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“Italians, first!” Unpacking the link between nationalism and immigrant discrimination

1. Introduction

The rise of national-populist parties in Europe and the challenge to liberal democracy is a leitmotif in contemporary politics (Mudde *et al.*, 2018; Betz *et al.*, 2019; Brubaker, 2020). This new nationalism seems largely driven by immigration, which affects ethnic majorities within nation-states (Betz, 2017, 2019; Halikiopoulou, Vlandas, 2019; Kaufmann, 2017, 2019b). Successful parties, such as the Front National in France and the Lega in Italy, mobilize on both populist and nationalist issues (Martinelli, 2018; Betz, 2019; Hutter, Kriesi, 2021). All over Europe, the idea is increasingly taking hold that cultural diversity, in particular if associated with international migration, is problematic or undesirable (Citrin, Sides, 2008; Gattinara, Morales, 2017; Antonsich, Petrillo, 2019; Kaufmann, 2019b). This debate is intertwined with the one on the role of multiculturalism in liberal democratic societies (Brubaker, 2001; Banting, Kymlicka, 2012), its presumed failure and its replacement with a model of civic integration based on post-national, universalistic liberal principles (Habermas, 1995; Joppke, 2017). Paradoxically, when put into practice, it is not rare for the logic of civic integration to lose its liberal character and universalistic criteria to instead repropose the native majority's monopoly on the definition of what the national culture is/should be (Suvarierol, 2012; Mouritsen *et al.*, 2019; Larin, 2020). Think of the various integration tests in Europe that have introduced a principle of conditionality and subalternity, linking access to rights to the (unilateral) assessment of elements such as knowledge of the host country's language, history and culture (Kostakopoulou, 2010; Wiesbrock, Carrera, 2010; Gargiulo, 2018).

Migrants' integration and new nationalism are pressing issues in Italy too, a more and more multi-ethnic country, home to over 5 million foreigners, 800,000 of whom minors going through the education system (Istat, 2020). Moreover, in recent years the politicization and mediatization of the so-called 'refugee crisis' has helped couple migration issues with socio-economic, security and cultural concerns (Gattinara, 2016; Barisione, 2020). In particular, during the 2013-18 legislature prominent political use was

made of the immigration issue and its linkage with national identity, driven by the strategic positioning of Matteo Salvini, leader of the League party (Passarelli, Tuorto, 2018), and his nationalist populist communication on the social media (Bobba, 2019). A lively debate accompanied the proposal for *ius soli temperato/ius culturae*¹ that arrived (and sank) in the Senate in December 2017. The political impact of ethnic prejudice in Italy is not a new matter, as the seminal work of Sniderman and colleagues pointed out (2002). The growing empirical literature on the topic confirms that the immigration issue has become more and more salient for a large majority of Italian voters (Di Mauro, Verzichelli, 2019). Paradoxically, this has occurred without any increase in anti-immigrant sentiments over the last thirty years in Italy, as accurate analysis of EVS data confirms (Molteni, 2020).

What I want to highlight here is that the rhetoric of the Italian political elite is increasingly showing a nationalism staked on the separation and contrast between natives and foreigners. This trend is summed up by the motto «Italians first», suggesting a nativist conception of the Italian nation and diversity as a threat. According to this view, support for discriminatory measures targeting immigrants is the direct consequence of «preference for the “native” exclusively on the grounds of “being native”» (Genova, 2016, 233). Furthermore, opposition to immigrants intertwines with the attempt to construct and/or reaffirm a collective identity around an ethnic majoritarian conception of national identity (for the Italian case see Guglielmi, 2018, 2020; Patriarca, Deplano, 2018; Kaufmann, 2019b). While classical nationalism define national identity by distinguishing nation-states, new nationalism seems to distinguish «the ‘native’ national identity from that of its current and prospective citizens, who tend to be migrants» (Suvarierol, 2012, 213). However, as yet little is known about how national identity and symbolic national boundaries influence attitudes towards immigration. Until a few years ago, the literature focused on instrumental and economic grounds. More recently, scholars pointed out that attitudes towards immigration are increasingly driven by symbolic rather than economic concerns (Hainmueller, Hopkins, 2014; Schmidt, Quandt, 2018; Heath *et al.*, 2020). Opposition to immigration seems primarily driven by cultural tensions based on identities, values and a lack of contact with outgroup members. However, as Hainmueller and Hopkins pointed out (2014, 225), «[...] more work is needed to strengthen the causal identification of socio-tropic concerns and to isolate precisely how, when, and why they matter for attitude formation». In fact, compared to a political economy approach, the socio-psychological approach appears less unified from the theoretical and

¹ *Ius soli temperato* was the proposed right to citizenship for children born in Italy to foreign parents if at least one of the parents had resided in the country for a certain number of years; *ius culturae* is citizenship gained by attending school in Italy.

methodological point of view. The common denominator is the reference, in a more or less explicit way, to Social Identity Theory (SIT). Two general hypotheses derive from this approach: 1) anti-immigrant sentiments are more prevalent among people with a strong sense of national identity; 2) negative attitudes are triggered when the sense of threat is heightened. To the best of my knowledge, these two hypotheses are generally tested without considering national identity and threat perception at the same time (for an exception see Sumino, 2017). Moreover, scholars generally have not paid the right attention to the fact that intensity of attachment is only one of the dimensions of national identity involved in formation of anti-immigrants attitudes (Huddy, 2001; Grimm *et al.*, 2016).

Against this background, the article aims to contribute theoretically and empirically to the topic, by focusing on mechanisms connecting different conceptions of national identity to support for migrant employment policy based on the nativist argument. The main claim of the paper is that both ethnic and civic conceptions of national identity might contribute to native favouritism directly and indirectly, because they make salient all those factors – perceived threats and diffidence in foreigners – which contribute to a deteriorating climate of intergroup relations. Theoretically, I proposed the *National Identity Threat Trust* model (NITT) to better investigate the mechanisms underpinning the formation of support for native employment priority (see Figure 1). Empirically, structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed on survey data from the last wave of EVS Italy (2017).

The theoretical framework underpinning the “causal” model proposed is presented in the next section. Section 3 presents the data and methodology. Section 4 is devoted to empirical analysis. The chapter closes with a discussion of the main results.

