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Comparing Ignorance: Imagined Immigration and the Exclusion of Migrantsin the U.S. and Western Europe

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There exists a well-documented tendency among citizens to perceive immigrant populations as much larger than indicated by official statistics. This misperception has been linked to desires to halt the flow off immigration or restrict immigrants' rights, raising concern about the consequences of pervasive faulty information. However, ignorance extends beyond questions of population size. There are also many qualitative misperceptions upon which individuals base their opinions about foreigners. In particular, citizens are likely to hold incorrect perceptions about the legal status of the typical immigrant (i.e. documented vs undocumented). The current study takes a unique approach by simultaneously examining both quantitative and qualitative forms of ignorance, and assessing their associations with support for a hypothetical restrictionist migration policy. Using a sample of 2,363 from the 2011 Transatlantic Trends Immigration Survey gathered in six countries – the U.S., Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy – this study finds high levels of both forms of ignorance. However, legal status misperceptions exhibit greater variation across countries and are more strongly associated with restrictionist attitudes. Contrary to the misperceptions literature, size misperceptions are only weakly associated with the outcome. Overall, the results highlight a need for a more complete understanding of the totality of misperceptions to elucidate the connection between ignorance and anti-immigrant attitudes.

Keywords: immigrants; misperceptions; undocumented immigration; stereotypes; ignorance

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Introduction

Social researchers have consistently found that when the typical individual thinks about immigrants, they imagine something quite different from the objective reality. Recent research on misperceptions has focused a great deal on how people perceive their country's immigrant population size; a statistic that respondents usually over-estimate. (Hjerm 2007; Semyonov, Raijman, Yom Tov and Schmidt 2004; Semyonov, Raijman and Gorodzeisky 2008; Sides and Citrin 2007; Citrin and Sides 2008). This tendency (sometimes referred to as population innumeracy) has generated increased scholarly attention and is now measured in multiple national and international surveys (Ipsos 2014; Transatlantic Trends 2013; Texeira et al. 2013; Jowell 2005). Most concerning is the finding that when inflated perceptions are common, support for anti-immigrant policy is more prevalent (Sides and Citrin 2007; Semyonov et al. 2004). Logically, this association has led some to call for the dissemination of correct population size information to improve intergroup relations and to aid in the integration of immigrant populations (Alba et al. 2005; Nadeau et al. 1991; Sides and Cirtin 2007; Sigelman and Niemi 2001).

The effectiveness of such a strategy is uncertain however, in part because misperceptions regarding immigrants are much wider in scope than inflated population numbers. Blinder's (2015) concept of the "imagined immigration" suggests that individuals have a more comprehensive, albeit still inaccurate understanding of what is meant by the word "immigrant" and whom it represents. In other words, ignorance extends beyond questions of population size to also include qualitative mischaracterizations of the typical immigrant. Perceptions of the

1

typical foreigner's country of origin, their reasons for being present in the host country, their socio-economic status, or their likelihood of criminality, among many other possible things, may be perceived incorrectly relative to the reality. Blinder (2015) argues that immigrant-related public opinion is formed around this imagined immigration rather than objective reality. Thus, if in the minds of individuals, the typical immigrant is something undesirable, it may, like size misperceptions, result in support for exclusionary immigration policies or the erosion of immigrants' rights.

While population size misperceptions have been studied extensively, they have yet to be considered alongside qualitative components of the imagined immigration. It remains unknown whether these different types of ignorance shape attitudes and policy positions similarly or if one is more important than the other. Using data from the six countries included in the 2011 Transatlantic Trends Immigration Survey (TATIS) the current study provides a more complete understanding of immigrant-related ignorance by considering whether all misperceptions are created equal. Specifically, the analysis compares the over-estimation of immigrant population sizes and mischaracterizations of the typical immigrants' legal status. It then simultaneously assesses the effects of these two misperceptions on a measure of support for restrictionist immigration policies.

Legal status mischaracterizations are a potentially important qualitative component of the imagined immigration, as the question of documentation versus no documentation is highly contentious, especially in the U.S. (Lyons, Coursey, and Kenworthy 2013; Berg 2009; Hood and Morris 1998; Goo 2015). It is also likely prone to faulty perceptions given an abundance of media attention on unauthorized immigration, particularly when focusing on Latino/as (Subervi, Torres, and Montalvo 2005; Timberlake and Williams 2012). Controversy surrounding

2

undocumented immigrants has also increased in Europe, particularly in the wake of the 2015

Migration Crisis, as individuals from outside the E.U. have increasingly sought refuge and

opportunity within the Schengen area (Duvell 2008; Morehouse and Blomfield 2011). The

current study considers legal status mischaracterizations alongside population size

misperceptions in an effort to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ignorance

regarding immigrants.

Ignorance about Foreign-Born Populations

Population Size Misperceptions: Quantitative Ignorance

Several studies have demonstrated ordinary citizens' uncertainty about immigrant and racial

minority population sizes (Hjerm 2007; Semyonov, et al. 2004; Semyonov, et al. 2008; Sides and

Citrin 2007; Citrin and Sides 2008; Alba et al. 2005; Wong 2007; Herda 2010; Kunovich 2016).

Generally, when asked how large these populations are, respondents provide over-estimates. This

phenomenon has generated considerable interest among social scientists because it suggests that

the reality perceived by individuals differs, often greatly, from objective data. In a recent report

from Ipsos MORI (2015), over-estimation on average was nearly ubiquitous across 32 nations. In

the U.S., where immigrants represent about 14 percent of the population, the typical respondent

perceives 33 percent of the country to be foreign born. Thus, the average American sees the

immigrant population as 19 percentage points larger than (2.36 times) the reality. Likewise, in

Italy respondents overestimated by 17 percentage points on average, in France and Germany by

14 points, in Britain by 12 points, and in Spain by 9 percentage points (Ipsos 2015).

The commonplace nature of size misperceptions has generated concern that individuals

will use inaccurate information to motivate anti-immigrant actions or formulate anti-immigrant

policy positions. The theoretical logic is often couched in group threat theory (Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967; Bobo 1983; Quillian 1995; 1996), which predicts that a greater objective number of perceived competitors for the dominant group will raise a sense of vulnerability, or threat, regarding control over social resources (ie: neighborhoods, schools, marriage markets, etc.). This sense of threat generates negative prejudice and discriminatory actions. Following this logic, the larger the immigrant population appears in one's mind, the more likely one will express feelings of group threat, regardless of the actual population size. This heightened threat should increase support for exclusionary immigration policy. Indeed, researchers using European samples have found that over-estimates are associated with support for measures that would stop or limit the flow of immigration (Sides and Citrin 2007), deport immigrants under various circumstances (Herda 2013), and curtail immigrants' rights (Semyonov et al. 2004).

While size misperceptions regarding immigrants have been documented in the U.S., their connection to immigrant policy positions remains understudied. Instead, research on misperceptions about racial minority communities is more common (Nadeau et al. 1991; Sigelman and Niemi 2001; Kunovich 2016; Wong 2010) and some find similar links to policy positions. In particular, Alba's et al. (2005) analysis of the General Social Survey revealed that inflated perceptions of African American and Latino populations predict opposition to affirmative action and the rejection of policies designed to help immigrants respectively.

