Abstract: Strong opposition to Muslim immigration is at the intersection of marginal political discourse and the mainstream in Europe and elsewhere. As a defining issue in a variety of recent events (e.g., populist electoral success in the Netherlands, Germany and Austria), support for targeted opposition to Muslim newcomers has been attributed to material concerns and recent refugee flows. In contrast to this approach, the present work focuses on how anti-immigrant sentiment is selectively revealed, offering a new perspective on the role of social norms in shaping political discourse. By way of a survey experiment in Norway, we measure the gap between what people express and the beliefs they hold anonymously, assessing how supporters of distinct political parties accept/reject social norms about overtly articulated intolerance.

Our main findings reproduce some of the findings in previous survey-based studies, but we also obtain two surprising results, both worrying. First, supporters of populist-right Progress Party not only exhibit low levels of tolerance, but they also reject social norm of tolerance toward minorities. Second, supporters of the mainstream centre-right Conservative party, generally considered to be much closer to the centre-left that to populist right when it comes to ethnic intolerance, turn out to be significantly more intolerant after social desirability bias is accounted for. Thus, our result indicate clear left-right divisions in intolerance, also among supporters of mainstream political parties. Implications for broader survey-based research on social norms and ethnic intolerance in Western Europe and North America are discussed.

In addition to presentation and discussion of empirical results, the guest lecture shall also include a brief presentation of list experiments as means to reduce and measure social desirability bias in survey-based research on sensitive issues.

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