Immigration and Nationalistic Attitudes: Panel Evidence from Chile *

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Abstract

Do demographic changes caused by migration make people more nationalistic? Using administrative and panel survey data from Chile, we find that immigration shocks—defined as rapid and large demographic changes—increase nationalistic attitudes. When large migration flows alter a country's demographics, native-born citizens may perceive this as a threat to their identity and self-image, making them more likely to adopt nationalistic attitudes. Studying nationalistic sentiments in the context of high migration and rapidly diversifying societies is particularly relevant, given how these attitudes might affect social cohesion and the integration of migrant communities.

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1 Introduction

Over the past decade, global migration has triggered profound demographic transformations, with an increasing number of people leaving unsafe and impoverished countries for more secure and stable destinations (Holland and Peters, 2020). These movements have significant implications for host societies, shaping people's attitudes and influencing political behavior (Adida, 2014; Kustov, 2021; Choi et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2023). Additionally, recent years have seen a notable surge in nationalistic rhetoric in global politics (Bremmer, 2017), with nationalist politicians gaining prominence in countries such as Brazil and the United States (Cagaptay, 2020; Wehner, 2022). This raises an important question: are these recent demographic and political changes connected?

While substantial research has explored how migration-driven demographic transformations influence economic and cultural grievances in developed countries (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014; Ferwerda et al., 2017), an expanding body of literature is now examining the social and political consequences of migration, particularly in the Global South (Rozo and Vargas, 2021; Holland et al., 2024; Severino and Visconti, 2024; González-Rostani et al., 2024).

Despite recent advancements, significant gaps remain in our understanding of the political consequences of demographic shifts in developing regions (Alrababa'h et al., 2021). While research has shown that exposure to refugee crises in Europe can foster exclusionary attitudes and bolster support for far-right parties (Dinas et al., 2019; Hangartner et al., 2019), the dynamics in developing regions are less well understood.

Migration in the Global South typically occurs among culturally and linguistically similar populations. Unlike in Europe or North America, where most migration research is concentrated, developing regions offer unique insights into how migration impacts national identity, as migrant and host populations often share identity markers such as language and cultural heritage. In such contexts, national identity may become more salient for native-born citizens. Indeed, previous research suggests that national identity can serve as a simple heuristic to distinguish nationals from migrants (Zhou, 2019). Consequently, understanding these dynamics is essential for grasping how

culturally proximate migration reshapes perceptions of belonging and political attitudes within the Global South.

Nationalism is a complex concept with multiple definitions; however, it generally involves identifying with one's own nation and distinguishing it from others (Bonikowski and DiMaggio, 2016; Rosenzweig and Zhou, 2021). To capture this commonly accepted definition, previous studies have measured national pride and national identity as proxies for nationalism (Bonikowski and DiMaggio, 2016; Rosenzweig and Zhou, 2021). We rely on these variables to study key dimensions of an 'imagined political community' (Anderson, 1983). Prior research has shown that nationalism is not a static identity since external shocks can influence its salience (Depetris-Chauvin et al., 2020; Kuehnhanss et al., 2021).

Chile presents a unique opportunity to study the political effects of immigration for two main reasons. First, since 2015, it has experienced a rapid and significant demographic transformation due to migration from other Latin American and Caribbean countries, with some areas undergoing drastic demographic changes while others have not (Bellolio and Valdés, 2020). Second, administrative data allows us to measure migration accurately at the local level (Severino and Visconti, 2024).

We combine administrative data (to measure exposure to immigration) with a three-wave panel study (to capture the outcomes). Using a dynamic or event-study difference-in-differences (DiD) design, we infer how immigration shapes nationalistic attitudes by examining the effects of varying lengths of exposure to sudden demographic change. Our findings indicate that immigration shocks make people more likely to adopt nationalistic attitudes one year after their initial exposure to a rapid and large demographic change caused by migration.