The Imagined Immigration: Qualitative Ignorance

Of course, ignorance regarding immigrants extends beyond questions of population size. There are also many qualitative characteristics about which citizens will demonstrate confusion. In general, the existing research suggests that the specific characteristics that individuals imagine

4

when they think of the typical immigrant, whether accurate or inaccurate, will also inform their attitudes and policy positions.

Blinder (2015) considered perceptions of why immigrants are present in Britain using survey data and official government statistics. His results revealed widespread qualitative misunderstanding about why immigrants are present in the country. At the time of the study, "student" was the most likely status for immigrants, but "asylum seeker" was the most likely perception among the 728 respondents. Further, according to official statistics, most immigrants to Britain have temporary, rather than permanent status. However, respondents were more likely to view the typical immigrant as permanent. Thus, similar to immigrant population size estimates, native-born individuals also perceive immigrants incorrectly in qualitative ways.

Blinder (2015) went on to argue that individuals base their immigrant-related attitudes and policy positions on the immigration that they imagine, rather than what actually exists. He found this to be the case in his data as those perceiving the typical immigrant to be an asylum seeker or having permanent status were more likely to endorse reductions in immigration. Thus, for anti-immigrant attitudes and policy positions, the specific immigrant that one imagines seems to be important.

Similarly, Herda's (2015) analysis of the Finnish National Election Survey found that many respondents in Finland also imagined immigration in a manner that differs from reality. Nearly one fifth of his 806 respondents incorrectly selected Somalia as the most common origin of immigrants in Finland. This perception is of course verifiable with official statistics, which indicate that Russia is the correct answer. This incorrectly imagined immigration is potentially consequential as Somalis represent a particularly maligned group in Finland (Pitkanen and Kouki 2002; Jaakkola 2005; Peutere 2010). If individuals think of Somalis when they choose to support

5

or oppose immigration, their misperception may have implications for immigrants more generally. This relates to Ford's (2011) finding among British respondents of an ethnic hierarchy of preferences regarding immigrant populations. His analysis suggested that respondents preferred immigrants who were racially white and from cultures most proximate to that of Great Britain. The attitudes and policy preferences of these individuals will likely be shaped by what or whom they imagine when they think of the typical immigrant.

Of course, there are many things that individuals can imagine, correctly or incorrectly, when they think of immigrants. Social scientists have indeed focused on various immigrant stereotypes for decades (Lippmann 1946; Allport 1979). Individuals often rely on these simplistic and exaggerated notions to understand unfamiliar out-groups. Previous research has focused on the endorsement of stereotypes regarding immigrants' levels of criminality, occupational skills, work ethic, socioeconomic status, intelligence, and willingness to assimilate, among others (Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Hagan and Polloni 1999; Reid et al. 2005; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Timberlake and Williams 2012). Many find that agreeing with such stereotypes is associated with anti-immigrant attitudes and policy positions (Timberlake et al. 2015; Figgou et al. 2011; Pantoja 2006; Wilson 2001). Others have successfully used such stereotypes to experimentally prime subjects and alter attitudes about hypothetical immigrants (Aalberg et al. 2012; Harell et al. 2012; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2012).

Clearly these stereotypes are influential and each is a potentially relevant piece of the imagined immigration. Many of them are also demonstrably inaccurate (see Blinder 2015; Herda 2016), making them analogous to quantitative ignorance about population sizes. But are the consequences about being wrong about population size the same as being wrong about qualitative characteristics? If so, there exists a need to shift the recent population innumeracy

6

research away from its sole focus on size perceptions to a more comprehensive analysis of the totality of respondents' immigrant-related ignorance. The current analysis moves in this direction by simultaneously considering quantitative misperceptions and qualitative mischaracterizations.

Documented or Undocumented?

The typical immigrant's legal status is a potentially important component of the imagined immigration and likely something that respondents will mischaracterize. Particularly in the U.S., the category of "illegal"[1] immigrants is controversial. Many hold especially negative attitudes toward the undocumented population (Lyons, Coursey, and Kenworthy 2013; Berg 2009; Hood and Morris 1998; Goo 2015; Espenshade and Calhoun 1993). If respondents view the typical immigrant as occupying this maligned status, it will likely associate strongly with a desire to restrict immigration. The current study considers this perception in the U.S. as well as Europe, where the topic of unauthorized migration has also become increasingly controversial (Morehouse and Blomfield 2011; Duvell 2008).

The stereotype characterizing the typical immigrant as undocumented has been observed in the U.S., particularly when researchers focus on Latino/a immigrants (Timberlake and Williams 2012; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996). For example, Masouka and Junn (2013) demonstrated that a full 62 percent of whites in the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality endorsed the idea that Latino immigrants were "mostly illegal immigrants". However, researchers have not yet analyzed this misperception alongside over-estimates of the immigrant population size. Thus, it remains unknown whether qualitative and quantitative ignorance behave similarly or if one is more important than the other for predicting anti-immigrant preferences.

Undocumented Population Sizes

Undocumented immigration involves the unauthorized entry or continued presence of foreign nationals in a host country. When considering ignorance regarding this category of individuals, it is necessary to establish what is typical according to the best available data. Table 1 presents estimates of the total number of undocumented foreigners for each of the nations analyzed in the current study. It also includes the total foreign-born population size and the percentage undocumented, which is calculated by dividing the total by the number of undocumented. The dates of each estimate are included in parentheses. These particular dates were the most proximate available to the year 2011 (the year of the TATIS data). The American estimate is generated by Pew Research (2015) and matches that of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (Hoefer et al. 2013). The European statistics were gathered from a variety of academic and governmental sources and have varying degrees of precision (see Clandestino 2012).[2] The table displays upper limit estimates in each of the countries listed to be as conservative as possible in determining the accuracy of respondents' perceptions.

Table 1. Estimated percentage of undocumented immigrants in each of the TATIS countries

	Undocumented/Irregular Migrants	Total Foreign Born Population	% Undocumented
U.S.	11.3 million[i] (2011)	41.3 million[i] (2011)	27.36%
Britain	863,000[ii] (2008)	7.5 million[ii] (2011)	11.51%
Italy	651,000[ii] (2008)	4.1 million[ii] (2012)	16.07%
France	400,000[ii] (2005)	5.2 million[ii] (2007)	7.69%
Germany	400,000[ii] (2010)	7.2 million[ii] (2010)	5.56%
Spain	390,000[ii] (2009)	6.23 million[ii] (2009)	6.26%

i. Pew Research (2015)
ii. See Clandestino (2012) for more information. The British estimate is calculated by academic sources using a residual method with census data; the French estimate is from border and internal flow data from the Minister of the Interior; the Italian estimate is based on weighted survey methods from academic sources; the German estimate is compiled by academic sources based on police apprehension data; the Spanish estimated is compiled by Clandestino based on a residual method using municipal registration and residence permits.

