Immigration and Perceived Social Position. Insights from an Unintended Survey Experiment

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Insights from an unintended survey experiment[*]

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Abstract

Using data from an involuntary survey experiment in Germany, we investigate whether prim-ing people on immigration affects their self-perceived social standing. Our findings suggest that individuals who are administered a module concerning attitudes toward immigration perceive themselves as in a higher social position than would otherwise. Consistently with previous literature, we find that this effect is driven by right-wing-leaning individuals.

Keywords: Attitudes towards Immigration, Priming, Survey Experiment, Per-ceptions.

JEL Codes: D31, J15.

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1   Introduction

The political economy of immigration is strongly influenced by perceptions and beliefs that people develop about immigrants (Alesina and Tabellini, 2020). When biased, people's beliefs on migrants are so effective in shaping people's policy preferences that the exposure to true information does not fully mitigate prior views (Alesina et al., 2018).

New research shows that people believe migrants to be more culturally distant, less educated, and more likely to benefit from government transfers (Alesina et al., 2021; Dahlberg et al., 2012; Senik et al., 2009). Similarly, recent contributions show that making migration a salient topic creates polarization between native citizens and immigrants and increases stereotyping (Bonomi et al., 2021; Bordalo et al., 2020; Meiske, 2022).

Although these findings might suggest that individuals perceive to be in a better social position with respect to immigrants, to the best of our knowledge, the effect of immigration on perceived individual social standing has not been explicitly tested yet.

Our work tries to add this piece of evidence to the debate on attitudes toward immigrants. Exploiting an involuntary survey experiment in the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS), we show that people who are pushed to think about immigration issues, perceive to stand in a higher social position. Consistently with literature suggesting that right-wing individuals have stronger negative perceptions towards immigration (Grigorieff et al., 2020), we find this effect mostly among right-wing and, to a lesser extent, center-wing-leaning people, while it is null for left-wing-leaning individuals. Finally, to rule out the possibility that our results are driven by more general psychological mechanisms, we perform a falsification test on personality traits and we find no statistically significant effects.

Our results contribute to the growing literature on attitudes toward immigrants and policy preferences. As an example, positional concerns are key determinants of preferences for redistribution and those who perceive to be (or think that in the future will be) in a higher social position are less willing to support redistribution (Benabou and Ok, 2001; Fisman et al., 2021). Positionality matters also in the bottom part of the income distribution due to the "last-place aversion", i.e. even individuals in the second-last place of the income scale might oppose redistribution due to the fear of becoming the last in the income distribution (Kuziemko et al., 2014). Understanding how exposure to immigration affects people's positional concerns can thus increase our knowledge of why an increase in the salience of immigration may trigger certain policy preferences.

2 Data and Identification

2.1 The German Social Survey (ALLBUS)

The German Social Survey (ALLBUS) is a biennial crossectional survey representative of the German population (Terwey, 2000). The ALLBUS survey started in 1980 and tracks Germans' opinions, attitudes, and socio-economic conditions. The ALLBUS survey often includes additional modules from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). These modules cover specific topics, such as Religion, Environment, and Inequality, and are usually administrated after the core module of the ALLBUS survey. In our empirical strategy, we exploit the administration of two different ISSP modules at the end of the ALLBUS questionnaires in 2004 and 2014.

2.2 The (unintended) Survey Experiment

Both in 2004 and 2014 -after the administration of the ALLBUS survey core module, two different ISSP modules were administered, namely the "Citizenship" module and the "National Identity" module. The "Citizenship" module deals primarily with what the respondents think about civil rights and obligations, political participation, and trust, while the "National Identity" module focuses on national or ethnic identification and attitudes toward immigrants. Each module was administered to half of the sample, splitting the original sample randomly. The last part of the two ISSP modules contained the same questions regarding demographic information and additional statements. Specifically, at the end of the ISSP questionnaire, both modules contained a question asking the respondents' relative social standing on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. The whole initial ALLBUS sample was split into the sub-modules so that we do not exclude *a priori* any observation from our estimation sample[1]. Figure 1 illustrates the structure of the survey[2].