We also show, in Appendix C, that areas with higher exposure to rapid migration shifts in Chile were more likely to support the newly formed far-right party in the 2021 presidential election. This suggests that parties relying on nationalistic rhetoric may appeal more to voters in increasingly nationalistic contexts. Regarding mechanisms, we provide suggestive evidence in Appendix B of an identitarian reaction to foreigners, seen through increased prejudice and hostility towards

newcomers, as a potential driver of rising nationalism.

Our findings have important implications for two main strands of research. First, this study contributes to the broader literature on nationalism and migration by illuminating how national identities are constructed and reshaped in response to migration, particularly in South-South contexts. Second, understanding how nationalistic attitudes are formed and contextually shaped has significant political implications, as nationalism can influence attitudes and behaviors, including increased xenophobia (Rosenzweig and Zhou, 2021) and support for far-right parties (Lubbers and Coenders, 2017).

2 Immigration in Chile

A large proportion of migration occurs between countries in the Global South, as refugees and economic migrants commonly relocate to nearby countries. For example, Venezuela's socioeconomic collapse has generated large-scale displacements to other countries in South America (Holland et al., 2024). In this context, Chile has become a major recipient of migrants, mainly from Venezuela, but also from Haiti (Bivort et al., 2019).[1]

Historically, Chile had a small proportion of foreign-born residents. However, its immigration rate has increased faster than any other country in Latin America (Doña Reveco, 2018) – from roughly 1% of the population in 2002 to 8% by 2018 (Bellolio and Valdés, 2020). This rapid and sudden demographic transformation has led to the politicization of immigration, as has occurred in the United States and Europe (Arostegui, 2018).

The number of visa requests submitted before 2018 serves as an excellent proxy for actual immigration in Chile. Nine out of ten migrants in Chile come from other countries in the region (Bellolio and Valdés, 2020), which is relevant because before the 2018 reform, Latin American

[1] For examples of research studying the politics of migration in Latin America, see Malone (2019), Vega-Mendez and Visconti (2021), Acevedo and Meseguer (2022), Hammoud-Gallego and Freier (2023), Argote and Perelló (2024), and Bessen et al. (2024).

citizens could enter Chile as visitors without a tourist visa, and many did not need a passport – just a valid ID. While in the country as visitors, Latin American citizens could request a (non-tourist) visa following a simple bureaucratic process. Migrants had to present an employment contract to obtain a temporary visa, and then after two years they could apply for permanent residency (Stefoni, 2011). Employment contracts were not limited to working in a company or an industry; less formal agreements, such as working for an individual taxpayer or a household as a nanny or contractor, were acceptable (Fernandez, 2017). To provide context on how migration evolved in Chile using data from the National Statistics Institute (INE): in 2010, there were 300,000 migrants in the country; that number increased by a factor of 4.3 in just eight years.

Chile had a strong focus on securing its borders before 2018 (Aedo, 2017), and obtaining regular status gave migrants access to social benefits and key public services. Therefore, it is not surprising that there were very few irregular crossings (an average of three people were arrested per day) according to official numbers (Vedoya, 2017), and that the most common way to migrate to Chile was to request a visa while in the country (Severino and Visconti, 2024).

However, these conditions changed dramatically in 2018 with the administration of then-president Sebastian Piñera. He passed a bill reforming the immigration law that required people from Venezuela and Haiti – the countries with the highest percentage of migrants entering Chile – had to request a tourist visa *before* traveling to the country as visitors (Bellolio and Valdés, 2020). This reform made the strategy of migrating as a tourist and using the 90-day window to obtain an employment contract infeasible for a large proportion of migrants. The number of irregular crossings skyrocketed after the reform; thus, using visas to proxy for migration was no longer an accurate and informative measurement approach. We, therefore, rely on administrative data covering the period before the immigration law was adopted in 2018.

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

To understand the impact of migration on attitudes, we use a three-wave panel survey and administrative data from Chile to implement a dynamic difference-in-differences (DiD) analysis to estimate how immigration affects nationalistic attitudes.

