment were not part of that preregistration, as these questions were added at the last minute when the severity of the pandemic was just becoming apparent (and when the researcher responsible for that preregistration was busy trying to figure out how to get back to his home country).

8 We could have selected other identities (e.g., social class) or attributes (e.g., education) to look for effect heterogeneity but Brexit identities were arguably the most salient political identities in Britain, given the political context at the time, and highly relevant to immigration attitudes and threat sensitivity.
more politically engaged than the average Briton. However, we are focusing on Brexit identifiers who are likely more politically engaged anyways. The survey contained 20 minutes of questions about respondents’ preferences regarding the ongoing Brexit negotiations. The experiment, reported on in this research note, followed. The experiment contained a block of questions on COVID-19 and a block of questions on attitudes toward immigration. Respondents either saw the COVID-19 block or the immigration block first. This was randomized. Those in the control group saw the immigration block first and those in the treatment group saw the COVID-19 block first. The COVID-19 block asked respondents: how concerned they are by COVID-19; their attitudes toward the government’s current response to COVID-19; precautions they were taking in response to the potential risk posed by COVID-19; and whether they knew anyone who had contracted COVID-19 (see Supporting Information A). The immigration block asked: how many new immigrants the UK should allow generally; the extent to which the UK should allow migrants from poorer countries outside Europe; whether there are too many migrants from EU countries in the UK; whether migrants from EU countries were the main source of unemployment; the extent to which the UK should allow migrants from poorer countries outside Europe; and whether immigrants to the UK can retain their cultural values without being less British (see Supporting Information A).

The COVID-19 block is designed to prime respondents in the treatment group to think about COVID-19 and the risks it poses before they answered the questions in the immigration block. Those in the control group were asked the immigration questions before they were asked anything about COVID-19. Of course, during the period in which the survey was fielded COVID-19 was on the minds of pretty much everyone even without the priming. Therefore, our effects are likely conservative in that they are the causal effects of additional priming. Note also that those in the control and treatment groups were equally primed to think about the Brexit negotiations by the preceding 20-minute questionnaire. Therefore, we are estimating effects of COVID-19 in the context of those negotiations.

A priori, we expect the effects of COVID-19 on immigration attitudes to vary within the British population. Specifically, we look at how the effects vary by Brexit identity—whether the respondent identifies as a “Leaver” or “Remainer.” The question measuring this was asked before either the COVID-19 or immigration blocks.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Before looking at the results from the experiment, we report on the degree of concern felt by those in the UK as expressed in responses to the question: “How concerned are you about the threat posed to the United Kingdom by the coronavirus (COVID-19)?” on a response scale from (1) “Not at all concerned” to (5) “Extremely concerned.” The average response is 3.68 (SD: 1.03), which falls between “Somewhat concerned” (3) and “Very concerned” (4).

We next turn to the experimental results to see how priming this concern in the context of Brexit negotiations translates into anti-immigrant attitudes. We look at how the responses to the immigration questions vary by whether or not the individual was first primed to think about COVID-19 and use a chi-squared statistic to determine if the differences are statistically significant.

We begin by looking at the control group for Leavers and Remainers in Figure 1. We see that descriptively Leavers are far more likely to say that the UK should admit “somewhat less” or “many fewer” immigrants (89.8 percent) compared to Remainers (13.7 percent). Without priming COVID-19, Leavers and Remainers are polarized on immigration attitudes.

We next look at the effect of priming Leavers and Remainers to think about COVID-19 before answering questions about immigration. Among Brexit

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9 See Supporting Information B for a balance test.
10 The COVID-19 block also mentions the government’s response, which may prime partisan considerations; however, these were probably already primed before the experiment in both the treatment and control groups by the nature of the Brexit survey.
11 Figures A.1 to A.5, in Supporting Information C, provide a direct comparison of Leavers’ and Remainers’ attitudes on immigration asked about prior to treatment (those in the control group).
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Leavers, the COVID-19 prime increases the percent of respondents indicating that the UK should admit many fewer immigrants by six percentage points (Figure 1). This is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p$-value $= 0.007$). There is a corresponding six percentage point drop in the percent of respondents indicating that the UK should admit somewhat less immigrants. There is no discernible effect on Remainers.

Among Leavers, the COVID-19 prime increases the percent of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that there are too many people from EU countries living in the UK by six percentage points (Figure 2). This is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p$-value $= 0.043$). There is a corresponding six percentage point drop in the percent of respondents slightly agreeing or slightly disagreeing. Again, there is no discernible effect on Remainers.

We do not detect any effect of the COVID-19 prime on the extent to which respondents thought that people from poorer countries outside Europe should be allowed to come and live in the UK (Figure 3). This is true of Leavers and Remainers.

The COVID-19 prime produces a statistically significant increase of almost six percentage points in the percent of Leavers slightly, somewhat or strongly agreeing that migrants from other EU countries are the main cause of unemployment in the UK ($p$-value $= 0.011$) (Figure 4). The prime also produced a 2.6 percentage point increase in Leavers strongly disagreeing that immigrants to the UK can retain their cultural values without being any less British ($p$-value $= 0.021$) (Figure 5). At the same time, it produced a 2.2 percentage point increase in Leavers strongly agreeing with the statement. This ambiguous result is statistically significant. As before, there is no discernible effect among Remainers for either question.

