



The public face of interest group lobbying on immigration: Who responds to and who ignores what they say

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Abstract

A main avenue for influencing public policy available to unions and business is public opinion campaigning. As groups with substantial credibility in the minds of the public, unions and employers have the potential to move immigration attitudes and, thereby, have a long-term indirect influence on immigration policy. The article asks, first, who is (not) convinced by arguments from business or labour leaders and second, what messages are most convincing. We present the results of a survey experiment in three very different immigration regimes and interest group environments (Canada, the UK and Germany). The results suggest that the net effects of public arguments are small, but vary widely across demographic groups.

Keywords

Business, immigration, public opinion, survey experiments, trade unions

Introduction

In 2014, in response to an initiative that would drastically cut immigration into Switzerland, the Swiss Employers Association argued that ‘Our economy depends on immigration of foreign workers. . . Without immigration, the labour market could collapse soon’ (Daum, 2013). A year later, in the wake of terrorist attacks in Paris, the president of the German Employers Association argued that ‘Germany has long become a country of immigrants and has to stay that way. Immigrants are our fellow citizens, neighbours and friends – an indispensable part of our economy, society and culture’ (Grillo, 2015).¹ Do these comments sway public opinion? Which argument is more likely to persuade? Who is

more likely to be persuaded? Many scholars have argued that business and labour groups are able to influence policy. These studies have explored many avenues by which business and labour groups shape policy (Boräng et al., 2020). In this article, we emphasise an understudied route of policy influence – public persuasion, or the ‘outside option’ (Beyers, 2008), adding to that research by arguing that these kinds of press releases, aimed at a general audience, are unlikely to have an aggregate effect on public

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opinion. Instead, we emphasise effect heterogeneity and the need for more care by these groups in designing public influence campaigns.

Business and labour organisations have a range of methods for influencing immigration policy, such as lobbying policymakers directly, funding research that supports their point of view, or encouraging their employees or members to vote one way or another. Another potential tool for doing so is to shape public opinion. These groups, as organisations who have built up ‘source credibility’ (Alt et al., 2016) with (some members of) the public, based on their work and reputations in other fields, may be able to shift the attitudes of their members or of the public at large through speeches, publications and statements to the media. Drawing on work in political psychology (Weber et al., 2012; Zaller, 1992), we argue that these groups have the potential to influence the public, but that this influence will vary in systematic ways.

As Knotz et al. (2020) argue, business and labour groups have faced mirror-image dilemmas in their public engagement on the topic of immigration. Unions face a trade-off between restricting labour supply to increase wages on the one hand and a basic ideological commitment to working-class solidarity on the other hand (Afonso et al., 2020). This dilemma is bolstered by party systems that have generally allied unions with parties (and voters) of the multi-cultural left.

Business groups, on the other hand, face a trade off between the cheap labour and economic growth that come with immigration and the potential for higher taxes to sustain the welfare state if the immigrants become dependent on it (Helbling and Kriesi, 2014). This latter effect can be somewhat lessened if the welfare state can be structured to prevent access by new migrants or to select migrants who are less likely to become dependent (Borwein and Donnelly, 2019). As with unions, business groups face something of a dilemma. Many of their traditional allies on the right have a default position that differs from the default position of business. To the extent that businesses want to see parties that are fiscally conservative succeed, they often need to accept social conservatism as well. This makes it problematic to take unambiguously pro-immigration positions,

even if that is the preference of many business leaders.

What happens, then, when these cross-pressured groups take pro-immigration positions on immigration to public constituencies that feel those same cross-pressures? How is this shaped by the content of their arguments? In this article, we show that across three countries, the content of the arguments these groups put forward has little aggregate effect on attitudes when compared to a generic positive argument. This is not a claim from a lack of statistical significance. Rather, the null effects are precisely estimated. However, we show that these aggregate null effects mask extensive effect heterogeneity.

Business, labour and public persuasion

When arguing for changes in immigration policy, these organizations face a number of challenges. Perhaps the most important is the potential for backlash (Page et al., 1987). If employer organizations are mistrusted by many of the left, pro-immigration messages from them may shift some opinions toward a more restrictive stance. Hearing a pro-immigration message from business may lead them to assume that immigration is bad for workers. On the opposite side, pro-immigration campaigns led by trade unions, who have moved in a pro-immigration direction in the last few decades (Penninx and Roosblad, 2000; Watts, 2002), might lead more conservative elements of the electorate to support anti-immigrant parties, thinking that immigration must be a left-wing issue.

A second challenge for these organisations is how to make their case. By virtue of expertise, they might have substantial credibility with the public. On the other hand, recent research (Culpepper and Regan, 2014: 725) suggests that unions are seen, at least in some countries, as ‘merely another interest group trying to preserve its special benefits’ and Dür and Mateo (2014) describe a case in which business lobbies failed to persuade the public despite expending substantial resources to do so. It may well be the case that business and unions have credibility only to the extent that their arguments are well-tailored to the issue (Dür, 2019; Emmenegger and Marx, 2019).