8

The undocumented population around 2011 was the largest by a wide margin in the U.S. in both absolute and relative terms, with 27.36 percent of foreigners having "illegal" status. The numbers of this population increased sharply beginning in the 1990s reaching over 12 million individuals in 2005. It has remained relatively steady ever since, at about 11 million individuals (Krogstad and Passel 2015). Immigrants from Mexico generally receive the most attention in this regard, but they represent less than half of the undocumented population in the U.S. There are also significant undocumented immigration flows from other parts of Central America, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean (Henderson 2014).

Based on estimates from The Clandestino Project, Italy has the next largest relative proportion of foreign born residents with undocumented status, at 16.07 percent. This is likely due to geography and its status as point of entry to the E.U. for migrants arriving from North Africa. This Central Mediterranean route was the most commonly used path into the Schengen Area prior to the recent migration crisis (Adams 2014). However, only Italy and Britain (11.51 percent) have foreign born populations with greater than 10 percent classified as undocumented. Thus, even with Britain, France, and Germany acting as popular destinations for economic migrants, their undocumented populations are small compared to the U.S.

Regardless, if one compares the estimated undocumented population to the total number of foreigners, the former represents a minority in every context. Even in U.S. where the absolute undocumented population size is quite large, nearly three-quarters of foreigners have documentation. Thus, to view the typical immigrant as present "illegally" would be a mischaracterization in all six contexts. The following sections consider how respondents in these countries perceive these realities.

Data, Variables, and Methods

Data

The current analysis examines data from the 2011 TATIS, which is an international survey designed to "identify attitudes and policy preferences of the general public related to immigration in Europe and the United States" (Kennedy 2011). As with previous misperceptions research, the cross-sectional design of the TATIS precludes assessment of temporality. However, the data uniquely permit the simultaneous analysis of both qualitative and quantitative immigrant-related misperceptions, which the existing literature has not considered. The sampling universe consists of individuals aged 18 and over, who have access to a landline telephone, with 20 percent of the sample being contacted via mobile numbers. Respondents were selected via multi-stage probability sampling. Interviews were conducted over the phone and in person between August and September of 2011. For the multivariate analysis, immigrants and those who did not respond to the size perception question are omitted. Further, the analysis only includes those who were selected to respond to the perceived size in one's country question.[3]

Variables

Quantitative Ignorance: Population Size Perceptions

The measure of the respondents' perceived immigrant population size is taken from a question asking: "In your opinion, what percentage of the total [country] population were born in another country?" Participants were directed to fill in a number between 0 and 100. A detailed description of this variable across the six sampled countries is provided in the analysis section.

Qualitative Ignorance: Legal Status Mischaracterizations

10

The measure of perceived legal status of the typical immigrant comes from a question asking: "In your opinion, do you think that most of the immigrants in the [country] are here legally or are most of them here illegally?" The three possible responses include: 1) "most immigrants are in the [country] legally"; 2) "most immigrants are in the [country] illegally"; and 3) "equal numbers of legal and illegal immigrants". A detailed description of this variable across the six countries is presented in the analysis section below. Due to the small percentage choosing the third option, these individuals were combined with those selecting the second option in the multivariate portion, as both are mischaracterizations.[4]

Dependent Variable: Restrictionist Attitudes

Ultimately, the analysis will consider the association between these two misperception measures and a scale of willingness to admit immigrants (henceforth referred to as restrictionist attitudes). The variable combines responses from four questions, each containing four categories ranging from "strongly support" to "strongly oppose". The items measure the circumstances under which respondents would allow foreigners into the country. These include: 1) "to avoid poverty"; 2) "to avoid political, ethnic, or religious persecution"; 3) "to avoid physical harm from armed conflict"; and 4) "to avoid the aftermath of a natural disaster". These items are particularly timely as many describe the motivations of the refugees who fled the Middle East and Africa for the E.U. during the 2015 Migration Crisis. While the data were collected before the crisis began, they provide valuable insight into the state of ignorance and restrictionist feelings in the West just prior to the influx of migrants. Using a factor analysis of polychoric correlations, the four component items load highly onto a single factor ($\alpha = .79$) with an eigenvalue above two ($\chi^2 = 4623.71$; $p = .000$). The final scale was generated using factor scores where higher values

indicate more restrictionist attitudes. Sample means for this and all other variables are included in Table 2. On average, restrictionist attitudes are highest in Britain and the lowest in Spain. The values in both countries are significantly (p<.05) larger and smaller respectively compared to each of the other countries in the sample.

Controls

As controls, the multivariate analysis includes two measures of inter-group contact, which are thought to influence size misperceptions in particular. As individuals encounter immigrants in their everyday lives, their experiences are believed to act as "evidence" that can be used to formulate a perception (see Tversky and Kahnaman's (1973) cognitive availability heuristic). Thus, one's level of contact with immigrants is assumed to inform their perceptions. The first such variable in the current analysis measures the amount of immigrant friends in one's social network. The three-category variable includes responses of "No, none" (reference category), "Yes, a few", and "Yes, many". The second variable measures the amount of immigrants in one's immediate family through parents' birthplace. The variable has three categories: 1) Your mother and father were born in [country] (reference category); 2) One of you parents was born outside of [country]; 3) Both of your parents were born outside of [country].

Table 2: Means (Standard Deviations in Parentheses) and Percentages for Variables Considered across TATIS Countries

	U.S.	Britain	France	Germany	Spain	Italy
Restrictionist Attitudes	2.20	2.41	2.23	2.17	1.95	2.18
	(.89)	(.88)	(.67)	(.65)	(.71)	(.79)
Female	51.52%	60.55%	51.54%	51.29%	47.55%	51.63%
Age	51.90	50.77	51.04	48.80	45.73	49.31
	(17.29)	(17.16)	(16.60)	(16.67)	(14.93)	(16.73)
Education Level						
Less than High School	8.82%	14.41%	41.84%	42.76%	35.61%	35.96%
High School Graduate	34.81%	35.16%	20.81%	21.46%	27.24%	40.94%
College Graduate	41.07%	42.29%	25.29%	6.75%	33.11%	20.60%
Post-Graduate	15.30%	8.13%	12.07%	29.03%	4.04%	2.5%
Political Conservatism	4.40	4.16	3.85	3.67	3.91	3.81
	(1.57)	(1.42)	(1.43)	(1.13)	(1.65)	(1.59)
Locality						
City	16.15%	14.60%	14.06%	22.09%	27.84%	23.64%
Suburbs	29.13%	22.73%	15.27%	19.88%	11.32%	12.95%
Small town	35.18%	41.32%	33.47%	34.97%	30.57%	50.63%
Country Village	7.21%	18.47%	32.20%	19.63%	29.43%	11.39%
Rural	12.33%	2.89%	5.00%	3.44%	.82%	1.40%
Immigrant Family						
Two Parents Native-Born	88.47%	90.38%	88.11%	88.55%	97.76%	99.17%
One Parent Foreign-Born	7.47%	5.58%	8.33%	6.16%	2.21%	.83%
Two Parents Foreign-Born	4.06%	4.05%	3.56%	5.29%	-----	-----
Immigrant Friends						
None	28.27%	36.72%	21.85%	28.22%	25.65%	43.65%
A few	55.84%	52.16%	66.03%	59.75%	63.87%	47.65%
Many	15.89%	11.12%	12.11%	12.02%	10.49%	8.70%
Observations	406	398	421	407	363	368

The multivariate models also include several demographic controls. Sex is measured dichotomously with female acting as the reference. Age is measured in years. Education is measured with four categories: less than high school, high school graduate (reference category), college graduate, and advanced degree. Political conservatism is an ordinal variable with seven categories ranging from "extremely liberal" to "extremely conservative". Residence type has five categories: big city (reference category), suburbs, small city, small town, country village, and

farm/countryside. Finally, all models include a set of country-specific region fixed effects to account for possible with-country geographic variation. These are omitted from presentation.