A DiD design employs pre- and post-treatment longitudinal data to estimate the effects of a given intervention by comparing outcomes over time between a treatment and a control group. These groups need to follow a similar trajectory before the treatment (i.e., the parallel-trends assumption) so that any difference in their trajectories after the treatment can be attributed to exposure to the treatment.

We use a dynamic (also called event-study) DiD, which is ideal when the treatment being measured occurs across multiple time periods (Callaway and Sant'Anna, 2021). When relying on a dynamic DiD, effects are aggregated by the length of exposure. For example, we can determine the impact of being exposed to an immigration shock just once or more than once. When using a dynamic DiD, the treatment follows a staggered adoption, meaning that when subjects are treated, they will remain in the treatment group, and the control group is composed only of never-treated units.

Measuring exposure to immigration is not easy. One option is to use perceptions of demographic changes, but previous studies have shown that people's perceptions tend to be endogenous to their political attitudes (Evans and Andersen, 2006). A possible solution to this problem is to use administrative data to calculate immigration rates. However, demographic changes can be explained by both regular and irregular migration, and administrative data can only inform us about the former. The case of Chile provides an opportunity to address this concern since, as explained above, before 2018, Latin American citizens could easily request a (non-tourist) visa while in Chile as visitors. Regular migration thus explains most of the demographic transformations before 2018. We use administrative data that contains all visa requests made in Chile between 2014 and 2017 and includes information about each migrant's municipality of residence. This data allows us to

compute immigration patterns at the municipality level. In Appendix D, we expand on the use of these administrative data.

Another potential issue associated with studying the impact of immigration is that native residents of areas exposed to high levels of immigration might get used to these demographic changes and, as a result, not update their political attitudes after foreigners arrive. Previous studies have highlighted the limitations of using immigration rates to measure perceived immigration (Newman and Velez, 2014). To address this concern, we analyze immigration shocks or substantive demographic changes caused by migratory waves that occur in a short time period (Severino and Visconti, 2024).

We compute the annual change in immigration to measure demographic transformations. For example, for the survey implemented in 2017, we use the number of visas requested in 2016 and 2015 to estimate the demographic change. In particular, we calculate the percentage-point change between 2016 and 2015 (i.e., changes in visa requests from one year to the next).[2] We define exposed municipalities as those with a change in visa requests equal to or greater than one standard deviation above the mean (considering all of the differences between years in a given survey wave). Control municipalities are those in which demographic changes were less than one standard deviation. Survey respondents living in exposed municipalities are considered exposed subjects, and those in control municipalities are control subjects. We use a continuous version of the exposure indicator in Appendix E as a robustness check (i.e., the change in percentage points), and conclusions do not change. Finally, since we only use administrative data before the immigration reform in 2018 to better capture migration changes, we compute immigration shocks for the years 2015, 2016, and 2017.

The panel study is based on a nationally representative sample; the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies administered the survey in person (Appendix F includes details about sampling). We use three waves from 2016 to 2018 to measure the outcomes. For example, for an outcome from the second wave (year 2017), the immigration shock is computed using visa requests

[2] Percentage change: (Visas year 1 – Visas year 2)/(Visas year 2).

from 2016 and 2015 to compute changes in migration. The logic of using a lagged treatment is that exposure to migration needs to precede the measurement of the outcome. Regarding the outcomes, we use two questions from this panel study to evaluate how demographic changes (measured using administrative data) affect nationalistic attitudes (measured using panel survey data). We use agreement with the statements "I feel proud to be Chilean" and "I identify with Chile" (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree). We use the average of responses to both statements to proxy for nationalistic attitudes to simplify the interpretation of the main results. Appendix G reports the findings when using pride and identity as different outcomes, and the conclusions hold. We standardize all outcomes to facilitate their interpretation.

