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POLICY BRIEF

Global Trends and Continental Differences in Attitudes to Immigration: Thinking Outside the Western Box

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In this Policy Brief we present a global overview of long-term trends and current attitudes to immigration across the world to highlight:

- Concerns about immigration in Western European and American countries have followed a different pattern than in Asia and Central and Eastern Europe over the last 40 years.
- Social and cultural concerns about immigration are relatively more salient than economic concerns in the Western world and more developed countries, while the opposite is true of developing countries in South America, Africa, and Asia.
- Asia and Africa are the continents most concerned with economic risks associated with immigration such as unemployment.
- Differences in attitudes to immigration by socio-demographic characteristics such as age, education, or gender vary greatly across continents and countries.
- Western European countries, the United States, New Zealand and Australia become increasingly favourable to immigrants as the share of immigrant population increases. In contrast, no such pattern is observable in other parts of the world.



We draw on high quality data available from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Study (EVS)¹ comprehensively presented to wider audiences by the Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM). This data allows us think outside of the Western box when analysing attitudes to immigration, but also reveals some the major knowledge gaps.

This Policy Brief is timely and relevant for a number of reasons, not least that many countries are restricting population flows in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic while migration remains one of the most debated areas of public policy and is high on the political agenda in many countries including the United States and European countries. To indicate the importance of the issues in Europe, in September 2020, the European Commission issued their new *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, which contains proposals to address border management and the internal and external dimensions of migration policies. Also in other regions of the world there is active debate about how to manage the social, economic and political pressures associated with migration and public concerns about immigration.

This Policy Brief is structured as follows. Firstly, we highlight why it is necessary to focus scholarly attention regarding attitudes to immigration also on other parts of the world rather than just the developed West. Secondly, we present longitudinal developments in attitudes to immigration since 1981 and highlight temporal changes in these. Thirdly, we highlight current global trends and developments in attitudes to immigration, based on data from the newest waves of the World Value Survey and the European Value Study. Fourthly, we show how socio-demographic factors affect attitudes to immigration and how these effects may be country dependent. Finally, we briefly touch upon macro trends influencing aggregate attitudes to immigration, specifically focusing on how the share of immigrants in the country may have differential effects on attitudes to immigration in different parts of the world. The Policy Brief concludes by stressing (a)

the value of thinking outside the Western box, (b) the diversity and variation in attitudes, and (c) the need to gather more systemic data and evidence from across the world.

Why Think Outside the Western Box?

To begin with, and drawing from OPAM analysis, we show that there is a stark bias in the focus of scholarly work on attitudes to immigration. This matters, because while policymakers can draw on a vast scholarship on attitudes to immigration as well as countless opinion polls to inform their decisions in the US and Europe, much less is known about how the public responds to immigration in the rest of the world.

Figure 1 shows that the social science literature on attitudes to immigration has overwhelmingly focused on developed countries, and in particular on the USA and Western Europe. The relative paucity of studies on attitudes to immigration in the rest of the world represents a significant gap in this literature that has important implications for the evidence base to inform policy.

1. The World Values Survey (WVS) and European Values Study (EVS) are a global research project that explores people's values and beliefs, how they change over time, and what social and political impact they have. It collects data from a series of representative national surveys covering almost 100 countries and is regarded as a reliable source of information by top scholars and academic institutions in social sciences.

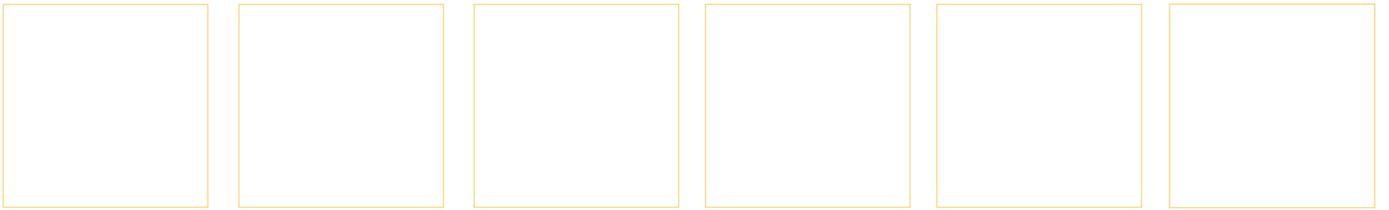
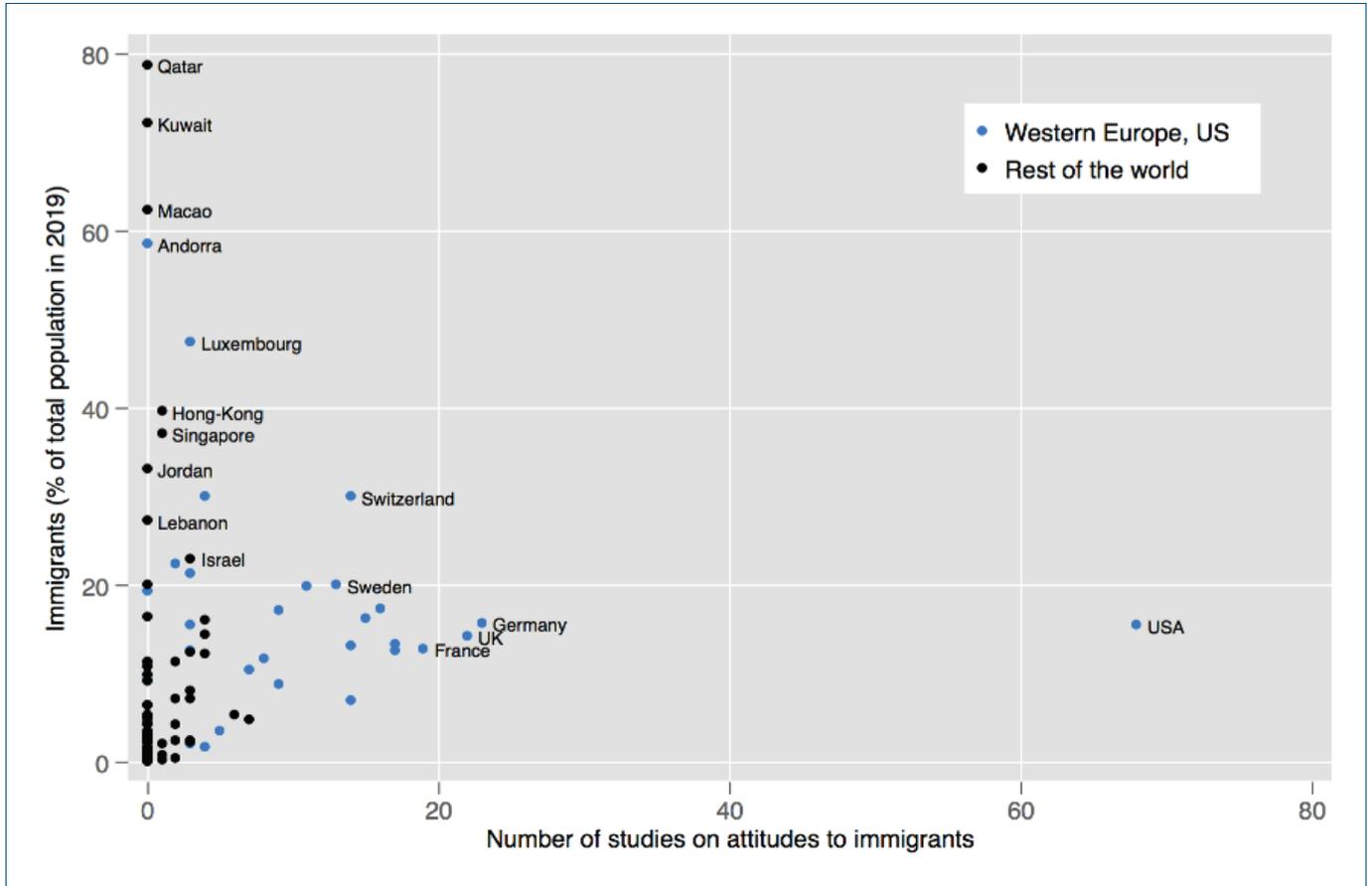


Figure 1: Number of studies on attitudes to immigration and share of immigrants population.



Source: Authors' own calculation and UN data.

Note: The 'Western Europe and U.S' group also includes New Zealand and Australia.

2. Longitudinal Trends: Social Proximity and Labour Market Discrimination

We now seek to broaden the focus beyond Europe and the USA. Since the first wave of the WVS survey in 1981, respondents in up to 100 countries have been asked to choose among various groups of people they would not like to have as their neighbour, with immigrants being one possible choice. In what follows, we take these attitudes to social proximity to identify the share of respondents who mentioned immigrants as disliked neighbours.

Figure 2.1 shows that over the past 40 years, attitudes to social proximity to immigrants have remained relatively

stable in the Americas and Western Europe. On the other hand, opinion is more volatile in Asia and Eastern and Central Europe, where all countries have become more negative on this issue. This is especially true for countries like Belarus, Estonia, Russia, and China, where the current share of respondents declaring that they would not like immigrants as their neighbours exceeds 25%. South Korea is a notable exception in this regard. The South Koreans' dislike of living in the vicinity of immigrants has been decreasing rather steadily since the 1990s.

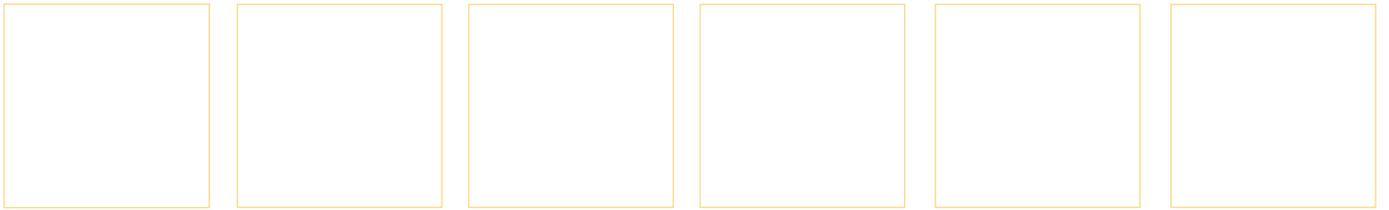
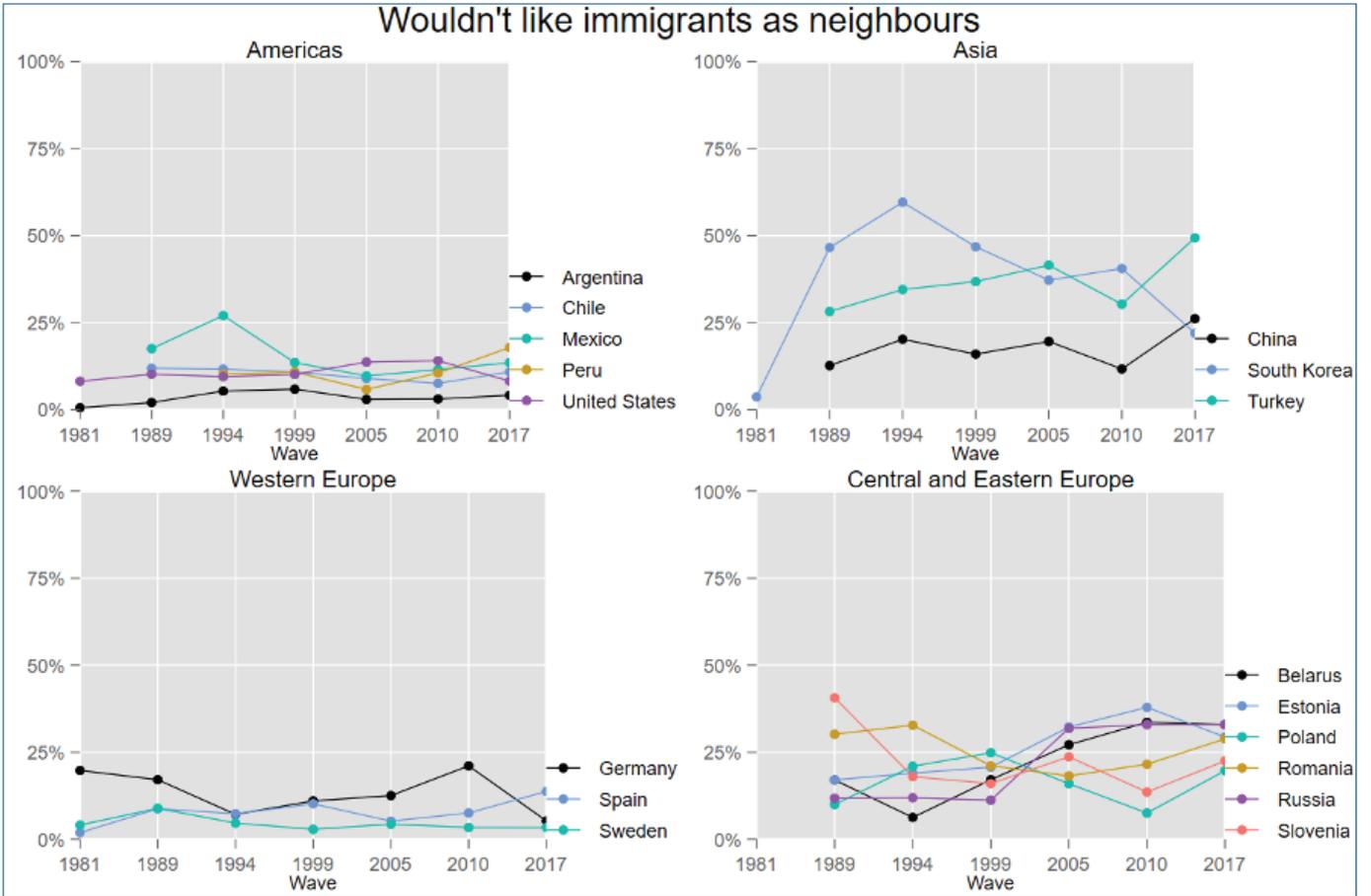


Figure 2.1: Longitudinal trends in attitudes to social proximity



Turning to attitudes regarding the labour market, there is a yet unresolved debate within the empirical academic literature about whether the recent global financial crisis has led to increased hostility towards immigrants. For instance, using data from the European Social Survey (ESS), Hatton (2016) found that immigration opinion has changed modestly since before the recession and is only weakly related to unemployment. On the other hand, in a more recent publication and using the same set of data, Isaksen (2019) concludes that the downward economic spiral in Europe correlates with more negative attitudes towards immigration in European countries.