Mills (2000) argued that business leaders' privileged access to the media, and thereby to the public played an important role in shaping public opinion. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) made a related argument about the ability of business elites to control the range of publicly acceptable issues and solutions. Research on unions has tended to focus on mobilisation (Pontusson and Rueda, 2010), rather than persuasion, but some recent work has suggested that they have the ability to persuade their members (Donnelly, 2016; Kim and Margalit, 2017; Mosimann and Pontusson, 2017).

Korpi (e.g. 2006) and others working in the power resources tradition emphasise the role of the unions in mobilising the working class to vote for left parties. That approach, along with other examinations of labour and the left, has argued that the main role for labour unions in politics is mobilisation (Becher and Stegmüller, 2019; Pontusson and Rueda, 2010). More recently, attention has turned to the ability of union leadership to sway attitudes of members (Donnelly, 2016; Kim and Margalit, 2017). These studies have argued that unions have the ability to shape their members' preferences through socialisation and messaging about both broad and specific policy issues.

Our approach, then, situates unions and business groups in the policymaking process displayed in Figure 1. We are examining the bolded link, and show that it has both potential and substantial limitations. We examine how messaging from those groups can shape public opinion on immigration at both the aggregate level and among theoretically relevant subsets of the population.

Many scholars argue that cultural concerns, rather than economic, are the main determinant of immigration attitudes (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). This might make it difficult for business and labour groups to be seen as credible on the issue. On the other hand, we have long known that public attitudes are malleable, and are formed, in part, by listening to political elites and other opinion leaders (Hooghe and Marks, 2005; McLaren, 2001; Zaller, 1992). This literature argues that people mostly choose not to spend much time working out carefully considered policy positions on complex issues (Zaller, 1992). Instead, they form snap judgements

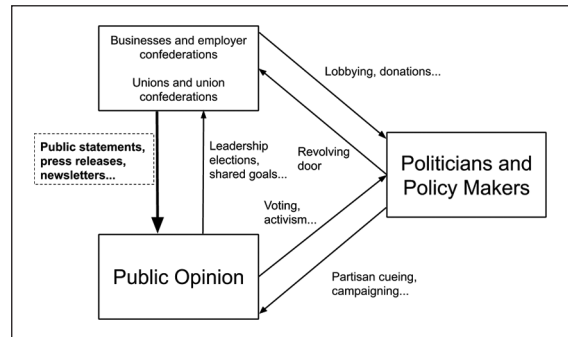


Figure 1. This displays the basic theoretical approach of this project. The main empirical focus is on the bolded link, in which interest groups shape public opinion.

based on salient considerations (often shaped, in turn, by the arguments they hear in the media) or they have somewhat firmer opinions based on trust in the judgement of their favourite politicians or opinion leaders (Lupia, 1994). Successful framing is difficult (Druckman and Lupia, 2016), and depends heavily on the content of the frames (Chong and Druckman, 2007).

Our approach combines these literatures to demonstrate a real, but limited, avenue by which business and labour can influence policy. We suggest that by making arguments in public about immigration policy, they can shape how people think about immigration, thereby increasing (or decreasing) support for it. However, we have reason to believe that the same arguments coming from a group can have positive impacts on the attitudes of some parts of the public and negative impacts on others. This means that using mass media to persuade the public is unlikely to have large effects on politics.

Hypotheses

We build on Zaller's (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample model, in which survey respondents hear a message (receive), decide based on the extent to which its source is credible and its content fits existing ideas whether to believe and remember the information (accept), and then construct survey responses by considering whatever information happens to be salient at the time (sample). In this model of opinion formation, people have a variety of ideas about

immigration, and which one is salient depends on context. Arguments therefore work better if they activate an existing and coherent set of ideas. Our first hypothesis² is that the content of the argument matters for whether it is accepted, and matters in a particular way for these economic actors.

Hypothesis 1 *Skills-based economic arguments from business and labour will have a more positive effect on public attitudes than non-economic arguments.*

We do not think that what credibility politicians have (and we know most of that credibility further comes from partisan elite cues (Druckman et al., 2013; Slothuus, 2010)) is limited to the economic sphere, and so we expect more variation between the effects of economic and cultural arguments coming from economic actors than from political elites more generally. Our expectation is that unions and business leaders are likely to influence opinion on immigration, especially if they provide a skill-based economic argument than a non-economic one to the people, because these interest groups making economic arguments fits a common assumption about the groups. We focus on a skills argument, rather than other economic arguments, such as one about economic growth or the long-term sustainability of welfare states because both business and labour are likely to have direct knowledge of, and therefore credibility on, labour markets. On the other hand, a recent Eurobarometer report showed that 'Europeans are divided about whether the overall influence of companies is positive or negative – 52% think that the overall influence of companies on society is positive, while 41% think it is negative' (TNS Political and Social, 2013: 6).

Where people are sceptical of these interest groups, we anticipate the possibility of backlash. This could wash out some of the positive effects, or even reverse them. One way of getting at this is through an analysis of subgroups.