This kind of methodology has been already used to show the effects of question randomization on party identification (Weiner, 2015; McAllister and Wattenberg, 1995).

Since the respondents could not decide which module to take and given that both modules contained the same question on social position at the end, the design of the survey gives us the possibility to take advantage of an unintended survey experiment. While some aspects of the ISSP modules might overlap, the "National Identity" module pushes respondents to focus

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[1]Our final estimation sample includes a smaller number of observations due to missing values in the outcome or dependent variables. For example, in 2004, 327 individuals did not compile the additional module.

[2]The relative ISSP modules in 2004 and 2014 were almost identical in all the questions. There were some slight changes concerning the introduction of some additional questions in the modules of 2014. To control for this little difference we include in all our regressions the year fixed effects. Furthermore, we show the results for the years 2004 and 2014 separately in Table A1.

Figure 1: Survey structure
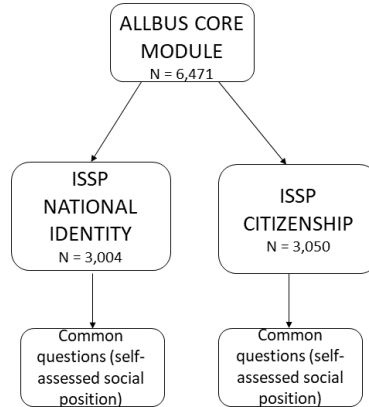
much more on migration issues[3]. As a consequence, if people perceive to stand in a higher social position with respect to immigrants, we expect that those who are primed with migration issues (through the "National Identity" module) are more likely to feel in a higher social position with respect to those who are not primed with migration issues.

2.3 Empirical strategy

Our aim is to understand if random exposure to migration issues might affect perceived social standing. To measure the self-assessed social position we use answers to the following question: *In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale that runs from top to bottom. Thinking of yourself, where would you put yourself on this scale?* Answers are on a 1-10 Likert scale where 1 means "bottom" and 10 means "top". The basic idea of our empirical strategy is that if people perceive migrants as an inferior group, people primed on migration issues should display a higher social standing.

A key aspect of our identification strategy is that the treatment group (those who are exposed to migration issues) and the control group are very similar. To check whether this is the case, we show in Table 1 a balance test. The table shows that treatment and control groups are very similar in all the observed characteristics. The only statistically significant difference among those groups is in their self-assessed social position.

We, therefore, estimate the causal effect of priming people on migration issues on perceived social position through the following linear model:

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[3]The questionnaires can be found at this link. In Figures A1 and A2 we show the first five most frequent words in the questionnaires.

$$SocialPosition_i = \alpha + \beta Exposure_i + \gamma C_i + \eta F + \epsilon \qquad (1)$$

Where $SocialPosition_i$ is the variable measuring the self-assessment of individuals' social position; $Exposure_i$ is the dummy variable taking a value equal to one for those who are exposed to migration issues and zero otherwise; C_i is a set of demographic controls and F captures time and regional fixed effects.

Table 1: Balance Test

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	ISSP Citizenship	ISSP National Identity	Difference
Perceived Social Position	5.926	6.052	0.120***
	(1.580)	(1.545)	(0.040)
Gender	0.494	0.491	-0.002
	(0.500)	(0.500)	(0.013)
Age	49.715	49.398	-0.375
	(30.425)	(30.640)	(0.810)
Household Income (log)	5.109	5.053	-0.012
	(2.770)	(2.802)	(0.029)
Employed	0.589	0.593	0.002
	(0.492)	(0.491)	(0.013)
Married	0.581	0.583	0.001
	(0.494)	(0.493)	(0.013)
Degree	0.133	0.127	-0.004
	(0.339)	(0.333)	(0.009)
Self-Position (left-right)	5.089	5.063	-0.030
	(1.681)	(1.645)	(0.045)
Observations	2,871	2,810	5,681

3 Results

Table 2 reports results from the estimation of our main model. All three specifications show that individuals who complete the National Identity module perceive themselves to be in a higher social position than those who complete the Citizenship module. In particular, if one looks at column 3 of Table 2 which includes the estimation from our preferred specification (i.e., including controls), it emerges that the administration of the National Identity module increases perceived social position by 0.13 points on a 1-10 scale, which is 2% of the mean. The effect might seem

small, but, interestingly, we find that the effect holds (and it is stronger) for certain categories of individuals.

