

Far-right parties find favor where immigrants, citizens vie for same public housing in Europe

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In Europe, far-right parties have emerged as the most vocal defenders of restricting welfare benefits to citizens only.

Why do voters find such a policy platform attractive? A new study examines the role played by competition between natives and immigrants over access to [social benefits](#).

The authors argue that citizens who perceive their access to social benefits is threatened by the presence of immigrants will be more likely

to vote for the welfare chauvinist far right.

To test this mechanism, they leverage a European Union directive forcing municipalities in Austria to open public housing to previously excluded immigrants. They find a deviation from historical trends in the election of 2006—the year of the policy change.

While the presence of public housing did not predict changes in support for far-right parties in prior elections, in 2006, municipalities with public housing were voting for the far right at higher rates. This is especially true in areas with large immigrant populations.

These results indicate that support for the far right sharply increased in municipalities where Austrian citizens faced the prospect of competing with immigrants for [public housing](#). The authors find similar patterns at the neighborhood level in Vienna.

The researchers also show the empirical patterns they find do not align with "a nationwide nativist reaction to the principle of immigrant access to public benefits." In other words, people might dislike sharing benefits with immigrants, but it is people directly affected who are more likely to voice their concerns by voting for the far right.

The study, accepted for publication in the *Journal of Politics* and co-authored by Charlotte Cavaille of U-M and Jamie Ferwerda of Dartmouth College, indicates that zero-sum reasoning with respect to welfare benefits can drive the electoral success of the radical right.

"The findings are pretty straightforward: Resource competition matters for far-right voting," said Cavaille, assistant professor at the Ford School of Public Policy.

The study suggests environments where globalization leads to large

population movements can become the source of distributional conflict that increases support for welfare chauvinist parties in countries with substantial in-kind social programs, including housing, health care and schooling.

"Interpreting these electoral shifts exclusively through the lens of cultural backlash potentially disregards voters' underlying concerns about access to social benefits in a context where fiscal adjustment has become a credible threat," the researchers wrote.

The study also distinguishes between "in-kind" benefits, such as housing or health care and those which are "in-cash," like housing vouchers or tax credits subsidizing private health insurance. The first category, researchers say, is more likely to lead to far-right support because those benefits are fixed in the short run and geographically bound.

Cavaille and Ferwerda say immigrants' rights were extended in many areas of Europe during times when conflicts over social benefits were not so noticeable or important, yet the Great Recession and humanitarian crises heightened "tensions between open borders and open welfare states."

Cavaille notes that such welfare chauvinist preferences are less likely to affect voting in the United States.

"People do not like it in principle," she said, but it's a bigger problem when these benefits are coupled with congestion—less likely given the U.S. welfare state design.

As far as a broad policy recommendation, Cavaille points to other research that supports placing refugees or [immigrants](#) in areas "without resource competition," such as in buildings specifically designated to accommodate them.

More information: Charlotte Cavaille et al, How Distributional Conflict over In-Kind Benefits Generates Support for Far-Right Parties, *The Journal of Politics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1086/720643](https://doi.org/10.1086/720643)

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