In Figure 2.2, we observe that in American and Western European countries, the public has become more positive about immigrants' access to jobs in the past 15 years. In contrast, the share of respondents in favour of discrimination has remained stable at around 75%

in Central and Eastern Europe and in Asia since 2005. Thus, the descriptive evidence in the WVS seems to be more in line with Hatton's results that the financial crisis had little or no effect, at least for Western Europe and the United States. However, we should stress that while Hatton's and Isaksen's analyses rely on general hostility and perception of immigration, the WVS survey asks specifically about policy preferences regarding whether or not immigrants should be discriminated against in the labour market.

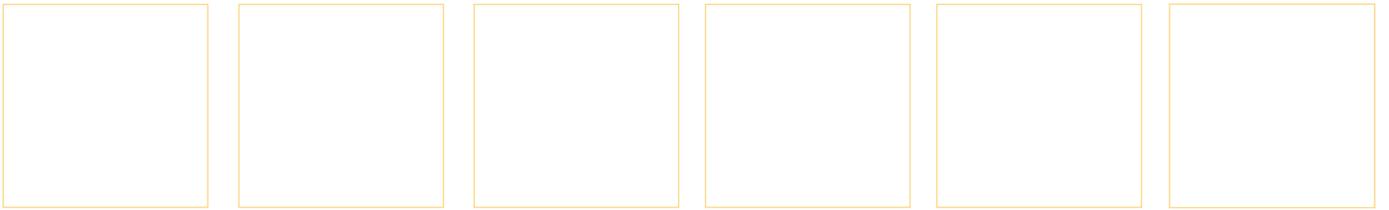
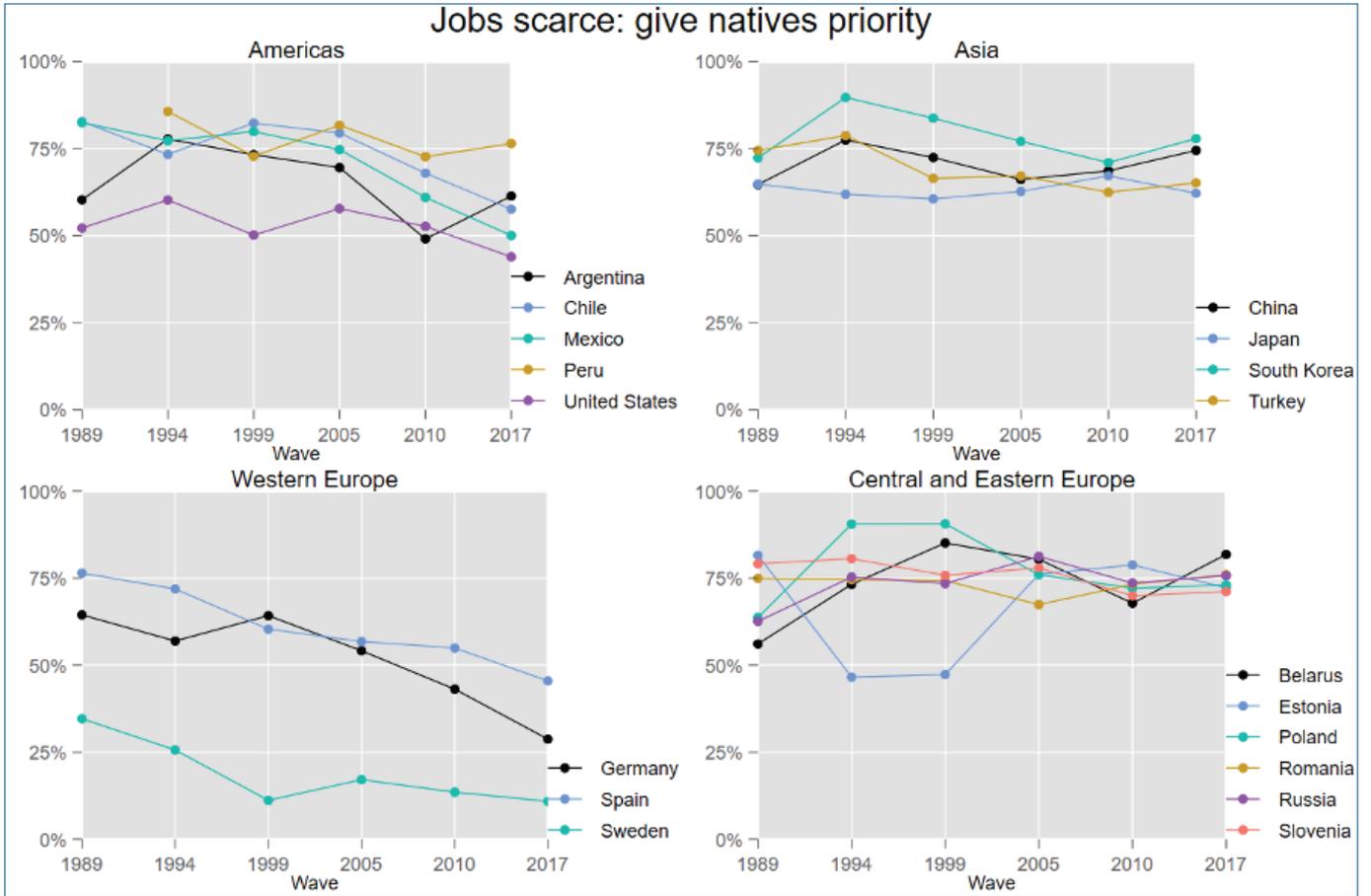


Figure 2.2: Longitudinal trends in attitudes to labour market discrimination



The long-term trends shown in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 therefore suggest that global attitudes to immigration may have responded to continent-specific drivers over the last 40 years.

3. Attitudes to Immigration: Current Trends and New Variables

The latest round of the EVS asks European respondents whether they are concerned with the living conditions of immigrants.

As can be seen from Figure 3.1, respondents from Western and Northern Europe show more empathy than residents of Eastern and Central European countries when asked if they are concerned with the living conditions of immigrants. In the former, at least a quarter of the population claims to be concerned with immigrants' living condi-

tions. In Germany, Spain, and Denmark, the percentage of 'much' or "very much" concerned respondents is close to 50%, while this fraction is consistently lower than 25% in Eastern and Central Europe, and drops under 10% in countries such as Estonia, Czech Republic, and Russia. The EVS also allows for a comparison of European responses with other parts of the world, namely Caucasus (see Figure 3.2). Although data for that region is limited, it reveals high heterogeneity in empathy scores across the three countries surveyed in this region, from 12% in Azerbaijan to 70% in Armenia.

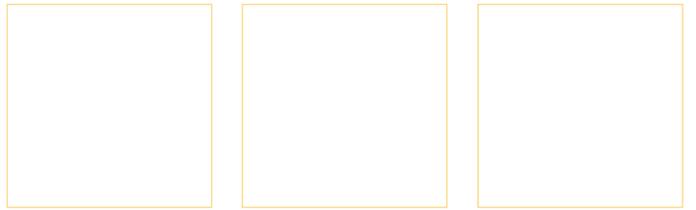


Figure 3.1: Concerns about immigrants' living conditions in European countries

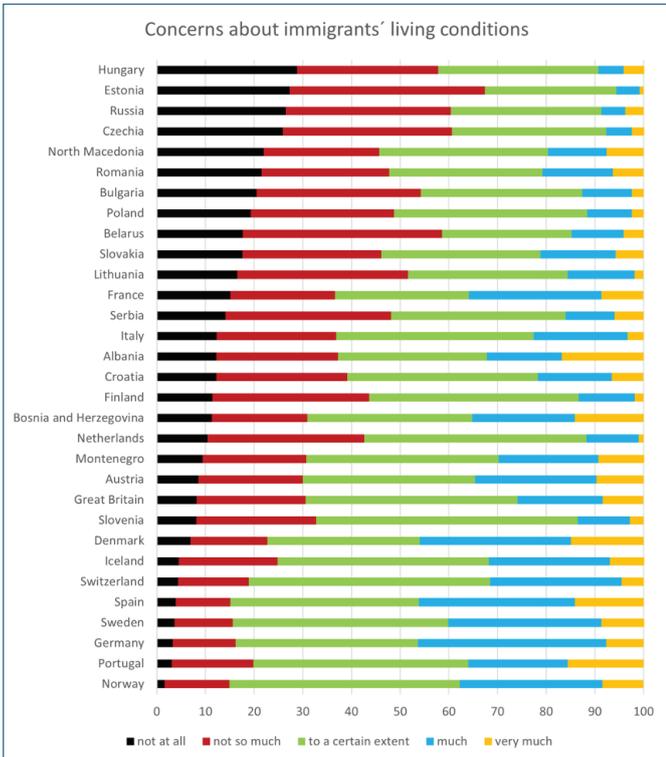
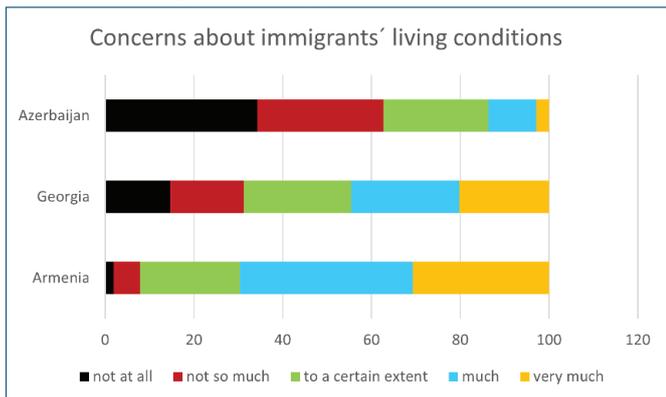


Figure 3.2: Concerns about immigrants' living conditions in Caucasian countries



The latest round of the WVS also provides a fresh perspective on global attitudes to immigration through a set of newly incorporated questions ranging from individual perceptions and beliefs about immigrants to immigration policy preferences.

Figure 3.3 shows respondents' opinion about the impact of immigration on their country. In Africa as well as most of Central and Western Asia, economic concerns are relatively salient. Respondents in those countries are more likely to report that immigration increases unemployment than social conflict, crime, or terrorism. Comparatively, respondents from most Western countries such as the US, Germany, New Zealand, and Australia believe that immigration is more likely to bring about social conflict than unemployment. However, the most distinctive feature of Western European countries and other developed countries is the relative concern they have about security vis-à-vis economic problems. In all European countries except Andorra, and in the United States, New Zealand, and Australia, a greater share of people think that immigration increases terrorism rather than unemployment. On the contrary, fewer people think that immigration increases terrorism rather than unemployment in Africa, Asia (both Central and Eastern), and all American countries other than the US.

The salience, commonly defined as the importance that respondents place on immigration-related concerns with respect to other social issues, is a widely debated topic in the empirical literature (Hatton 2017; Talò 2017) and has been shown to greatly influence electoral choices (Dennison and Geddes 2019). The distinctive patterns within countries shown in Figure 3.3, however, reveal that the relative salience of concerns about immigration is not the same in the developing world as in developed countries, where most of the research on attitudes to immigration is concentrated (see Figure 1).

