# People not Places: The Limited Role of Local Context in the Globalization Backlash*

Stephen Ansolabehere† and Marco M. Aviña‡

Department of Government, Harvard University

March 11, 2025

**Abstract**

A wealth of research over the last decade has documented the causes and consequences of what it has termed a "globalization backlash." A recuring claim in this literature is that *local* exposure to globalization, as measured for instance with import penetration and foreigner influxes, has led to rising nationalism, populism, isolationism, protectionism, and xenophobia among the mass public. This paper synthesizes these findings and tests their empirical implications. Leveraging 18 years of national surveys covering 650,000 unique respondents and 300 policy items, we estimate first-order associations between a range of contextual indicators of globalization exposure and individual preferences over trade, immigration, international cooperation, and the military. Contrary to prevailing expectations, we observe minimal relationships between contextual variables and public mood on globalization. This challenges a popular narrative and suggests the backlash is due to issue polarization rather than public opinion swings against globalization.

*We thank Christopher Kenny, Krzysztof Pelc, George Yean, and Christopher Wlezien, as well as participants at the 2024 SPSA annual meeting.

†Frank G. Thomson Professor of Government, Department of Government, Harvard University, sda@gov.harvard.edu.

‡Ph.D. Student, Department of Government, Harvard University. mmendozaavina@fas.harvard.edu.

In recent years, social scientists have studied extensively what they have termed a backlash against globalization and its economic, political, and sociocultural implications (Walter, 2021). The rise of protectionism and challenges to the World Trade Organization's (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) demonstrate a pushback against *economic* globalization (Ahlquist et al., 2020; Milner, 2021; Colantone and Stanig, 2019). Growing resistance by both the mass public and political elites to the constraints placed by international institutions on national sovereignty could stem from a broader dissatisfaction toward *political* globalization (Zürn et al., 2012; Hutter et al., 2016; Vries et al., 2021).[1] Rising opposition to immigration and multiculturalism as well as the resurgence of nationalist populist movements are expressions of disenchantment toward *sociocultural* globalization (Rodrik, 2021; Mutz, 2018; Grossman and Helpman, 2021; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

While a number of studies link the anti-globalization backlash to the resurgence of nationalism, populism, isolationism, protectionism, and xenophobia over the last decades, there is considerable disagreement when it comes to the underlying causes of this backlash (Walter, 2021). A wide variety of explanations have been proposed, including Chinese import penetration (Autor et al., 2013; Autor et al., 2016; Autor et al., 2020), automation (Wu, 2022; Wu, 2023; Milner, 2021; Anelli et al., 2019; Caselli et al., 2021; Frey et al., 2018), the digital revolution (Mansfield and Rudra, 2021), the decline of trade unions and the manufacturing sector (Gabbitas, 2017; Broz et al., 2021; Rodrik, 2021), mounting inequality and economic insecurity (Van Reenen, 2011; Burgoon, 2013; Pástor and Veronesi, 2021; Flaherty and Rogowski, 2021), austerity policies (Fetzer, 2019; Frieden, 2018; Frieden, 2019), social status threat (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Kurer, 2020; Mutz, 2018; Abdelal, 2020), immigration and demographic change (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Mayda et al., 2022; Becker et al., 2017; Dustmann et al., 2019), and the infringement of national sovereignty by international institutions (Mearsheimer, 2019; Hooghe and Marks, 2009; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

[1]For instance, as Walter (2021, p. 422) notes, "international organizations as diverse as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the International Criminal Court, and the European Union have lost important member states, and initiatives for new international agreements have been hard to conclude."

A common trend throughout these studies is the assumption that *communities* most directly impacted by globalization are those driving the backlash. Autor et al. (2013)'s "China shock" paper is perhaps the most influential study to make this argument.[2] Autor et al. (2013, pp. 3165–6) find that "localized economic shocks stemming from rising trade pressure in the 2000s" led to right-ward shifts in political preferences, media consumption, and electoral outcomes, that is, places most exposed to globalization became, on the aggregate, more conservative and more likely to support the Republican Party. In subsequent work, Autor et al. (2020) link import penetration to Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 Presidential election, suggesting exposure to globalization exposure might have been the deciding factor of this election. The "China shock" framework has since been used by several researchers to document the effects of trade on political outcomes ranging from xenophobia (Ferrara, 2023; Bisbee et al., 2020; Strain and Veuger, 2022) to support for populist, nationalist, and protectionist movements (Steiner and Harms, 2023; Bisbee et al., 2020; Colantone and Stanig, 2018b; Dippel et al., 2015; Broz et al., 2021). For instance, Ballard-Rosa et al. (2022) and Ballard-Rosa et al. (2021) observe import exposure increases authoritarian values and support for Trump in 2016. Beyond trade exposure as an explanatory factor, researchers have focused on how local increases in the foreign population and exposure to demographic change may lead voters to contest globalization (Enos, 2014; Rocha and Espino, 2009; Mayda et al., 2022; Colantone and Stanig, 2018a; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017).