In addition to our generic expectation, we expect that the effect is likely to vary depending on demographic differences. Existing research shows that people differ substantially in their attention to politics and therefore in their exposure to different

messages and communications. People react critically to political communication only to the extent that they are knowledgeable about political affairs (Zaller, 1992). The level of knowledge and interest about political affairs are therefore deciding factors for acquiring political information from elites and converting it into political preferences. Two important factors that can influence the propensity to be moved by an argument are age and education.

Zaller (1992) argues that elderly people are likely to possess a range of interests, values and experiences that may significantly affect their willingness to accept or resist certain messages. Additionally, research on education suggests that better education makes people more resistant to certain policies (Luskin, 1990). However, people may not always respond to critical arguments – in this case contextual information about immigrants – canvassing their minds for all relevant thoughts. They may respond to an argument 'off the top of the head' on the basis of whatever ideas are immediately accessible in memory. Taylor and Fiske (1978), for instance, argue that an emphasis of a single piece of information – such as the fact that immigrants bring skills and/or diversity – can greatly affect subsequent opinions.

Nonetheless, as Converse (2006) highlights, important messages enable citizens to juxtapose the received messages with their existing beliefs. More precisely, as Zaller (1992) also argues, people tend to accept arguments that are consistent with their political predispositions, and resist those that are inconsistent, but they do so only to the extent that they acquire the pertinent contextual information to identify a relationship between the message and their predispositions. This suggests that the chances of individuals being convinced by an argument are likely to depend on their education and age.

Additionally, psychological literature on opinion change leads us to expect that people can fail to sufficiently rely on their level of knowledge alone to decide about the type of message they encounter. Instead, they evaluate the source of a message in responding to it (Zaller, 1992). As McGuire (1969) wrote: 'The given message is judged as fairer, more factual, more thoroughly documented, its conclusion following more validly from its premises, and even

more grammatical, when it is ascribed to a high- as opposed to a low-credibility source' (p. 198).

Synthesising these theories suggests that people's response to an argument/message is likely to depend both on the credibility of the sender and the receiver's sociodemographic characteristics. And as the existing research suggests that unions enjoy 'credibility' in society, we may reasonably expect that a message from unions is more likely to convince better educated and elderly people (Zaller, 1992).

We argue that at least two causal mechanisms are likely to play obvious roles behind this expected heterogeneous effect across various sociodemographic groups. First, studies have demonstrated that the life experiences, life-cycle, demographic differences between older and younger and more educated and less educated citizens shape their political decisions (Binstock et al., 2011). People, as they grow in age, tend to observe and learn from experiences accumulated along the years. For example, older individuals could be more easily swayed by union leaders than the youth who grew in an era of declining union membership.

Second, further research suggests that older people are likely to hold different opinions due to their different priorities such as increased concerns about safety and security than the youth (Zellman, 1975). Furthermore, older people possess a wide range of experience and expertise and tend to spend more time making decisions, compared to people of a younger age. This experience tends to 'lock in' attitudes (Achen, 2002). In addition, the young may have more personal contact with immigrants. This could increase or decrease their receptivity to pro-immigrant messaging. On the one hand, a more concrete touchstone might make the arguments resonate more. On the other hand, it may mean that their opinions are more locked-in by personal experience. This could also be viewed through the materialist/post-materialist distinction (Inglehart, 1981). Whereas the elderly will be more receptive to skills arguments grounded in an economy-based materialist vision of a society, the youth will be more receptive to cultural claims focused on rights, autonomy or self expression. A similar relation is expected when looking at education. Individuals

with a higher level of education are expected to have preferences of the post-material type (cultural arguments) while individuals with low levels of education are expected to have more material (skills arguments) concerns.

Unions generally support higher levels of redistribution, while business leaders are generally more sceptical of state interventions to reduce inequality (Korpi, 2006). The literature on source credibility (Alt et al., 2016) suggests that, in general, people are more likely to believe messages coming from groups with whom they have agreed in the past. We expect, then, that there will be substantial variation in the effect of pro-immigration arguments across the left-right spectrum. In short, we derive our second hypothesis from a combination of political psychology literature on credibility and political economy literature on conflict between labour and business.

Hypothesis 2 *Both skills and cultural arguments will have heterogeneous effects across sociodemographic groups.*

- A. *The elderly will be more receptive to skills arguments while the young will be more receptive to cultural arguments.*
- B. *People with high levels of education will be more receptive to cultural arguments while individuals with low levels of education will be more receptive to skills arguments.*
- C. *Respondents who support more redistribution will be more receptive to arguments from unions, while those opposed will be more responsive to arguments from business leaders.*

In summary, skills-based arguments from interest groups are likely to have a positive effect on older and less educated people while the effect is less likely to exist for the younger and better educated individuals. In other words, it would mean that, to gain substantial support from the younger and educated people, unions and businesses must strategise to allocate their core ideas, messages and arguments along the lines of a cultural argument to eschew the possibility of backlash from them.

Empirical approach

To examine who is (not) convinced by arguments from business and labour leaders, and what messages from these interest groups are most effective to convince people, we conducted a survey experiment that explicitly and separately tests these claims to find out the avenues through which interest groups can influence immigration policy. In this study, we randomly assigned participants to experiment and control groups, and made the experimental arguments exogenous to observed outcomes. Each respondent sees a single combination of arguer and argument.

