

## Populist radical right rhetoric increases discrimination towards minorities: Welfare ethnocentrism and anti-Roma attitudes

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**Abstract.** ‘Welfare chauvinism’ (or ‘welfare ethnocentrism,’ when directed against native-born ethnic minorities) is a declination of nativism within the social policy domain and a common element of populist radical right discourse. Previous studies have shown that this rhetoric can influence how people perceive the deservingness and entitlement of certain groups to welfare rights. In this study, we propose it has additional effects by evoking a purported lack of reciprocity in what concerns benefits from, and contributions to, the welfare system, such rhetoric can also justify and legitimize discrimination against out-groups in other domains that are unrelated to welfare. We use a pre-registered experiment embedded in a survey of a nationally representative sample of the Portuguese population to examine whether individuals who are exposed to the issue of illegitimate ‘takers’ of the welfare system become more likely to express discriminatory intentions regarding an out-group’s freedom of movement and establishment. We find that in the Portuguese context, where the populist radical right frequently portrays the Roma minority as welfare abusers, highlighting the issue of reciprocity can trigger a sizeable increase in discriminatory intentions against the Romani even in domains unrelated to welfare rights.

**Keywords:** welfare ethnocentrism; radical right; Portugal; discrimination; Romani

### Introduction

One of the main features of the ideological discourse of populist radical right parties is ‘nativism’ (Mudde, 2013, p. 3): the antagonism between ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ people and ideas, with the latter seen as threatening to the nation-state (Higham, 1955). This ‘horizontal’ axis of contemporary populist rightist discourse – orthogonal to the ‘vertical’ axis that poses an antagonism between the ‘people’ and the ‘corrupt elites’ (Brubaker, 2020) – is sometimes expressed in terms that pit ‘our own’, ‘hard-working’ and ‘tax-paying’ people against out-groups portrayed as undeserving ‘abusers’ of the welfare system. This brand of ‘welfare chauvinism’ (Andersen & Bjørklund, 1990) – or ‘welfare ethnocentrism,’ when directed against native-born ethnic minorities (Ford, 2016) – can be said to represent a declination of nativism in the social policy and economic domains (Mudde, 2007, p. 22).

In this study, we ask whether the use of rhetoric raising the salience of (lack of) reciprocity in welfare benefits and contributions can be responsible for fostering discriminatory intentions towards ethnic minorities in other domains. It is well known that ethnic majorities tend to discriminate against minorities and foreign nationals in what concerns welfare and redistribution. (Lack of) reciprocity – ‘a proportionality between the individual’s outcome of rewards and costs (...) and his inputs or contributions of assets or liabilities’ (Deutsch, 1975, p. 144) – seems to play a crucial role in the perceived ‘deservingness’ of minorities as beneficiaries of welfare rights (Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2012; Reeskens & van der Meer, 2019). However, we also know such perceptions and attitudes are malleable. The salience, tone and framing of political and media

discourse about minorities can affect people's views about them, regardless of (or in interaction with) 'real-world' demographic and economic changes (Brader et al., 2008; Hopkins, 2010; Eberl et al., 2018; Schleiter et al., 2022). For example, in a recent study using vignette experiments in Slovakia, Findor and colleagues (2022), show that exposure to (in their case, positively framed) arguments centred precisely on reciprocity plays the most important role in fostering support for social housing schemes for the Roma minority.

In this study, we argue that such rhetoric may play a broader role, by triggering discrimination against minorities even in domains unrelated to welfare rights. As van Dijk proposes (2012, p. 16), ethnic domination comprises not only a *social* dimension, composed by the everyday practices of discrimination but also a *cognitive* dimension. These cognitions are shaped by discourse (van Dijk, 1993) – including from political elites and the media – and help in fulfilling a crucial function: *legitimize* the expression and practice of discrimination. An idea akin to this, which goes back to Pettigrew's (1958) normative view of discrimination, is present in theories of justification-suppression (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986) or justified discrimination (Pereira et al., 2010): particularly in contemporary Western societies, where anti-discrimination normative pressures have increased, individuals are more likely to express discriminatory intentions when they are provided with *justifications* for such attitudes or behaviours.