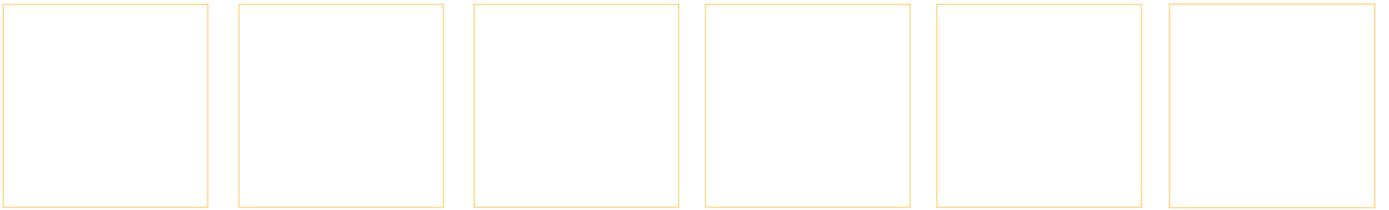
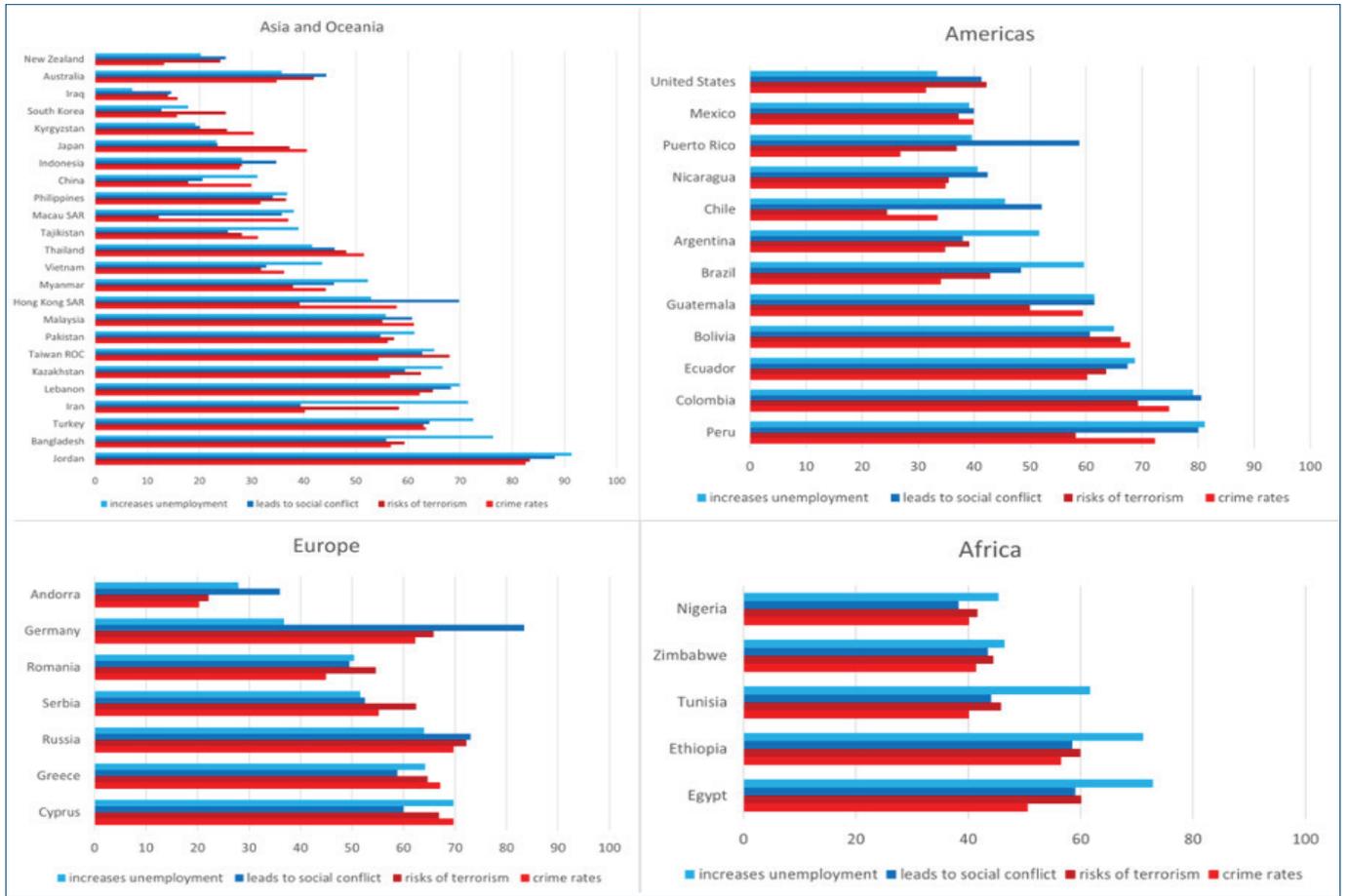


Figure 3.3: Perceptions of the economic and security risks associated with immigration



Note: Respondents were asked about the impact of immigration on their country. The percentages for each category shows the share of respondents who agree.

Figure 3.4 confirms that the perception of immigration in the Western world is indeed rather specific. Globally, more people agree that immigration strengthens cultural diversity rather than fill useful jobs. Yet, the gap between the share of the population who think that their country culturally benefits from immigration and those who think immigrants make an economic contribution is significantly larger in developed countries. This difference reaches 10 percentage points or more in countries such as Germany, Andorra, Greece, Argentina, Chile, New Zealand, and Australia. On the other hand, the relative gap in the perception of immigration’s cultural and economic benefits is generally fairly small and sometimes negative

in Asia or Eastern and Central Europe. It remains however closer to Western standards in African countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Zimbabwe, as well as a few Asian states such as Hong Kong, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

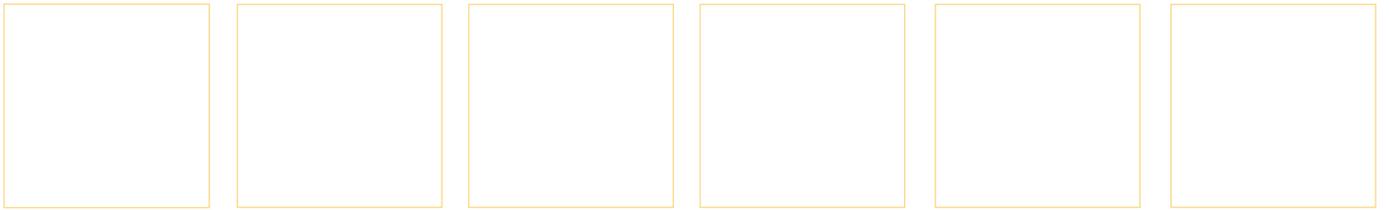
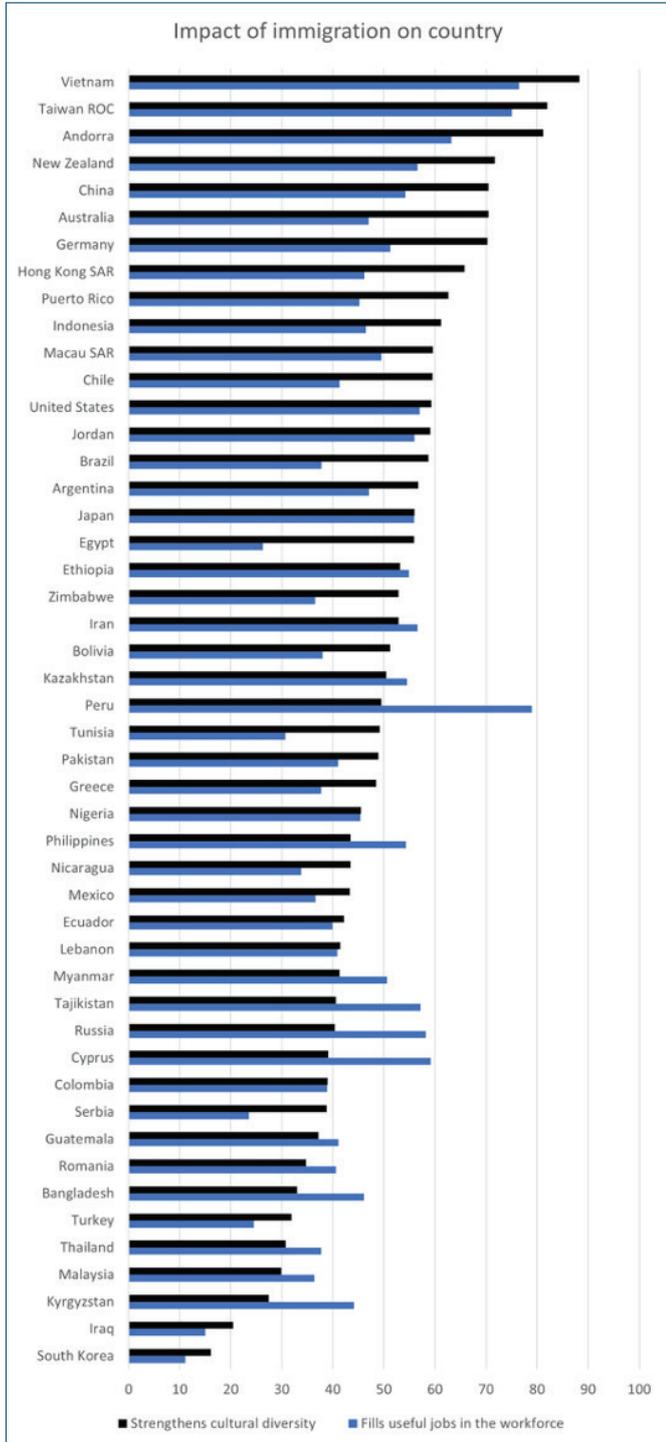


Figure 3.4: Perceptions of the cultural and economic benefits of immigration



Note: Respondents were asked about the impact of immigration on their country. The percentages for each category shows the share of respondents who agree

The WVS data show that countries with higher GDP per capita seem to have a lower share of respondents that are strictly opposed to immigration. The share of people who think that no immigrant should be allowed into their country is usually above 10% in lower GDP-countries and can go up to 25% in countries like Turkey, Iraq, or Bolivia. This fraction is significantly smaller in richer countries in Asia, Western Europe, America, as well as Oceania, where respondents with such views represent only between 1 and 5% of the population.

Another striking pattern that emerges from Figure 3.5 is the positive correlation between preferences about immigration policy and economic development within the American and European continents. In Europe, the combined share of people opposing strict limits on the number of immigrants in Germany and Andorra is more than twice as large than is in Greece or Russia. In Americas, this share represents over 50% of respondents in the US, Mexico and Argentina, but less than 30% of Peruvians, Bolivians, or Ecuadorians.

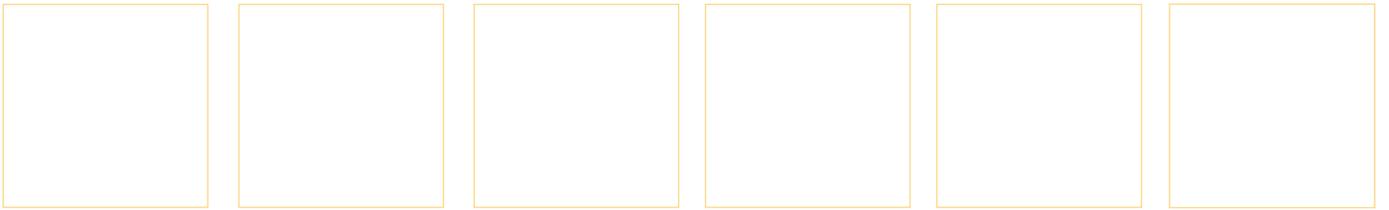
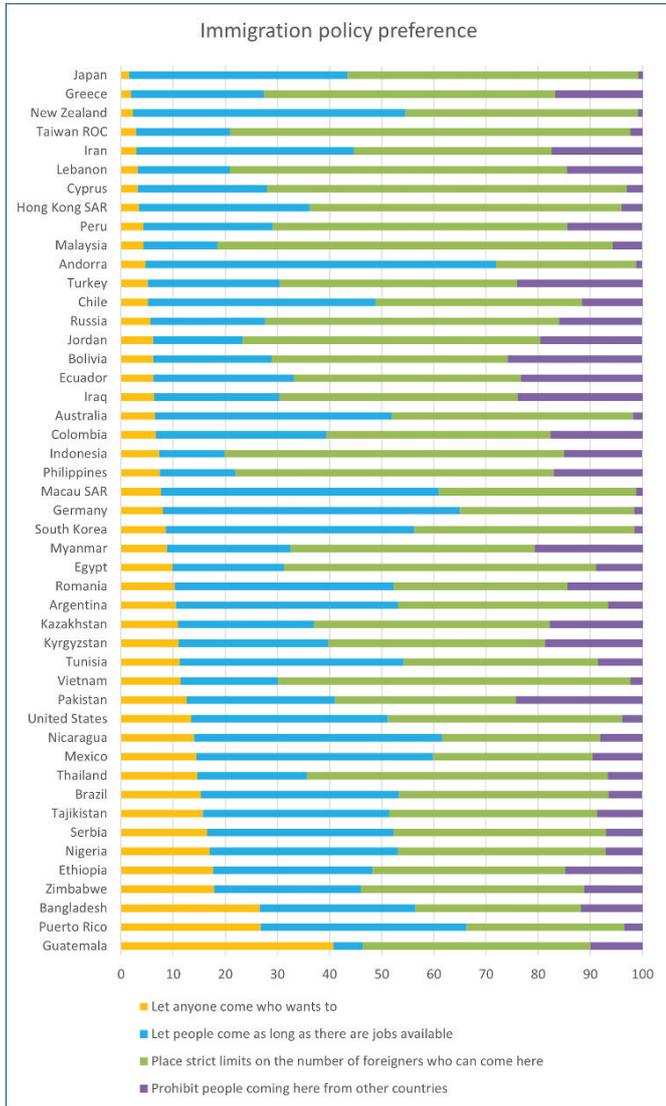


Figure 3.5: Preferences on immigration policy



and Garcia-Albacete 2013). Figure 4.1 shows that, overall, older respondents tend to have more negative attitudes to immigration than younger ones. Individuals over 50 are in general slightly more supportive of discriminatory policies that give priority to natives over immigrants in the labour market (panel a), while younger people (under 30) are less concerned with the social proximity of immigrants (panel b). This is consistent with previous studies showing that older people are more likely to express concerns about immigration or hold negative attitudes about immigrants than younger people (Mayda 2006; Quillian 1995), even after retiring from the labour market (Jeannot 2018). However, these patterns are much more visible in European countries and America than in Eastern Asia and Africa. Moreover, younger respondents (less than 30 years old) are consistently more opposed to labour market discrimination in American countries, while in Europe this age gap is more visible in countries where opposition to social proximity with immigrants is greater on average.