We investigate the heterogeneity of our results across political preferences. We take advantage of a question belonging to the core questionnaire that asks individuals about their political position. We split the sample between left-, center-, and right-wing leaning individuals[4]. Table 3 reports the results. Priming on immigration does not affect left-wing-leaning individuals' perceived social position (column 1). Instead, we find a significant effect for Center- and Right-wing-leaning individuals (columns 2 and 3, respectively), and the effect is stronger for the Right-wing. Specifically, the exposure to migration issues increases the perceived social position of Right-wing-leaning individuals by 0.257, which is 4% of the mean. We, additionally, recode left-right self-positioning to further analyze which individuals drive the results (see Table 4). The effect we find is stronger among extreme-right individuals[5]: priming on immigration increases social self-positioning by 6% of the mean.

Table 2: Main results

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Perceived Social Position	Perceived Social Position	Perceived Social Position
National Identity Module	0.125***	0.120***	0.125***
	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.038)
Observations	5,681	5,681	5,681
Adjusted R-squared	0.001	0.081	0.159
Region FE	No	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	No	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	No	Yes
Mean Dep. Var.	5.988	5.988	5.988

Robust SE: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Controls include: gender, age, age squared, income, unemployment status, marital status, land dummy, year dummy.

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[4]We classify Left, Center and Right-wing-leaning individuals as those who scored respectively less than 4, between 5 and 6, and more than 7 on the question *"Here we have a scale that runs from left to right. If you think of your own political views, where would you place them on this scale?"* Possible answers are on a 1-10 scale with 1 meaning "left" and 10 meaning "right".

[5]We categorize political positioning using the following classification: Extreme left if the score is below or equal to 3, Center-left if the score is between 4 and 5, Center-right if the score is between 6 and 7, Extreme right if the score is above or equal 8.

Table 3: Heterogeneity

	(1) Left-wing Sample Perceived Social Position	(2) Center-wing Sample Perceived Social Position	(3) Right-wing Sample Perceived Social Position
National Identity Module	0.035	0.111**	0.255***
	(0.071)	(0.053)	(0.085)
Observations	1,710	2,685	1,286
Adjusted R-squared	0.151	0.164	0.170
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep. Var.	5.988	5.988	5.988

Robust SE: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Controls include: gender, age, age squared, income, unemployment status, marital status, land dummy, year dummy.

Table 4: Heterogeneity: Extreme

	(1) Extreme left wing Sample Perceived Social Position	(2) Center-left wing Sample Perceived Social Position	(3) Center-right wing Sample Perceived Social Position	(4) Extreme right wing Sample Perceived Social Position
National Identity Module	0.086	0.014	0.186***	0.365***
	(0.101)	(0.057)	(0.067)	(0.119)
Observations	996	2,310	1,627	748
Adjusted R-squared	0.123	0.169	0.181	0.133
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep. Var.	5.988	5.988	5.988	5.988

Robust SE: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Controls include: gender, age, age squared, income, unemployment status, marital status, land dummy, year dummy.

3.1 Robustness Check

Building on an unplanned survey experiment, our empirical strategy faces several threats to our identification.

First, we cannot fully differentiate between the National Identity module increasing social positioning, and the Citizenship module lowering social positioning. The difference in self-assessed social position might be driven by the fact that people answering the Citizenship module feel not behaving properly. As said, the Citizenship module contains questions on citizens' obligations and rights. While answering these questions one might feel not fulfilling certain obligations.