Methods

The analysis begins by documenting and comparing the extent of population size misperceptions and legal status mischaracterizations across the six countries. Next, the consequences of these misperceptions are assessed through country-specific multivariate regression models predicting restrictionist attitudes. Finally, predicted values are presented to compare the effect sizes of quantitative and qualitative ignorance. All analyses apply sample weights to ensure within-country representativeness and replace missing values through multiple imputation using 20 datasets.[5]

Analysis

The Extent of Ignorance across Countries

The horizontal bar chart in Figure 1 displays respondents' perceptions of the legal status of the typical immigrant within each country. Non-trivial percentages mischaracterize in each context. However, there is clearly a high degree of variability in accuracy with more than 80 percent of Germans correctly perceiving the typical immigrant as present legally, while only 21.35 percent of Italians do the same. The latter, along with the U.S. are the only two countries in which a majority of respondents perceive the typical immigrant as having undocumented status. While less than a majority does so in Spain, there are more Spaniards mischaracterizing than accurately perceiving the reality. Conversely, ignorance is lower in Britain and France where only one-third and one-quarter hold faulty perceptions respectively.

14

Figure 1. Perceived legal status of the typical immigrant in each of the 2011 TATIS countries
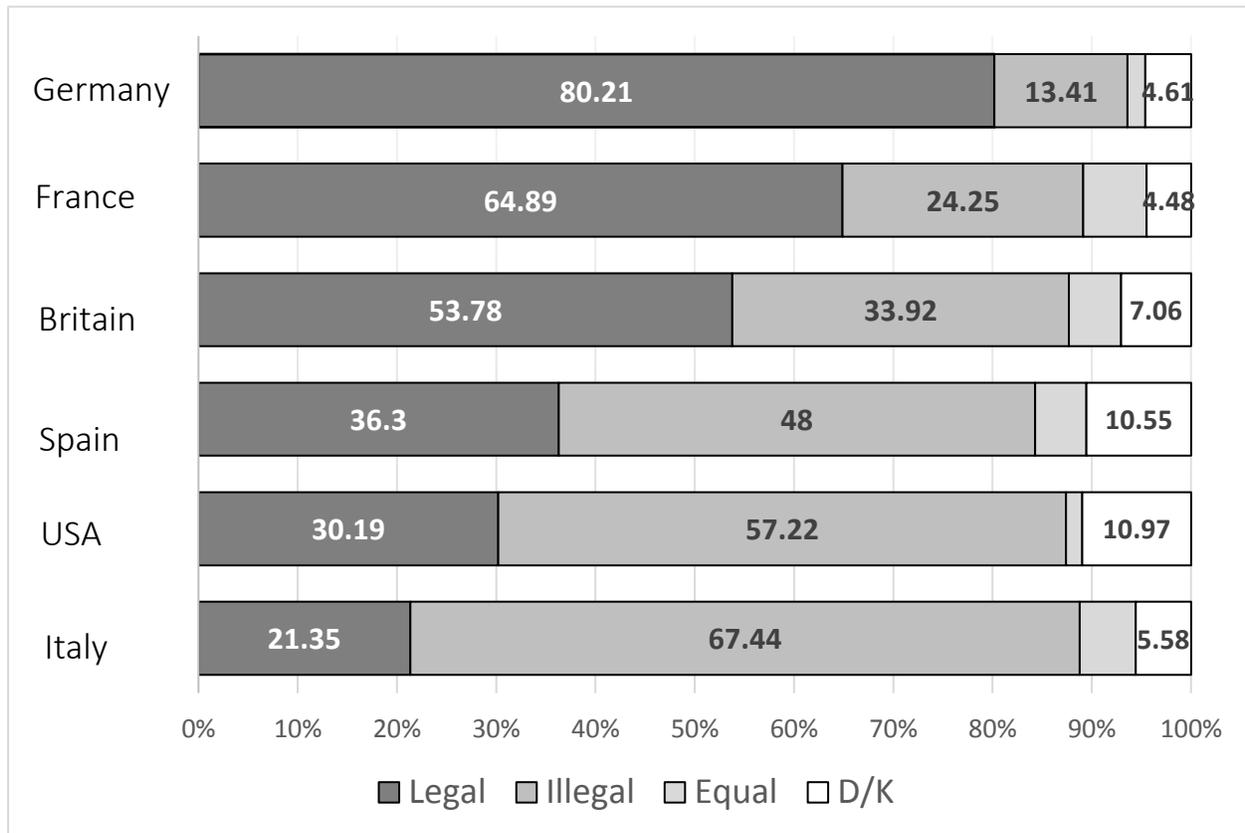
The extent of quantitative misperceptions is presented in Figure 2. The bar graph displays the mean estimated size within each country from the TATIS and the actual sizes gathered from Eurostat (2013) and Pew Research (2015). In all of the countries considered mean estimates of the immigrant population size exceed the actual sizes. Over-estimation is most extreme in the U.S. where respondents perceive the immigrant population size to be nearly three times larger than the reality. The typical American overestimates by 25.22 percentage points. Estimates are most accurate in Spain where the actual size is overestimated by about 50 percent on average, which corresponds to 7.21 percentage points. Respondents in Britain overestimate by

15

19.72 percentage points, in France by 12.37 points, Germany by 15.1 points, and Italy by 14.39 percentage points.

