

# Social Contact, Cultural Marginality or Economic Self-Interest? Attitudes Towards Immigrants in Northern Ireland

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*Although scholars of mass political behaviour have proposed various explanations for why an individual would oppose immigration, the relative impact of these various explanations has rarely been assessed. It is with this omission in mind that this study assesses empirically three alternative theories in explaining attitudes towards immigrants: the social contact hypothesis, cultural marginality and economic self-interest. Using the 2003 Northern Ireland component of the European Social Survey, the results suggest that social exposure and cultural marginality are the two key explanations, independently important, in predicting pro-immigration attitudes within this society. Of these two theoretical perspectives, however, social exposure, particularly in terms of having a previously established friendship network of immigrants, stands out as the most important and consistent predictor of attitudes. It is to these two factors, especially prior social exposure, that pro-immigrant politicians and policy makers should direct their attention.*

*Keywords: Immigrants; Attitudes; Social Contact; Cultural Marginality; Northern Ireland*

## Introduction

During the last two decades, opposition to immigration has become increasingly politicised in many regions of Western Europe. Explicitly anti-immigration parties such as the French *Front National* have attracted large proportions of the electorate,

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while governments have been formed in Austria, Italy and Switzerland that involve Radical Right Populist (RRP) parties such as the Freedom Party (FPO), the Northern League and the Swiss People's Party (SVP), respectively (Baumgartl and Favell 1995; Betz and Immerfall 1998; Hainsworth 2000). In fact, as recently as October 2003, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) won a stunning victory in the country's general elections, when it captured 28 per cent of the vote, more than any other party. Even in Britain, a society traditionally not known for its support of extreme right-wing parties (see Eatwell 2000), the openly racist British National Party (BNP) has emerged as a growing electoral force at the local level over the last decade (Alexander and Alleyne 2002). Currently, 18 council seats are held by BNP members in England, the most recent obtained in Essex in September 2003. Hence, it is no exaggeration to claim that the extreme right, for the first time since the Second World War, constitutes a significant force in established Western European democracies at both the local and national level (see Schain *et al.* 2002).

Scholars of mass political behaviour have proposed various explanations for why an individual would oppose immigration or support a nativist political movement (see Fetzer 2000a for a comprehensive review of this literature). One school of thought concentrates on abstract psychological predispositions to xenophobia. Thus, anomie or alienation, national identity, authoritarianism, cognitive rigidity, pessimism, poor self-efficacy or political powerlessness as well as national pride are all said to cause diverse forms of xenophobic attitudes and nativism (see Billiet *et al.* 1996; Hjerm 1998, 2001; Knudsen 1997; Lubbers and Scheepers 2002; Maddens *et al.* 2000). A different set of researchers offers 'micro-theories' about more concrete sociological variables. These scholars blame individuals' nativism and anti-immigration attitudes on a range of factors such as youthfulness, failure to belong to a union, the lack of involvement in one's church, coming from a rural environment, or the lack of contact with immigrants (Adler 1996; Betz 1994: 142–6; Lubbers and Scheepers 2002). Of these various attributes, however, the lack of contact with immigrants traditionally stands out as the most commonly evoked factor in explaining nativism and xenophobic attitudes. In fact, as Ellison and Powers (1994: 385) have argued, the contact hypothesis has remained one of the 'most durable ideas in the sociology of racial and ethnic relations.'

This is also the case in Northern Ireland, where the social contact hypothesis has played a major part in government policy in resolving stereotypical and sectarian attitudes along religiously-based ethnic divisions over the last thirty years (Hughes and Donnelly 2003; Knox and Hughes 1996). In fact, some recent work in the Northern Ireland context has stressed the importance of the type, or quality, of contact within different contexts in alleviating prejudicial attitudes and sectarian tensions between the two main religious communities, Protestants and Catholics, within this society (Cairns and Hewstone 1999). This is not to deny, however, growing public unease in relation to this singular approach. In fact, recent government initiatives suggest a notable shift in community relations policy from an exclusively integrationalist standpoint, focusing on symptoms of the conflict such

as segregation and division, to a more holistic approach which also seeks to address its root causes, most notably structural inequality and discrimination (Hughes and Donnelly 2003).