2. Theoretical framework

The paper adopts a cognitive perspective that considers ethnicity and nationhood as ways of perceiving, interpreting and representing the social world rather than “things” in the world (Brubaker, 2004). In this framework, the expectations concerning the mechanisms that promote or inhibit support for native priority derive from two theoretical sources which are presented below. The first is the debate within sociology and political science on the different ideas of nationhood and “new” nationalism driven by immigration, while the second consists of socio-psychological models of intergroup relations.

2.1. Nativism as way to draw national symbolic boundaries

It is Norwegian anthropologist Barth who must be thanked for introducing this new way of studying ethnicity at the end of the 1960s.

Abandoning the claim to identify objective traits that characterize an ethnic group, Barth's approach instead concentrates on ethnic borders and the processes that keep them alive. He rejects an essentialist definition of ethnic groups and emphasizes the fact that they are «categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people» (Barth, 1969, 9). The differences in themselves are not important. What is important is the fact that a social difference is established and that it is defined as ethnic, that is, linked to «basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by [a person's] origin and background» (ivi, 13). Language, skin colour, clothing, lifestyles and values can be used to exhibit and point out the ethnic boundary, but, in reality, one and the same "objective" difference can be highlighted, exaggerated or minimized by the same subject in different social interactions. Pizzorno spoke of the emergence of these forms of sociality using the metaphor of a «micro-exit from the state of nature», a process that «sees people meet each other and build their own sociality, not on the premise of cooperating together, but on the premise of judging themselves akin owing to some value that is chosen, at a particular moment, as being shared by all of them» (Pizzorno, 2007, 147). They are differences which produce an effect even if they are only imagined and even if their outer appearance may vary. Recently, Kaufmann pointed out a similar view, affirming that ethno-traditional nationalists may seek a slower rate of ethnic change because they wish to protect communities which serve as symbols of nationhood (Kaufmann, 2019a, 440-445).

According to the cognitive approach, nativism may be understood as a particular way to draw national symbolic boundaries that includes a differentiation between two groups: natives and immigrants. In this framework, nativism should be considered as a relational and not a static concept. In the long run, immigrants have the potential to become natives in the eyes of the host nation; indeed, colonizers and immigrants can come to define themselves as natives too (Fry, 2007; Kešić, Duyvendak, 2019).

Even if increasingly used in Western Europe, nativism is primarily an American concept. Europeans tend to talk about ultra-nationalism or xenophobia or racism rather than nativism. However, even though nativism is often justified along racist lines, religious or ideological issues may be used in its argumentation too (Guia, 2016; Betz, 2017; 2019). The term's origins lie in mid-nineteenth-century political movements such as the Know Nothing Party. In his seminal *Strangers in the Land. Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (1955), John Higham defined nativism as an «intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. un-American) connections» (Higham, 2002, 4). He identified three subtypes: 1) *religious* nativism, which made European Catholic minorities a threat to the American religious and political life; 2) *political* nativism («The Red Scare»), which affirmed that leftist ideas and practices (e.g., strikes) imported from Europe were a threat to the typically American

liberalism; and 3) *racial* nativism, which established a clear distinction between the “true” WASP Americanness and Blacks, Asians, and Southern and Eastern Europeans.

Recent literature shows a clear evolution of the notion of nativism, while distinguishing it from closely related concepts, such as racism, nationalism and xenophobia (Betz, 2017; 2019). Beyond the proliferation of labels (cultural nativism, economic nativism, racist nativism, secularist nativism...), a minimal definition of nativism includes three features (Guía, 2016; Betz, 2017; 2019; Kešić, Duyvendak, 2019). First, a line of demarcation between natives and foreigners based on temporal and/or cultural distance. Typically, temporal differentiation distinguishes native-born and inhabitants of long standing from new arrivals, while cultural differentiation emphasizes natives’ common values. Secondly, foreignness is associated with a threat to the nation. Consequentially, as the nativist logic has it, the national community must be preserved and defended, and natives must be given priority in the distribution of societal resources. It is worth stressing that the first two features regard the social construction of national symbolic boundaries, while the last explicitly regards the wish to promote the natives’ interests. At the individual level, the nativist logic is consistent with the psychological mechanism clearly stressed by Social Identity Theory: social categorization, ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination (Tajfel, 1981; Turner *et al.*, 1987). Therefore, (cultural/temporal) nativist differentiation may be better understood in terms of contents establishing the normative dimension of national identity, which refers to the norms, beliefs and values perceived as prototypical of group identity (Citrin, Sides, 2004)².

This area of investigation is dominated by the widely criticized “ethnic/civic” dichotomy (Kohn, 1961; Smith 1991). In reality, this transposition from the macro to the micro presents various weaknesses (Brubaker, 1992; Shulman, 2002; Kaufmann, Zimmer, 2004). First of all, it is based on a highly ideological and almost Manichean vision of nationalism. In the attempt to overcome this dichotomy, Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995) proposed a tripartite framework based on three different symbolic codes – primordial, cultural and civic (or civil) – upon which the collective identity is built. The first defines the group boundaries on the basis of ascribed traits (such as gender, lineage and ethnic group). Hence, inclusion is not possible. The second relates collective identity to the

² Referring to Social Identity Theory and in particular to the definition of social identity introduced by Marilynn Brewer (2001), Citrin and colleagues (Citrin, Sides, 2004) proposed a conceptualization of national identity based on three dimensions: 1) cognitive, that is, self-categorization as a group member (who am I?); 2) affective, that is, the strength of emotional attachment; 3) normative, that is, beliefs about the criteria for inclusion in the group/the attributes of the prototypical member (who are we?).

sacred world: faith in God, but also in reason or in progress, can act as a boundary of national belonging. Here, inclusion is only possible through conversion. The third code concerns familiarity with the group's customs and traditions, rules of conduct and institutions. Note that this code (defined by the authors as civic or civil; *civility code*) often acts in implicit ways: «civic codes of collective identity maintain the boundaries by not mentioning them» (Eisenstadt, Giesen, 1995, 81). In this sense, the mechanism does not seem unlike the one proposed by Billig (1995) in his definition of “banal” nationalism. Kymlicka (2001) also distinguished between a dimension of national belonging based on sharing traditions and national ways of conduct from the strictly civic (meant here in terms of citizenship) and ethnic one. Lastly, Brubaker (1992; 2004) and Smith (2000) also distanced themselves from the initial rigid dichotomies and/or tripartitions in favour of readings allowing an interrelation between the different dimensions of belonging. Instead of a rigid dichotomy, three semantic centres instead emerge in the literature – ethnic, cultural and civic/political – that are linked together and can give rise to different identity configurations.