In this paper, we return to the question of whether the localized exposure to globalization provoked a backlash. We test the main empirical implications of previous studies on this question by leveraging 17 years of national surveys covering more than 600,000 unique responses and roughly 300 policy items pertaining to trade, immigration, international cooperation, and military engagement. We pair our survey data with several measures of globalization exposure at various geographic levels, including sociodemographic trends from the Census and American Community Survey, as well as indicators of trade penetration

[2]As Rodrik (2021, p. 141) notes, their paper "has spawned a small cottage industry of papers using a similar approach to document the political consequences of trade shocks."

and manufacturing decline from previous published studies (Autor et al., 2013; Autor et al., 2019; Kim and Pelc, 2021b; Kim and Pelc, 2021a). We correlate contextual indicators with individual-level preferences over immigration, trade, and international affairs.

Our results offer limited support for common claims based on context, with most of the *first-order* associations we observe between context and public opinion being either null or negligible (Rainey, 2014). For instance, a rising foreigner population at the zipcode level does not predict higher opposition to immigration, falling employment in the manufacturing sector at the county level does not correlate with preferences over trade policy, and local economic decline does not motivate isolationism. We now turn to the empirics of our study.

# Data and Method

## The Cooperative Election Study

Our main data source is the Cooperative Elections Study (CES), which is fielded every election year by YouGov during the weeks leading to and following the November election day, and every non-election year around the same period.[3] We pool all waves between 2006 and 2023 inclusively, which results in 641,955 unique observations. Crucially, the CES records information on respondents' location, that is, the zipcode, county, or congressional district where they reside (Kuriwaki, 2022). We repertory all questions tapping into globalization policy preferences, broadly defined, amounting to around 300 items (Dagonel, 2021).[4]

Following Ansolabehere et al. (2006), Ansolabehere et al. (2008), Aviña and Roman (2024), and Sethy et al. (2025), we categorize survey questions into one of four issue domains: immigration, trade, international cooperation, and the military. Then, for each issue and for each year, we construct a scale by reducing all relevant questions into a single latent variable using principal components factor analysis. Then, using the factor analysis scores,

[3]See `https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/`.

[4]See the Appendix for the full list of survey questions used.

we compute a weighted average of all questions. This means we do not have to determine the weights beforehand, or even how many dimensions underlie the data. Higher scores on these scales characterize increased support for American engagement with the rest of the world (i.e., more liberal immigration policies, more free trade, more international cooperation, and a more active US military).

Admittedly, this measurement approach has its limits. Since the preference items included in the CES are chosen based on the political context surrounding each election cycle, there is limited overlap in the specific questions asked across time. This feature of our data implies our four issue scales vary in terms of the questions they encompass from year to year. That being said, this does not pose any major issue for three reasons. First, while the particular questions asked vary considerably across time, the broader issues remain the same. For instance, the Syrian conflict appears in the 2013 and 2015 surveys, and the war in Ukraine in the 2022 survey only; yet the batteries used to capture respondents' underlying preferences over American foreign policy remain conceptually analogous (i.e., both ask questions tapping into roughly the same aspects of armed conflict, such as diplomatic solutions, financial assistance, arms shipments, and outright US military intervention). Second, the sheer number of items typically included in any given year of the CES means there is enough statistical information for us to measure latent preferences over the broader issues of immigration, trade, international cooperation, and military intervention. Third and lastly, all our analyses are strictly pooled cross-sectional in nature; that is, we zero in on variation *within* waves while partialling out variation *between* waves.

## Contextual Indicators

We merge our survey data with a range of contextual indicators of globalization exposure. We exploit several data sources which we group into three types of explanatory factors: trade exposure, economic decline, and demographic change.

To measure trade exposure variables, we rely on Autor, Dorn, and Hansen's Chinese

import penetration data (Autor et al., 2013; Autor et al., 2019). This measures "the increase in imports from China by combining (a) the contemporaneous change in imports from China in eight other developed countries and (b) the industrial composition of production within commuting zones" (Rodrik, 2021, pp. 145–6) over 1990-2014. For our analyses, we map commuting zones to counties using the crosswalk file provided by Autor and Dorn (Autor and Dorn, 2013). Additionally, we use Kim and Pelc's (Kim and Pelc, 2021a; Kim and Pelc, 2021b) data on *cumulative* Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), Anti-Dumping (AD), and steel AD petitions, as well as the number of workers touched by TAA petitions, at the county level on and since 1990. These indicators are meant to reflect long-lasting pain induced by foreign imports on American communities. Finally, we also consider changes in counties' share of manufacturing jobs on and since 1990 (Kim and Pelc, 2021a; Kim and Pelc, 2021b).