We propose that the resort to the widely shared distributive justice criterion of 'reciprocity' in political rhetoric helps in fulfilling precisely that function. By reminding people of the existence of reasons to be negative towards social groups who allegedly violate the reciprocity criterion, such discourse helps in legitimizing attitudes against minorities and facilitates discrimination against them, including the general denial of opportunities or equal treatment. More specifically, our hypothesis is that exposure to rhetoric that raises the salience of the issue of illegitimate 'takers' of the welfare system is, by itself, capable of fostering discriminatory intentions against minorities even in a domain unrelated to welfare policies and rights. In the Portuguese context, we test whether this occurs towards the Roma minority, the recurrent target of such discourse by the populist radical right party *Chega* (*Enough*).

As a case study, Portugal has some specificities in the European context. Openness towards immigration, as measured by social surveys, is generally higher than the European average, after having increased in the last decade (Heath & Richards, 2019). This has been coterminous with the relatively low salience of immigration as an issue in Portuguese politics, arguably reflecting 'the low intensity of this social phenomenon, as Portugal is among the EU Member States with the lowest proportion of foreign citizens' (Carvalho, 2022, p. 10). However, social distance vis-à-vis the Roma minority, as captured by the Bogardus scale used in the European Values Study, albeit slightly below the European average, can be said to be high in absolute terms (EVS, 2022).<sup>1</sup>

This combination of circumstances may help in explaining why the Portuguese populist radical right has so far chosen to designate the Romani instead of immigrants as the main social out-group (Carvalho, 2022, p. 15), causing welfare ethnocentrism – rather than the more conventional welfare chauvinism – to become one of the core elements of the party's rhetoric. As Mendes (2021, p. 332) notes, one of the earliest and most pronounced features of the *Chega's* political agenda has been the 'targeting [of] the Roma population – claiming the "gypsies"<sup>2</sup> mainly live on state subsidies and refuse to abide by the law.' This, however, is far from unique to the Portuguese case. *Chega* echoes the anti-Roma rhetoric of Eastern European parties such as the *People's Party Our Slovakia*, the *United Romania Party*, the Bulgarian *Ataka*, or the Hungarian *Jobbik*, by combining

‘punitive populism’ – exacerbated law and order concerns and support for more severe criminal justice policies (Lópes-Rodríguez et al., 2021) – with welfare ethnocentrism (Ford, 2016; Cinpoes & Norocel, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

By the last 2022 elections, only 3 years after its formation, *Chega* had already become the third largest party in Portugal, with 7 per cent of the vote and 5 per cent of seats (Marchi, 2020; Heyne & Manucci, 2021; Marchi & Alves, 2022). Afonso (2021) shows a positive, strong and significant correlation at the municipal level between the share of recipients of RSI (*Rendimento Social de Inserção*), an income support scheme aimed at individuals in extreme poverty, and the vote share for *Chega*’s leader in the 2021 presidential election. However, this correlation becomes stronger as the size of the resident Roma minority increases. This suggests the possibility that the party’s ‘welfare ethnocentric’ rhetoric has produced electoral effects: ‘higher social assistance reciprocity results in higher vote shares for the radical right when these benefits are believed to mostly benefit ethnic minority individuals’ (Afonso, 2021, p. 5).

Our question, however, is different. Given its novelty and rapid growth, the party has been gathering an immense amount of media coverage (Serrano, 2020), raising the question about the potential impact of the party’s rhetoric among the wider audience they have been able to reach. To what extent does its discourse contribute to trigger discrimination against the Romani in domains that may even go beyond welfare rights? This is what we examine next.

## Experimental design

We employ a population-based pre-registered survey experiment embedded in a national in-person household survey of 807 Portuguese voters that took place on 10–18 September 2022.<sup>4</sup> The sample was designed to be representative of the Portuguese voting age population in terms of gender, age, education, region and size of locality. Localities were chosen randomly, stratified by region and size of the locality, households were selected by random route, and respondents were chosen by the quota method. Data collection took place through computer-assisted personal interviews, and the response rate (AAPOR RR1) was 29 per cent (with a cooperation rate of 42 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

After giving their informed consent and completing the main survey – which included questions on evaluations of the economy, government approval, voting intention and socio-political and socio-demographic characterization of the sample – respondents were randomly assigned to two different groups (control and treatment). The control group was asked about preferences about spending in social support schemes: whether they should ‘increase,’ ‘decrease’ or ‘stay the same.’ The treatment group was posed the same question but prefaced with an introductory statement

When talking about social support schemes, there is sometimes a discussion about the idea that some social groups continuously benefit from subsidies without giving back to society, at the expense of higher taxes and the taxpayers’ exhaustion.