In the specific topic dealt with here, there are nevertheless some difficulties in clearly attributing nativist symbolic boundaries to one pole or another. Kaufmann (2017, 2019a, 2019b) directly addressed the issue, affirming that the ethnic/civic dichotomy is not sufficient to understand the new nationalism driven by immigration. He proposes using the term ethnic majoritarianism to stress the fact that «most Americans are not ethnic nationalist, but many are ethno-traditional. Few would restrict national membership to those from the dominant ethnic group, but many recognise that the majority ethno-tradition forms part of the myth-symbol complex of the nation» (Kaufmann, 2019b, 441). Ethnic majoritarianism may be open or closed, based on the accepted level of assimilation. However, even open ethnic majoritarianism differs from civic nationalism: «the former seeks to preserve an ethnic majority, or descent community, rather than accept a multi-ethnic form of nationhood based solely on state institutions and values. For open ethnic nationalists, majority ethnicity remains a key component of nationhood, but its boundaries are maintained partly through marital and “identificational” assimilation» (Kaufmann, 2017, 34).

Despite these limits, at the micro level the “ethnic/civic” dichotomy has widely influenced the work of sociologists and political scientists involved in the empirical study of national identities. In particular, extensive use has been made of this outline in sample surveys aimed at making a comparative study of the contents of national identity (see, for example, the recent European Values Study 2017 that will be used in this article, but also the Pew Research Center, Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey and the module on national identity in the International Social Survey Program from 1995, 2003 and 2013). Typically, interviewees are

presented with a list of attributes (for example, language, place of birth, religion, customs and traditions, citizenship) and asked how important they consider them in order for a person to be a true co-national. Despite identifying two or three latent dimensions, at the macro level the empirical studies have rarely found a full correspondence with the rigid ethnic/civic dichotomy deriving from the historical and sociological study of nationalism (Jones, Smith, 2001; Björklund, 2006; Haller, Ressler, 2006; Theiss-Morse, 2009; Reeskens, Hooghe, 2010; Guglielmi, Vezzoni, 2016; Ariely, 2020). Hence, even though various scholars continue to use civic and ethnic to name the latent dimensions emerging from statistical analyses, they have to be understood as general labels (Trittler, 2017) which are often correlated to each other and dependent on the national context used by individuals to trace the national prototype. Moreover, as has been noted, despite the rightful criticism levelled at the theoretical, methodological and empirical contradictions in the civic/ethnic dichotomy (Ariely, 2020), if not used in a prescriptive sense, this terminology has a heuristic utility all the same (Koning, 2011).

In particular, by using these instruments we can keep what the political elites say that the nation is or should be separate from how the citizens who are part of it see and regard it (Helbling *et al.*, 2016). In addition, it gives the possibility of highlighting recurrent patterns in the population, using statistical techniques. Then, in the specific topic dealt with here, there is empirical evidence that conceptions which underline “ethnic” (or ascribed) elements of the nation foster the emergence of negative attitudes towards foreigners. The question of those who adopt conceptions more oriented towards a “civic-political” commonality is more complex, however. Even though they may seem, in general, to support more inclusive attitudes towards foreigners, the significance and intensity of this positive effect varies depending on the operative definitions adopted and the national contexts investigated (e.g., Theiss-Morse, 2009; Pehrson, Green, 2010; Wright *et al.*, 2012; Verkuyten, Martinovic, 2015; Mepham, Verkuyten, 2017; McAllister, 2018; Guglielmi, 2020).

2.2. National identity and native favouritism: the mediation role of threat perception and trust-related emotions

As pointed out before, for the nativist logic, not only is the social differentiation between natives and foreigners meaningful and salient, the idea that native «groupness» (Brubaker, 2004) is threatened by foreigners is too. Quite surprisingly, the association between the nativist conception of national identity, perceived collective threat and attitudes towards migrants’ integration remains quite unexplored. Nevertheless, a large part of empirical research on predictors of negative attitudes towards migrants focuses on the perception of threat (for recent studies on the topic see, among others, Meuleman *et al.*, 2019; Davidov *et al.*, 2020; Heath *et*

al., 2020). More or less implicitly, this literature refers to ITT (Integrated/Intergroup Threat Theory, Stephan, Stephan, 2000), a social-psychological model relating to perceived threat that leads to prejudice (for the Italian case see Salvati *et al.*, 2020). To sum up, two kinds of collective threats are included in the model: realistic and symbolic. The former regards physical threats (to the social order, stability) and economic threats (competition over scarce resources, such as welfare and jobs). The latter concerns a large spectrum of threats towards contents of the normative dimension of the ingroup social identity (i.e. cultural/religious values, customs, beliefs).

As for the topic of this article, ITT offers a useful framework for the depiction of a causal chain linking national identity to support for the idea that natives should have priority in the distribution of societal resources. First, while accepting that ingroup identification and threat perception may reinforce each other, many scholars suggest that ingroup identification should be considered as a logical antecedent to threat perception. In particular, according to the “Group Identity Lens” model (Verkuyten, 2009; 2018)³, perceived threat mediates the effect of identification on ingroup favouritism. Group identity acts as a lens through which individuals frame intergroup relations. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981) the more an individual feels attached to the nation, the more s/he is sensitive to the potential collective threat coming from outgroups. As pointed out above, the topic of the direct and indirect effect on attitudes towards migrants of the normative dimension of national identity via association with perceived threat is relatively unexplored by sociologists and political scientists. This is perhaps due to the lack of measures, given that very few surveys include questions that can tap both intensity of attachment and the meanings attributed to national identity (Ariely, 2020). However, some evidence exists that is consistent with this mediation model. For example, using Canadian data from the ISSP 2003, Sumino shows that ethnic and civic national identities shape perceived collective threat, which in turn influences adherence to multiculturalism (e.g., Sumino, 2017). Moreover, recent analyses of cross-national survey data suggest that realistic and symbolic threats act as legitimating factors in mediating the relationship between racism and opposition to immigration and support for ethnicist criteria (Davidov *et al.*, 2020; Ramos *et al.*, 2020).