We try to test this alternative channel by focusing on the sample of 2004, where, in addition to the demographic questions and the question on social position, both ISSP modules contained at the end a set of questions to measure the Big Five personality traits.

Indeed, while the priming on immigration might directly affect people's perceived social position -since people might unconsciously compare themselves with immigrants-, the priming through the Citizenship module should affect people's social position through a more specific psychological mechanism; i.e. not being able to fulfil citizens' obligation. The literature shows a robust correlation between the Big Five personality traits and the sense of civic duty. In particular, the sense of civic duty is highly correlated with extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeableness (Weinschenk, 2014). If our results are driven by the Citizenship module increasing the sense of duty, we should expect some differences also in answers to the Big Five personality traits that, among others, measure individuals' level of compliance and reliability.

In the survey, people are asked each of the Big Five twice, once in positive terms and once in negative terms (Rammstedt, 2007). For example, to measure conscientiousness the survey asks the respondent whether he/she does a thorough job and whether he/she tends to be lazy. Respondents answer on a 1-5 scale with 1 corresponding to "applies completely" and 5 "does not apply at all". We re-code the answers in negative terms and sum the scores so that the final variable is measured on a 2-10 scale with higher values corresponding to higher intensity of the personality trait.

Results in Table 5 show that while respondents primed with immigration issues are more likely to feel in a higher social position, there are no statistically significant differences in the answers to the Big Five personality traits[6].

Table 5: Robustness (I)

	(1) Perceived Social Position	(2) Extraversion	(3) Neuroticism	(4) Conscientiousness	(5) Openness	(6) Agreeableness
National Identity Module	0.121**	0.083	-0.004	0.079	0.038	0.014
	(0.061)	(0.073)	(0.071)	(0.056)	(0.072)	(0.070)
Observations	2,207	2,207	2,207	2,207	2,207	2,207
Adjusted R-squared	0.126	0.029	0.021	0.067	0.035	0.014
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep. Var.	5.573	6.545	7.028	8.206	6.857	6.379

Robust SE: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Controls include: gender, age, age squared, income, unemployment status, marital status, land dummy, year dummy.

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[6]A balanced test of the personality traits can be found in Table A2.

A second possible explanation of our results is that answering the Nationality module induces a positive emotional effect because people are pushed to think about the good sides of their nation. This can also be consistent with the fact that right-wing people might drive our results. To try to test this possibility, we run an additional heterogeneity test. Specifically, we split our sample according to respondents' views on Germany. If the results are driven by the fact that people have positive feelings when thinking about their country, we expect to find stronger effects among those who already have positive views of Germany.

To run this test we use answers to two different questions belonging to the core quaestionnaire: one asking how life in Germany is and the other asking what the economic situation in Germany is. Specifically, we split our sample according to answers to the following statements: "All in all, one can live very well in a country like Germany" and "How would you generally rate the current economic situation in Germany?". Possible answers range from completely agree to completely disagree for the first statement and from very good to very bad for the second statement. Results are displayed in Tables 6 and 7. We find a small and insignificant result among people who already have positive views about Germany, suggesting that our main results should not be driven by increased positive feelings associated with nationalism.

Table 6: Robustness (II)

	(1) Live well in Germany Completely Agree Perceived Social Position	(2) Live well in Germany Agree Perceived Social Position	(3) Live well in Germany Tend to Disagree/ Completely Disagree Perceived Social Position
National Identity Module	0.081	0.151***	0.144
	(0.054)	(0.057)	(0.136)
Observations	2,547	2,488	609
Adjusted R-squared	0.116	0.135	0.138
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep. Var.	5.992	5.992	5.992

Robust SE: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Controls include: gender, age, age squared, income, unemployment status, marital status, land dummy, year dummy.