To estimate the dynamic DiD, we rely on the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) DiD estimator, which computes the treatment's effect by the length of exposure using never-treated units as the control group. We also include a set of placebo covariates (i.e., not affected by exposure to migration) to increase the efficiency of our estimates, such as respondents' education, gender, age, and survey date. Appendix H includes the results of the dynamic DiD without controls, and the main conclusions hold.

The data of the panel survey include 25% of all municipalities in Chile, but cover 67% of the population. We have 6,249 observations (or 2,083 participants across three waves) from the 92 municipalities used in the study (29 exposed and 63 never treated). Since exposure to a demographic change is assigned at the municipality level, but outcomes are measured at the individual level, we use bootstrapped-based standard errors. Figure 1 depicts the distribution of the control (i.e., never treated) and exposed groups (i.e., regardless of the time of exposure). We compare the pre-exposure characteristics of both groups in Appendix C.

The exposed and control municipalities are located in the country's three main geographic areas – north, center, and south.[3] Regarding spillovers, since the entire country experienced a demographic transformation and the key distinction between places is the degree of change, we

[3] Excluding the deep south (Aysen and Magallanes regions), which only accounts for around 1% of the population.

expect violations of the non-interference assumption to bias the effects toward zero. This design is, therefore, a hard test to find any effects.

In the final dataset, the units of analysis are thus survey respondents embedded in panel data. Exposed individuals are those living in a municipality in which immigration increased by more than one standard deviation in the previous year, and control subjects live in municipalities that were never exposed to an immigration shock. The outcome measures national sentiments toward Chile.

