

# Wealthy turn anti-immigrant when their riches are threatened

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Anti-immigration sentiment rises when affluent people fear losing their wealth, a psychological study has found.

The University of Queensland's Professor Jolanda Jetten said harsh attitudes towards immigrants were found in times of economic downturn and relative deprivation—and also in prosperous times.

"Affluent people who fear losing [wealth](#) in the short or long term experience collective angst about their group's future vitality and wealth status," she said.

"Our research found this fuels negative attitudes toward immigrants and minorities. Even though [wealthy people](#) may have a lot, their fear of falling is associated with opposition to immigration."

Professor Jetten said the research turned accepted wisdom on its head, showing that society's most economically vulnerable were not always the most supportive of anti-immigration calls.

"In explaining the rise of right-wing populism, many have pointed to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis as the root cause of rising anti-immigrant sentiments," she said.

"Experts had long believed that economic downturns triggered perceptions of relative deprivation and chances of civil conflict. Moreover, [economic crises](#), so the argument typically goes, increase fear and frustration among poor working-class voters. These dynamics are typically referenced when discussing Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential elections, and the success of populist parties like One Nation in Australia. The assumption that economic crises combined with individual relative deprivation provide [fertile soil](#) for populism, dominate many of the discussions on the origins of right-wing populism and anti-immigrant sentiments more generally."

But the new research highlighted wealthier people who might be attracted to such populist parties, said Professor Jetten from the UQ

School of Psychology.

"It seems that if you have a lot of money, you feel you have a lot to lose and the fear of falling makes you feel vulnerable and concerned about the future," she said.

The research team, including Dr. Frank Mols and Dr. Nik Steffens, found an association between opposition to immigration and fear of losing wealth, individually or collectively, across four studies involving a total of more than 1000 people.

"In the laboratory, when we made people feel wealthy they were more opposed to immigration when they were made to feel that they might lose some of their wealth in the future than the group who felt their wealth was secure," Professor Jetten said.

"In a study among Australian participants we found the [fear](#) their own financial future, or that of Australia's, will be worse than the present, was associated with more opposition to immigration. The results may help us to explain why support for political parties with anti-immigrant messages sometimes comes from the wealthiest in society. This is important at a time when populist parties and leaders with strong anti-immigrant stances are a force to be reckoned with in many countries."

The study is published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

**More information:** Jolanda Jetten et al. Prosperous But Fearful of Falling: The Wealth Paradox, Collective Angst, and Opposition to Immigration, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167220944112](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220944112)

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