4. Socio-demographic Factors

Beside country differences, attitudes to immigration vary greatly across respondents within those countries. In this section, we assess the association between attitudes to immigration and the factors such as age, education and gender that are most commonly thought to influence these variations.

Studies show that attitudes towards immigration are stable over adulthood (Hooghe and Wilkenfeld 2008) and remain remarkably persistent as the person grows older in a similar way to other political predispositions acquired in youth (Lewis-Beck 2009; Neundorf, Smets

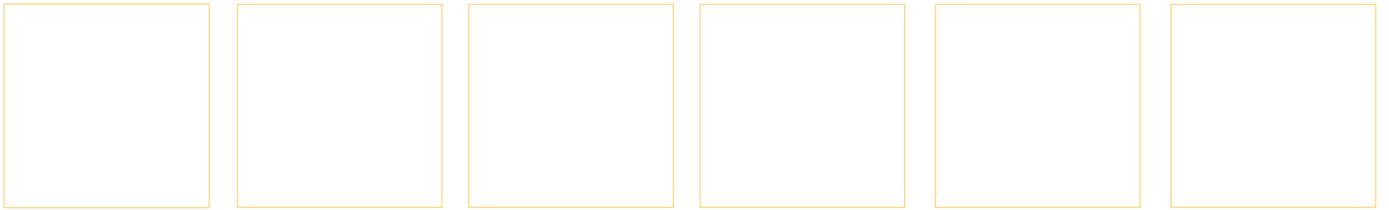
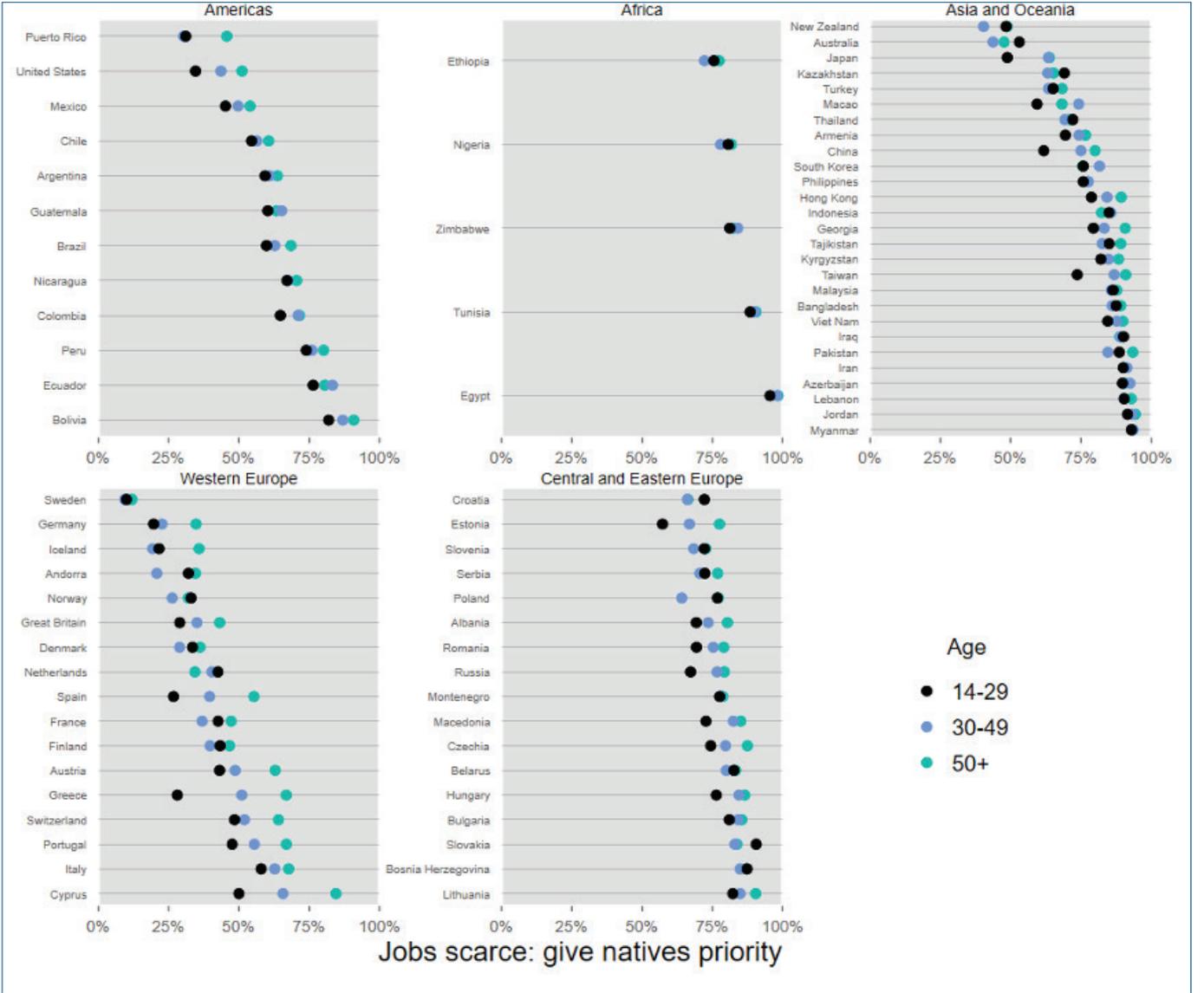
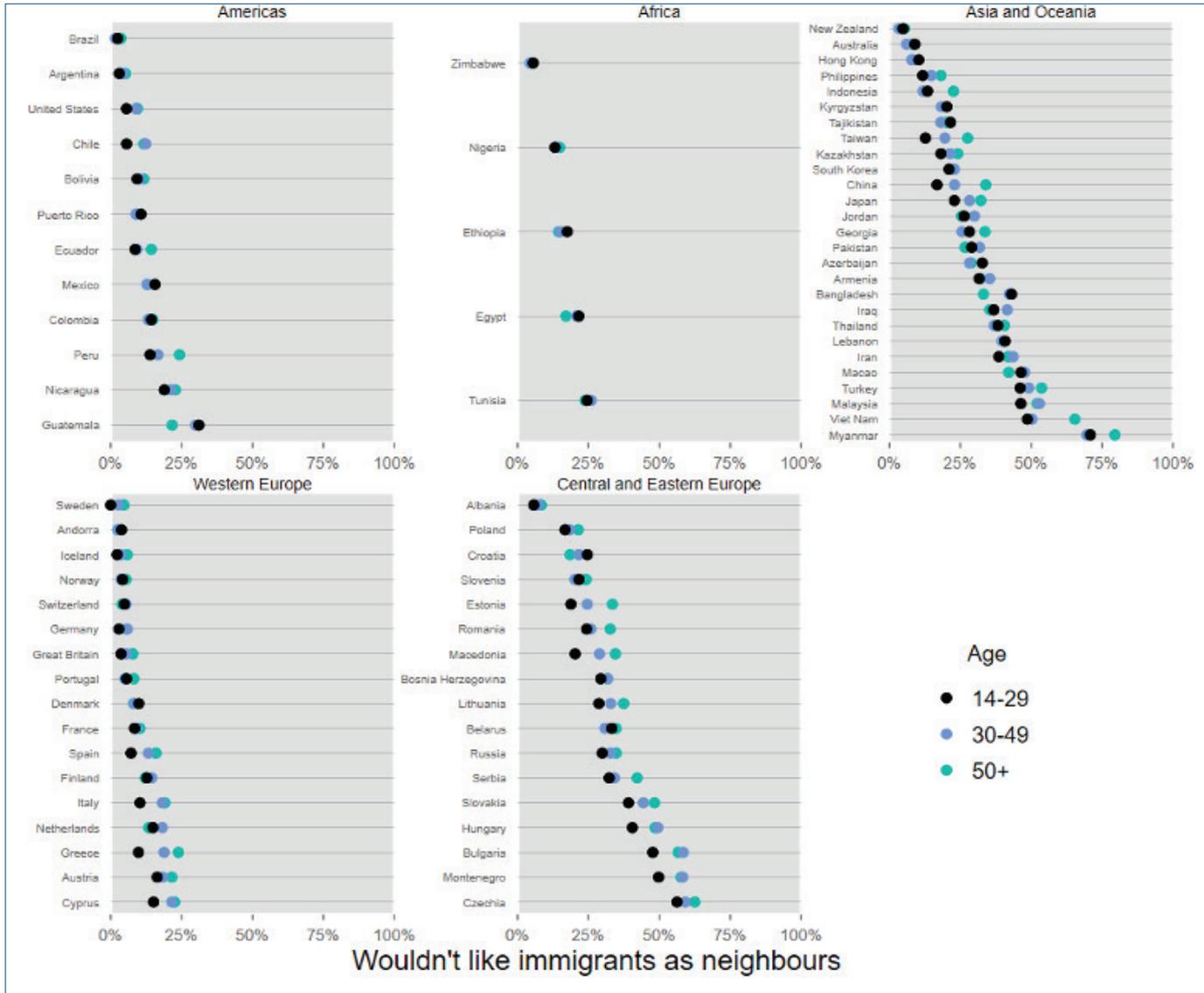
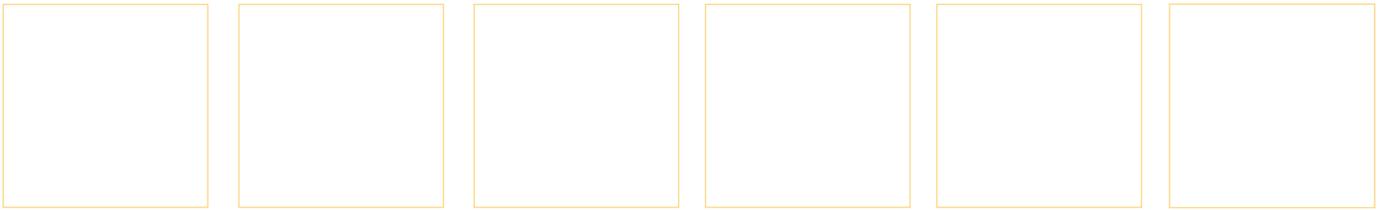


Figure 4.1: Age differences in attitudes to immigration across countries



a) Labour market discrimination

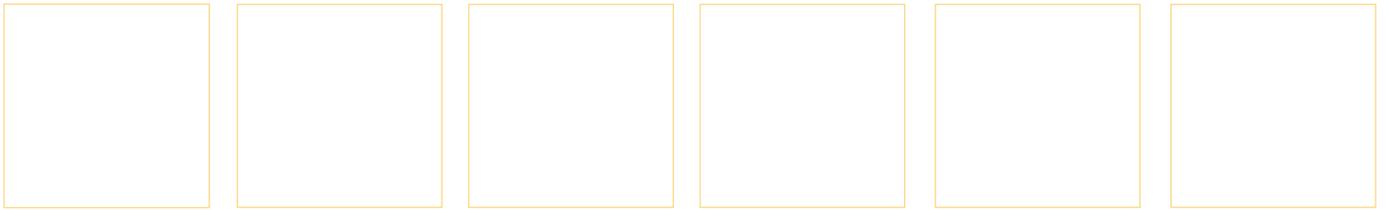


b) Social proximity

In the majority of countries surveyed, we can observe generational differences in attitudes to immigration (see Figure 4.2). We see that in many countries, generations become similarly (un)concerned about social proximity to immigrants as well as labour market competition. Figure 4.2 also shows that there are remarkable differences between countries – in recent years, concerns about immigration declined in some countries and grew in others. Nevertheless, in many countries a generation gap is also visible. Overall, the pre-war generation and baby-boomers appear to hold the most negative views, but this

generational hierarchy in anti-immigration attitudes is not strict and is instead nonlinear in several states.