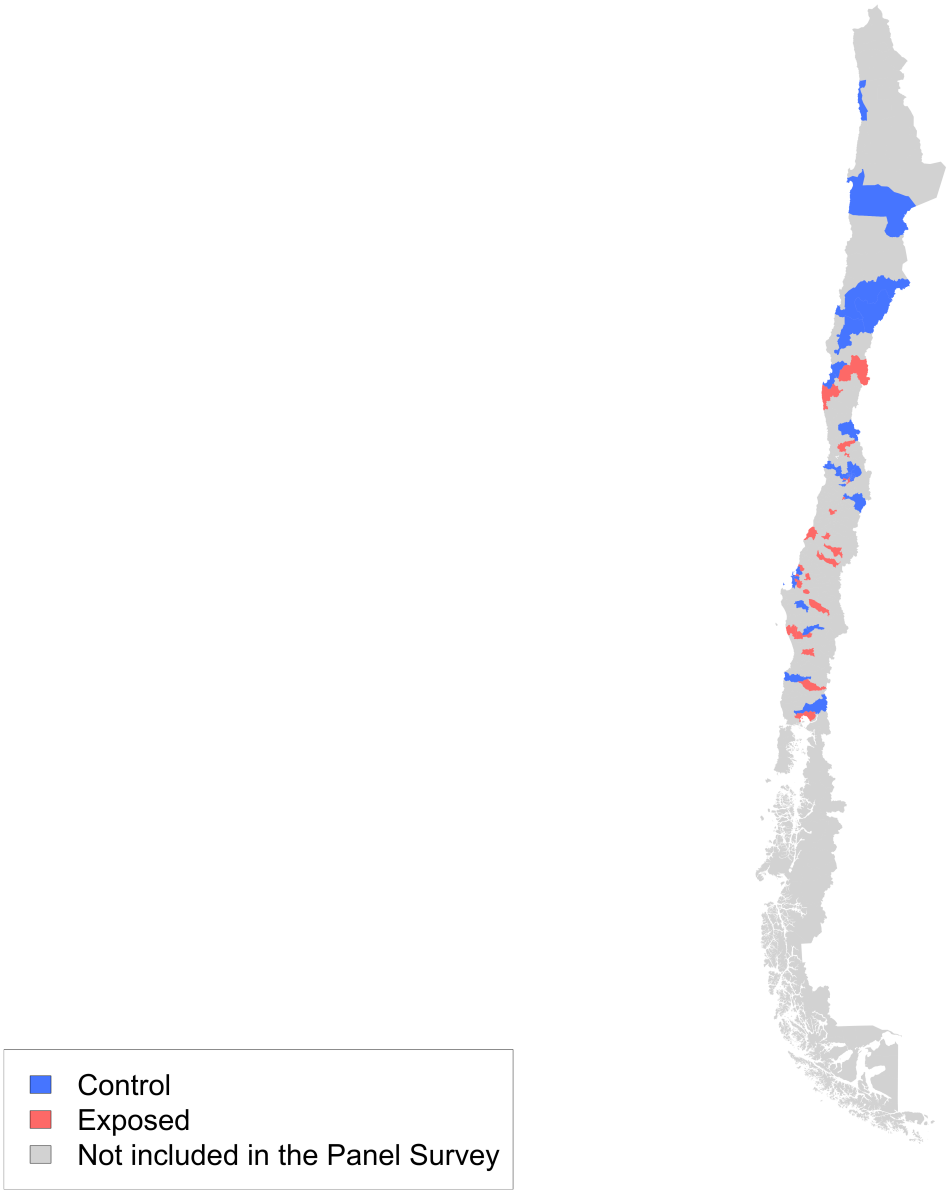

Figure 1: Map of Chile depicting municipalities that: (i) were exposed to an immigration shock, (ii) were not exposed to an immigration shock, and (iii) were not included in the panel survey data.

4 Results

In Appendix I, we explore the descriptive statistics of nationalistic attitudes. In this section, we focus on the results from the dynamic DiD. Because it is not easy to interpret a design based on multiple time periods, a common approach is to aggregate group-time effects into an event-study plot (Callaway and Sant'Anna, 2021). This approach provides the average treatment effects with different lengths of exposure. We report the effects of the first (immediate) and second (after one year) exposures to an immigration shock.

Figure 2 displays the main results of immigration shocks on nationalistic attitudes. The dots represent the average effects, and the lines 95% confidence intervals. The results in gray correspond to the pre-exposure analysis, which compares the *never treated* (i.e., controls) and *eventually treated* (i.e., not exposed at the time but will be exposed in the next waves). The results in black correspond to the post-exposure analysis or the effects of an immigration shock by the length of exposure, which is based on the comparison between *never treated* and *first treated* (i.e., exposed for a first time or immediate exposure), and *never treated* and *second treated* (i.e., exposed one year after initial exposure).