Of particular importance is that the sample and weights are designed to make our estimates representative. When speaking to the public, groups need to know not just how their message will influence their members or the people around them, but the national public as a whole. Thus, we can confidently measure an average effect of these messages on adults in each country.

This design also allows us to measure effect heterogeneity. In other words, it shows that messages/arguments from unions and businesses shape peoples' attitudes towards immigration in two important ways. First, it offers unions and business leaders the insights that they can adopt to specifically target their audience by setting up their pro-immigration policy agenda based on the arguments to which these audiences seriously respond. Second, it allows the interest groups to avoid plausible backlash against them by providing generic arguments to people who ignore specific arguments from the unions and business leaders. Thus, the survey experimental strategies of our study offer a novel way by which interests groups can identify who responds to their messages (the audience) and who ignores them (non-audience).

Countries

We conducted the experiment in three countries with different interest group environments and with different levels of business and labour coordination (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Figure A1 in the online appendix shows that they have also experienced very different trends in this coordination over the last two

decades. The UK and Canada have higher levels of union membership than Germany, and while those levels have declined quickly in Germany and the UK, they have declined only slowly in Canada.

On the other hand, union membership means something quite different in the UK and Canada than in Germany. In the latter, the historical and legal power of unions and a tradition of labour-market coordination (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Rueda and Pontusson, 2000) have meant that a much larger share of the workforce is represented in collective bargaining in Germany than in the other two countries. Figure A2 similarly shows that such coverage is high and declining in Germany, while it is lower and declining in the UK, and lower and holding steady in Canada. These different trajectories and levels of membership and coverage suggest that union leaders might have very different levels of credibility with the public and with their members.

The differing traditions of immigration politics, and especially the role for businesses in making immigration decisions, is another way in which these three countries differ. In Germany, with its long tradition of labour-based guest workers and the more recent importance of free movement in the EU, business has clearly played an important role in deciding policy. That is less clear in the UK, where historic ties to the Commonwealth formed the backbone of pre-2004 immigration policy. Finally, in Canada, the immigration system is clearly designed to help the economy, but the emphasis has long been on generalised human capital, rather than responding to specific business needs.

Finally, the political environments of the three countries at the time of the survey (late 2018) were quite different. The UK was governed by a Conservative Party clearly committed to reducing immigration, Canada was governed by a Liberal Party clearly presenting itself as a party of openness, and Germany was somewhere in between, governed by a grand coalition encompassing a wide range of opinion on immigration, and led by a Christian Democratic Chancellor who was under serious pressure from her right for her relatively pro-refugee policies. This range of environments means that respondents in the three countries were hearing

different debates with different levels of intensity around the issue of immigration.

This variation means that we can be quite confident that the results below that are consistent across countries are probably generalisable to at least some other North American and Western European countries. It also means, though, that where our results diverge across country, we can only give tentative suggestions for why. Those variations, then, call for future replication and extension.

Data

The data for this analysis comes from a survey conducted in the fall of 2018. A quota-sampled online panel was collected through Qualtrics, a commercial survey and marketing firm that purchases samples from a variety of sources. Respondents have opted into the sample, and participate in surveys on a wide variety of topics. Using basic demographic filters, the firm is able to ensure a sample that is reasonably representative of the population. The result is about 1200 respondents from each of Canada, the UK and Germany. Table A1 presents key descriptive statistics for the sample in each country. The analyses below use raked weights, making the sample representative on age, region, education, language, ethnicity and immigration background.³ The key experimental question here took the following form:

[Group] [argument], while other people think immigration causes too many problems. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement that ‘the government should let more immigrants come and live here’?

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Somewhat disagree
4. Neither agree nor disagree
5. Somewhat agree
6. Agree
7. Strongly agree

Respondents were shown the question with a randomly assigned group and argument from the following lists.⁴

Groups

- Some politicians
- Some business leaders
- Some unions

Arguments

- Think we should have more immigration
- Say that immigrants bring skills our economy needs
- Say that accepting immigrants is part of who we are as a country
- Say that immigrants make [country] a more thriving and diverse place
- Say that people who want to come and live here deserve a chance

The first element of each of these lists serves as a control. Since respondents were not provided any cue about the party of the politicians, that endorsement carries little information. Similarly, the bland statement in favour of immigration provides no justification. All of the treatment effects, then, are the effects of the additional information carried by the group or the argument. While the randomisation allows us to be confident that any differences across treatment groups are caused by the group or the argument, rather than by any pre-existing characteristics of the respondents, the control of a generic positive argument helps us to isolate the effects of skills and culture argument relative to generic argument. This is, of course, quite different from how some arguments are presented in the real world, but we think of it as similar to the experience of seeing a single item in a person’s social media feed, a single newspaper headline, or a short snippet of a TV news programme.⁵ We think of our experiment as measuring the effect of seeing a headline or a brief snippet in a Facebook feed relaying an interest group’s public statements on immigration support.