The statement, while making no reference to a specific group, conveys the contrast between ‘welfare takers’ and the exploited majority (here, ‘the taxpayers’) in a way that raises the issue of the violation of the reciprocity criterion: the former receive without contributing, the latter bear an undue burden. The statement also follows, in an abbreviated manner, one of the main messages stressed by *Chega* in its political rhetoric and official statements.<sup>6</sup>

We followed by measuring discriminatory intentions<sup>7</sup> towards the Roma through the dual-list item-count technique (Droitcour et al., 1991). Also known as the ‘double list experiment’,

Table 1. The dual-list experiment items

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List 1
In general, immigration has been good for the country.
The decriminalization of abortion has gone too far in Portugal.
In general, public services in Portugal have very high quality.
(Additionally for group B: <i>Gypsies should not be able to impose their presence in communities where they are undesired.</i> )
List 2
The protection of the environment should have priority over economic growth.
Euthanasia should continue to be illegal in the vast majority of cases.
Taxes on fuel should be increased.
(Additionally for group A: <i>Gypsies should not be able to impose their presence in communities where they are undesired.</i> )

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this technique is designed to minimize survey measurement error resulting from respondents' hesitancy to directly report socially sensitive behaviours or opinions. It allows the estimation of their prevalence without requiring respondents to directly admit to them, by estimating the difference between the mean number of items (from a list that includes the sensitive item) with which a randomly selected group of respondents agree and the mean from another group exposed to the same list but where the sensitive item is absent. 'Double' here refers to the fact that two list experiments are implemented, allowing all respondents to be exposed to the sensitive item while changing the non-sensitive ones, thus decreasing the variance of the pooled estimate of the difference in means. The goal is to measure agreement with the following potentially sensitive statement:

Gypsies [Ciganos] should not be able to impose their presence in communities where they are undesired.

Note that the statement, while referring to a minority group – *ciganos* – conveys agreement not with unequal treatment concerning social rights and benefits but rather with limitations of freedom of movement and establishment. For the purpose of capturing agreement with such discriminatory intention, the respondents were randomly split into two groups (A and B), presented each with two sets of statements, and then asked about how many of the statements they agreed with. Table 1 shows the items employed. The order of statement presentation was randomized for each subject.

Group A received List 1 without the sensitive item of interest and List 2 with it, while, symmetrically, Group B received List 1 with the sensitive item of interest and List 2 without it. The choice of items followed common recommendations for the selection of items in list experiments (Glynn, 2013): avoidance of the use of many high- or low-prevalence items and introduction of negative correlation within the lists, which in this case was sought by using, in both lists, issue positions at opposite ends of the GAL (green, alternative, libertarian)–TAN (traditionalist, authoritarian, nationalist) scales (Hooghe et al., 2002): pro-immigration and anti-abortion in List 1, pro-environment and anti-euthanasia in List 2.

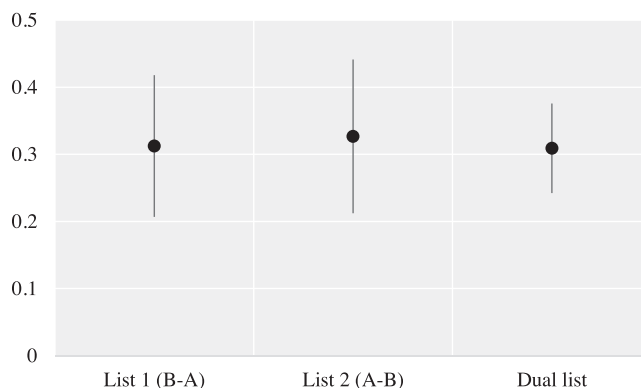


Figure 1. Estimates of agreement with discrimination against ciganos (CI 95 per cent).