Figure 2. Perceived and actual immigrant population sizes in each of the 2011 TATIS countries
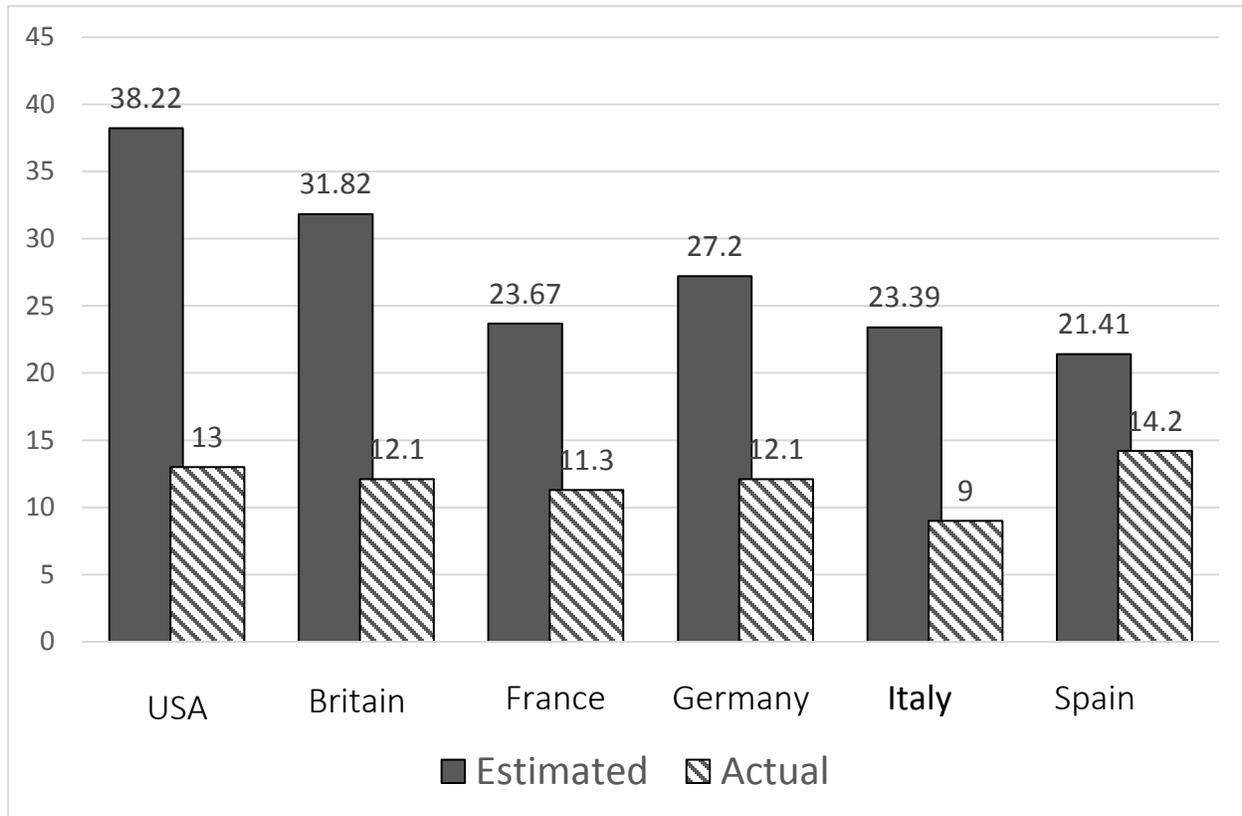
Figure 3 provides a comparison of the pervasiveness of the two perceptions of interest. From left-to-right, the three bars indicate: 1) the percentage of respondents whose estimate constitutes an over-estimate by any amount (relative to actual sizes); 2) the percentage over-estimating by an amount that exceeds their country's mean estimate (see the solid bars in Figure 2); and 3) the percent mischaracterizing the typical immigrant's legal status (the options "mostly illegal" and "equal numbers legal and illegal"). The results show that in most countries, over-estimation is more common than legal status mischaracterizations. The difference is most striking in Germany where over 70 percent over-estimate, while only about 15 percent

16

mischaracterize. In fact, Germans are more likely to offer an above average over-estimate (larger than 27.2 percent) than to mischaracterize the typical immigrant's legal status. A similar pattern is observed in France. However, in both Italy and Spain, legal status mischaracterizations are more common than over-estimation. In the former, nearly 65 percent over-estimate the immigrant population size, but more than 73 percent mischaracterize the typical immigrant's legal status. Thus, it appears that the pervasiveness and character of misperceptions vary across contexts.

Figure 3. Percentages Over-Estimating, Over-Estimating above the Country Mean Estimate, and Perceiving the Typical Immigrant to be Present Illegally or Equally Legal and Illegal
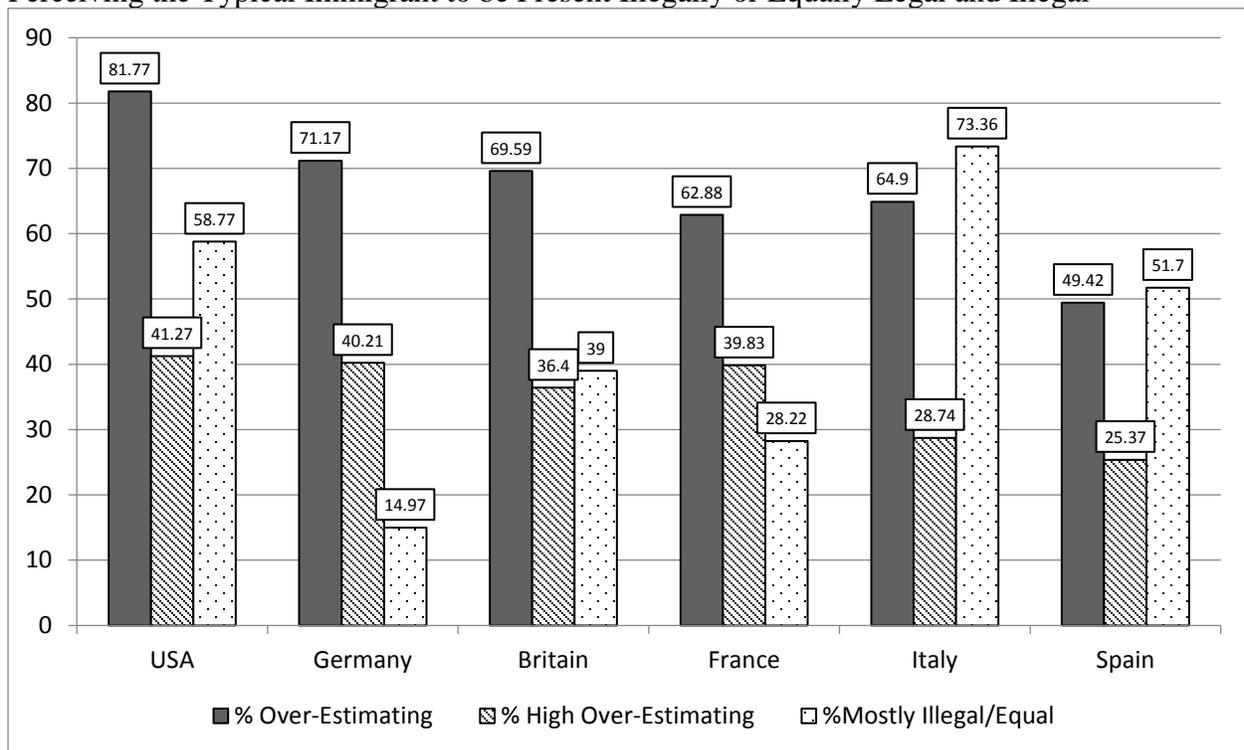
Ignorance and the Desire to Restrict the Flow of Migrants

Table 3 displays the associations between both misperceptions of interest and restrictionist attitudes using least squares regression. Beginning with the U.S., those mischaracterizing legal status are predicted to be .337 points higher (p<.001) on the restrictionist attitudes scale, relative

17

to those with accurate perceptions. The effect corresponds to nearly one-third of a standard deviation on the dependent variable scale (see Table 2), making it a sizable association. This significance holds net of population size perceptions, the controls listed in Table 2 (coefficients not displayed in the table; see Appendix A for full results) and region fixed effects. The legal status misperception point estimates are even larger in Great Britain (b = .451; p<.001) and France (b = .372; p<.001). Note however that each of the 95 percent confidence intervals for these slopes overlap indicating statistical equivalence across contexts. The legal status mischaracterizations are also associated with greater restrictionist attitudes in Italy and Germany, with slightly smaller magnitudes (p<.05). Spain is the only country without a statistically significant legal status misperception association (p = .331).