Secondly, according to some strands of social psychology literature, the relations between ingroup identification, perceived threat and ingroup favouritism may be better understood by taking into account the

³ The alternative model – the “Group-Identity Reaction” model – does not seem suitable for political identities, such as national identities, that are stable over time and resilient to contingent manipulation (Huddy, 2001; Verkuyten, 2009).

role of trust-related emotions (Voci, 2006; Christ *et al.* 2013; Freitag, Kijewski, 2017). Perceived collective threat and trust are embedded in similar processes and they constitute the pillars of intergroup social climate. Typically, absence of trust towards the outgroup is a particular form of prejudice which influences opposition to the outgroup and is more likely to emerge if intergroup comparison is a salient factor (Hewstone, 2015). Competition over resources and perceived threat contribute to a climate of distrust that hinders tolerance and positive relations (Dovidio *et al.*, 2008). As regards the topic of this article, some survey-based findings are consistent with this expectation. For example, ingroup trusters seem to display more nativist attitudes regarding immigration policy. This kind of ingroup favouritism is reinforced by the perception of a collective threat (Crepaz *et al.*, 2014). As regards the link between the meanings of national identity and outgroup trust, there is evidence that civic/cultural contents provide a foundation for the extension of trust to newcomers and minorities (Chin, 2020). It is also found that perceived threat mediates between values such as universalism and conformity/tradition and attitudes towards immigration (Davidov *et al.*, 2020).

3. *Research question and hypotheses*

Based on the foregoing discussion, I propose the *National Identity Threat Trust* model (NITT) to better investigate the mechanisms underpinning the formation of support for native employment priority.

I consider two sources of attitudes to explain support for natives' priority: national identity and intergroup social climate. According to the "Group Identity Lens Model", I expect that national identity components (both affective and normative dimensions) constitute the frame in which intergroup social climate (perceived threat and trust-related emotions) become salient. In turn, they influence attitudes towards native favouritism. I distinguish between ethnic majoritarianism and civility based on the literature on the different conceptions of national belonging. The first concept stresses the temporal and cultural differentiation between natives/foreigners typical of new nationalism as described by Kaufmann (2019b), while the second emphasizes the "banal" (Billig, 1995) / "civil" (Eisenstadt, Giesen, 1995) contents of national belonging. It is based on knowing the language, sharing the same customs and respecting the institutions. These form the lowest common denominator that everyone – natives or not – could achieve. Moreover, regarding the affective dimension of national identity, following the literature on multiple identities (Risse, 2010), I consider the role of both national and supranational territorial attachment.

Against this background, I arrived at six hypotheses corresponding to structural paths in the NITT model:

H1. “Intergroup Climate Hypothesis”. Diffidence in foreigners and perception of symbolic and realistic threat – as a result of intergroup comparisons – are expected to contribute directly to increasing support for native employment priority.

H2. “Nativist Spiral Hypothesis”. The ethnic majoritarian conception of national identity is strongly expected to directly and indirectly affect support for native employment priority, via positive association with the perception of economic and symbolic threats and distrust of foreigners.

H3. “Two-Faced Civility Hypothesis”. The civil conception of national identity is expected to have a negative direct effect on support for native employment priority and the level of distrust of foreigners but contribute indirectly to increasing support for native employment priority via positive association with the perception of economic and symbolic threats.

H4. “Supra-national Attachment Hypothesis”. Attachment to supranational entities (Europe, the world) is expected to directly and indirectly reduce support for native employment priority via negative association with the perception of economic and symbolic threats and distrust of foreigners.

H5. “National Attachment Hypothesis”. Attachment to the nation is expected to both directly and indirectly increase support for native employment priority via positive association with the perception of economic and symbolic threats and distrust of foreigners.

H6. “Push-Effect Politicization Hypothesis”. Citizens close to right-wing nativist parties are expected to exhibit a similar relationship structure between national identity, perception of threats and support for native employment priority to the rest of population. What is expected to change is the strength with which some mechanisms deploy their effects.

4. *Data, measures and method*

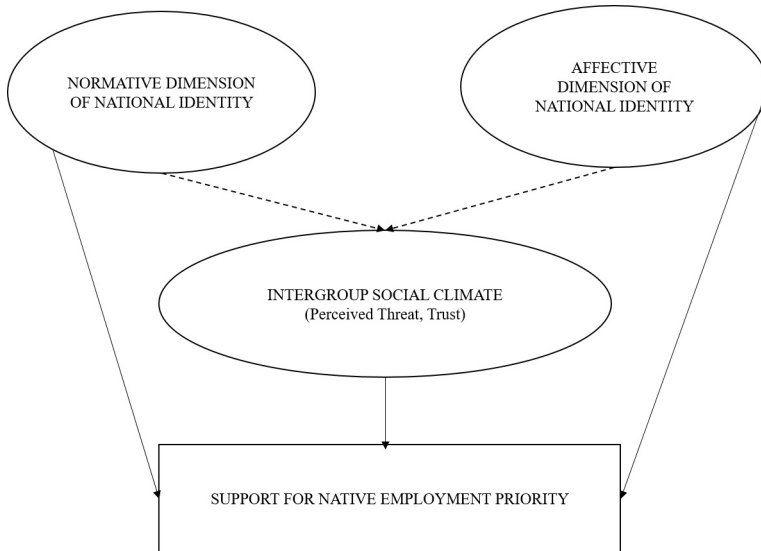
Figure 1 shows the simplified theoretical *National Identity Threat Trust* model (NITT). The full structural equation model is in Figure 2. The items used to measure the latent and observed variables and related descriptive statistics are presented in Table A1 (Appendix). They were selected based on the theoretical and empirical framework discussed above. The data come from the EVS-Italy 2017.

4.1. Measures

Support for native employment priority

Support for the idea that natives should have priority in the event of competition for a job is measured by an observed variable, that is, the level of agreement with the following statement “When jobs are scarce,

Figure 1. *The NITT Model (National Identity – Treath – Trust) to explain support for native employment priority*



employers should give priority to [NATIONALITY] people over immigrants”.

Note that six out of ten respondents agree with the idea that if jobs are scarce, Italians should have priority over immigrants. It is worth to stress, however, that the rate of agreement has not changed much in the last 30 years, and that it was already very high in 1990 (70%, based on the first EVS-Italy).