We assess economic decline and demographic change using several zipcode- and county-level indicators from the American Community Survey (ACS). These are population estimates which rely on data collected over the five prior years. Multi-year estimates allow for increased statistical reliability for less populated areas and small population subgroups. The period covered by this data varies across geographic units, with county-level data being available for the period between 2009 and 2023, but zipcode-level data only becoming available starting from 2011. We consider indicators observed on the same year as the survey response, and we compute changes relative to five years prior.

## Testing the Context Hypothesis

We now turn to the empirical analysis. All estimates reported below come from linear models (via OLS) which regress our four issue preferences scales on the aforementioned contextual variables along with survey-year dummies. We scale non-binary independent variables by two standard deviations, which allows us to compare standardized effect sizes across continuous and binary regression coefficients (Gelman, 2008). For interpretability, we

apply the same transformation to our four continuous dependent variables. All standard errors are cluster-robust (RC2) at the level of observation of the contextual variable assessed in the model (zipcode or county).

For all figures that follow, the horizontal axis corresponds to the standardized regression coefficients characterizing the impact of the contextual variables shown on the vertical axis. The gray scale indicates our four different outcomes. The shaded region around the zero dotted line bounds the region of negligible effects based on a Cohen's $d$ of $|0.05|$—a very small standardized effect size. Following Rainey (Rainey, 2014), we characterize an estimated association as substantially negligible (i.e., we reject the null hypothesis of a meaningful relationship with an $\alpha$ of 0.05.) if no value contained within its 90% confidence intervals falls outside the shaded region.

## Trade Exposure

We begin our analysis by assessing perhaps the most dominant mechanism in the globalization backlash literature—that import penetration, particularly from China, hurts communities by undermining their local manufacturing sector (Autor and Dorn, 2013; Autor et al., 2019; Autor and Dorn, 2013; Autor et al., 2016; Autor et al., 2020; Autor et al., 2022). Here, we assume the "China shock" has long-lasting, cumulative effects at the *county* level. Thus, we mainly focus on over-time *changes* in our indicators of trade penetration and manufacturing jobs, and on the total number of TAA and (steel) AD petitions since 1990 (i.e., before the avent of trade liberalization).

In Figure 1, it is clear that most associations are minimal, with almost all associations falling within the negligible effects region around zero. The only exceptions pertain to the share of manufacturing jobs in the respondent's county in 1990, which seem to be driving down support for immigration. This, however, simply suggests that places that has a strong manufacturing economy three decades ago are *slightly* less open to immigration today, which could be due to a number of confounding factors such as rurality and local demographics.

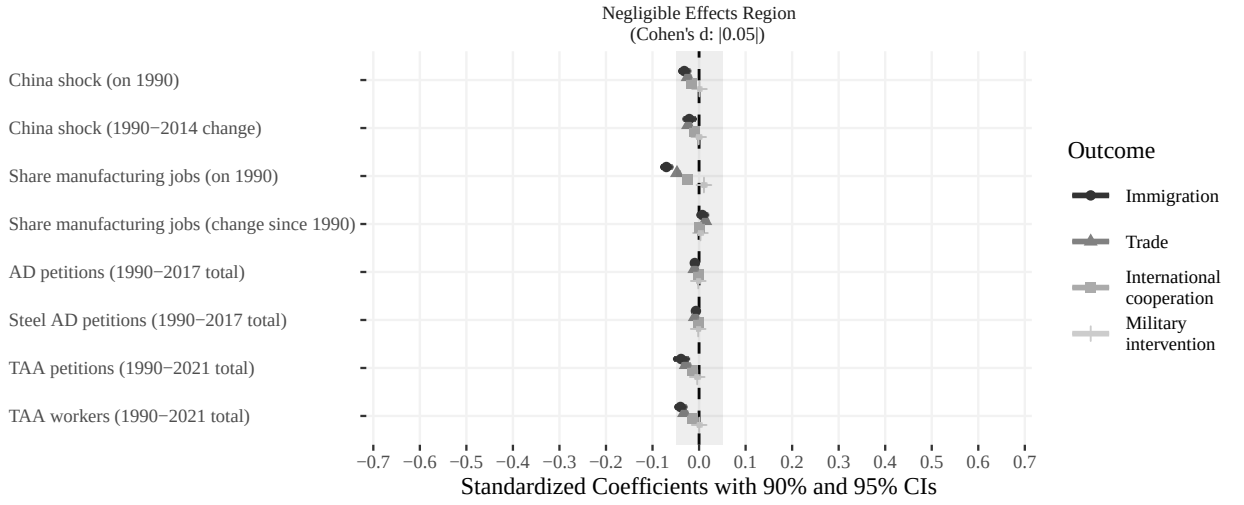


**Figure 1:** Trade exposure (county level)

## Economic Decline

We now move to another popular story: that people having witnessed economic decline around them become less supportive of globalization as a result (Rodrik, 2021; Broz et al., 2021; Ballard-Rosa et al., 2022; Dancygier and Donnelly, 2013).