While recent scholarship has focused heavily on size misperceptions and consistently links them to support for anti-immigrant policy views, their effects on the current dependent variable are mixed. For one, the size perception coefficient reaches significance in the direction expected only in Italy.[6] A single percentage point increase in immigrant population size estimates is associated with a .006 unit increase in restrictionist attitudes. Stated another way, a 10 percentage point increase in size estimates corresponds to about 7 percent of a standard deviation on the dependent variable scale. This association is marginally significant (p<.10). The same effect fails to reach significance in the Britain, Germany, Spain, France, and the U.S. Further, in two latter nations, the point estimates are actually negative in direction.

Table 3: Multiple Regressions Models Predicting Restrictionist Attitudes across TATIS Countries

|	USA		Britain		France		Germany		Spain		Italy	
	B	**se**	**B**	**se**	**B**	**se**	**B**	**se**	**B**	**se**	**B**	**se**
Perceived Size	-0.004	0.003	.003	.002	-.002	.003	.002	.002	.003	.004	**.006+**	**.003**
Perceived Legal Status												
Mostly Illegal	**.337****	**0.116**	**.451*****	**.105**	**.372*****	**.097**	**.236***	**.119**	.101	.104	**.296***	**.116**
Don't Know	-0.022	0.165	.090	.169	.358*	.169	-.237	.258	-.093	.300	-.197	.209
Mostly Legal	*Reference*		*Reference*		*Reference*		*Reference*		*Reference*		*Reference*	
Constant	**1.487*****	**0.454**	**1.446*****	**.309**	**1.877*****	**.242**	**1.552*****	**.253**	**1.404*****	**.310**	**1.666*****	**.286**
F-statistic	**4.49*****		**8.46*****		**4.28*****		**5.81*****		**2.89*****		**3.19*****	
R-squared	.266		.320		.311		.287		.291		.236	
Observations	406		398		421		407		363		368	

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, +p<.10; Each model controls for sex, age, education status, political conservatism, locality, immigrant family members, immigrant friendships, and region fixed effects.

19

Comparing Ignorance

The ultimate question in the current analysis is whether all misperceptions are equal in terms of their consequences for restrictionist attitudes. In Table 3, the magnitudes of the legal status misperceptions are generally larger and more often statistically significant, but how much larger? The different scaling of the two perception variables (dichotomous vs. continuous) means that the coefficients are not directly comparable. One way to draw a comparison is to calculate how large a respondent's size estimate must be to equal the effect of believing the typical immigrant is undocumented. These hypothetical estimates are calculated using the regression equations from Table 3, and are demonstrated in the darkest circles in the comparative bubble chart in Figure 4. The chart also includes the actual immigrant population sizes and the sample mean estimated sizes for reference (see Figure 2). Only Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and Spain are included because their size estimate coefficients are in the direction expected (in the U.S. and France the coefficients are negative in direction).

In Britain the average respondent would need to perceive the immigrant population to be over 150 percent of the country to match the level of restrictionist attitudes of someone perceiving the typical immigrant as undocumented. Of course, this hypothetical estimate is mathematically impossible in reality. However, it demonstrates a greater importance of legal status mischaracterizations in terms of consequences for restrictionist attitudes. The required size estimate of 150.3 is nearly 12.5 times the actual population size (12.1 percent) and more than 3 times the mean estimated size (31.8 percent). The pattern in the German sample is similar, but with reduced magnitude. A German respondent would need to estimate immigrants to be 118 percent of the country to match the effect of perceiving the typical immigrant as present illegally.

20

Figure 4: Effect Size Comparisons (Population Innumeracy vs. and Legal Status Mischaracterizations) From Models Predicting Restrictionist Attitudes (Table 3)
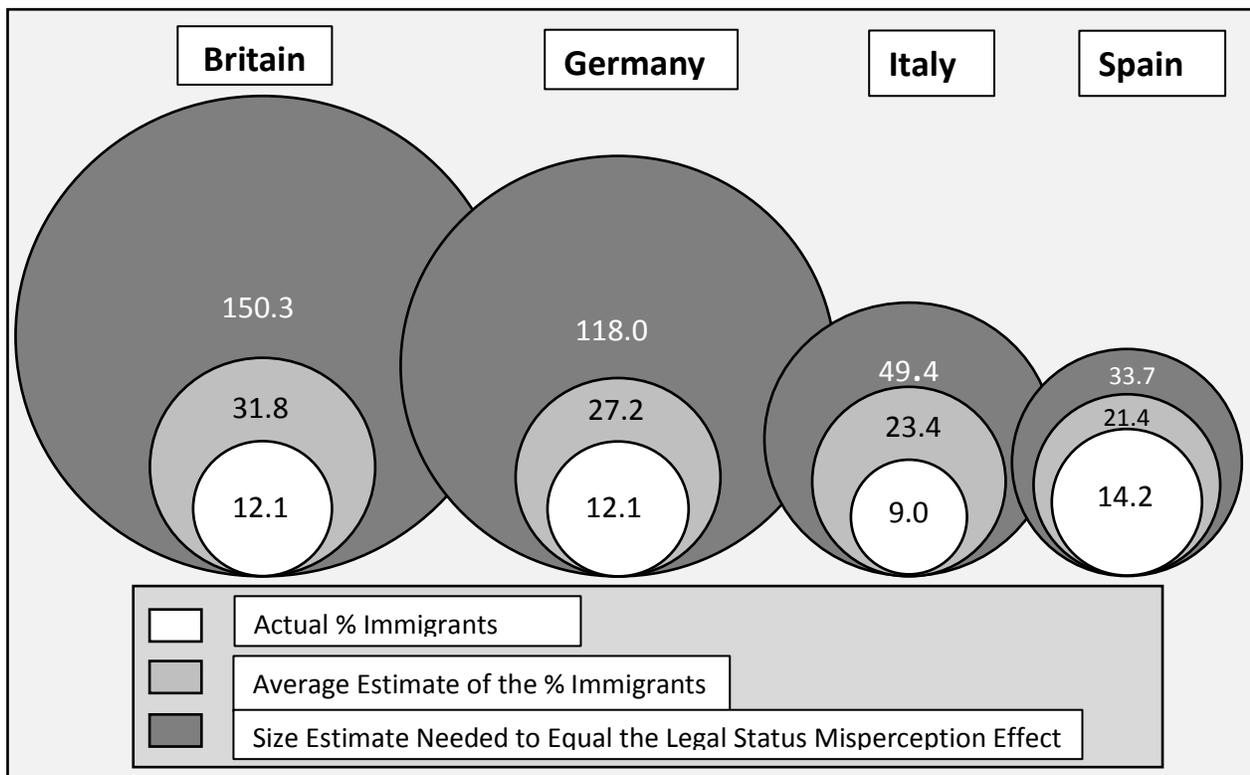
The comparison is not as drastic in Italy, where size misperceptions and legal status mischaracterizations are both significantly associated with restrictionist attitudes. However, one would need to perceive immigrants to be almost one half of the Italian population to match the effect of believing that the typical immigrant is undocumented. This hypothetical estimate is nearly 5.5 times the actual size and more than twice the mean estimated size. The pattern in Spain, is similar with a size estimate of 33.7 – more than 2.3 times the actual size – needed to match the magnitude of the legal status mischaracterization effect. Overall these predicted values suggest that legal status misperceptions are more consequential for restrictionist attitudes than size misperceptions.