Results

In the simplest possible analysis, we can examine whether business and labour groups are more successful in shifting attitudes than politicians. Here we see few differences. Disregarding the type of

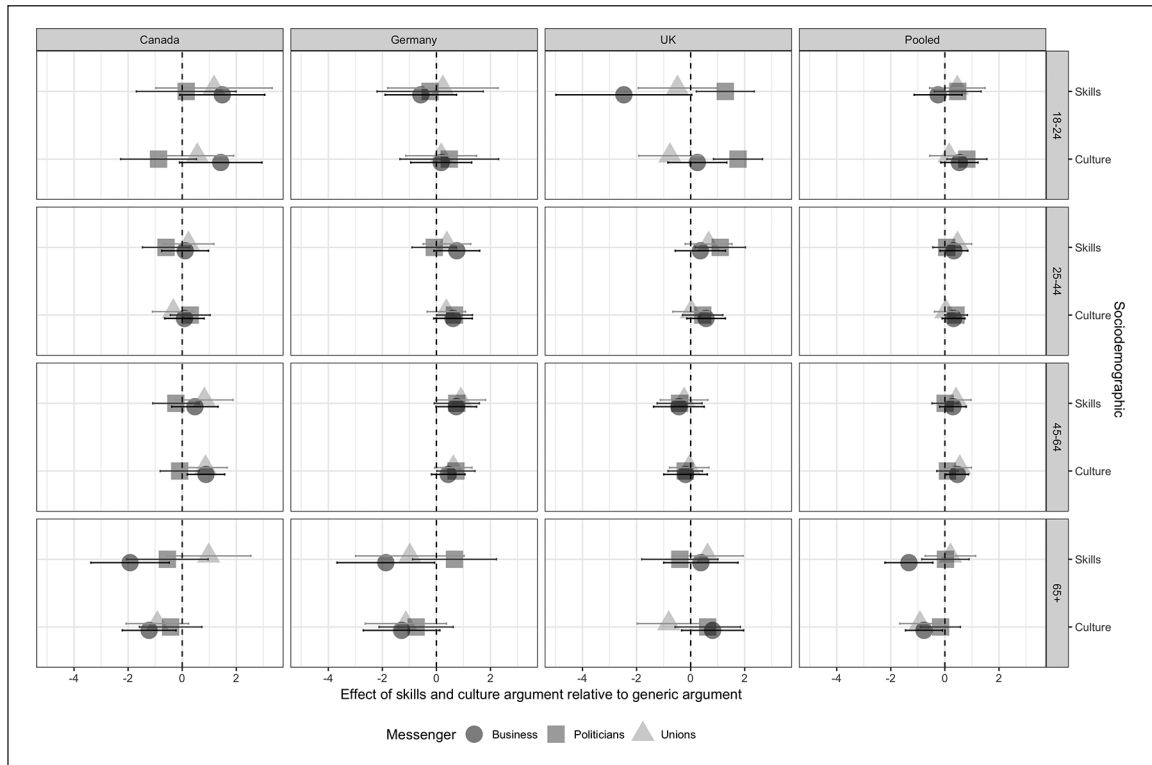


Figure 2. This displays the effect of the skills argument in across age groups.

message and the target audience, the messenger does not seem to have any effect.⁶

Table C2 presents a model where we interact the messenger and the argument in order to test Hypothesis 2. Is the cultural argument more effective when formulated by politicians? Is the skills argument less effective? Again, we presented a large number of coefficients but these results can be summarised easily. The type of message, interacted with the messenger does not have any consistent effect. While some effects are statistically significant, like the effect of a culture-based message in the UK, in comparison with a generic message, these effects do not hold across countries. Disregarding the target audience, the interaction between the messenger and the message type does not seem to have any effect.

Turning our attention to Hypothesis 2, which argued that the effects of messages will vary across subgroups of the general population, Figures 2 to 4 present a breakdown of all results. We present the

average treatment effects for both specific arguments: the skills-based argument and the cultural argument, relative to the generic argument that immigration is good. We present these average treatment effects for eight different socio-demographic groups and three different messengers; politicians, business leaders and union leaders.

Each individual point can be interpreted as the difference in effectiveness between a skills-based (or a culture-based) argument and the control; the generic positive argument. A point to the right of the dotted line means that, in average, individuals from that group are more receptive to a skills-based argument. A point to the left means that the generic argument is more effective than the skills-based argument. Each point on the scale represents one step on a seven-point Likert-scale. For instance, by looking at the top left panel in Figure 3, we see that, in Canada, among individuals with at least a Bachelor degree, a skills argument delivered by business