12 All $p$-values are one-tailed.
FIGURE 3  To what extent do you think the UK should allow people from the poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here?

FIGURE 4  Migrants from other EU countries are the main cause of unemployment in the UK

Overall, there is substantial evidence that COVID-19 has the potential to increase anti-immigrant attitudes among Leavers but not among Remainers. While we hypothesized a potential lessening of anti-immigrant among Remainers, the heterogeneity in the effects of COVID-19 on anti-immigrant attitudes between Leavers and Remainers is generally as we expected given the centrality of immigration attitudes in distinguishing these identity groups.

FIGURE 5  Immigrants to the UK can retain their cultural values without being any less British
Given that the British political parties have taken different positions on Brexit, one might wonder how the COVID-19 treatment might be conditioned by support for the different parties, and whether the positions of those parties primarily supported by Remainers might explain the null result among Remainers. During the referendum, Labour and the Liberal Democrats took relatively firm pro-immigrant positions, supporting a continuation of freedom of movement of those from the EU. Since the referendum, Labour has taken a less clear position. Meanwhile, Conservatives have been consistent in their position against the freedom of movement of immigrants from the EU before and after the referendum. It is also the case that while the relationship between Brexit identity and party support is far from perfect, the majority of Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters identify as Remain and the majority of Conservative supporters identify as Leave. On that basis, one might postulate that the unclear position Labour has recently taken on immigration mitigates the treatment effect for some Remainers. Specifically, we might expect to see a clear effect for Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters but not Labour supporters. To examine this possibility, we look at the treatment effects for the five outcome variables by supporters of Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats. To be clear, this was not part of the original research design. Rather, it is a post hoc exploration. The results are presented in Supporting Information D and they do not reveal any statistically significant treatment effects within each of the party categories. It appears that while there is a correlation between Brexit identity and party support, the treatment effects really are conditioned by Brexit identity and not party support.

Next, we examined whether the conditioning effect of Brexit identity is itself conditioned by partisanship. This requires an analysis of respondent subgroups defined by both Brexit identity and party support. Because this results in a small number of respondents in some of these groups, we adjust our strategy for this analysis. We used Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) linear regressions, where we regress the outcome variable on the treatment variable, the partisan support variable, and their interaction. We estimate a regression for each outcome variable and each Brexit identity. This produces treatment effects for each partisan support group, within each Brexit identity group. The results are presented in Supporting Information D. For Leavers, we find statistically significant effects for two of the outcome variables among Conservative supporters, for three of the outcome variables among Labour supporters, and for none of the outcome variables among Liberal Democrats. The significant treatment effects among Conservative/Leavers are in the same direction as they are for Leavers as a whole. The significant treatment effects among Labour/Leavers are in the opposite direction—in other words, in a more pro-immigrant direction. For Remainers, we only find one statistically significant effect, which is well within the false detection rate and so likely due to chance. Overall, it is still unclear as to why the treatment had no effect for Remainers, but the analysis does reveal that the treatment effect for Leavers is somewhat conditioned by party support. The shift toward a more anti-immigrant position may be limited to Conservative party supporters.

CONCLUSION

In the UK, the outbreak of COVID-19 took place against the backdrop of a period of considerable political volatility. In the five years before the pandemic, the UK had witnessed the shock vote for Brexit, a protracted national debate about this result, the electoral rise of national populist parties, and the broader fragmentation of the party system. The issue of immigration was central to this debate, with negative attitudes toward the free movement of labour from other EU member states, or a desire to reform immigration, being a driver of public support for Brexit, the national populist Brexit Party, and Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party.

13 To identify supporters of these three parties, we combine a question asking who the respondent voted for in the last general election and (for those that did not vote) a question asking who the respondent would have voted for if they had voted. It should be noted that this question was asked after the treatment (near the end) and so there is the potential for post-treatment bias in our analysis. However, to the extent that the treatment is unlikely to have affected past party support, the analysis will be free from such bias.

14 For two of the outcomes, the treatment effect is significant among Conservatives. However, the effects are in opposite directions for the two outcomes.
Media reports suggest the coronavirus may be increasing hate crimes and has the potential to inflame preexisting anti-immigrant attitudes. At the same time, the national debate over COVID-19 has seen much media draw attention to the positive contribution that migrant workers make, particularly in the National Health Service. While it may be too early to investigate the full effects of COVID-19 on public opinion, our innovative survey experiment shows that in the context of Brexit negotiations, COVID-19 may indeed exacerbate anti-immigrant attitudes among Brexit Leavers while having little effect on Remainers. If this is so, the gap in immigration attitudes between the two identity groups may only widen further. Finally, while we focused on a particular identity made highly salient by the national political context, we expect that other political identities and their constituent attitudes, values, and attributes might play a role in the heterogeneity of threat effects in other political contexts (e.g., partisan identities in the United States).

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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

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