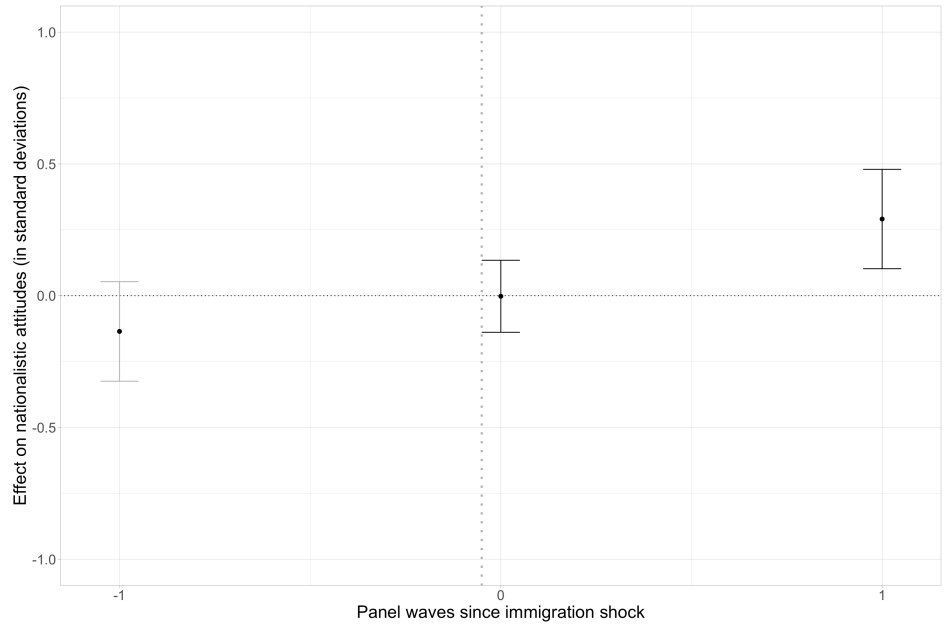

Figure 2: Average effect of immigration shocks on nationalistic attitudes by length of exposure. A length of exposure of -1 refers to the period before the first exposure, 0 to the first exposure, and 1 to the second exposure to an immigration shock. 5,782 observations (respondent-wave). See full results in Appendix N.

The figure shows a nonsignificant result before the first exposure (95% CI: [-0.325, 0.053]), which provides evidence to support the parallel-trends assumption (i.e., both groups followed the same trajectory in the pretreatment period, which is expressed by the null results). There is no evidence of an effect during the initial exposure (95% CI: [-0.139, 0.134]), but there is evidence of such an effect one year after the first exposure. A second exposure to an immigration shock increases nationalistic attitudes by 0.29 standard deviation units (95% CI: [0.102, 0.479]). The patterns are the same when using national pride and national identity separately (rather than the average of both): there is no evidence of a pretreatment effect, no evidence of an immediate effect, and a significant increase one year after the initial exposure (national pride 95%: [0.164, 0.541], national identity 95%: [0.004, 0.401]).

To provide more context to effect sizes, unstandardized nationalistic attitudes are scored between 1 and 5. When we use this version of the outcome rather than the standardized one, we find that the immigration shock increases nationalism by 0.21 points after two exposures (see Appendix H). Considering that the average score for nationalistic attitudes in the never-treated group is 4.31, changing this outcome by a fifth of a point is not a minor update.

Figure 2 thus shows that people do not change their political attitudes immediately after being exposed to an immigration shock. Their new attitudes crystallize after a year, suggesting that some contact with migrants is needed to make them more nationalistic.

We explore and expand on the causal mechanism in Appendix A. We provide suggestive evidence that this enhanced nationalism is a form of exclusionary nationalism. Additionally, we provide preliminary evidence about how migration can increase hate crimes against migrants, negative rhetoric on social media, and support for far-right parties (see Appendix J, K, and C). We discuss and rule out alternative mechanisms based on increased patriotism and elite-driven attitudes in Appendix B. Finally, we also present survey data from eight Latin American countries to improve the external validity of the main results in Appendix M.

5 Conclusions

Large, unprecedented demographic changes have multi-faceted political outcomes in host countries. When significant migration flows change a country's population structure, native-born citizens often perceive a threat to their identity and self-image, making them more susceptible to adopting nationalistic attitudes.

Using administrative data containing all visa requests made at the local level and panel survey data, including questions about nationalistic attitudes, we find that first exposure to immigration had no initial effect. However, one year later, nationalistic attitudes notably increased. This suggests that it takes time for people to adjust and react to these changes, with national pride and identity becoming more pronounced over time.

The main driver behind this increase seems to be an identitarian reaction. When faced with an influx of migrants, locals tend to reinforce their own national identity despite cultural similarities. When migrants share language and cultural traits, distinctions become less overt but more meaningful, prompting locals to reinforce their identity to maintain social cohesion. This reaction is not just theoretical; we observed a rise in negative rhetoric on social media, support for the newly formed far-right party, and even hate crimes in areas with higher immigration rates.

As nations all over the world grapple with immigration-related challenges, our findings have important political implications in trying to understand identity formation in Latin America and beyond. This is particularly pertinent in the context of South–South migration, an often overlooked yet crucial phenomenon in which neighboring developing countries host the majority of immigrants. Understanding these dynamics is vital for addressing the potential consequences of a surge in nationalistic rhetoric and attitudes in global politics.

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