These findings are in line with the recent empirical research on age-specific patterns regarding immigration attitudes (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2018; McLaren and Paterson 2019; Schotte and Winkler 2018). These studies show that when isolating the effect of birth cohorts, a person's biological age is no longer significant (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov 2018) and that older individuals are more averse towards immigrants not because they become more critical towards immigration policies

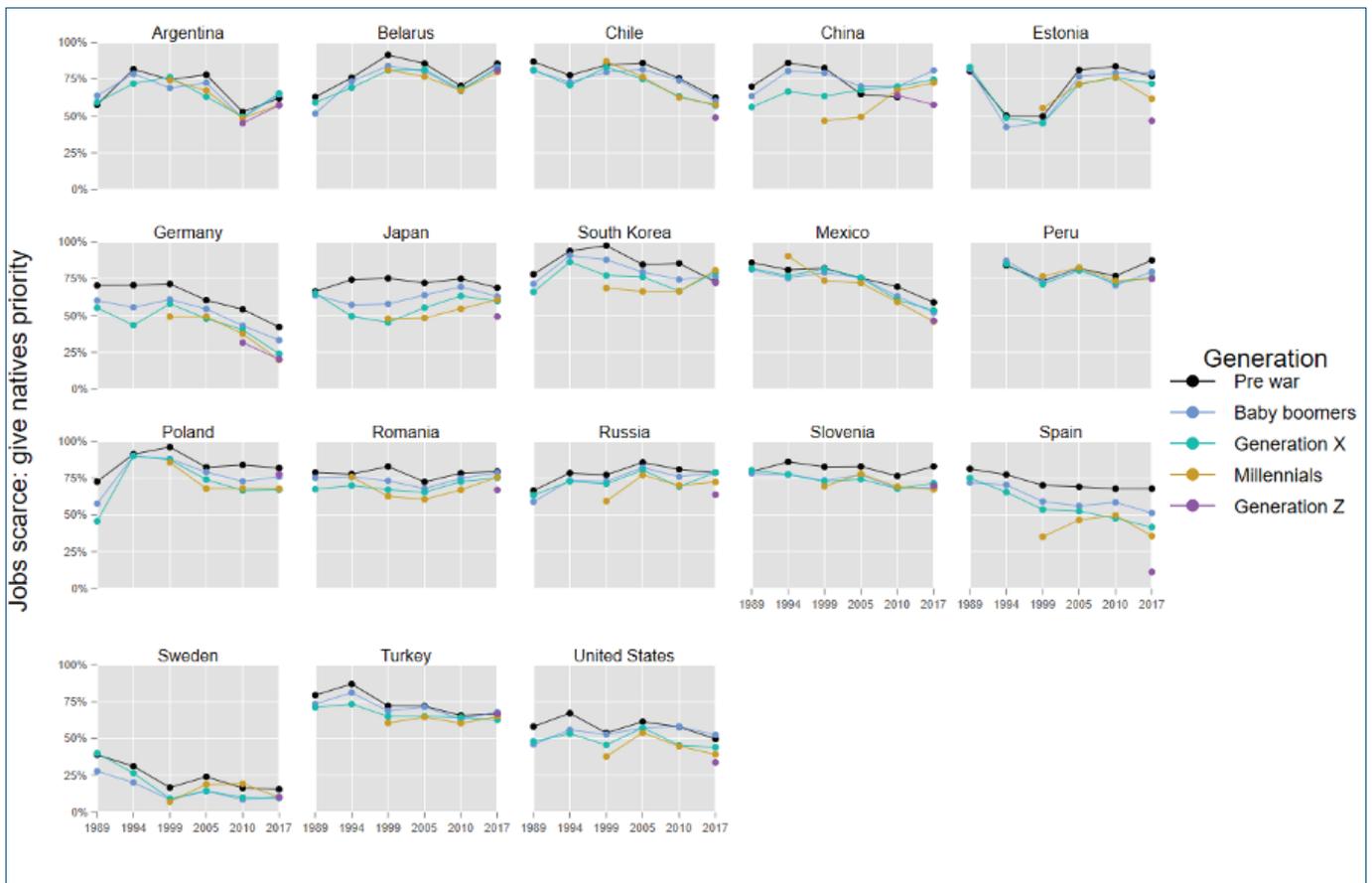


over the life-span, but because of a cohort or generational effect (Schotte and Winkler 2018; Jeannot and Dražanová 2019). In other words, it is not simply a matter of older individuals being more against immigration than younger ones. Instead, it appears that age cohorts, individuals born around the same time, experience a unique set of common circumstances constituting a shared political socialization that has a long-lasting impact on their attitudes towards immigration.

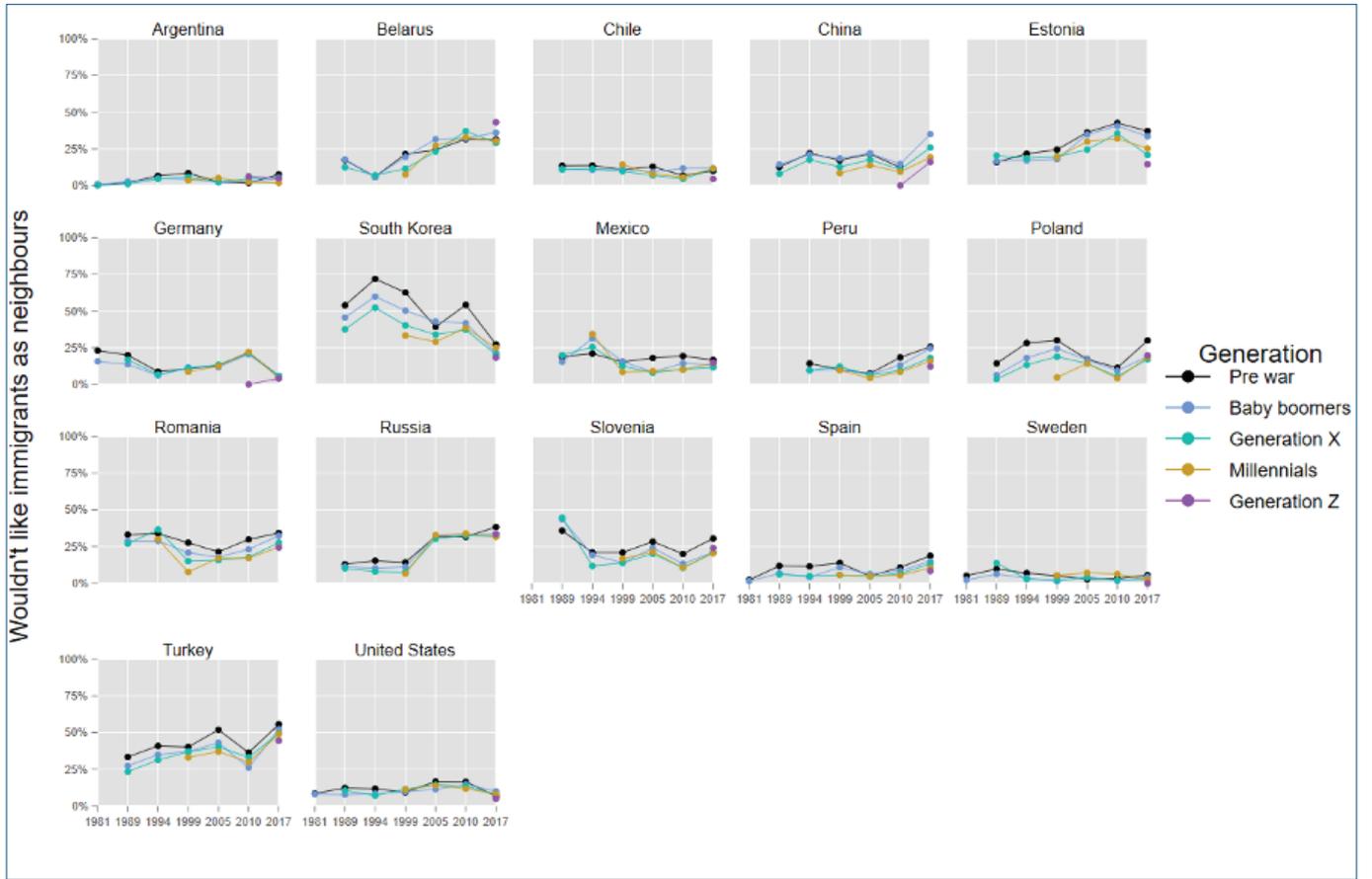
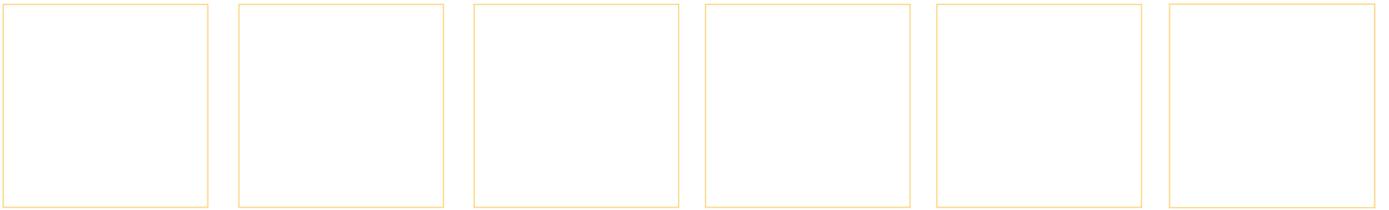
Moreover, Figure 4.2 also points to possible period effects. While differences in attitudes to immigration

between generations stay more or less stable, they follow similar patterns with time. What this implies is that certain periods might exert a shift in attitudes for all individuals in the same country, regardless of their age or birth cohort. However, there are notable exceptions to these period effects. For instance, anti-immigrant attitudes in the labour market increases more steeply among millennials in China compared to other generations. Moreover, there is also a trend toward reduced generational differences in Japan and Korea.

Figure 4.2: Attitudes to immigration by generation (1989-2017)



a) Labour market discrimination



b) Social proximity

Figure 4.3 shows that in Asia and Africa, educational attainment hardly changes respondents' opinion about discriminatory labour market policies. In contrast, in Europe, New Zealand and Australia, individuals with higher education (i.e tertiary education and above) are much less supportive of such discrimination. In several countries such as Denmark, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, or Portugal, the difference in the share of people agreeing to give natives priority when jobs are scarce between respondents with high education and those without is greater than 10%. Likewise, lower education significantly increases support for discriminatory labour market policies among respondents from Europe and American countries as well as New Zealand and Australia. The U.S is a notable exception: Individuals with medium - secondary - education are by far the most

opposed to equal treatment of immigrants and natives in that country (50% vs 30%). Panel b in Figure 4.3 suggests that attitudes about social proximity are consistently more hostile among respondents with lower education across the globe.