Figure 2 casts doubt on this narrative. We assess a variety of economic indicators in the respondent's *zipcode*, considering both the levels observed at the time of the survey response as well as the change relative to 5 years prior.[5] Again, most point estimates, and particularly those corresponding to 5-year changes, fall within the shaded area. It seems that residing in a community or neighborhood that has "fallen behind" over the five prior years does little to explain globalization preferences. That being said, the positive coefficients shown for current labor force participation, poverty, and median home values and rent suggest more people in more prosperous places are more open to globalization in general.

[5]We replicate our analyses using county-level economic indicators and report the results in the Appendix. The findings remain substantially the same.

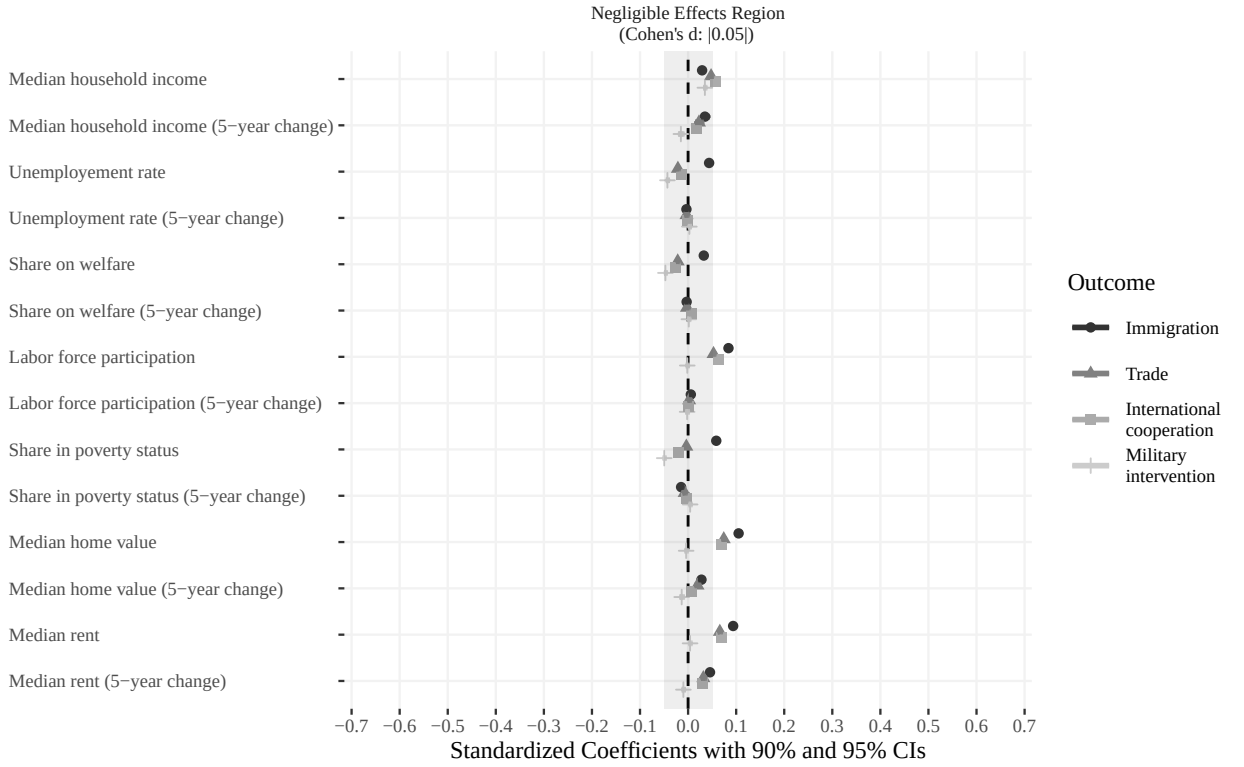


**Figure 2:** Economic decline (zipcode level)

## Demographic Change

Our last foci is on the demographic changes commonly associated with globalization and open borders. A large literature argues diversification and foreigner population growth might boost exclusionary attitudes by activating threat among whites and native citizens (Enos, 2014; Rocha and Espino, 2009; Campbell et al., 2006; Taylor, 1998; Hopkins, 2011; Newman, 2013).

