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A comment on Alesina, Miano and Stancheva (2023)*

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Abstract

Alesina et al. (2023) examine how people perceive the number and characteristics of migrants and how those perceptions affect their support for redistribution. They find that respondents from the United States, United Kingdom, Sweden, Italy, Germany and France markedly overestimate the share of immigrants in each country, with the average respondent in all countries except Sweden overestimating by more than a factor of two. We reproduce these results using the original code and data and test the robustness by (i) including participants excluded for time to complete the survey, (ii) extending the analysis of misperceptions to all survey respondents, and (iii) using alternative authoritative estimates of the proportion of immigrants. We find that these checks marginally change the estimates of the size of the misperception but do not change the conclusions to be drawn from the analysis. Alesina et al. (2023) also test the effect on support for redistribution of showing videos on immigrant characteristics. We computationally reproduced the treatment effects on support for redistribution.

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1 Introduction

Alesina et al. (2023) (henceforth AMS) used a combined survey and experimental approach to examine how people in the United States, United Kingdom, Sweden, Italy, Germany and France perceive the number and characteristics of migrants, and how those perceptions affect their support for redistribution. The authors obtained a sample of 22,006 non-immigrants aged between 18 to 69 years old across the six countries. The survey included an "immigration block" and "redistribution block" of questions. The immigration block sought respondents' perceptions about the number and characteristics of immigrants and non-immigrants in their countries. The redistribution block sought respondents' attitudes to redistribution, such as taxation of different parts of the income distribution and charitable contributions.

The authors found that respondents from all surveyed countries markedly overestimate the share of immigrants in each country, with the average respondent in each country except Sweden overestimating by more than a factor of two. They also found that respondents "primed" by the immigration block before completing the redistribution block support less redistribution, including lower charitable contributions.

In this paper, we investigate whether their analytical results are computationally reproducible and test their robustness with three checks: (i) retaining respondents excluded by AMS for the time taken to complete the survey, (ii) including participants from treatments groups in the analysis and (iii) using alternative authoritative estimates of the true proportion of immigrants.

We obtained the data and code for the paper from the Replication package provided by the authors at Zenodo (Alesina et al., 2022). The replication package included the cleaned data from the main survey wave, national and local statistics on immigrants and non-immigrants, and scripts for producing figures and tables. The package was designed to enable the reproduction of the tables and figures in the main text of the paper. Code was not provided to reproduce outputs contained in the Appendix. We successfully reproduced the data underlying Figure 2 and Tables 4, 5 and 6 using AMS's code. The outputs were identical.

In the original analysis, in Section 3 AMS excluded participants who were in the fastest and slowest 2% of respondents to complete the survey from each country. We reran the analysis using the original code except for removing flagged respondents. We found that retaining these respondents marginally increased the size of the misperception.

In their original analysis, AMS also constrained their analysis in section 3 to the 5,562

respondents in the control group. In our re-analysis, we included all 20,006 survey respondents. The results were robust to using the full sample, with the size of the misperception for the full sample generally within a percentage point of that for the control group reported in section 3 of the paper.

Finally, AMS relied on specific data sources to provide the "actual" statistics against which the level of misperception could be calculated. We considered some alternative data sources and found that the level of misperception remained at a similar magnitude regardless of the data source.

2 Reproducibility

We ran the original code and reproduce the data underlying Figure 2 and Tables 4, 5 and 6. We find that the point estimates are identical. The original text contains a typographical error relating to the sample size. Section 2.1 describes the sample as comprising 4,500 from the US, 4,001 from the UK, 4,001 from Germany, 4,000 from France, 4,000 from Italy and 2,004 from Sweden, for a total of 22,506 respondents. The data file in the replication package contains only 22,006 respondents, with 4,000 respondents from the US.

3 Replication

In this section, we reproduce Figure 2 and show that its conclusion is robust to alternative specification.

3.1 Figure 2 Left Panel

Table 1 reproduces the left panel of Figure 2 (p12). The figure in the paper reports the actual share of immigrant (blue dot) and the perceived share of immigrant (red dot). They do not report a statistical test or standard error as the effect is large and is evident without a statistical test. In Table 1 we report the misperception of the share of immigrants, which is the difference between the perceived and the actual share of immigrants. This is what is reported in the right panel of Figure 2. We also report the standard error of this estimate and the p-value from a t-test testing whether this misperception is equal to 0.

The first column reproduces the results reported in the paper. We reproduce the exact same estimate. The p-value is always very close to 0.

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
US	Estimate	26.082	26.617	24.821	20.782	22.582
	Std Error	(0.728)	(0.727)	(0.375)	(0.728)	(0.728)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	960	1,000	3,837	960	960
UK	Estimate	17.987	18.171	16.186	17.987	17.487
	Std Error	(0.637)	(0.631)	(0.343)	(0.637)	(0.637)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	973	1,012	3,842	973	973
DE	Estimate	15.459	15.819	14.062	15.459	16.059
	Std Error	(0.678)	(0.665)	(0.348)	(0.678)	(0.678)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	973	1,013	3,840	973	973
FR	Estimate	16.609	16.961	18.230	16.609	16.509
	Std Error	(0.614)	(0.610)	(0.348)	(0.614)	(0.614)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	980	1,020	3,839	980	980
IT	Estimate	16.406	16.936	16.605	16.406	16.506
	Std Error	(0.654)	(0.655)	(0.342)	(0.654)	(0.654)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	971	1,011	3,836	971	971
SE	Estimate	9.402	10.045	9.217	9.402	9.902
	Std Error	(0.814)	(0.830)	(0.432)	(0.814)	(0.814)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	481	501	1,921	481	481

Table 1: Misperception of the share of immigrants reported in Figure 2 left panel as in the paper (first column), including the respondents in the top 2% and bottom 2% of survey time (second column), including respondents from both the control and treatment groups (third column), using alternative definitions for the actual share of immigrants in the country (fourth and fifth columns).