### Preliminary analyses

We start by presenting the results of diagnostic tests of the randomization of both the treatment (exposure to rhetoric confronting ‘takers’ and ‘contributors’) and the assignment to the list of experiment groups. In what concerns treatment randomization, an independent group *t*-test reveals a non-significant difference between the mean age of the control (50.3) and treatment group (51.7) respondents ( $p = 0.228$ ), while chi-square tests of independence between treatment and gender ( $p = 0.496$ ), college education ( $p = 0.236$ ) and region ( $p = 0.768$ ) all fail to reject the null hypothesis of independence.

Similarly, mean ages of respondents assigned to groups A and B in the double list experiment are not significantly different ( $p = 0.832$ ), and the null hypothesis of independence is not rejected for gender ( $p = 0.304$ ), college education ( $p = 0.750$ ) and region ( $p = 0.816$ ), as well as, crucially, assignment to the initial treatment or control groups ( $p = 0.648$ ).

A second preliminary analysis concerns the relationship between belonging to the treatment group and responses to the question of whether ‘spending in social support schemes, should “increase,” “decrease” or “stay the same”’. Treating the dependent variable as ordinal (1, ‘decrease’; 2, ‘stay the same’; 3, ‘increase’), a Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test yields a statistically significant difference between the control and treatment groups in what concerns the underlying distributions of responses to the question ( $p = 0.001$ ), with those exposed to treatment exhibiting a lower rank. In other words, those among whom the issue of ‘welfare takers’ was made salient became less supportive of increasing spending in social support schemes.

Finally, concerning our main dependent variable, Figure 1 presents estimates of the prevalence of agreement with the key item that captures discriminatory intentions against *ciganos*. Figure 1 shows the linear difference-in-means estimations, first based on List 1, then on List 2 and finally using both.<sup>8</sup> Agreement with discrimination against *ciganos* is estimated as reaching approximately 30 per cent. The result is similar regardless of the use of List 1 or List 2, reinforcing confidence that the use of different non-sensitive items did not affect the results. The use of the dual-list technique obviously allows greater precision, yielding a 95 per cent confidence interval of [0.24, 0.38].

Table 2. The effect of treatment on discriminatory intentions

	List 1 results	List 2 results	Dual List results
Coefficient	0.120	0.137	0.123
(Robust SE's)	(0.108)	(0.116)	(0.068)
<i>p</i> -value (one sided)	0.133	0.115	0.035
95% CI (one sided)	[-0.057, ∞]	[-0.054, ∞]	[0.012, ∞]
<i>N</i>	746	728	699

## Hypothesis test

Our hypothesis is that, in the Portuguese context, exposure to treatment – raising the issue of ‘welfare takers’ – increases discriminatory intentions against the Romani. For that purpose, we conducted a multivariate analysis for the dual-list design, using treatment as the independent variable (Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010; see Tsai, 2019, pp. 432–433 for the extension to the dual-list design of the item-count technique). Given that we pre-registered a directional hypothesis about the positive impact of treatment on discriminatory intentions, we evaluated it as such using one-tailed *p*-values (Cho & Abe, 2013).<sup>9</sup> Table 2 shows the main results.

We find that those exposed to treatment exhibit a higher discriminatory intention against *ciganos* than those in the control group. All point estimates of the treatment effect have very similar magnitudes. However, the benefits of a dual-list design in terms of increased precision are also visible here: when using data with all the subjects who were confronted with the key item capturing discrimination, we can rule out a null effect with more than 95 per cent confidence.

## Exploratory analyses

Besides testing our pre-registered hypothesis, we also conducted exploratory analyses concerning the possibility of heterogeneous treatment effects. On the one hand, it is conceivable that raising the salience of the ‘welfare takers’ issue might activate anti-Roma discrimination to a greater extent among individuals experiencing greater levels of economic deprivation. The coefficients (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix) for the interaction terms between treatment and ordinal scales of both (negative) ‘feeling about income’ and (negative) egocentric economic evaluations are positive. However, they are far from significant at conventional levels (respectively,  $p = 0.562$  and  $p = 0.693$ ).