21

Discussion

Recent headlines point to the dawn of the "post-truth" era in the U.S. and Western Europe (Matthew 2016; Economist 2016). In fact, "post-truth" was named the 2016 Word of the Year by the Oxford Dictionary, who define it as circumstances under which "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford 2016). Researchers interested in perceptions about immigrant populations have been documenting such "alternative facts" in people's heads for decades. The tendency for individuals to base their views on the immigration they imagine, rather than what actually exists is troubling and raises many questions about the consequences of factual ignorance. The current analysis considered the extent of two types of faulty information about immigrants across six Western nations and whether both forms were equal in terms of their consequences for restrictionist attitudes. The main findings and implications for future research are as follows:

Ignorance is Pervasive, but Variable across Nations

Quantitative ignorance exists in nearly every place that researchers have looked and the current study finds similarly. Over-estimation is the norm in all of the countries considered. However, ignorance regarding immigrants extends beyond questions about population size. Qualitative misperceptions regarding the legal status of the typical immigrant exist at non-trivial levels in each context. However, there is considerable variation, ranging from over 80 percent correct in Germany to only 21 percent correct in Italy. Further, there is also variation across contexts in terms of which misperception is more pervasive. Size misperceptions are more dominant in the U.S., Germany, France, and Britain, while legal status misperceptions are more common in Spain and Italy.

Some of this variation may be a result of actual population sizes. The U.S. and Italy, which exhibited the largest proportions of individuals mischaracterizing the typical legal status, also have the largest portions of unauthorized immigrants relative to their total immigrant populations. Conversely, a large majority of Germans accurately characterize the typical immigrant as having documentation. While Germany has a large immigrant population, its relative proportion of undocumented migrants is the smallest in the current sample. This suggests that misperceptions may have some grounding in reality, despite being exaggerated. However, with only six sampled nations, one can only speculate in this regard.

Another possibility that could drive misperceptions is a country's status a point of entry for migrants and proximity to source countries. The U.S.-Mexico border acting as the point of entry for a large portion of undocumented migrants has made the issue widely publicized and particularly contentious, which may contribute to widespread overgeneralization. Italy and Spain, the countries with the highest and third-highest levels of legal status mischaracterization in the sample, similarly have become focal points in Europe for undocumented immigration given their proximity to Africa. As a result, it is likely that unauthorized migration receives greater media attention in these countries, which can contribute to the cognitive availability of the typical citizen. Unfortunately, measures of media exposure are not available in the TATIS, precluding further exploration of this possibility.

Regardless, legal status misperceptions are an important component of the imagined immigration for researchers to continue examining because it is both verifiable and prone to misunderstanding. However, there are potentially many others that should be considered as well. Whether the typical immigrant depends on government assistance, is employed, possesses host country language abilities, or is involved in crime or terrorism, are also verifiable and could be

23

valuable points of ignorance for researchers to understand. Particularly in studies that analyze size perceptions, it is necessary to consider the totality of ignorance by also including measures of qualitative mischaracterizations. This is true especially because the latter seem to be more strongly associated with consequences for restrictionist attitudes than the former.

Legal Status Mischaracterizations are Associated with more Restrictionist Views

The current study considered how desires for a more restrictionist migration policy might be influenced by misperceptions. Such an outcome is timely as many nations have recently struggled to incorporate an influx of migrants. Particularly in the wake of the European Migration Crisis, it is essential to understand why individuals might support or oppose restrictionist policies.

Legal status mischaracterizations seem to be consequential as they are associated with support for greater restrictions in five of the six countries considered. Undocumented immigrants represent a population about which people hold particularly negative attitudes (Lyons, Coursey, and Kenworthy 2013; Berg 2009; Hood and Morris 1998; Goo 2015). Thus, if individuals imagine this maligned category when they think of immigrants it is logical that they will desire more exclusionary policies, as the current results suggest.

This pattern raises further questions about what other consequences might arise from such distorted worldviews. For one, determining the degree to which an incorrectly imagined immigration contributes to the rise of anti-immigrant politicians like Donald Trump in the U.S., or the success of "Brexit" in the U.K., could be a useful task for future research. When claims-makers repeat accusations of immigrants harming society or not respecting host country laws and culture it will likely find eager adopters among those who already believe in a reality where the typical immigrant is present "illegally" or possesses other undesirable characteristics.

It is important to note however, that the cross-sectional design of the TATIS data represents a weakness of the current study. This author assumes that perceptions of legal status and population size exist prior to restrictionist views, but this cannot be confirmed here. Determining the correct sequence between misperceptions and policy perceptions remains an important task for future research. Regardless, the associations found in the current study provide a justification for the continued consideration of qualitative mischaracterizations alongside quantitative misperceptions.

Not All Misperceptions are Created Equal

Interestingly the current study finds that population size misperceptions did not exhibit a strong or consistent effect on restrictionist attitudes. In fact, they reached significance in only one of this six countries considered. This counters much of the existing literature, which consistently finds that size misperceptions predict support for anti-immigrant policy positions (Sides and Citrin 2007; Herda 2013; Semyonov et al. 2004). Rather, the current study suggests that qualitative misperceptions are more consequential for such positions.

Only Italy yielded a significant size perceptions association, but this was small relative to the corresponding legal status mischaracterization effect. An Italian would need to perceive the immigrant population to be nearly five times larger than the actual size to match the impact of mischaracterizing the typical immigrants' legal status. The remaining countries all demonstrate non-significant, near zero effects for size misperceptions.

This pattern may differ from the existing literature because it is common for other analyses to combine data from multiple countries, producing larger sample sizes. For example, the widely-used 2002 European Social Survey contains 22 nations, each with over 1000 observations. The resulting regression models contain roughly 10 times more observations than

25

the combined total across the current models, yielding greater estimation power and more significant coefficients. For this reason, the effects of size misperceptions may be overstated in the existing literature.