In the second column, we include the respondents in the top 2% and bottom 2% of survey time. Those were excluded in the original results as those respondents have been flagged as not paying enough attention to the survey.

In the third column, we include respondents from both the control and treatment groups. In the original results, Figure 2 includes respondents from the control group only (which makes sense given the design of the survey/experiment).

In the fourth and fifth columns, we use alternative definitions for the actual share of immigrants in the country (see Section 3.3). The other specification choices are the same as in the original paper (i.e., excluding respondents flagged for not paying attention and only including the control group). The results are similar to the results reported in the paper. The effect for the US drops a bit, but it stays above 20%.

To sum up, we are able to reproduce the exact results from Figure 2 and by exclud-

ing/including different observations in the estimation or using alternative definitions of the actual share of immigrants in each country, we get very similar results.

3.2 Figure 2 Right Panel

Table 2 does the same thing for the right panel of Figure 2.

Similarly, to the left panel, we are able to reproduce the exact same results as in Figure 2 (first column). By changing the specification we get similar results (columns 2 to 5).

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
No College	Estimate	19.228	19.581	18.327	18.454	18.804
	Std Error	(0.370)	(0.367)	(0.194)	(0.366)	(0.366)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	3,184	3,306	12,581	3,184	3,184
College	Estimate	15.337	15.859	15.487	14.121	14.561
	Std Error	(0.447)	(0.447)	(0.239)	(0.438)	(0.440)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	2,152	2,249	8,531	2,152	2,152
Low Income	Estimate	17.818	18.146	17.289	16.907	17.283
	Std Error	(0.310)	(0.308)	(0.164)	(0.306)	(0.307)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	4,466	4,642	17,739	4,466	4,466
High Income	Estimate	16.902	17.762	16.623	15.729	16.172
	Std Error	(0.736)	(0.741)	(0.392)	(0.722)	(0.725)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	872	915	3,376	872	872
No Imm. Parent	Estimate	17.050	17.460	16.764	16.094	16.482
	Std Error	(0.297)	(0.295)	(0.157)	(0.293)	(0.293)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	4,832	5,028	19,165	4,832	4,832
Imm. Parent	Estimate	23.458	23.898	21.241	22.535	22.913
	Std Error	(0.993)	(0.987)	(0.524)	(0.985)	(0.985)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	505	528	1,941	505	505
Age 46-69	Estimate	15.316	15.378	15.440	14.391	14.776
	Std Error	(0.413)	(0.409)	(0.219)	(0.408)	(0.409)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	2,516	2,574	10,044	2,516	2,516
Age 18-45	Estimate	19.765	20.417	18.763	18.787	19.175
	Std Error	(0.393)	(0.391)	(0.208)	(0.386)	(0.387)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	2,822	2,983	11,071	2,822	2,822
Female	Estimate	19.729	19.937	18.954	18.756	19.150
	Std Error	(0.386)	(0.382)	(0.206)	(0.382)	(0.383)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	2,725	2,822	10,808	2,725	2,725
Male	Estimate	15.519	16.170	15.324	14.586	14.966
	Std Error	(0.420)	(0.420)	(0.220)	(0.412)	(0.414)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	2,613	2,735	10,307	2,613	2,613
Right-Wing	Estimate	18.451	18.861	18.104	17.198	17.679
	Std Error	(0.444)	(0.441)	(0.238)	(0.437)	(0.438)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	2,145	2,238	8,413	2,145	2,145
Left-Wing	Estimate	18.013	18.384	17.294	17.043	17.437
	Std Error	(0.434)	(0.431)	(0.227)	(0.428)	(0.429)
	p value	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
	N	2,449	2,548	9,770	2,449	2,449

Table 2: Misperception of the share of immigrants reported in Figure 2 right panel as in the paper (first column), including the respondents in the top 2% and bottom 2% of survey time (second column), including respondents from both the control and treatment groups (third column), using alternative definitions for the actual share of immigrants in the country (fourth

3.3 Actual Statistics about Immigrants and non immigrants

AMS relied on national-level immigration statistics from PEW Research Center (2017) for the US and on national-level immigration statistics from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017) (United Nations and Affairs, 2017) for European countries to compare the elicited perceptions with actual data. Source files were provided in Excel as part of the replication package.

As part of our replication, we first checked all computations performed in the provided national-level Excel source files. This included for the US the distinction between documented and undocumented immigrants. We found no errors in these computations. We also performed selected checks of the local-level immigration statistics for European countries. We note, however, that for the US no Excel source file was provided that calculated immigration statistics at the local level. Thus we were not able to verify the computations underlying these data.

While we found that the underlying calculations of immigration statistics were correct based on the data provided, we wanted to check whether the conclusions drawn from Figure 2 hold up for different data sources. The rationale for this test was that we noticed that the US data reported is for 2015, while the European data is for 2017, with perceptions elicited in 2018.

We performed two robustness checks related to the source of the data, reported in Columns 4 and 5 of Table 1 and 2. In Column 4, we use the share of foreign-born for the year 2017 from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017) for all countries, including the US. This means that the misperception estimates in Column 4 are identical to the original paper for the European countries, but different for the US. In Column 5, we use the share of foreign-born for 2015 from the OECD International Migration Outlook 2017 (2017), Statistical Annex, for all countries (OECD, 2017). The strength of this exercise is that all actual comparison data come from the same source and are for the same year. It also does not distinguish between documented and undocumented immigrants, which, despite the explicit emphasis in the survey questions on documented immigrants, might be more similar to what survey respondents have in mind when they think about "immigrants".

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