More recent international research, moreover, while not discounting the social contact hypothesis, has stressed the primary role of economic self-interest and cultural marginality in explaining anti-immigration attitudes in Europe and elsewhere (Fetzer 2000a). Focusing initially on theories of economic self-interest, this approach contends that people's political attitudes primarily reflect their narrow, material self-interest. Thus, individuals who perceive that they will be disproportionately financially harmed by immigration, such as the lesser educated or the economically weaker classes in a nation, are more likely to oppose immigration and vote for extreme-right parties than their more economically privileged counterparts (Gaasholt and Togeby 1995; Golder 2003; Hello *et al.* 2002; Hjerm 2001; Jackman and Volpert 1996; Rajjman *et al.* 2003; Verbeck *et al.* 2002). In fact, some proponents of this perspective go so far as to suggest that 'economic interests seem to be the main reason for the increase in opposition to both legal and illegal immigrants' in the United States and elsewhere (Espenshade 1995; Espenshade and Hempstead 1996; Rajjman *et al.* 2003).

Marginality theory, in contrast, holds that—everything else being equal—experiencing marginality or oppression itself creates sympathy for other marginalised or oppressed groups, even if they do not belong to one's own group. In other words, contrary to the economic self-interest perspective, proponents of this view suggest that membership of a marginalised, oppressed or discriminated-against group not only increases sympathy for immigrants but also accentuates xenophobia. This seems to be particularly the case when the culturally marginal, such as members of a racial, ethnic, or religious minority, are considered. For example, Fetzer (2000b), in a recent and detailed investigation of this issue in France, Germany and the United States, not only found that having origins in a foreign country and belonging to a religious minority significantly decreased anti-immigration sentiment across all three nations, but belonging to a religious minority also reduced support for nativist political movements in both the US and France. This is not to deny, however, the potential importance of economic marginality in explaining this phenomenon. For example, Betz (1994: 69–106), in one of the first detailed studies of anti-immigration attitudes in Europe, suggested that women, because they are also usually victims of discrimination, were more sympathetic to foreigners than men, and it was for this reason that they were significantly less likely than men to agree with open intolerance of immigrants or xenophobic violence. Subsequent research focusing on gender differences in xenophobia and ethno-violence in post-unification Germany confirms these findings (Adler 1996).

It is with these three alternative theories in mind that this article focuses on attitudes towards immigrants in Northern Ireland. In particular, using the 2003 Northern Ireland component of the European Social Survey, the empirical analysis examines public perceptions concerning the preferred racial or ethnic background of

immigrants within this society, as well as attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants in either a work or marital situation. From the outset it should be noted that the denigration of individuals or groups based on perceived differences, i.e. xenophobia, is arguably a part of everyday life around the world. Xenophobic attitudes are not new, nor are they likely to disappear in the near future (Rydgren 2003). In this article we are not concerned with the extent to which Northern Ireland is more or less xenophobic than other regions within Europe. Rather, the main purpose of this article is to evaluate empirically the three alternative theories in explaining attitudes towards immigrants within this society.

The use of Northern Ireland as a case study in terms of evaluating these three theories may be considered particularly appropriate. First, unlike many European nations, Northern Ireland has a long tradition of religiously-based sectarian divisions and political conflict. In fact, not only do comparative studies show that the conflict in Northern Ireland is easily the most intense and violent in Europe—since 1968, over 3,000 people have lost their lives and over 40,000 have been injured—but prejudicial attitudes and religious segregation practices remain deeply ingrained within this society, and this seems to be particularly the case among the young (Hayes and McAllister 1999, 2001).