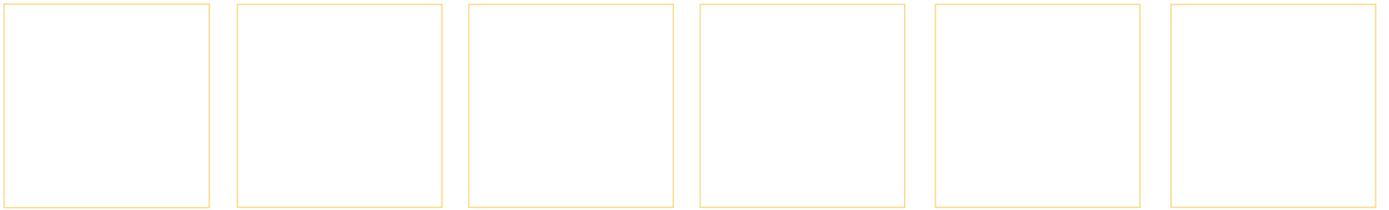
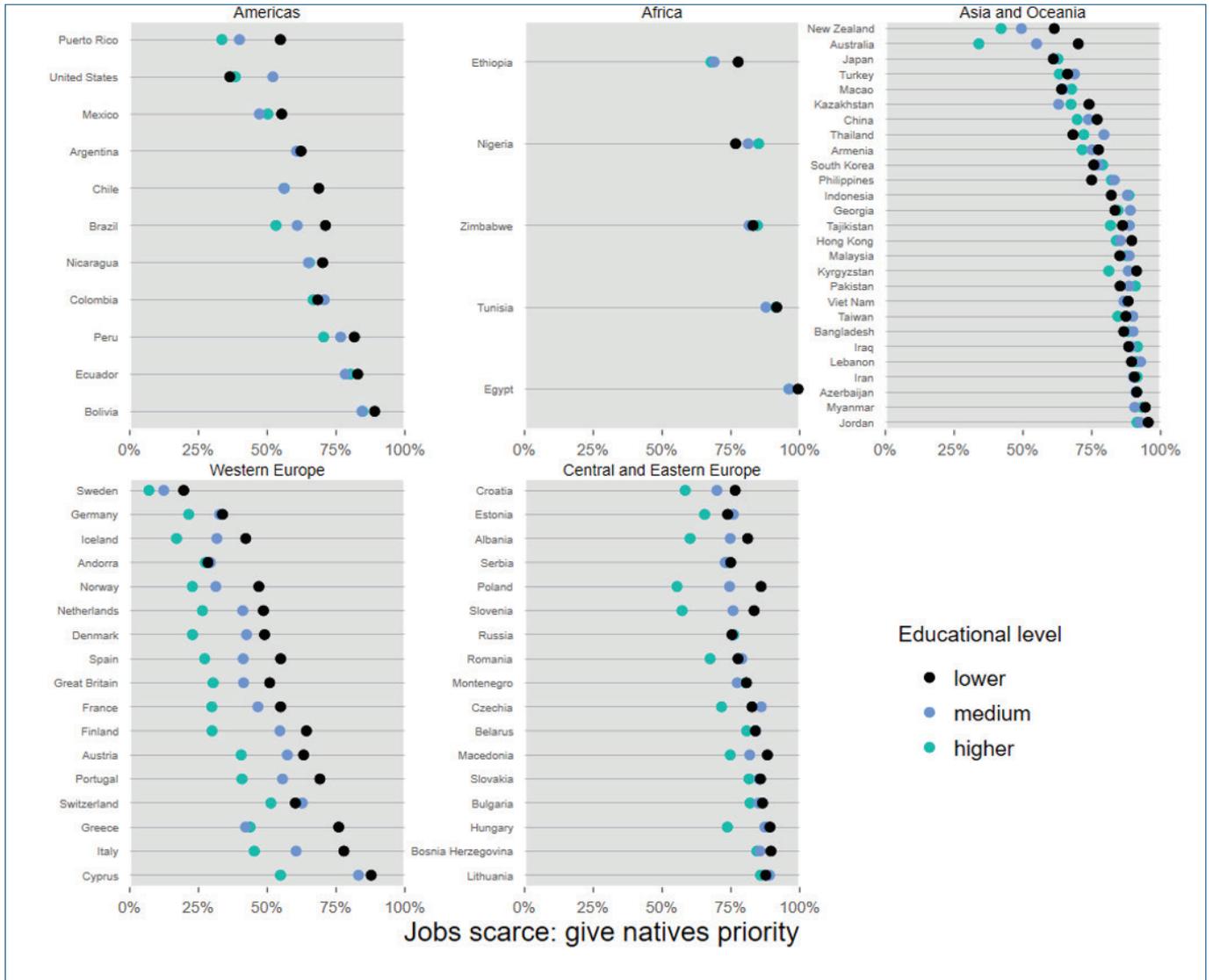
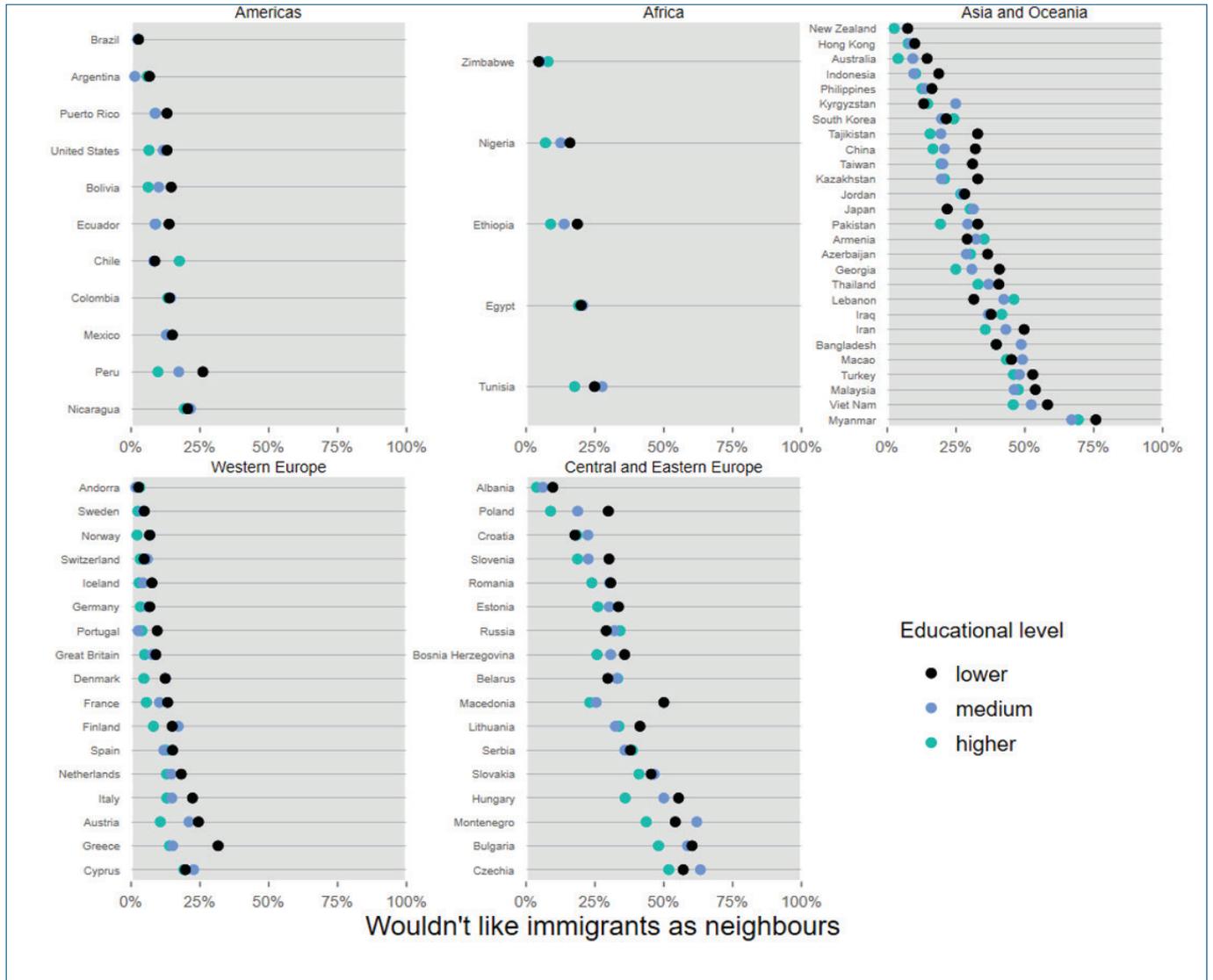
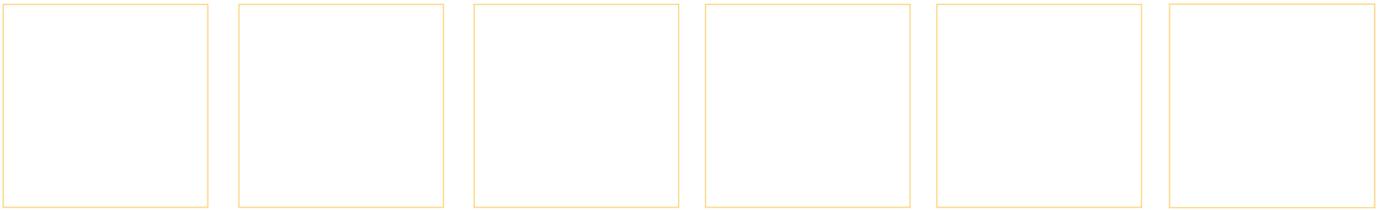


Figure 4.3: The effect of education on attitudes to immigration



a) Labour market discrimination



b) Social proximity

In most countries, individuals with higher education show the most favourable attitudes to immigrants and this education gap appears to hold over time (Figure 4.4), although the differences between groups in their willingness to have immigrants as their neighbours are closing. However, there are also notable exceptions to these trends. For instance, in the last decade, respondents with lower education in the U.S were the least likely to give priority to nationals in the job market. The education gap in labour market chauvinism has also closed in several

other countries such as Germany, Argentina, Japan and Russia. Finally, looking at social proximity issues across educational categories, Figure 4.4 shows that in Russia people with higher education are now the most opposed to having immigrants as their neighbours.

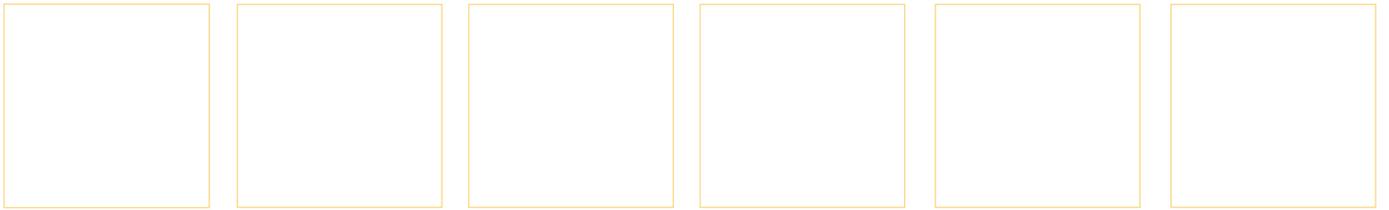
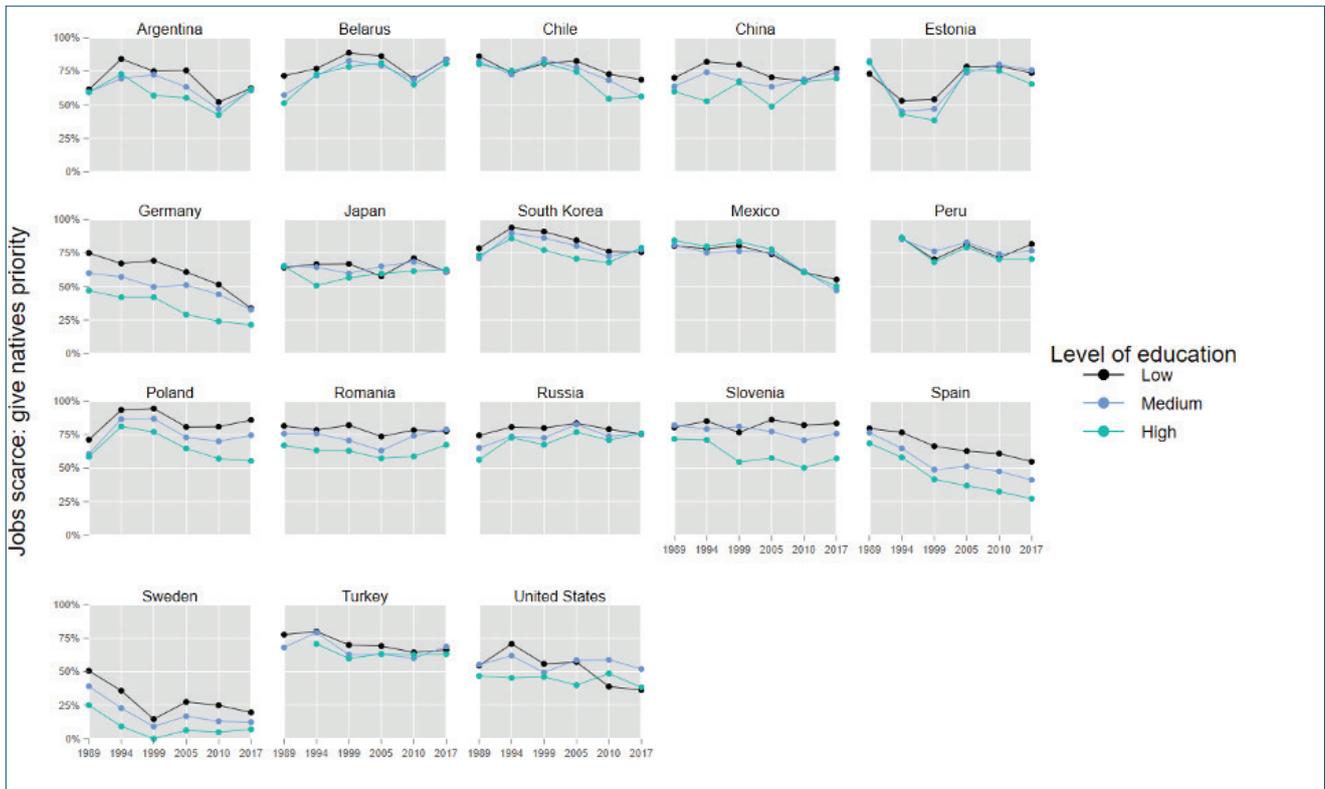
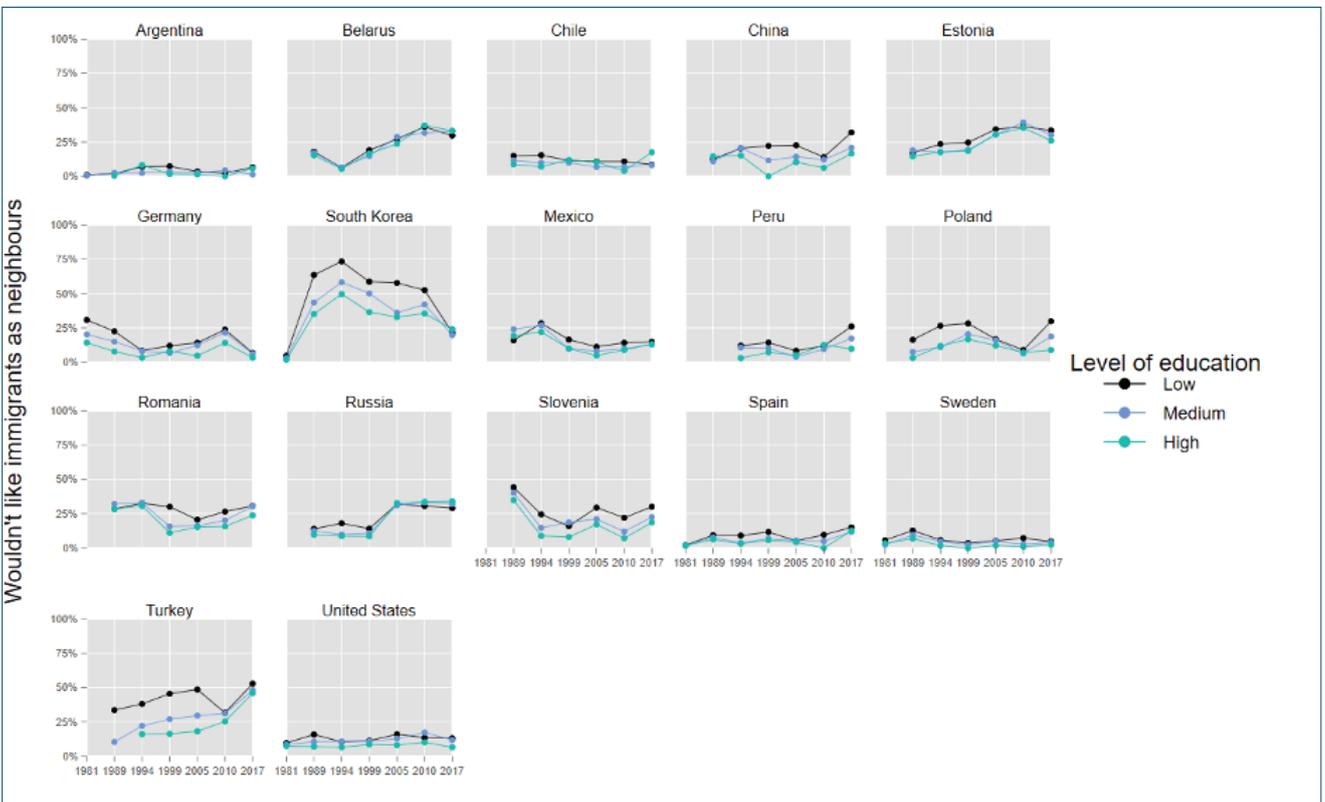