National identity

a) Normative dimension of national identity

As regards the normative dimension of national identity, the model distinguishes the ethnic majoritarian code of national belonging from civility. Both latent variables are measured by assessing the extent to which a respondent considers a list of attributes important in order to be a “true” co-national. The ethnic majoritarian code is measured by a list of symbolic boundaries defining a temporal and values based differentiation: Being born in Italy, Having Italian ancestry and Being Christian⁴.

⁴ Actually, the item “Being Christian” is presented in the list of attributes defining a “truly” European. Unfortunately, as far as national prototype is concerned, the level of importance attributed to being Christian was not tested. However, previous comparative studies showed that the two items – if measured at national and European level - are highly correlated (Guglielmi, Vezzoni, 2016).

The civility code implies more inclusive and achievable attributes: Being able to speak the national language, Sharing Italian culture and Respecting the Italian political institutions and laws.

b) Affective dimension of national identity

To take into account the distinction between exclusive identification vs multiple territorial identities, the model includes a latent variable (globalism) measuring the level of attachment to Europe and the world and an observed variable concerning the level of closeness to country.

Intergroup social climate (threats and trust)

a) Perceived collective threat

Realistic threat is measured by a latent variable based on agreement with the idea that migration is a burden for the national welfare state and responsible for the increase in the rate of crime in Italy.

As regards symbolic threat, unfortunately the EVS questionnaire does not provide a specific/valid measure. The model includes a proxy variable, that is, self-rating on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is “It is better if immigrants maintain their distinct customs and traditions” and 10 “It is better if immigrants do not maintain their distinct customs and traditions”. Even if is not a proper measure of symbolic threat, it is reasonable to suppose that people not comfortable with the idea that migrants maintain their customs (and then opt for assimilation) are more sensitive to symbolic threat. Scholars habitually use this item to measure the adoption of a multicultural/assimilationist view in intergroup relations.

b) Outgroup trust

In order to measure trust in foreigners, the NITT model includes a latent variable based on the level of trust in people of another religion and people of another nationality.

4.2. The modelling strategy

To test the hypotheses, a structural equation model (Bollen, 1989) was specified consisting of: 1) the measurement model, which includes five latent variables (ethnic majoritarianism, civility, globalism, distrust of foreigners, realistic threat); 2) the structural/causal model which, based on the theoretical assumptions, links the five latent variables seen above and three observed variables (national attachment, symbolic threat, native employment priority).⁵ Specifically, the measurement model aims to check the extent to which our conceptual refinement and the operationalization of the constructs are consistent with the survey data collect-

⁵ In this article, SEM is performed using Mplus 8.1 software. To deal with missing data, Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) was used. The estimator used is WLSMV-Weighted Least Square Mean and Variance Adjusted.

ed. The causal model seeks to unravel to what extent symbolic national boundaries (ethnic majoritarianism vs. civility), together with perceived threat and distrust of foreigners, promote or inhibit support for the idea that natives should have priority if jobs are scarce.

The associations between national attachment, globalism, ethnic majoritarianism and civility are estimated as covariances/correlations given that directional effects cannot be easily established between them. It is the same for the threat and trust measures. The remaining latent and observed variables are related to them in a meaningful way, based on the foregoing theoretical discussions. The structural paths are specified as follows: affective and normative dimensions of national identity directly and indirectly influences the respondents' willingness to ask for employment priority for natives, through the mediation of i) realistic and symbolic threat and ii) distrust of foreigners⁶.

5. Findings

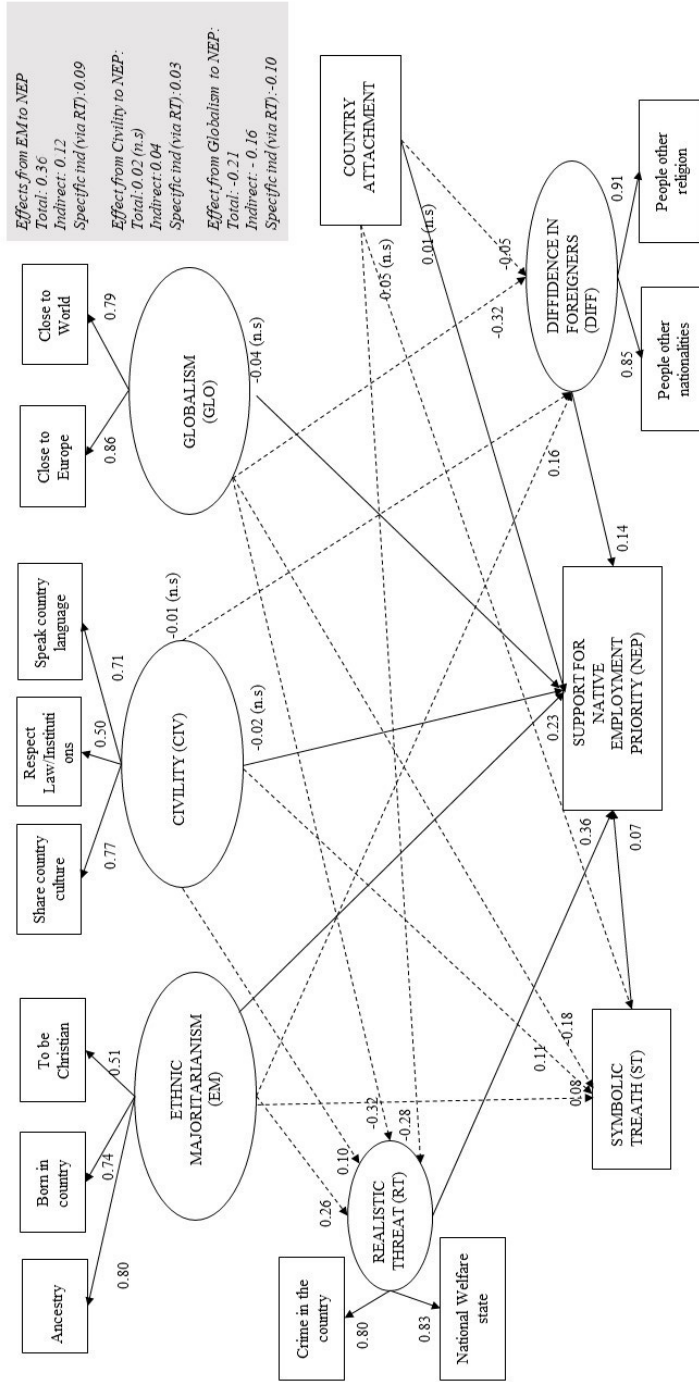
To test the empirical validity of my argument, I followed a two-step analytical strategy. First, I fitted an overall test of the Full SEM that did not include perceived threat and trust as mediators. In other words, I estimated the direct effects of all the variables in the model. Then, a second model was tested which included threat and trust-related measures as mediators. Both models exhibited a good fit, but the mediation model seems more able to reproduce the data (Model 1: Chi Square=434.482; DF=71; CFI=0.965; RMSEA=0.048; SRMR=0.053; Model 2: Chi Square=246.594; DF=65; CFI=0.977; RMSEA=0.035; SRMR=0.026). Therefore, the model fit test is consistent with the general hypothesis presented here that national identity first affects inter-group social climate (perceived threat and trust) then, directly and indirectly, determines individual reactions to employment priority for natives.