Second, unlike many other established Western democracies, at 40 per cent of the population (Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency 2002a, Table S308: Religion By Sex), Northern Ireland has a traditionally established and sufficiently large culturally and economically marginal internal population—Catholics—to allow a meaningful comparison of minority–majority divisions in terms of this issue. Despite the passage of a series of anti-discrimination laws since the late 1970s and the substantial progress that has been achieved in the reduction of religious inequalities in educational and occupational attainment over the last two decades, Catholics still remain, on average, less affluent than Protestants, are under-represented in the higher Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) groups, mainly professional and managerial, and are substantially more likely to be unemployed (Osborne 2004; Russell 2004; Shuttleworth and Green 2004). In fact, recent census estimates suggest that, when the economically active population is considered, Catholics are still significantly less likely to be employed than Protestants. As Shuttleworth and Green (2004: 118), summarising these findings, conclude: ‘the 2001 Census of Population showed that 73 per cent of Catholics aged 16–74 were economically active as compared to 79 per cent of Protestants; and 44 per cent of Catholics were employed against 50 per cent of Protestants.’ Furthermore, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that Catholics are notably more likely to experience long-term unemployment than Protestants—this is particularly the case among Catholic males (Shuttleworth and Green 2004: 112).

Even in relation to educational attainment, where some of the most notable advances have been achieved, with Catholics and Protestants now demonstrating similar educational profiles in the 25–44 year-old age group, although Catholics are currently slightly over-represented among those with the highest qualifications and

amongst those with no qualifications (Osborne 2004: 83), Catholics continue to experience higher levels of unemployment than Protestants across all educational levels, and this is again particularly the case among Catholic males (Osborne 2004: 85). Thus, despite this increasing parity in educational attainment between the two main religious communities in Northern Ireland—a cumulative by-product of over two decades of outward Protestant migration among students for higher education and their failure to return in significant numbers—Catholics still do not achieve the same rate of labour market access as Protestants.

Finally, unlike other regions in Europe, Northern Ireland has a long tradition of promoting religious and ethnic tolerance based on the social contact hypothesis. In fact, as briefly referred to earlier, more so than any other theoretical perspective, the social contact hypothesis has played a major part in government policy aimed at resolving religiously-based ethnic divisions within this society.

### **Data and Methods**

The data used in the analysis come from the Northern Ireland component of the European Social Survey (ESS), which was conducted in the Autumn of 2003 ( $n = 781$ ). The ESS is a biennial multi-country survey covering over twenty nations. The first round, which was fielded in 2002/2003, involved fifteen nations and is currently available from the ESS data website (see <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>). In all cases, the data represent randomly selected samples of citizens aged 15 years and above, representative of their parent populations. The project is funded jointly by the European Commission, the European Science Foundation and academic funding bodies in each participating country—the Economic and Social Research Council in the case of the UK—and is designed and carried out to exceptionally high standards.

Attitudes towards immigrants, the dependent variable, was assessed in terms of six questions, two relating to public perceptions concerning the preferred racial or ethnic background of immigrants and four in relation to personal contact with immigrants in either a work or a marital situation. Focusing initially on public perceptions concerning the preferred racial or ethnic background of immigrants, this attribute was assessed in terms of the following two questions: 1) To what extent do you think that the UK should allow people of the *same* race or ethnic group as most people to come and live here?; and 2) How about people of a *different* race or ethnic group from most people in the UK? In both cases, the response categories were: allow none, allow a few, allow some, and allow many. Attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants, or what might be considered a sterner test of opinions in relation to this issue, were assessed in terms of four questions, two measuring the degree to which respondents would mind, or not mind, if someone of the *same* ethnic and racial group as most people in the UK was appointed as their boss or married a close relative, and two which focused on personal contact in both a marriage and a work situation with someone of a *different* ethnic or racial group. All four personal contact

variables were operationalised via an 11-point scale, scored from 0 (not mind at all) to 10 (mind a lot).