Figure 4.4 Attitudes to immigration by educational level (1989-2017)



a) Labour market discrimination



b) Social proximity

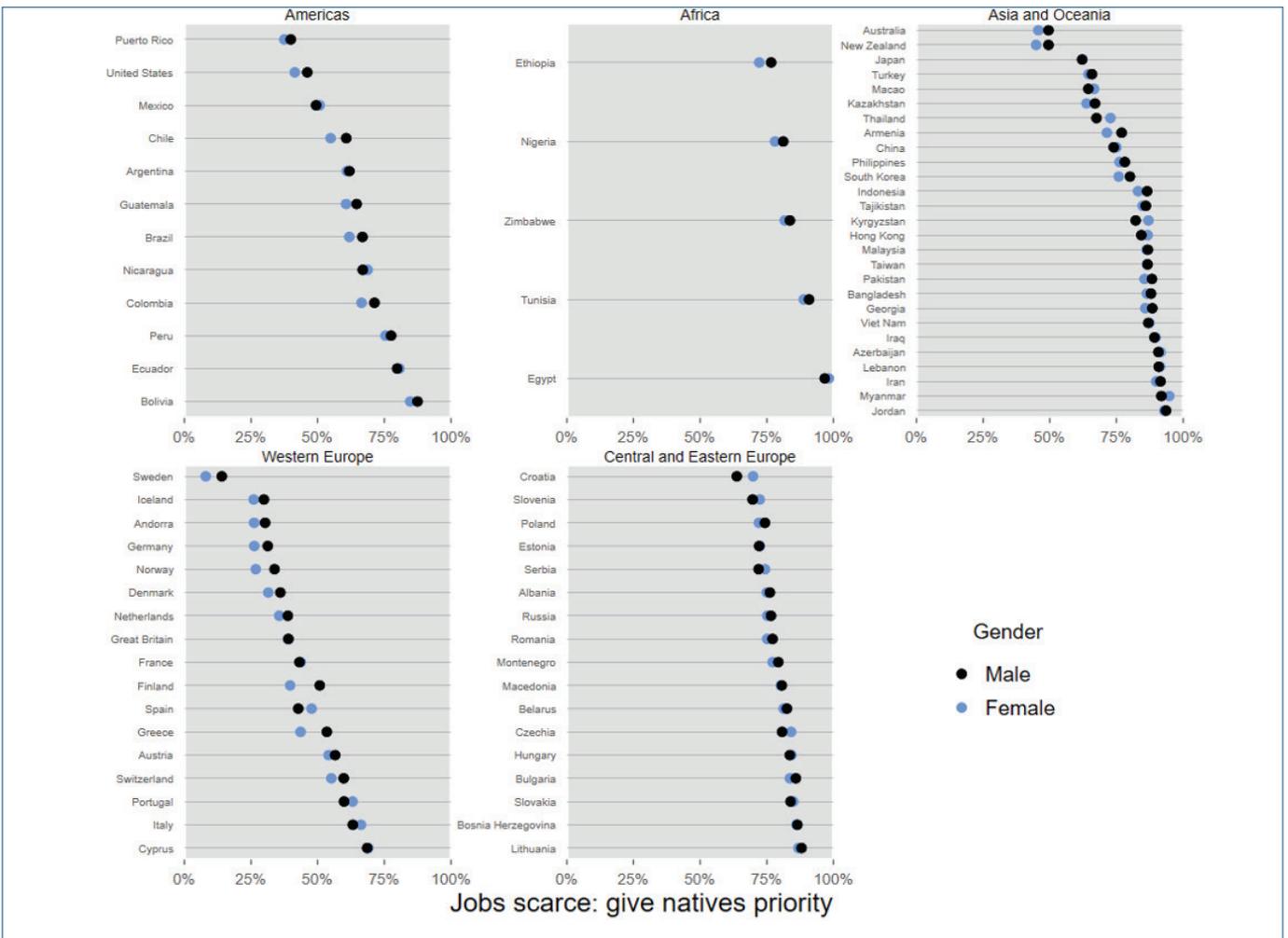


Theoretically, it is not entirely clear whether either women or men should have more anti-immigration attitudes. Studies generally assume men should hold more anti-immigration attitudes, due to their more authoritarian personalities (Adorno et al. 1950) and conservatism (Harteveld et al. 2015: 107). However, with the recent politicisation of gender in immigration debates (Farris 2017), native women might view certain immigrants as a threat to gender equality (Ponce 2017). Figure 4.3 indeed suggests that gender does not explain much of the variation in attitudes to immigration. In New Zealand and Australia, the US and Northern Europe, women are slightly more opposed to discriminating immigrants on the labour market than men, but this pattern is not observed across other regions (see panel a of Figure 4.5).

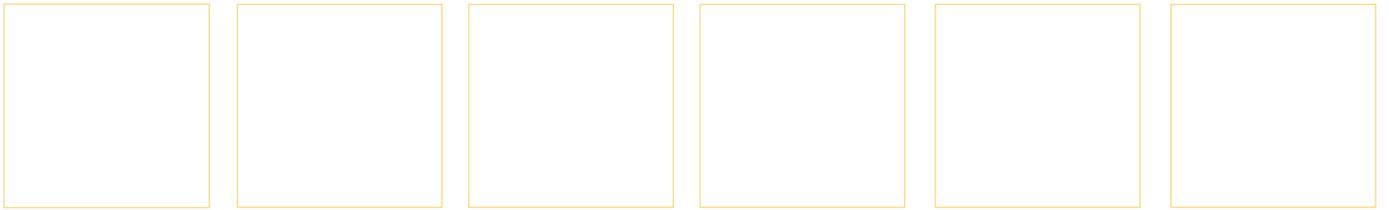
Moreover, there is no visible gender gap in attitudes to social proximity with immigrants (Figure 4.5, panel b).

The sociodemographic evidence contained in the WVS and EVS surveys is therefore in line with the empirical literature in the European and U.S context (Mayda 2006; Cavaille and Marshall 2019), particularly in relation to the impact of age and education. Our analysis does, however, reveal that these effects may not necessarily apply to attitudes to immigration in less scrutinized regions such as Asia and Africa. This is consistent with several studies showing that the strengths of the relationship between education and attitudes to immigration depends on contextual factors (Borgonovi and Pokropek 2019) and does not always hold outside the established Western realm (Dražanová 2017).

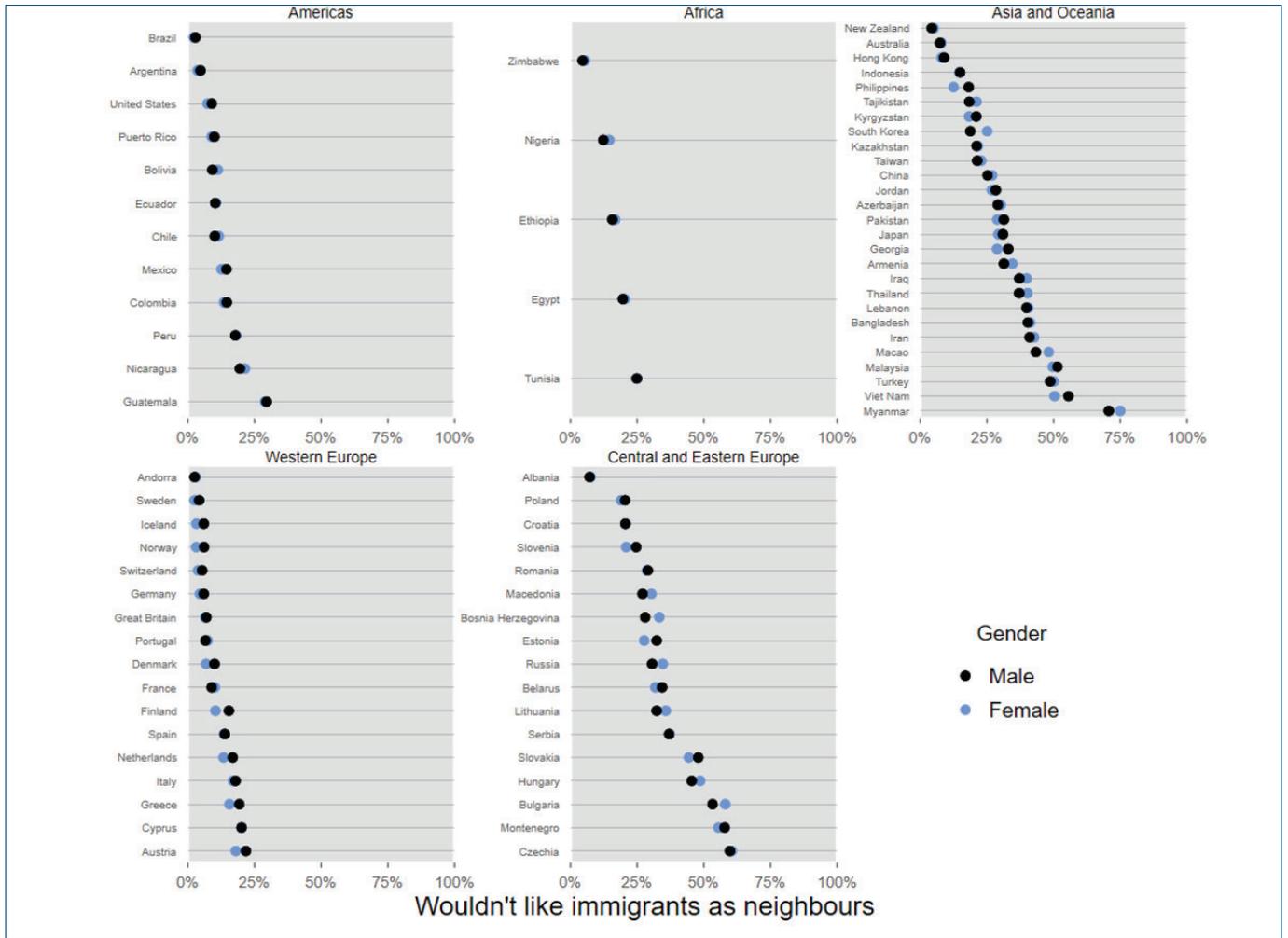
Figure 4.5: The effect of gender on attitudes to immigration