Figure 3 again gives reason for skepticism. Here we consider various *zipcode*-level indicators at the time of the survey response as well as their changes over the last five years.[6] It appears (changes in) the Asian, Hispanic, and foreigner populations, as well (changes in) the share of non-English language speakers, yield either a nil or a *positive* impact on preferences. More diverse areas are more open to immigration and trade, and changes in contexual diversity do

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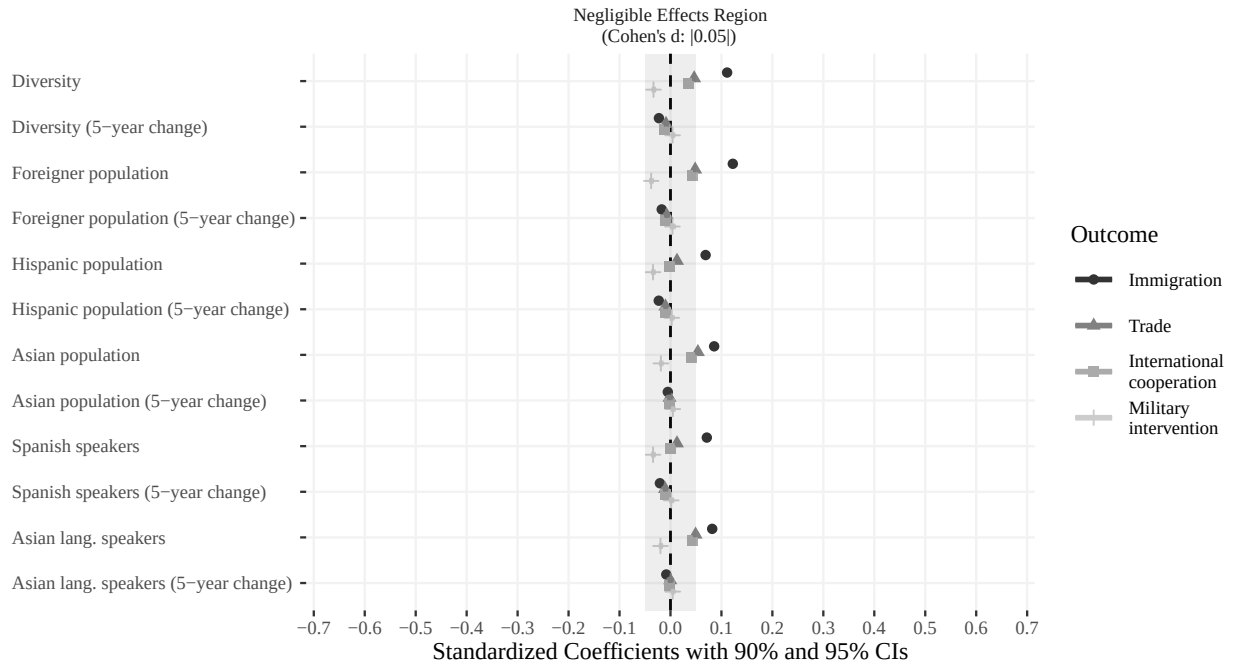


**Figure 3:** Demographic change (zipcode level)

not map onto changes in public attitudes toward globalization.[7]

# If Not Context Then What?

Having shown that context, be it in the form of trade exposure, economic decline, or demographic change, has limited explanatory power on preferences when looking at the electorate as a whole, it is useful to take a step back and ask what, then, might shape public opinion on these issues.

International relations scholars commonly argue public opinion on foreign affairs is rooted in domestic politics (Naoi, 2020; Walter, 2021; Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017). This is because political elites themselves have increasingly politicized these issues—and particularly those pertaining to globalization—leading to polarization in mass preferences (Walter, 2021). Thus, while economic shocks or cultural changes might not suffice to explain a backlash, they may

[7]We measure diversity using an index of group concentration where $p_j$ is the proportion of the total population from group $j$ (Blau, 1977): Diversity $= 1 - \sum_{j=1}^{J} p_j^2$. This is equal to the more widely used Herfindahl-Hirschman index of group concentration, substracted from 1 (Rhoades, 1993).

shape the dynamics at play in national debates and contribute to issue polarization (**336**; Naoi, 2020). In Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7, we explore how several *individual* characteristics shape political preferences.