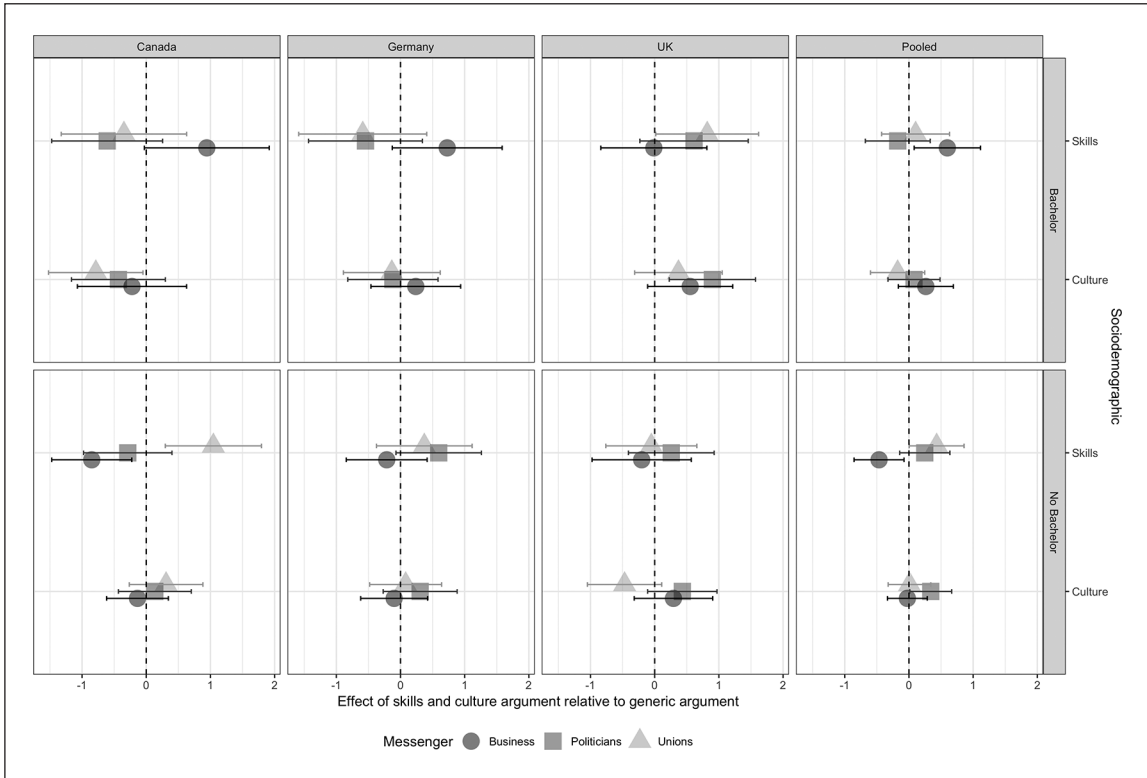


Figure 3. This displays the effect of the skills argument across education categories.

leaders increases by an average of one point one’s answer to the outcome variable.

What do these results tell us? Figure 2 presents the results broken down by age group. One of the most striking patterns is among individuals aged over 65. In all three countries, unions are more apt than business at delivering a skills-based argument. In other words, individuals over 65 see as more credible a skills-based message coming from union leaders, than from business leaders. It is in Canada that this pattern is the most striking. On average, a skills argument from a labour organization is one point more effective than a generic argument. In contrast, the same skills-based argument is two points less effective than the generic positive argument, when formulated by business leaders. This difference is smaller in Germany and the UK, but still in the positive direction. In Germany however, for messages coming from both union and business leaders, the

skills argument is less effective than the generic statement in favour of immigration.

Among seniors, we observe similar patterns for the cultural argument. Different messengers and different messages seem to have different effects in different jurisdictions. Politicians are more effective at delivering a culture-based argument in Canada and Germany but business leaders are more effective in the UK. Significant variation can be noted, but in the aggregate pooled model, we observe that the generic control is more effective for individuals over 65.

For young people, similar variations are noticeable. Both in the UK and in Germany, unions are more apt at conveying a skills-based message than business leaders. In the UK, however, the generic message is more effective. Simply, in relative terms, unions are less ‘inefficient’ than business to convey a skills message. In Canada, both unions and business leaders are very effective at conveying a