A close look at the mediation model, as illustrated by the path diagram in Figure 2, reveals a more complex structure of direct and indirect effects⁷. SEM confirmed the expectation that the effect of identity dimen-

⁶ To assess the ability of the Full SEM to reproduce the data, I referred to the CFI (Comparative Fit Index), RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) and SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual). The cut-off values are: (a) CFI: if the value is equal to 0.95, the model can be accepted, values above 0.90 are satisfactory; (b) RMSEA: values between 0 and 0.05 are considered indicators of a good fit; c) SRMR, a value of less than 0.08 is generally considered a good fit.

⁷ As regards Model 1, a close look at the standardized direct effects of the core variables reveals the strong impact of the perception of a realistic threat ($\beta=0.350$, p-value: 0.000) and ethnic majoritarianism ($\beta=0.247$, p-value=0.000), followed by distrust of foreigners ($\beta=0.152$, p-value=0.000) and symbolic threat ($\beta=0.100$, p-value=0.000). The effect of civility and territorial attachment – both national and supranational – is negligible and not statistically significant.

Figure 2. The National Identity – Treath – Trust SEM (standardized coefficients; level of significance $p < 0.001$; $n.s. > 0.05$; $n = 2,277$; EVS 2017–Italy)



sions on support for native employment priority is partially mediated by threat and trust-related feelings.

Before looking at the structural paths, some words are needed on the coefficients of non-directional relations between the variables included in model 2⁸. Let us start with the national identity measures. First, even though the distinction between the ethnic majoritarianism and civility codes seems to be meaningful⁹, it is worth pointing out that the two conceptions of national identity are positively correlated ($\beta=0.450$). The ethnic majoritarianism is not completely alternative to civic-cultural belonging. Rather, it seems to be a way of drawing additional national boundaries to the one, shared by almost all the population, that defines those who speak the language of the country, share its culture and respect its institutions as “true” Italians. It is worth to note that ethnic majoritarianism is embraced by a minority of Italians, while civility is widespread: the mean of the nativism index is 5.8 (sd=2.2) and the mean of the civility index is 8.6 (sd=1.5), on a scale from 1 to 10.

Moving to the affective dimension of national identity, national attachment and attachment to Europe/the world (globalism) are distinct in the mind of respondents, but nevertheless strongly associated ($\beta=0.572$), according to nested model of multiple identities (Risse, 2010). The great majority of the respondents affirm that they are close to Italy: 28.9% very close, 50.5% close, 17.7% not very close, 2.9% not at all close. Moreover, national attachment is positively associated with both kinds of symbolic national boundaries. Therefore, what seems to make the difference is the extent to which attachment to the nation does or does not hinder the development of multiple territorial affiliations that also include supra-national references. Consistently, the model shows a negative correlation between ethnic majoritarianism and globalism ($\beta=-0.116$) and a positive, but weak correlation with civility ($\beta=0.073$).

Finally, the correlations between the supposed mediators of the relationship between national identity and native favouritism confirm that symbolic threat, realistic threat and distrust reinforce each other. The strongest correlation is between distrust of foreigners and realistic threat ($\beta=0.266$) and the weakest between distrust and symbolic threat ($\beta=0.117$).

Looking closely at the direct and direct effects, interesting results arise as to the mechanisms underpinning the formation of attitudes towards native priority if jobs are scarce. First, the main expectation that perceived collective threat and distrust of foreigners have a positive direct

⁸ Covariances between independent variables and between mediators are estimated, but not represented in Figure 2 for space reasons.

⁹ SEM including a single latent variable to measure the symbolic national boundaries obtains a very poor fit. Results available on request.

effect on support for native favouritism is confirmed (H1 – “Intergroup Climate Hypothesis”). Of the three sources of support for the idea that Italians should have priority over immigrants, what matters most is the perception that migrants and migration threaten the social order and the welfare system ($\beta=0.362$). To a lesser extent, diffidence in foreigners contributes to increasing support for native employment priority ($\beta=0.142$). The effect of perceived symbolic threat is positive but very low ($\beta=0.07$).

Secondly, the results also confirm the “Nativist Spiral Hypothesis” (H2). In detail, people who draw ethnic majoritarian national symbolic boundaries are more likely not only to support native employment priority ($\beta=0.236$) but also to be diffident of foreigners ($\beta=0.168$) and to feel threatened by migration/migrants. This last effect is stronger for realistic ($\beta=0.267$) than for symbolic threat ($\beta=0.089$). Therefore, the total effect of ethnic majoritarianism on support for the idea that employers should give priority to Italian people over immigrants is higher ($\beta=0.364$) than the direct effect ($\beta=0.236$). Decomposition of the effects shows that the indirect effect ($\beta=0.128$) is mainly due to the impact of ethnic majoritarianism on realistic threat ($\beta=0.096$). Less notable is the impact of ethnic majoritarianism on distrust ($\beta=0.025$) and on symbolic threat ($\beta=0.008$) even more so.