On the other hand, individuals’ reactions to exposure to the ‘welfare takers’ issue could be contingent upon their predispositions. The notion of ‘dog whistling’ conveys the idea that messages that do not explicitly mention race or ethnicity – such as the one used in this experiment and in some of *Chega*’s public pronouncements (see note 5) – can, nevertheless, sway opinions about policies or groups among an intended audience of individuals who are already prejudiced or ideologically close to the speaker (Haney-López, 2014; Bonikowski & Zhang, 2023). In Table A2 in the Online Appendix, we show results of examinations of the interaction between treatment and racial prejudice, measured pre-treatment as agreement with the statement, ‘Some races or ethnic groups are born less hard-working than others’ (previously used in the European Social

Survey) in a 5-point scale from ‘completely disagree’ to ‘completely agree’. The coefficient for the interaction term is positive but not statistically significant ( $p = 0.307$ ). Similarly, the coefficients for the interaction term between treatment and a 0–10 left-right self-placement scale ( $p = 0.515$ ) and with a dummy variable identifying the quartile of respondents placed in the positions furthest to the right ( $p = 0.848$ ) are not significant either (see Table A3 in the Online Appendix).

## Discussion

In this research note, we show that exposure to a discourse that raises the issue of violations of the criterion of reciprocity in welfare support and contributions – the notion of ‘takers of the welfare system’ – makes individuals more likely to express discriminatory intentions towards a minority group. Using a pre-registered survey experiment in Portugal, where the Roma minority has been the target of a ‘welfare ethnocentric’ rhetoric by a populist radical right party, we observe a sizeable effect – an increase of about 12 percentage points of agreement with discriminatory intentions. Importantly, such discriminatory intent concerns freedom of movement and establishment, a domain unrelated to the issue mentioned in the treatment. In sum, a central element of the political discourse of an increasingly important party in Portugal seems to have the potential to produce relevant societal consequences.

There are important limitations in this study that point to several potential directions for future research. First, we propose that the mechanism behind this effect is provided by salient rhetoric that, by conjuring powerful criteria of distributive fairness, helps in legitimizing and justifying discrimination. This is consistent both with theories about political discourse and the cognitive dimension of discrimination (van Dijk, 1993) and with social psychological models that assert how discrimination is only expressed in certain normative contexts or when justifications are available (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Pereira et al., 2010; Pettigrew, 1958). This suggests that rhetoric such as the one examined here could have similar effects in contexts where, like the Portuguese, a native minority such as the Romani is the target of welfare ethnocentrism, as it occurs in several Eastern European countries. Furthermore, this theoretical mechanism does not exclude its generalizability to other contexts where other native minorities (e.g., Muslims) or even non-native ones (immigrants) tend to be similarly targeted. However, the narrower goal of this research note was to test a causal relationship between the salience of the ‘welfare takers’ issue and discriminatory intentions. In order to establish both the concrete mechanism underlying the effect reported here and its generalizability to other contexts, further studies are required.

Second, the treatment used in this experiment focused on one of the several possible types of social policy programmes around which chauvinist or ethnocentric exclusionary arguments can be construed: ‘subsidies’, that is, means-tested cash benefits. Recent research suggests that different kinds of social programmes elicit different uses of nativist appeals and different social responses to them. As Ennsner-Jedenastik (2018) shows, while universal or means-tested programmes – organized according to equality and need principles – are at odds with nativist worldviews in theory and/or in practice, the same does not necessarily occur with programmes organized according to equity principles – such as pensions or unemployment benefits. Furthermore, among the former, differences have also been detected between cash versus in-kind benefits or services (Eick & Larsen, 2022; Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2022). Future studies about how exclusionary rhetoric around social programmes triggers discriminatory intentions ought to explore these variations.

Finally, exploratory analyses provided no evidence that this effect was moderated by economic deprivation, racial/ethnic prejudice or respondent's ideological predispositions. It is interesting to note in this regard that studies using either aggregate (Afonso, 2021) or individual-level data (Heyne & Manucci, 2021) have shown that variables capturing economic deprivation fail to play any relevant role in explaining the vote for *Chega*. The lack of effect heterogeneity based on racial/ethnic prejudice or ideological predispositions is another ancillary finding that suggests the need for further research and replication. Indeed, given that the insignificant interactions underlying the claim of a lack of effect heterogeneity may be an artefact of a lack of statistical power, one cannot be certain of whether these individual variables really play an important role or not. However, if the robustness of these homogeneous effects across the board were confirmed, this would hint at the possibility that, more than a 'dog whistle,' this kind of rhetoric is a serve-all narrative with potential widespread capacity to politically mobilize and harness negative emotions vis-à-vis minorities.