Several independent variables were used to measure each of the three competing explanations. First, the *social contact hypothesis* was assessed in terms of the amount of exposure a respondent experienced in relation to immigrants. In particular, the following three questions were used: 1) Do you have any friends who have come to live in the UK from another country?; 2) Do you have any colleagues at work who have come to live in the UK from another country?; and 3) How would you describe the area where you are currently living? Whereas the response categories for the first two questions were a) yes, several; b) yes, a few; and c) no, none at all; the response categories for question three were: a) an area where almost nobody was of a different race or ethnic group from most people in the UK; b) some people are of a different race or ethnic group from most people in the UK; and c) many people are of a different race or ethnic group. Overall, the results suggest that quite a significant proportion of the adult population in Northern Ireland claim to have had some sort of contact with members of an immigrant community, a somewhat surprising finding given that the most recent census estimates reveal that 96 per cent of the Northern Ireland resident population have been born in the UK (see Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency 2002b, Table KS05: Country of Birth). For example, just over a quarter, or 27 per cent, of the adult population had at least one friend who came to live in the UK from another country, and a similar proportion (30 per cent) reported to have at least one work colleague who is an immigrant. A somewhat smaller but still notable proportion, 23 per cent, say that they live in an area where there are 'many' or 'some' people of a different ethnic or racial group.

*Cultural marginality*, our second explanation, was represented by religious denomination (operationalised in terms of Catholic versus Protestant) and subjective perceptions of discrimination. In this instance, subjective perceptions of discrimination were assessed by the following question: Would you describe yourself as being a member of a group that is discriminated against in this country? The response categories were: a) yes; and b) no. Overall, the results suggest that, although only a small minority of the adult population were willing to define themselves as belonging to a discriminated group, Catholics were significantly more likely to do so than Protestants. For example, whereas just 13 per cent of the adult population claimed to belong to a discriminated group, the proportion of Catholics and Protestants who endorsed this view was 19 and 8 per cent respectively.

*Economic self-interest*, the third explanation, was operationalised in terms of the following four variables: Goldthorpe's (1980: 39–42) social class schema (operationalised as a three-category dummy variable distinguishing between the service, intermediate and working class), employment status (coded 1 for labour active and 0 for other) and two attitudinal questions assessing respondents' subjective feelings about their household income and their views on the general state of the UK economy. To be specific, subjective feelings about household income and attitudes towards the economy were based on the following two questions: (1) Which of the

descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?; and (2) On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in the UK? Whereas attitude towards the economy was operationalised in terms of an 11-point scale, scored from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied), attitude towards household income was assessed in terms of the following four responses: a) living comfortably on present income; b) coping on present income; c) finding it difficult on present income; and d) finding it very difficult on present income. Overall, the results suggest that, whereas respondents are about equally divided in terms of their views on the UK economy (the overall mean is 48.3), two-fifths, exactly 40 per cent, report that they are living comfortably on their present income.

Finally, the remaining variables included in the regression models indicate the respondents' demographics. These include: gender (coded 1 for male and 0 for female), age (measured in years) and education (a three-category dummy variable distinguishing between the tertiary- and secondary-educated versus those with no educational qualification). As in previous investigations of this issue (see Fetzer 2000a, 2000b), all three variables are included in a control capacity given their potential overlap in interpretation in terms of our alternative theoretical explanations. For example, individuals with low levels of education tend not only to have limited economic resources but they are also more likely to belong to the more economically marginalised groups in a society. In other words, either of these two overlapping explanations may be used to explain anti-immigrant sentiments among the lesser educated. As discussed earlier, a similar argument could be made in relation to gender.