Moving to the “Two-Faced Civility Hypothesis” (H3), the results suggest that not only ethnic majoritarianism but also civility play a role in adherence to nativist criteria in the event of competition for jobs. The direct effect of civility on native favouritism is negative, but negligible and not significant ($\beta=-0.025$, $p\text{-value}=0.367$). However, it should be stressed that civility contributes directly to increasing both the perception of realistic ($\beta=0.111$) and symbolic threat/preference for assimilation ($\beta=0.08$). Instead, no effect is found as regards the third pillar of the “negative climate of intergroup relations”, that is, distrust of foreigners. Decomposition of the effects of civility on native favouritism reveals that the indirect effect is positive and significant ($\beta=0.045$, $p\text{-value}=0.002$) and is mainly at work via the perception of realistic threat ($\beta=0.039$, $p\text{-value}=0.001$).

Finally, the NITT model allowed me to investigate the extent to which the affective dimension of national identity promotes native favouritism. The data partially support the expectation in the “National Attachment Hypothesis” (H5). Attachment to the nation was expected to directly increase support for native employment priority. However, the actual effect is weak and not significant ($\beta=0.01$). As regards the expected indirect effect via positive association with the perception of economic and symbolic threats and distrust of foreigners, the model shows a different pattern. National attachment seems to decrease the level of diffidence ($\beta=-0.058$, $p\text{-value}=0.045$), while the effects on both kinds of perceived threats are not significant. The compatibility with strong national identification and outgroup trust is not a strange finding. Psychological experiments have shown that ingroup favouritism is not necessarily linked to outgroup der-

ogation (Abbink, Harris, 2019). However, further analysis is needed to better investigate the link between national attachment and the reaction to intergroup relations.

The “Supra-National Attachment Hypothesis” (H5) claimed that the closer respondents feel to Europe/the world, the more likely it is that they oppose priority for natives if jobs are scarce. The direct effect is negative ($\beta = -0.048$, $p\text{-value} = 0.080$). The effect via negative association with the perception of economic ($\beta = -0.283$) and symbolic threats ($\beta = -0.184$) and distrust of foreigners ($\beta = -0.329$) is in line with expectations. As a result, despite the weak direct effect, the total effect of globalism on native favouritism is remarkable ($\beta = -0.213$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$). Again, the specific indirect effect that contributes most to native favouritism is realistic threat ($\beta = -0.102$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$).

Finally, as regards testing of the “Push-Effect Politicization Hypothesis” (H6) it is worth noting that the EVS questionnaire was administered just a few months after the national election of March 2018. The social and political climate was crisscrossed by nativist claims. “Italians first!” was the main leitmotif of several right-wing parties: League, Brothers of Italy with Giorgia Meloni, CasaPound Italy and Italy to the Italians. Not surprisingly, the people close to these parties are more likely to support native employment priority (42% strongly agree vs 32%). Moreover, they exhibit a higher level of ethnic majoritarianism, but the difference from the rest of the population is not so large (the mean of the ethnic majoritarianism index is 6.1 vs 5.8). However, they also display a slightly higher position on the civility index (8.8 vs 8.5). An invariance test was carried out to check the extent to which the structure of direct and indirect effects depicted by the NITT model differs between people close or not close to parties endorsing a nativist view (H6). The configural model exhibited a good fit in both groups, supporting the hypothesis of invariance of the equivalence of form depicted by the NITT model¹⁰. However, scalar invariance is reached only for the measurement part of the model.

The decomposition of the effects in the two groups confirms interesting specificities concerning the structural path. For the group of right-wing party supporters, the total and direct effects of ethnic majoritarianism on agreement with the idea that natives should have priority is lower than among non-supporters ($\beta_{\text{tot}} = 0.196$, $\beta_{\text{direct}} = 0.165$ vs. $\beta_{\text{tot}} = 0.403$, $\beta_{\text{direct}} = 0.256$). The direct effects of diffidence and realistic threat are also lower (respectively $\beta = 0.061$ and $\beta = 0.259$ vs. $\beta = 0.181$ and $\beta = 0.358$). Instead, among the supporters of nativist parties, the civility code shows a bit higher indirect effect ($\beta = 0.070$ vs. $\beta = 0.033$), via rein-

¹⁰ Group 1 – close to nativist parties: Chi Square= 102.761; DF=65; CFI=0.978; RMSEA=0.035; SRMR=0.032; Group 2 – not close to nativist parties: Chi Square= 223.866; DF=65; CFI=0.982; RMSEA=0.037; SRMR=0.028).

forcing the salience of both the symbolic and realistic perceived threat, which in turn influences the preference for priority employment for natives. Finally, the direct effect of symbolic threat is higher in this group of citizens close to nativist parties ($\beta=0.118$ vs. $\beta=0.069$).

To sum up, the analysis showed that the ethnic majoritarian conception has a positive impact on perceived collective threats (realistic and symbolic) and trust-related emotions, which in turn influence support for discriminatory migrant employment policy. The civil conception contributes only indirectly to increasing support for native employment priority via positive association with the perception of economic and symbolic threats. The influence of the civil conception of nationhood on intergroup social climate seems to be similar to ethnic majoritarianism, despite being less intense. It is the very existence of a line of demarcation between us and them which is perceived as relevant in national terms that arouses negative attitudes towards foreigners, which in turn influence support for discriminatory migrant employment policy. Finally, citizens close to right-wing nativist parties exhibit a similar relationship structure to the rest of population. However, the “nativist” politicization of attitudes towards immigrants makes the symbolic threat a particularly salient factor. Indeed, findings suggest that the group of right-wing party supporters (compared with the rest of population) is more prone to use the “cultural clash” argument to legitimate native priority.

6. *Conclusion*

On these pages, I have attempted to offer a contribution to a better understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the formation of immigration policy preferences based on nativist criteria, by focusing on Italian case.

First of all, the data give an empirical anchor to the reflections on national communities that are imagined (Anderson, 1991), but anything but imaginary. As historically rooted forms of sociality, the symbolic boundaries of the nation can be traced in meanings that are widespread in the public opinion, ideologies and shared norms. And these boundaries produce important social and political consequences (Cella, 2006). On this aspect, the work presented here has debunked some clichés and confirmed others. The idea of Italianness rooted in citizens minds is above all based on a civic-cultural affinity. Knowing the language, having the same customs and respecting the institutions: this is the lowest common denominator on which everyone seems to agree (see also Guglielmi, 2018, 2020). This is the code of “banal” nationalism (Billig, 1995) in Italy. Instead, a wholly negligible minority of Italians (less than 5%) display an exclusively ethnic majoritarian conception (based on the same ancestry, place of birth and Christian background). Nevertheless, some level of

“implicit” nativism seems fairly common among Italian citizens, with over half of Italians combining the civil code with the ethnic majoritarian one agree. The latter promote a tightly woven idea of Italianness, in which all the criteria are important to establish a difference between co-nationals and non-co-nationals. Even more widespread is the “explicit” preference for discrimination based on native status: 6 out of 10 agree with the idea that if jobs are scarce, Italians should have priority over immigrants. Note, however, that the rate of agreement has not changed much in the last 30 years, and that it was already very high in 1990 (70%, based on the first EVS – Italy). It is not surprising, given the dominant narrative of “invasion” in Italy (Ambrosini, 2013, 2019).