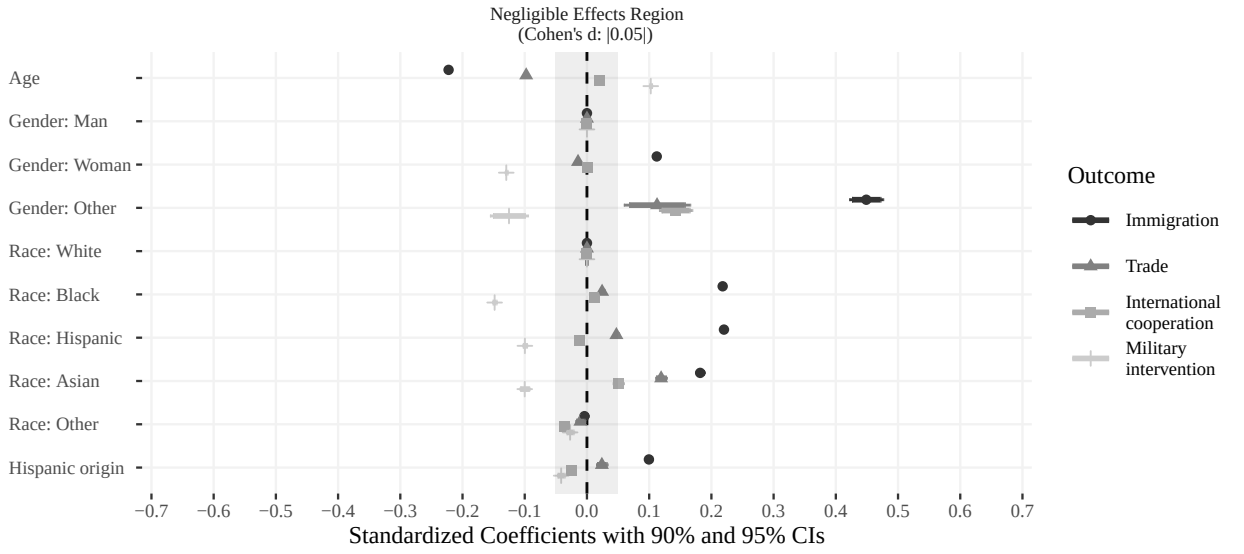


**Figure 4:** Demographic variables

Beginning with demographics (Figure 4), there are a few noteworthy points. Age lowers support for globalization. Women and nonwhites (Hispanics in particular) are more globalist than men and whites. This is consistent with accounts of gender and racial gaps in public opinion on globalization and foreign affairs (Mansfield et al., 2015; Green-Riley and Leber, 2023).

We also consider socioeconomic variables (Figure 5). The main finding here is that employment status, industry sector, and union membership—labor market characteristics considered as important predictors of *individual* vulnerability to globalization shocks (Bisbee et al., 2020; Owen and Johnston, 2017)—do not seem to structure public opinion to a considerable extent. For instance, unemployment does not predict opposition to immigration or trade, and a manufacturing job only moderately lowers support for globalization relative to other industry sectors. Contrary to previous findings (Frymer and Grumbach, 2021; Gabbitas, 2017), union membership seems uncorrelated with policy preferences. Lastly, and perhaps