### **The Racial or Ethnic Background of Immigrants: Public Preferences and Attitudes Towards Personal Contact**

Throughout the European Social Survey, respondents were questioned separately about their attitudes to allowing 'same' race or ethnic group immigrants into the country versus those of a 'different' race or ethnic group. Our analysis likewise follows this distinction. Looking first at respondents' views concerning immigrants of the same racial or ethnic group, the results suggest that the overwhelming majority of respondents—83 per cent—would allow a 'few' or 'some' people of the same race or ethnic group to come and live in the UK (see Table 1). A similar, albeit slightly less supportive, view emerged when immigrants of a different race or ethnic group were considered. Here, 79 per cent of respondents expressed the view that they would allow a 'few' or 'some' people of a *different* race or ethnic group from most people in the UK to come and live here. Respondents are thus slightly happier to allow immigrants of the same race and ethnic background than they are to allow entry to different racial or ethnic groups. Overall, only 16 per cent of respondents were prepared to say that no persons of a different race or ethnic groups should be allowed to come and live

**Table 1.** Public preferences concerning the racial or ethnic background of immigrants to the UK (%)

	Same	Different
Allow none	11.1	16.1
Allow a few	30.6	36.6
Allow some	51.9	42.2
Allow many	6.3	5.1
N	714	719

Source: Northern Ireland European Social Survey (2003).

here and 11 per cent endorsed the same view when individuals of the same race or ethnic background were considered.

Thus, contrary to previous research in the UK, which found a distinct difference in attitudes towards the settlement of men and women of colour versus 'people from EC countries' and Australians and New Zealanders (see Brewer and Dowds 1996), the results reported here suggest that there are no large differences in attitudes among the Northern Ireland adult population towards immigrants of either the same or a different race and ethnic origin. Furthermore, this lack of difference in finding occurs despite the fact that the vast majority of respondents believe that most immigrants who come to live in the UK nowadays are, in fact, of a different race or ethnic group to the majority of its population. For example, whereas 70 per cent of respondents believe that most immigrants are of a different race or ethnic group to the majority of people currently living in the UK, just under one-fifth feel that it is about half and half (a different or the same race and ethnic group), and only 12 per cent believe that most immigrants are of the same race or ethnic group as the majority of people in the UK today.

Turning now to our second and sterner measure, or attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants in either a work or marital situation, Table 2 presents the results of this analysis. As in our previous investigation, attitudes toward personal contact with immigrants of either the *same* or a *different* race or ethnic group are presented separately. As previously stated, all four personal contact variables are operationalised in terms of an 11-point scale, scored from 0 (not mind at all) to 10

**Table 2.** Attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants (%)

	Same		Different	
	Boss	Marry	Boss	Marry
Mind a lot	3.9	5.2	5.0	7.1
Not mind at all	43.8	47.9	40.8	40.2
Mean	24.85	23.16	27.77	29.26

Note: All variables are operationalised in terms of an 11-point scale, scored from 0 (not mind at all) to 10 (mind a lot).

Source: Northern Ireland European Social Survey (2003).

(mind a lot). For the purposes of this investigation, in addition to the reported mean (re-scored to range from 0 to 100), the results for the two extreme categories—‘mind a lot’ and ‘not mind at all’—are also presented. Focusing initially on the first extreme position on the scale, or individuals who would ‘mind a lot’, the results in Table 2 suggest that very few people endorsed this view, irrespective of whether an immigrant was appointed as their boss or whether a close relative was to marry an immigrant. Furthermore, as in our previous analysis, there is no notable difference in attitudes in terms of immigrants of either the same or of a different race and ethnic group in relation to this issue. For example, whereas just 4 per cent of respondents said that they would ‘mind a lot’ if their appointed immigrant boss came from the same race or ethnic group as the majority of the population in the UK, the equivalent figure for immigrants coming from a different race or ethnic group was almost identical at 5 per cent.

On the other hand, at least two-fifths of respondents were prepared to endorse the other extreme position on the scale, or say outright that they ‘would not mind at all’ irrespective of whether an immigrant was appointed as their boss or whether a close relative was to marry an immigrant. Again, there is no notable difference in attitude in terms of immigrants of the same or of a different race and ethnic group in relation to this issue. For example, whereas 44 per cent of respondents said that they would ‘not mind at all’ if their appointed immigrant boss came from the same race or ethnic group as the majority of the population in the UK, the equivalent figure for immigrants coming from a different race or ethnic group was quite similar at 41 per cent. This is not to deny, however, the minority position of this view. As the data in Table 2 clearly show, irrespective of whether attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants in either a work or marital situation are considered, most respondents *would mind* some level of contact with immigrants of the same or a different race and ethnic group.