	(1) Econ. Sit. Germany Very Good/Good Perceived Social Position	(2) Econ. Sit. Germany Part good part bad Perceived Social Position	(3) Econ. Sit. Germany Bad/Very Bad Perceived Social Position
National Identity Module	0.037	0.187***	0.142*
	(0.059)	(0.063)	(0.077)
Observations	2,074	2,061	1,526
Adjusted R-squared	0.118	0.110	0.114
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep. Var.	5.993	5.993	5.993

Robust SE: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Controls include: gender, age, age squared, income, unemployment status, marital status, land dummy, year dummy.

Finally, as we use a categorical variable ranging from 1 to 10 as the main outcome variable, we run an alternative specification using an Ordered Probit model. We include the coefficients from the estimation in Appendix Table A3. The different specification confirms the findings from the preferred specification (i.e., the linear model).

4 Conclusion

This paper studies the effect of priming people on immigration issues on perceived social position. Using data from an unintended survey experiment in Germany, we find that individuals who are randomly administered a module on attitudes towards immigration declare to be in a higher social position than those who are administered a module on citizenship. Our findings suggest that when individuals are pushed to think about immigration, they tend to perceive themselves to be in a higher social position than would otherwise. Consistently with previous literature (Grigorieff et al., 2020), we find that this effect is driven by right-wing-leaning individuals.

Our findings might help to interpret attitudes toward immigrants. Literature shows that right-wing people tend to support hostile measures against immigrants (Avdeenko and Siedler, 2017). Part of these negative attitudes can be explained by the fact that right-wing people think of immigrants as an inferior group on the social ladder. Similarly, the literature on immigration and preferences for redistribution suggests that individuals are less willing to support redistribution if exposed to immigration as they think that immigrants benefit more from redistribution (Alesina et al., 2021; Dahlberg et al., 2012; Senik et al., 2009). This mechanism can be reinforced if people perceive immigrants to be in a lower social position.

Although our results are robust to several specifications and robustness checks, our empirical

strategy has some limitations and the interpretation of the results should be taken with caution. Building on an unplanned survey experiment, we are not in the position of disentangling neatly individual beliefs during the administration of the two separate modules. Future research is needed to investigate how unconscious biases affect people's perceptions of immigrants' position in society.

5 Appendix

Table A1: Sample Split by Year

	(1)	(2)
	Year 2004	Year 2014
	Perceived Social Position	Perceived Social Position
National Identity Module	0.135**	0.133***
	(0.059)	(0.050)
Observations	2,401	3,280
Adjusted R-squared	0.124	0.097
Region FE	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep. Var.	5.536	6.320

Robust SE: *p<.10; **p<.05; ***p<.01.

Controls include: gender, age, age squared, income, unemployment status, marital status, land dummy, year dummy.

Table A2: Balance Test 2004

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	ISSP Citizenship	ISSP National Identity	Difference
Perceived Social Position	5.471	5.603	0.137**
	(1.542)	(1.548)	(0.062)
Gender	0.513	0.489	-0.024
	(0.500)	(0.500)	(0.020)
Age	48.471	48.224	-0.281
	(17.158)	(32.475)	(1.056)
Household Income (log)	8.055	8.094	0.043
	(1.456)	(1.481)	(0.059)
Employed	0.548	0.559	0.013
	(0.498)	(0.497)	(0.020)
Married	0.602	0.616	0.015
	(0.490)	(0.487)	(0.020)
Degree	0.094	0.083	-0.011
	(0.292)	(0.275)	(0.012)
Self-Position (left-right)	5.234	5.193	-0.034
	(1.724)	(1.693)	(0.072)
Extraversion	6.486	6.553	0.066
	(1.777)	(1.712)	(0.072)
Neuroticism	7.018	7.009	-0.008
	(1.721)	(1.652)	(0.070)
Conscientiousness	8.170	8.242	0.071
	(1.390)	(1.350)	(0.057)
Openness	6.845	6.867	0.027
	(1.718)	(1.709)	(0.071)
Agreeableness	6.384	6.364	-0.017
	(1.621)	(1.678)	(0.068)
Observations	1,226	1,175	2,401

Table A3: Aternative specification: Results from Ordered Probit

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Whole Sample	Left-wing Sample	Center-wing Sample	Right-wing Sample
	Perceived Social Position	Perceived Social Position	Perceived Social Position	Perceived Social Position
National Identity Module	0.088***	0.024	0.079**	0.180***
	(0.027)	(0.050)	(0.040)	(0.057)
Observations	5,681	1,710	2,685	1,286
Region FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mean Dep. Var.	5.988	5.988	5.988	5.988

Robust SE: *$p<.10$; **$p<.05$; ***$p<.01$.