Secondly, I claimed that national identity directly and indirectly influences preferences on issues such as restrictions based on immigration status: directly, as a specific form of ingroup favouritism/outgroup discrimination that arises in competitive intergroup contexts, as purported by Social Identity Theory; and indirectly because national identity (the affective and normative dimensions) may contribute to a deteriorating climate of intergroup relations. To empirically test the argument I proposed a model, that considers national identity and threat perception at the same time. The National Identity Threat Trust structural equation model allowed me to confirm that the ethnic majoritarian conception of national identity contributes to native favouritism both directly and indirectly by making salient diffidence in foreigners and realistic/symbolic threat. It is a self-feeding spiral of prejudice initially fuelled by the feeling of national belonging based on the distinction between natives and non-natives. Interestingly, despite civility is not directly associated with native employment priority, it contributes to reinforcing the feeling that the nation is threatened by immigrants, a perception that largely fuels support for using nativist criteria if jobs are scarce. Rather, non-exclusive national identities, open to supranational references, seem to curb the favor for nativist policies.

Finally, in the public and media Italian debate, it is often taken for granted – and therefore deemed not worthy of further theoretical reflection or empirical analysis – that there is an association between ethnic conceptions of the nation, right-wing political leanings and negative attitudes towards migrants, and the opposing association between civic conceptions of the nation, left-wing political leanings and more inclusive attitudes. To this regard, the results suggest that the “nativist” politicization of attitudes towards immigrants grafts onto mechanisms that are invariant in the population. However, it reinforces their effects and makes the symbolic threat a particularly salient factor. Using a metaphor, supporters of nativist parties drive the same car as other citizens and traverse the same maze of roads that might lead to preferences for immigration policy based on nativist criteria. They simply are more likely push a little harder on the accelerator when they think about their national identity.

More research is required to better investigate how the interaction between political ideology and national identity influences support for discriminatory migrant policy. However, it is worth stressing that, unlike what is commonly thought, the link between ethnocentric conceptions of national identity and native favouritism seems to go beyond right-wing parties supporters. This similarity could perhaps explain the more or less explicit consensus, even among those who profess liberal and universalist orientations, for the idea of nation underlying immigration laws in Italy. Antonsich and Petrillo (2019) documented a remarkable discrepancy between the inclusive conception of nationhood that manifested itself in the parliamentary debate of the Turco-Napolitano law (Law 40/1998) and the final law, that framed immigration mainly in terms of national “security”. Other authors observed the assimilationist imprint of subsequent legislative measures, as the 2009 Integration Agreement (Carbone, 2018; Gargiulo, 2018). Further research is required to investigate the nexus between conceptions of Italian national identity and the current practices of civic integration, in which the universalistic and liberal criteria of inclusion bow down to the requested adherence on the part of the migrant to a sort of minimal nationhood (Caponio, Testore, 2018). This is a topic that cannot be addressed here, but additional research on the connection between the macro-level (the ethnocentric connotation of integration policies) and the micro-level (how individuals define the national boundaries) would say something interesting about “new nationalism” in Italy.

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Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics (EVS Italy 2017)

	Valid	DK/ NA	Min	Max	Mean	SD	25%	50%	75%
NORMATIVE DIMENSION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY									
<i>Some people say the following things are important for being truly [NATIONALITY]. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is? (1=not at all / 4=very; reverse score)</i>									
To be a Christian *	2228	49	1	4	2.5	1.0	2	2	3
To have [COUNTRY]'s ancestry	2261	16	1	4	2.7	0.9	2	3	3
To have been born in [COUNTRY]	2262	15	1	4	3.1	0.9	3	3	4
To be able to speak [THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE]	2271	6	1	4	3.6	0.6	3	4	4
To respect [COUNTRY]'s political institutions and laws	2269	8	1	4	3.6	0.6	3	4	4
To share [NATIONAL] culture	2273	4	1	4	3.6	0.6	3	4	4
AFFECTIVE DIMENSION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY									
<i>People have different views about themselves and how they relate to the world. Using this card, would you tell me how close do you feel to...? (1=not at all / 4=very; reverse score)</i>									
[COUNTRY]	2265	12	1	4	3.1	0.8	3	3	4
[Continent; e.g. Europe]	2231	46	1	4	2.5	0.9	2	3	3
World	2251	26	1	4	2.5	0.8	2	3	3
INTERGROUP SOCIAL CLIMATE									
<i>THREAT- Please look at the following statements and indicate where you would place your views on this scale?1-10</i>									
Realistic Threat - Immigrants do not make crime problems worse (1)/ Immigrants make crime problems worse (10); reverse score	2232	45	1	10	7.2	2.6	6	8	10
Realistic Threat - Immigrants are a strain on a country's welfare system (1)/ Immigrants are not a strain on a country's welfare system (10); reverse score	2132	145	1	10	6.6	2.7	5	7	9

Symbolic Threat - It is better if immigrants maintain their distinct customs and traditions (1)/It is better if immigrants do not maintain their distinct customs and traditions (10)	2184	93	1	10	6.1	2.7	4	6	8
<i>TRUST - I would like to ask you how much you trust people from various groups. Could you tell me for each whether you trust people from this group completely, somewhat, not very much or not at all? (1=not at all / 4=completely; reverse score)</i>									
People of another religion	2140	137	1	4	2.5	0.7	2	2	3
People of another nationality	2174	103	1	4	2.5	0.7	2	2	3
NATIVE EMPLOYMENT PRIORITY									
<i>For each of the following statements I read out, can you tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with each. Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree? (1 = strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree; reverse score)</i>									
When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to [NATIONALITY] people over immigrants	2235	42	1	5	3.8	1.2	3	4	5