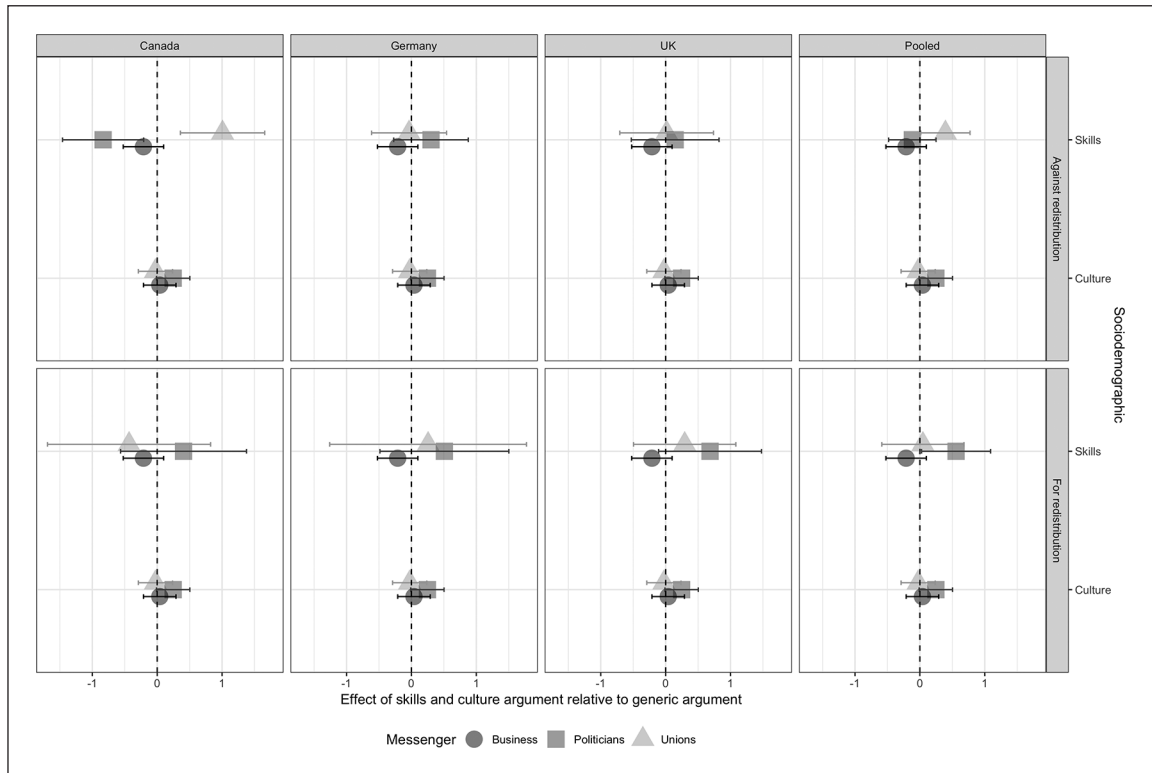


Figure 4. This displays the effect of skills and culture arguments across ideological groups.

skills-based argument. For both messengers, the average effect is over one point. It is interesting to note that politicians as messenger have a very different effect in Canada to that in the UK. While politicians seem to be effective messengers for specific arguments in the UK, they are not in Canada. Rather, they are less effective than union and business leaders at conveying specific arguments.

The results for those who are middle aged are mixed. For respondents aged between 25 and 44, unions are slightly more efficient at conveying a skills-based argument in Canada and the UK while business leaders seem to be more efficient in Germany. For individuals aged between 45 and 64, the observed effect for unions is, again, slightly larger than the effect for business. In both cases, the effects are small and non-significant.

Figure 3 presents the results broken down by educational level. In all three countries, union leaders are more effective at conveying a skills-based

message, compared to the generic one, than business leaders. In Canada, this difference is the largest, while in the UK the difference in effects between is, in practical terms, null. Among those who hold a bachelor's degree, results vary between countries. In Canada and Germany, individuals are more likely to respond to a skills argument when formulated by business leaders than union leaders. In the UK, the opposite pattern is observed. Individuals with a bachelor's degree are more likely to respond favourably to a message originating from union leaders.

Figure 4 presents the results broken down by attitudes towards redistribution. Specifically, those categorised as being in favour of redistribution either agreed or presented a neutral position when asked if 'the government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels, even if that means raising taxes'. The only clear effect is for Canadians opposed to economic redistribution. These individuals are more willing to listen to union leaders when they

advance a skills-based argument. For individuals favouring redistribution, specific rather than general arguments are more effective when made by politicians with an unspecified ideological tinge. This result holds in all three countries. Nevertheless, as mentioned with the other subgroup analyses, these results tend to lack conventional levels of statistical significance. The key takeaway is that there is significant heterogeneity. Business and union leaders and politicians cannot hope to adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy.

Discussion

In this article, we use a simple survey experiment to show that different types of elites are likely to formulate different types of messages when targeting different audiences. Our first result demonstrates that the type of message and the messenger do not have a constant effect across the range of individuals. We find that specific messages by business and union leaders do not work well with individuals aged over 65. In Canada, union leaders are more effective at conveying a specific message to youth, but in Germany and the UK, politicians have that advantage. In the UK, youth are particularly suspicious of a skills-based message delivered by business leaders. Individuals with a bachelor's degree are more receptive to specific arguments by business leaders while individuals without a bachelor's degree are more tempted to listen to such an argument formulated by politicians or union leaders.

Our second main result shows a variation in reactions to the treatment across the left and right. This variation does not consistently follow the most intuitive argument. It is not the case that left voters are always more responsive to arguments from unions than from business, nor is the reverse pattern clear. Altogether our result provides evidence about significant heterogeneity, suggesting that business and unions may not adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy to push their arguments.

Our results have several important implications for politicians, business leaders or union leaders aiming to influence public opinion. First, when they speak to the press, they are speaking to the public writ large, and doing so will not always have the effect they would like. Put differently, to influence

public opinion on immigration, business leaders, union leaders and politicians should adapt their message depending on who the target group is.