Controls include: gender, age, age squared, income, unemployment status, marital status, land dummy, year dummy.

Top 5 most frequent words Citizenship Module

Figure A2

Top 5 most frequent words Nationality Module
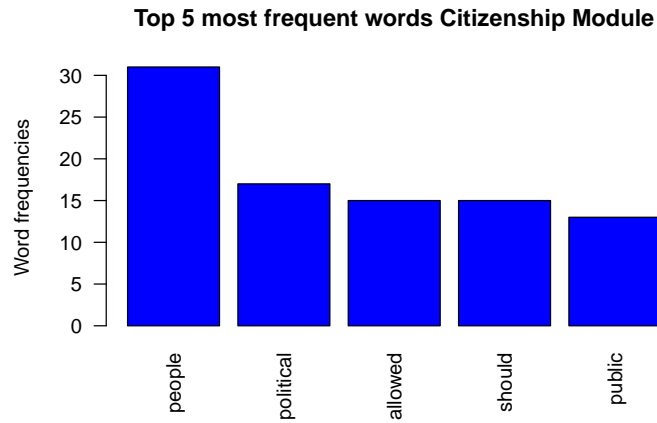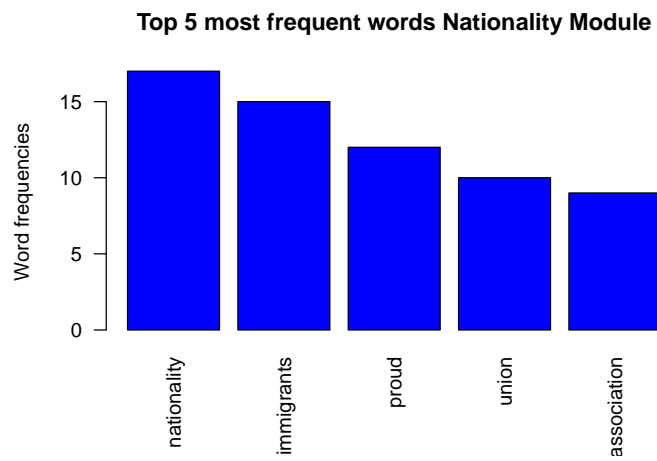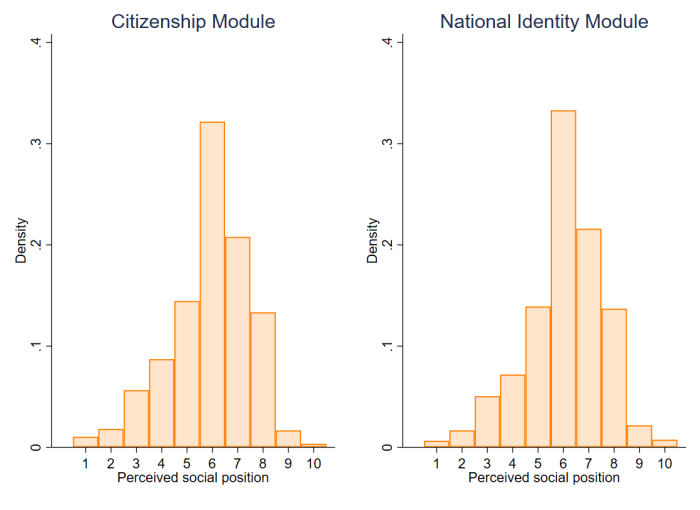

Figure A3: Distribution of the perceived social position

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