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## Data Availability Statement

All the data and code required to replicate the results in this article are available at the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/g46rb/>. The study's pre-registration is also available here: <https://osf.io/7csde>. Ethical approval was not sought for the present study because the experiment upon which it is based involved no deception and a harmless intervention.

## Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

## Notes

1. In the latest Portuguese EVS, conducted in 2020, 33 per cent of respondents stated they would not like to have Romani as neighbours.
2. The Roma community in Portugal is a minority ethnic group who settled in the country as early as the 15th century with the last wave arriving in the 19th century. The vast majority of the members of this community are not immigrants as they were born in Portugal. Although the Portuguese Census does not ask questions about ethnicity, Portuguese *ciganos* are estimated to comprise only 0.5 per cent of the resident population (Afonso 2021). While most members of this community do not identify themselves as 'Romani,' we use that expression for the sake of clarity, together with the Portuguese term with which they do identify (*ciganos*).
3. These elements were present in Ventura's rhetoric even before *Chega* existed. In 2017, while still a candidate to the mayoral office of the city of Loures for the mainstream centre-right PSD (Social Democratic Party), asked in an interview to comment on a previous statement of his about 'excessive tolerance to certain minorities',

- Ventura, after stating he was referring to the *cigano* minority, stated that ‘in Portugal we have a culture with two types of worrying things: one is the existence of groups that, in terms of the composition of their income, live almost exclusively from state subsidies, and the other is that they think they are above the rule of law’ — ‘André Ventura: Os ciganos vivem quase exclusivamente de subsídios do Estado’, *Sol*, 17 July 2017. Available at <https://sol.sapo.pt/artigo/572564/andre-ventura-os-ciganos-vivem-quase-exclusivamente-de-subsidios-do-estado>.
4. The pre-registration (<https://osf.io/7csde>) and the replication materials (<https://osf.io/g46rb/>) are available at Open Science Framework links.
  5. A response of 29 per cent is very close to average response rates in academic face-to-face surveys elsewhere (Schröder, 2016). Nonetheless, a disproportionately politicized sub-sample of the population is a potential issue. Thus, we compared shares of respondents in our sample who did not place themselves in a left-right scale (16 per cent), do not feel close to any party (49 per cent) and report that they did not vote in the preceding election (27 per cent) with those obtained with the ‘gold standard’ provided by the in-person household 2022 Round 10 of the European Social Survey (respectively, 20, 43, and 31 per cent). The similarity of findings with this academic social survey – where the greatest effort to minimize non-response is employed – assuages concerns with sample non-representativeness.
  6. See, for example, this excerpt of a bill introduced by *Chega* in parliament: ‘The huge fiscal burden that strains the Portuguese has been accentuating injustices regarding the attribution of state subsidies, with a middle class struggling to survive more each day, while differentiated segments of social groups keep continuous (and extremely expensive) social benefits without any counterpart for the society that works for them.’ [Projecto de Lei N.º 778/XIV/2.ª]. Or this other excerpt, from the party’s 2022 election manifesto: ‘The exhaustion of the low and middle classes, those who work and abide, the ‘good Portuguese’, is a consequence of the use and abuse of the attribution of social benefits, subsidies and other advantages’— in Tiago Varzim, ‘Da pensão mínima de 705 euros ao défice zero. O programa económico do Chega.’, in *Eco*, 22 January 22, 2022. Available at: <https://eco.sapo.pt/2022/01/22/da-pensao-minima-de-705-euros-ao-defice-zero-o-programa-economico-do-chega/>.
  7. While this specific item does not measure actual behaviour, we argue that agreement with this item/issue is a proxy to a clear and more blatant discriminatory behaviour (i.e., Romani people should be segregated from the larger population). To make clear that we do not measure actual behaviour, we refer to our main dependent variable as ‘discriminatory intentions’ (Asbrock et al., 2007).
  8. All estimates were obtained using Stata’s *kict* package for statistical analysis of the item-count technique (Tsai, 2019).
  9. See also Lakens (2016).

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