Second, these results have important implications for elites trying to shape public opinion, in particular when it comes to immigration policy. In order to prevent backlash, different elites must use different message types to target different socio-demographic groups. Technology may allow such targeting for subtle messages, but it also makes it more difficult when the messages are contrasting. It may be possible to target advertisements, but once a message is out in the public, anyone can critique it and share it widely. This loss of message control makes shaping public opinion much more difficult for large, potentially unwieldy organizations. That elites must be creative and use different messages when targeting diverse populations will not come as a complete surprise. Being specific and efficient, sometimes expedient, in communication underlies successful public opinion strategies. Yet, even if these groups know this, they often still intervene in debates in an untargeted way.

Third, our results speak to the literature on immigration politics. The effect heterogeneity we detected complicates the often simple models of attitude formation in the literature. It suggests that different people will react to the same arguments in different ways, and that business and union groups have some (but weak) leverage over attitudes. If attitudes are driven primarily by deep-seated cultural predispositions or big structural economic phenomena, there should be little room for movement on these attitudes in response to experimental treatment (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Druckman and Lupia, 2016). Having shown modest effects, we believe these results should push us to understand immigration attitudes as a social phenomenon.⁷ People receive messages from many sources, we should work to understand both the direction (for and against immigration) and the content (types of arguments) to which different groups of people are responsive (Chong and Druckman, 2007).

Fourth, our findings are timely. Recent events have urged business and union leaders in the UK to join forces to try and influence policy in a way that furthers what they see as the broader economic interests of the country. In a letter published a few

days before the first of the failed Brexit dates of 29 March 2019, UK's Trades Union Congress and Confederation of British Industry denounced vigorously a 'deal or no deal strategy' Brexit, something they saw as unacceptable and deleterious for the country. The broader argument is of course that the country needs immigration and some form of trade agreement with the rest of Europe to protect 'the jobs, rights and livelihoods of ordinary working people' (O'Grady and Fairbairn, 2019). While addressed to the Prime Minister, Theresa May, the groups released the letter to the media in a clear attempt to shape not just elite thinking, but the public discourse around the issue. Our findings suggest that the letter is likely to move some people, but to do so in conflicting and, perhaps, self-defeating ways. Subsequent research could help in explaining and understanding the successes or failures of such interventions.

Although these findings are important, there are several limitations. We identify two of them. First, generally in survey experimental research, the treatment is somewhat artificial. Respondents, by choosing to complete a survey about politics, probably expect political messages, and adapt their mindset accordingly. Furthermore, a message in a survey is different from the messages which individuals see in real life, on television or on the internet. Second, even if it was the case that our experiment was not artificial, it does not follow that there are no other, direct or indirect, perhaps more important, ways to influence public opinion. In other words, targeting by elites is multifaceted. They use different types of messages, medium and tones. Our experiment focused on one particular type of message and medium, one where the statement is presented in a direct manner, without humour or an appeal to a sense of humanity. Influence is varied, and our survey does not capture these variations.

As politicians look for policies that sustain the welfare state, business and labour groups want them to do so in ways that do not substantially lower wages and benefits or substantially raise taxes. For most wealthy countries, this means immigration levels must be increased. One Canadian business group recently argued (Smith, 2018) that without immigration, Canada's labour force would shrink, slowing

the estimated average annual real GDP growth rate to 1.3 percent by 2040 and more than likely forcing tax rates to increase as the number of taxpayers declined.

Fewer taxpayers could also affect living standards and threaten the ability of Canada and its provinces to cover the cost of vital public services for aging Canadians, notably health care.

In the UK, the TUC argued (Crawford, 2018) that limiting the number of migrants that can enter the country from the EU also threatens the welfare of everyone in the UK. EU citizens play a critical role in helping keep the UK's public services running. Over 60,000 staff in the NHS alone come from the EU, and EU workers also play a key role in UK industries.

These groups believe that they need immigration to support the welfare state, and they issue public calls in the hopes of shaping public discourse.

Our research opens the door to a new line of research. Future work should evaluate more precisely which type of message works by increasing the variety of arguments put forward. In addition, researchers can explore the influence of these interest groups in shaping public opinion towards immigration in other European and non-European settings. Furthermore, exploring these sets of questions in developing countries where interest groups, particularly businesses (Murali, 2017), play an immense role in public policies could help understand efficient strategies by business and unions leaders and politicians that can be taken to positively mould peoples' opinion towards immigration across different contexts and geographical settings.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Both quotes translated by Lennart Maschmeyer.

2. We formulated two hypotheses and did not pre-register them. We hope to replicate and extend the findings here in future work.
3. The survey was conducted in English and French in Canada, in English in the UK, and in German in Germany. These kinds of online samples have a number of well-known strengths and weaknesses. The online appendix has a brief discussion on this topic.
4. The survey included an additional 800 respondents in each country who were presented with two other groups (religious leaders and experts), but we have dropped those respondents from our analysis in order to focus on two key economic interest groups and the political baseline.
5. This approach has also become common in political science in recent years (see, for instance Druckman et al., 2013; Alt et al., 2016; Dür, 2019).
6. Table C1 in the appendix presents the results of a regression model where we compare the effect of a message delivered by union leaders, business leaders and politicians.
7. For similar arguments, see Hopkins (2010). For similar arguments in the realm of the welfare state, see Donnelly (n.d.).

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