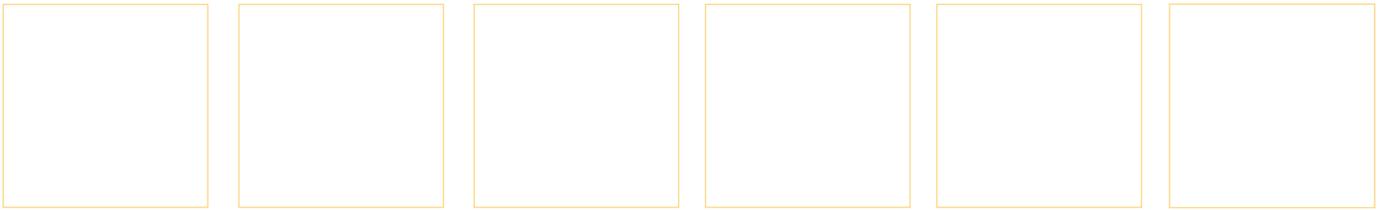


a) Labour market discrimination



b) Social proximity

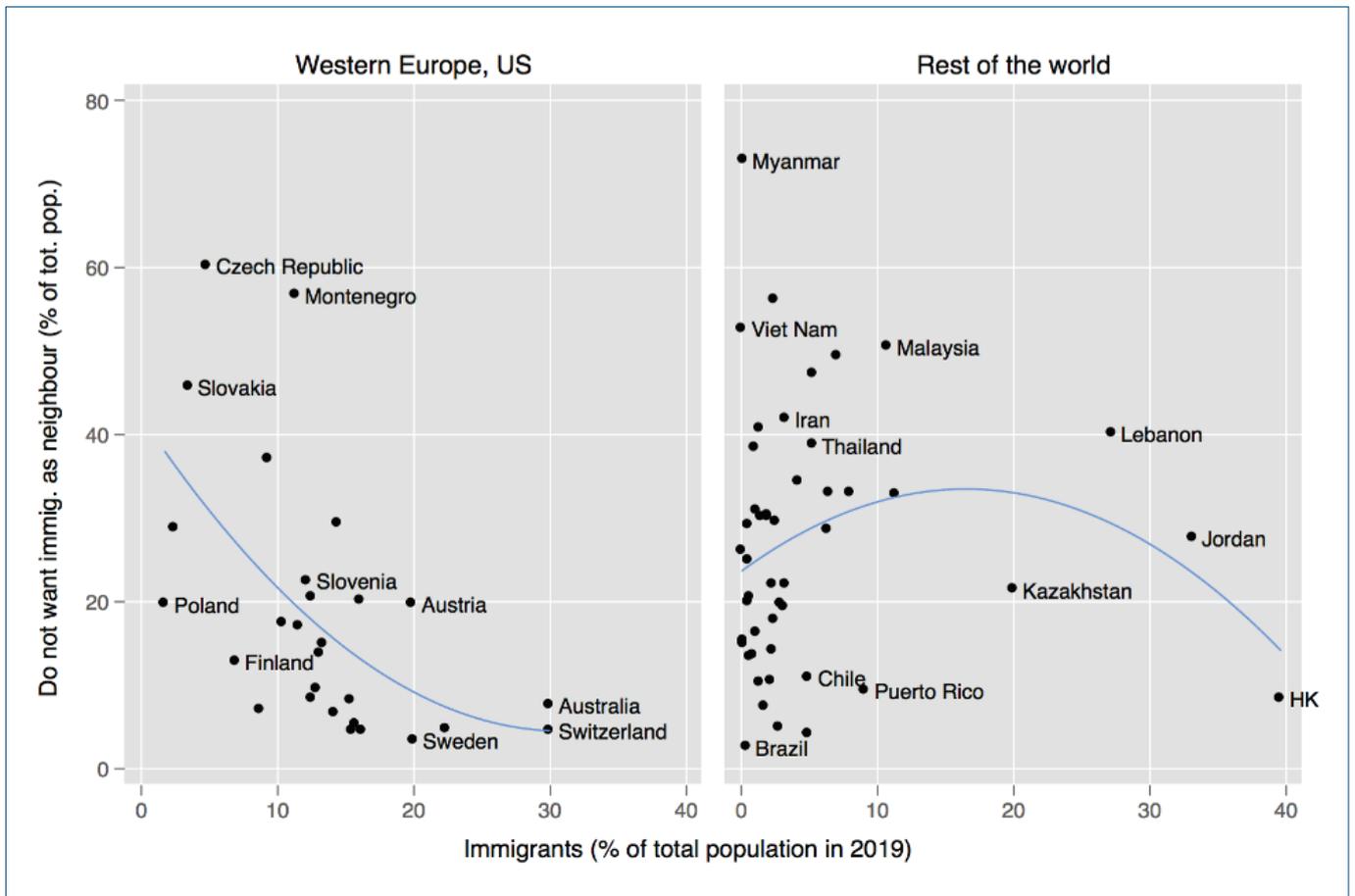




5. Macro-trends: Share of immigrants and attitudes to immigration

Beside individual characteristics, it is useful to examine how views on immigration vary across countries based on the diversity of their population. In Figures 5.1 and 5.2, we plot the relationship between the size of the immigrant population and attitudes to immigration separately for Western countries and the rest of the world. This comparative perspective confirms the divergence between the Western, and, incidentally, most scrutinized states on the one hand (see Fig. 1), and other regions of the world.

Figure 5.1: Attitudes to social proximity of immigrants and share of the foreign population.



Source: World Value Survey and UN data

Note: The 'Western Europe and US' group also includes New Zealand and Australia.

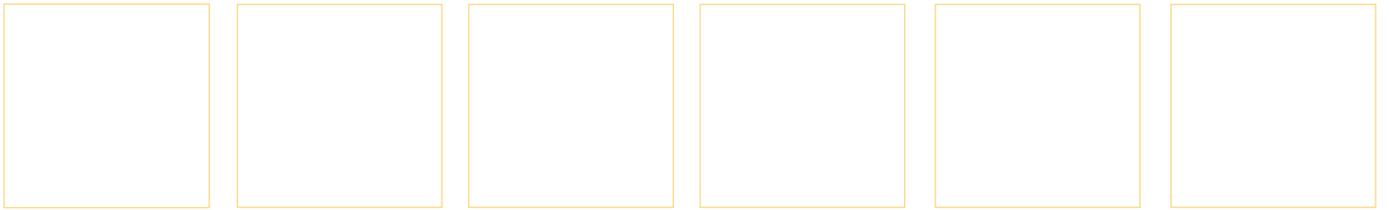
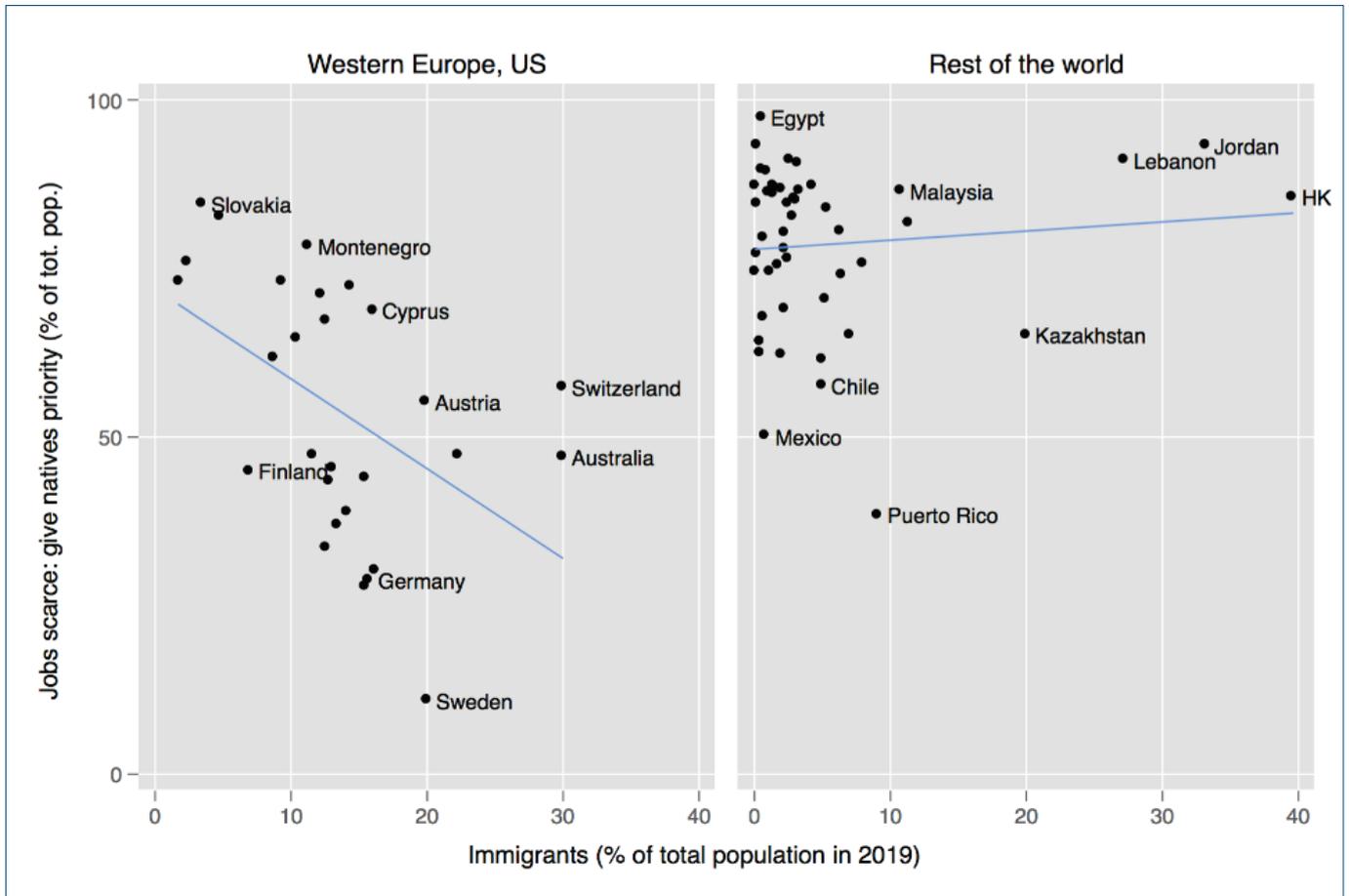


Figure 5.1. shows a clear positive correlation between positive social proximity to immigrants and the share of immigrants in developed countries. As the share of immigrants increases, opposition to social proximity decreases. This pattern is in stark contrast with attitudes in developing countries for which no such relationship emerges.

Figure 5.2 contains information about country-wide policy preferences with respect to the discrimination against immigrants in the labour market. Again, the difference is striking between developed and developing countries. While in Western countries attitudes to labour market discrimination clearly improve with the share of immigrants, no clear pattern is visible for developing countries.

Figure 5.2: Attitudes to job discrimination against immigrants and share of the foreign population.



Source: World Value Survey and UN data

Note: The 'Western Europe and US' group also includes New Zealand and Australia.



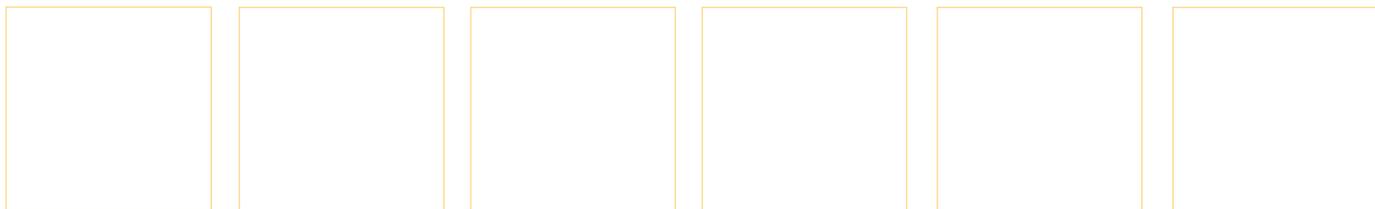
6. Conclusion

The evidence in this brief suggests that attitudes to immigration are highly heterogeneous across countries and continents and differ greatly based on political, economic and cultural factors. The long-time trends reveal that while support for discrimination against immigrants in the labour market has remained stable in Central Europe and Asia, it has decreased in American and Western European countries. Western Europeans and respondents from American countries also place security risks associated with immigration relatively above economic concerns, while the opposite is true for Africa, Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe.

This suggests that immigrants may be perceived differently in Western Europe, the US, New Zealand, and Australia compared to Asian and African countries, and that the relative salience of cultural and economic concerns about immigration as well as individual policy preferences vary between developed and developing countries.

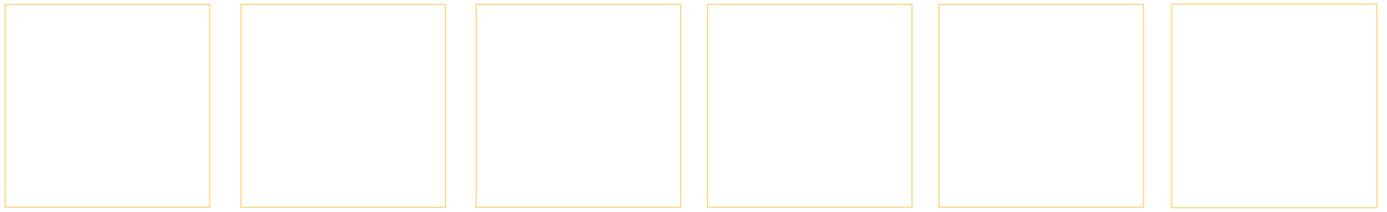
Finally, these continental specificities show up in the relationship between attitudes to immigration and the share of immigrants living in a country. While respondents from developed countries become increasingly favourable to immigrants as the share of immigrants increases, no such pattern is observed in other parts of the world. Of course, the size of the immigrant population is only one of the explanations for these differences, and we cannot conclude that they are the main driver of continental divergences. In absolute terms, anti-immigrant attitudes can be relatively widespread in some high-immigration, rich countries such as, for instance, Switzerland. Nevertheless, the descriptive analysis contained in this policy brief already highlights the need for comparative analysis and further empirical investigation outside the Western world in order to provide a more comprehensive perspective on attitudes to immigration. From an academic standpoint, country-wide and individual-level explanations are often muddled and mistakenly treated as interchangeable – and aggregate-level drivers of attitudes to immigration remain particularly overlooked in the theoretical literature. Taking into account country-level social and political characteristics such as the level of corruption, the functioning of key institutions, or integration policies may allow academics and policymakers alike to better understand continental, country-level, and regional differences in attitudes to immigration.

From a policy standpoint, although the present analysis does not delve into the various channels that influence public opinion to immigration, it raises questions about the validity of a uniform policy response to the current so-called ‘immigration crisis’ within the European Union. In light of the divergences in attitudes to immigration across EU member countries, a one-size-fits-all policy approach might not be optimal. Instead, thinking outside the Western box seems a timely alternative.



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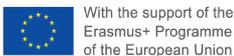
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