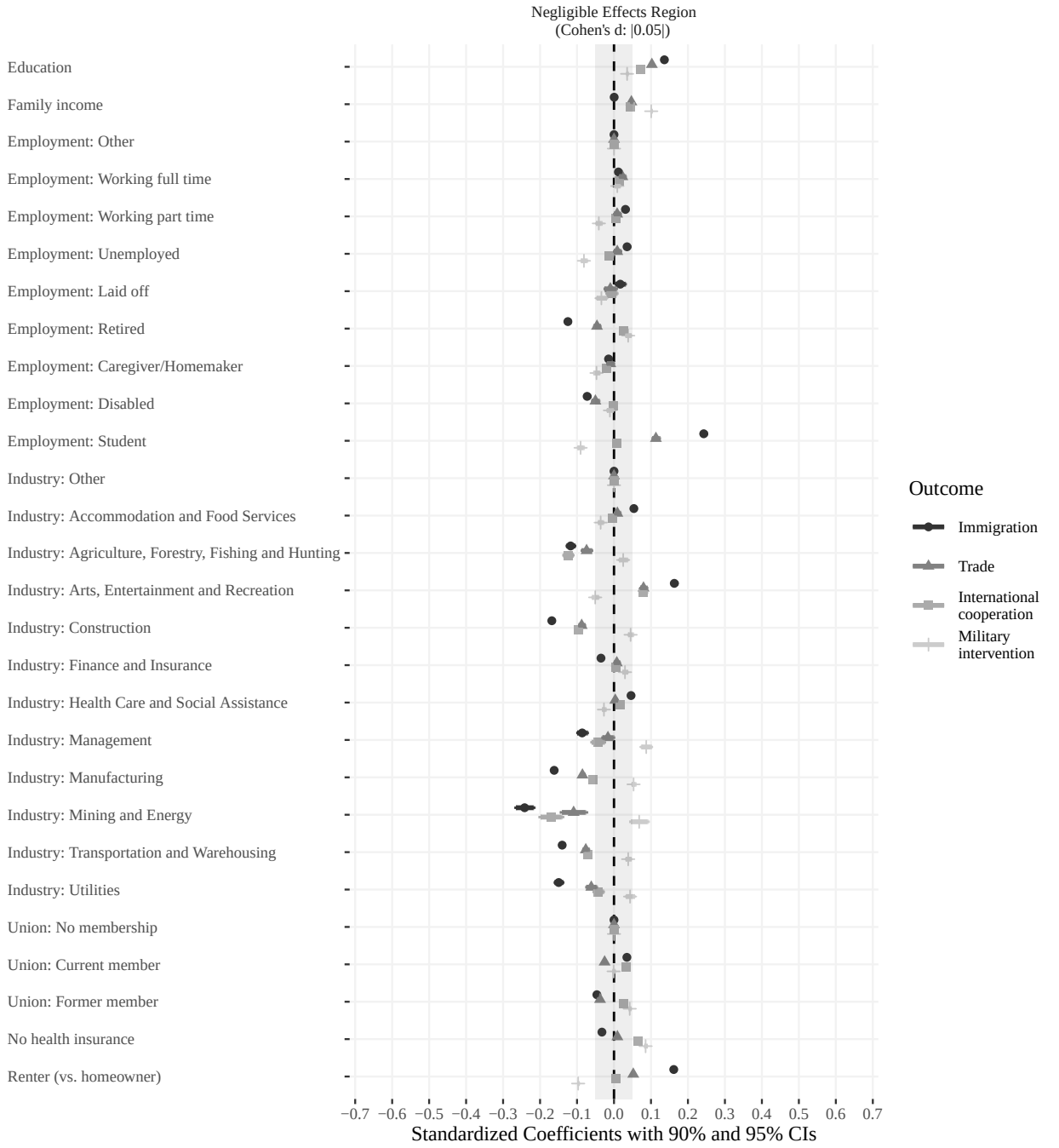


**Figure 5:** Socioeconomic variables

surprisingly, education and income—two variables very often used by political economists to discuss the winners and losers of globalization—yield small effects at most.

Our analysis of variables commonly associated with political psychology (Kertzer and Tingley, 2018) produces a striking portrait (Figure 6). Party identification and ideology

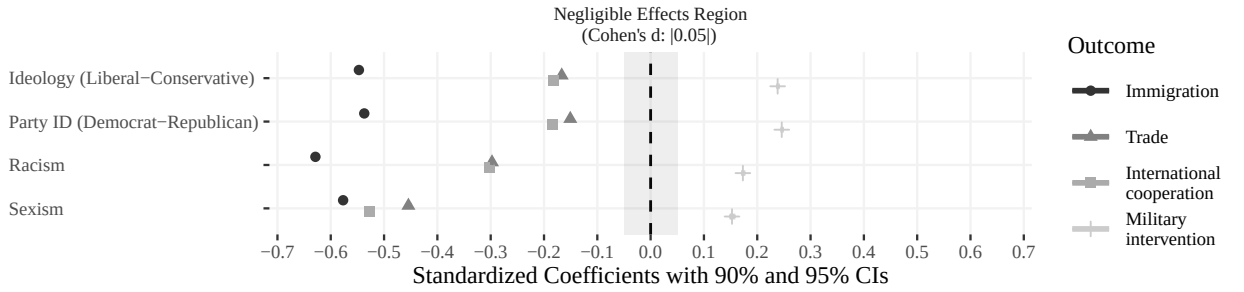


**Figure 6:** Socio-psychological variables

account for large divides in public opinion over immigration, as do attitudes regarding gender and race.[8] These divides are more moderate when it comes to other facets of globalization, however. All in all, these results corroborate previous findings on the sociocultural nature of the globalization backlash, and how it may stem from social status threat among dominant groups (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Mansfield and Mutz, 2013; Mutz, 2018; Mutz, 2021; Mutz and Kim, 2017; Mutz et al., 2021).

Lastly, we turn to the role of life experiences. Previous research finds migration (Hainmueller et al., 2017; Just and Anderson, 2015), higher education (Bobo and Licari, 1989; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2007; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2006; Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010), marriage (Stoker and Jennings, 1995; Kingston and Finkel, 1987), parenthood (Grechyna, 2023; Elder and Greene, 2007; Elder and Greene, 2012; Elder and Greene, 2016; McGuirk et al., 2023), and military service (Elder Jr. et al., 1991; Jennings and Markus, 1977; Krueger and Pedraza, 2012) can impact political attitudes, preferences, and behavior. We find support for these arguments, although most of the associations are small (Figure 7). Immigrants are more open to globalization (relative to natives), as are people with graduate degrees (relative to those without a high school degree). Conversely, married individuals and widowers (relative to single people) as well as those with a military background (self or family member) express less enthusiasm regarding increased US engagement with the rest of the world.

[8]We construct these scales following the same method as that used for our four outcomes. For each wave of the CCES, we found all questions on racial and gender relations, which we then reduced into two standardized scales using principal component factor analysis. The same limitations apply.