Research on population size misperceptions often understands their consequences through group threat theory (Blalock 1967; Quillian 1995; 1996). It is logical to assume that if larger out-groups are more threatening, those who *perceive* out-groups to be larger will express more feelings of threat. However, the current findings suggest that the misperceptions-threat connection may be more complicated. How individuals perceive population size does not seem to be as important as how they imagine certain, qualitative characteristics of the population. In other words a large population may not be as threatening as a "mostly illegal" one. This opens the possibility that a small out-group population can be a source of threat if it is viewed as having undesirable traits. Perhaps a large out-group may be viewed as unthreatening if it is associated with desirable traits. It would be useful for future research to examine the link between ignorance and threat perceptions with these possibilities in mind.

It is clear that in order to understand immigrant-related ignorance and its consequences, researchers must now consider multiple bases of ignorance simultaneously. It seems that in certain contexts, some forms of ignorance are consequential, while they may have little or no effect elsewhere (i.e. legal status misperceptions in Britain vs. Spain). This may depend on the particular climate surrounding immigrants in a given country and the issues that are most salient and contentious (i.e. typical legal status in the U.S. or perhaps the religion of the typical immigrant in Germany or France). A useful task for future researchers would be to explore country-specific areas of ignorance to determine which types are most consequential and where.

26

Conclusion

Ordinary citizens express ignorance when it comes to immigrant and minority populations. They are unsure of how many there are, why they are present, where they are coming from, and their legal status, among many other possible things. This study confirms that legal status misperceptions exist in multiple countries and appear to be consequential for restrictionist attitudes in many. It also highlights that immigrant population size misperceptions may not be the most important form of ignorance, contrary to the focus of recent literature. Ideally the current findings will generate an increased focus on respondents' totality of ignorance and how it can motivate individuals to support anti-immigrant policies. Unfortunately, there are potential dangers if the immigration that citizens imagine can motivate actions and policy preferences. Perhaps through a more comprehensive consideration this ignorance, we will determine ways to generate a more well-informed and tolerant public.

Endnotes

1. While this adjective is controversial, the current study uses it occasionally to reflect the question wording from the TATIS survey.

2. By definition, undocumented populations are clandestine and difficult to count accurately. These data are presented as rough estimates with the goal of establishing broadly that if one imagines the typical immigrant as undocumented, they are misperceiving the reality.

3. Half of the TATIS sample were asked about their perceptions in their country as a whole and half about their local community. Respondents were randomly assigned to each group as part of an experiment conducted by the survey administrators. As a check, the current author considered the degree to which respondents in both groups differed on all other variables to ensure that

27

dropping the latter group did not introduce selection into the data. The results indicated no significant differences between the two groups in terms of the demographic, cognitive, or the policy position variables.

4. Alternative models in which the category "equal" is included separately (not shown) largely mirror those presented. The "equal" coefficient reaches significance only in France (p<.05), but the magnitude is nearly identical to the "mostly illegal" coefficient.

5. In the full sample, 81.46 percent of cases contain no missing observations. Among individuals with missing responses, over 80 percent are missing on only a single variable. The largest percentage missing is on the political conservatism variable (10.09 percent) followed by education (4.43 percent). All regression models were also estimated using list-wise deletion (not shown). The magnitudes and significance patterns are similar to those presented.

6. These models present the size perception effects controlling for legal status mischaracterizations. Additional models were estimated that omit the latter (not shown), which yield magnitudes and significance patterns that mirror those presented. The unique exception is in Britain where the size misperception association is statistically significant (b = .007; p = .001) without controlling for legal status misperceptions. Models that omit size perceptions all yield legal status perception effects that mirror the results presented.

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28

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29

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31

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Appendix A: Full Multiple Regressions Models Predicting Restrictionist Attitudes across Six Countries

	USA		Great Britain		France		Germany		Spain		Italy	
	B	se	B	se	B	se	B	se	B	se	B	se
Perceived Size	-0.004	0.003	.003	.002	-.002	.003	.002	.002	.003	.004	**.006+**	**.003**
Perceived Legal Status												
Mostly Illegal	**.337****	**0.116**	**.451*****	**.105**	**.372*****	**.097**	**.236***	**.119**	.101	.104	**.296***	**.116**
Don't Know	-0.022	0.165	.090	.169	.358*	.169	-.237	.258	-.093	.300	-.197	.209
Female	-0.051	0.117	**-.339*****	**.090**	.004	.077	**-.203****	**.071**	-.061	.092	-.120	.098
Age	**.012*****	**0.003**	**.009*****	**.003**	.001	.002	**.004+**	**.002**	.004	.004	.002	.003
Education												
Secondary School	0.119	0.222	-.116	.145	**.189+**	**.104**	-.151	.104	.023	.123	.029	.112
College	0.19	0.223	-.067	.135	-.023	.103	-.040	.167	-.189	.117	**-.260+**	**.143**
Post Graduate	-0.067	0.227	**-.433***	**.195**	.146	.130	-.125	.094	.343	.233	-.421	.306
Conservatism	**.077+**	**0.045**	**.150*****	**.033**	**.127*****	**.031**	**.124*****	**.036**	**.106****	**.034**	**.108****	**.035**
Locality												
Suburb	-0.07	0.162	**.311***	**.135**	-.021	.134	.094	.113	-.039	.196	.062	.167
Town	-0.176	0.176	.143	.123	-.185	.117	**.191+**	**.106**	.056	.141	.036	.116
Country Village	0.171	0.26	**.245+**	**.139**	-.037	.122	**.211+**	**.125**	.060	.129	.038	.188
Rural Area	-0.089	0.245	**-.344+**	**.197**	**.295+**	**.167**	**.316+**	**.184**	-.448	.296	-.377	.338
Cognitive Availability												
Immigrant Family												
One foreign born parent	0.012	0.214	.082	.153	-.082	.123	.022	.193	-.192	.340	.304	.220
Two foreign born parents	0.201	0.27	.082	.173	.072	.137	**.515***	**.210**	-----	-----	-----	-----
Immigrant Friends												
Yes, a Few	**-0.421****	**.144**	-.097	.094	**-.175+**	**.096**	.069	.084	-.084	.118	**-.235***	**.098**
Yes, Many	**-.502****	**.187**	**-.368***	**.145**	**-.344***	**.141**	**-.241+**	**.135**	-.084	.176	**-.273+**	**.155**
Constant	**1.487*****	**0.454**	**1.446*****	**.309**	**1.877*****	**.242**	**1.552*****	**.253**	**1.404*****	**.310**	**1.666*****	**.286**
F-statistic	**4.49*****		**8.46*****		**4.28*****		**5.81*****		**2.89*****		**3.19*****	
R-squared	.266		.320		.311		.287		.291		.236	
Observations	406		398		421		407		363		368	

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, +p<.10; Note that in Spain and Italy, the Immigrant Family categories were combined because of sparse cells. All models include a set of county-specific region fixed effects (not shown).

34

35