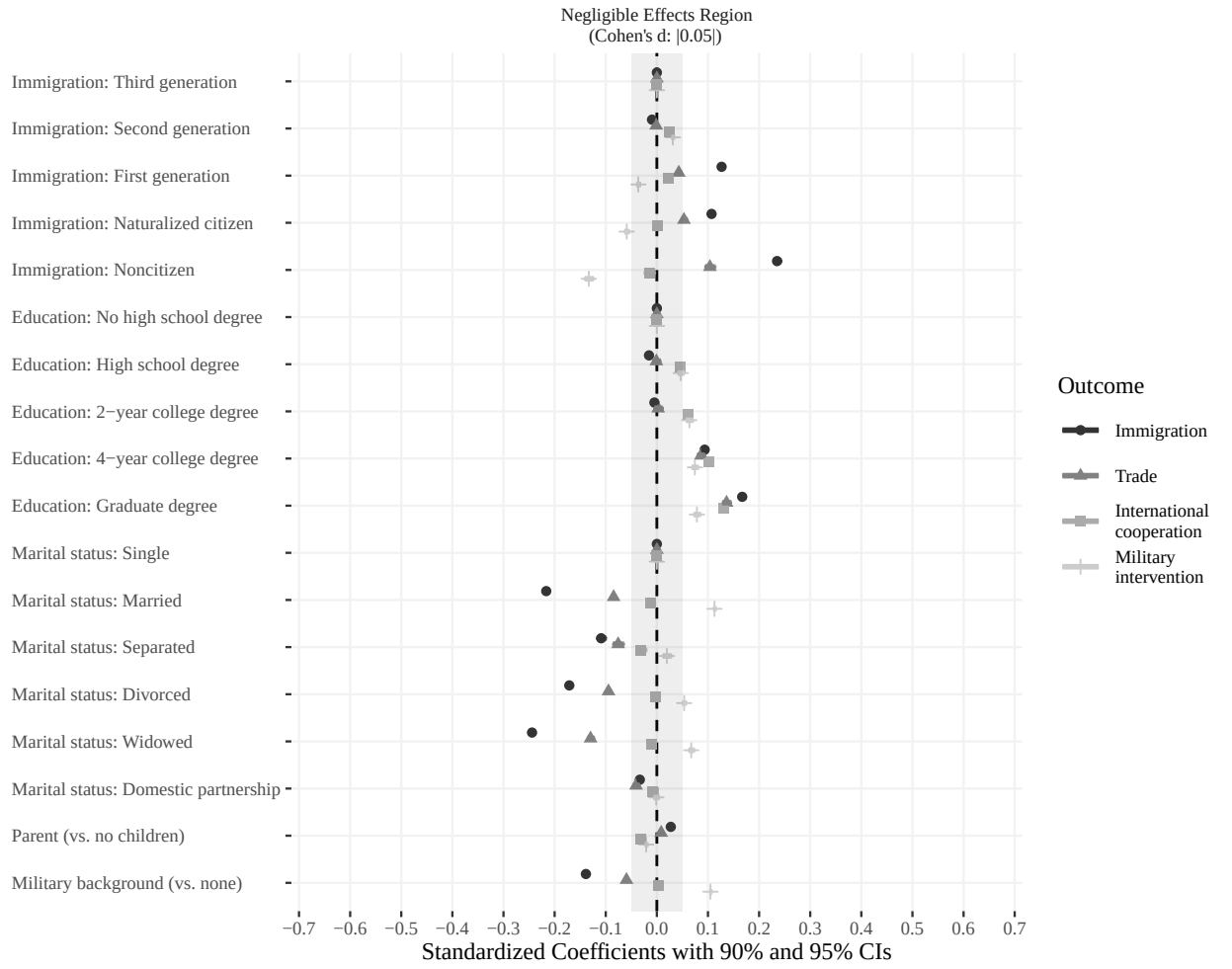


**Figure 7:** Life experiences

# Discussion and Conclusion

This paper assessed the relationship between local exposure to globalization and public opinion over immigration, trade, international cooperation, and military intervention. Contrary to prevalent expectations, we find no evidence that context significantly shapes mass attitudes toward globalization, even when considering various measures of exposure and several issue domains. Furthermore, we present suggestive evidence that preferences over globalization are shaped by the same factors underlying domestic politics—party identification, ideology, attitudes about race and gender, demographics, socioeconomics, and life experiences. We challenge the prevailing narrative in the globalization literature suggesting the backlash is the

product of a shift in public opinion against globalization. Instead, it appears mass preferences have become polarized as political elites have politicized these issues (Walter, 2021).

While surprising, our findings align with previous studies reporting mixed evidence for the context-opinion link. Hill et al. (2019) find no effect of local demographic change on vote choice in 2016, while Aviña and Roman (2024) as well as Brady and Finnigan (2014) observe nil associations between neighborhood diversification and preferences over social and fiscal policy. Similarly, Miller (2023) argues ethnocentrism and racial resentment play a more important role in shaping public attitudes toward immigration than a myriad of factors commonly associated with self-interest and economic decline. It is important to note that prior research has often relied on less expansive samples than ours to conduct statistical significance testing; low power is known to generate false positives (Arel-Bundock et al., 2022), which may contribute to publication bias (Franco et al., 2014).

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# Appendices

## Contents