It is interesting to note, however, that respondents are, overall, slightly more willing to allow personal contact between immigrants of the same race and ethnic background than those of a different racial or ethnic group; this seems to be particularly the case when the marriage of a close relative is involved. For example, whereas, on average, just under a quarter of respondents said that they would mind—the mean is 23.2—if a close relative was to marry an immigrant of the *same* race or ethnic origin as the majority of the population in the UK, the equivalent percentage figure for an immigrant coming from a *different* race or ethnic origin is six points higher at 29 per cent. A similar, albeit less pronounced, pattern is echoed when attitudes towards the appointment of an immigrant boss are considered. Here, whereas, on average, about 25 per cent of respondents said that they would mind having an immigrant boss from the *same* racial or ethnic group as the majority of the population in the UK, the equivalent average figure for an immigrant boss coming from a *different* race or ethnic group was slightly higher at 28 per cent.

### The Impact of Social Contact, Cultural Marginality and Economic Self-Interest

As previously stated, the purpose of this article is to evaluate empirically the following three alternative theories in explaining attitudes towards immigrants within Northern Ireland: the social contact hypothesis, cultural marginality and economic self-interest. To address this objective, Table 3 begins the investigation by examining the relationship between each of these alternative theories and public preferences concerning the racial and ethnic background of immigrants. As in all previous analysis, public preferences concerning immigrants of either the *same* or a *different* race or ethnic group are presented separately. An overview of Table 3 suggests the importance of all three theoretical perspectives in explaining attitudes towards immigrants.

Focusing initially on the social contact hypothesis, the results in Table 3 are conclusive and in the direction expected. People who have colleagues or friends who have come to live in the UK are indeed more likely to demonstrate pro-immigrant attitudes than those who do not. For example, whereas 76 per cent of respondents who had immigrant friends demonstrated a pro-immigrant attitude in relation to immigrants of the *same* race or ethnic group and 67 per cent were in favour of the settlement of immigrants of a *different* race or ethnic group, the equivalent figures among respondents who did not have immigrant friends were only 52 and 40 per cent. Of course, it could also be argued that people whose attitudes are already pro-immigration are more prepared to make friends with immigrants; however, the almost equivalent proportions held by respondents who claim to have immigrant colleagues—as well as the notable difference in opinion between them and those who do not—suggest that contact leads to favourable attitudes rather than vice-versa. The same pattern holds for people who live in racially mixed areas. For example, whereas 64 per cent of respondents in mixed areas were in favour of immigration by individuals of the same race or ethnic background, the equivalent figure among those who lived in areas with almost nobody of a different race or ethnic group was somewhat lower at only 56 per cent.

A similar, albeit somewhat less conclusive, pattern emerges when the cultural marginality hypothesis is considered. As a group, the culturally marginal are notably more likely to express pro-immigration attitudes, although the evidence is not consistent across both indicators. For example, whereas 71 per cent of Catholics demonstrated a pro-immigrant attitude in relation to immigrants of the same race or ethnic group and 66 per cent were in favour of the settlement of immigrants of a different race or ethnic group, the equivalent figures among Protestants were notably lower at just 48 and 35 per cent respectively. By contrast, only in relation to immigrants of a different race or ethnic background is there a significant association between membership of a discriminated group and attitudes towards immigrants. Individuals who describe themselves as being a member of a discriminated group are notably more likely to hold favourable attitudes towards immigrants of a *different* race or ethnic background than those who do not.

**Table 3.** The relationship between social exposure, cultural marginality and economic self-interest on public preferences concerning the racial or ethnic background of immigrants to the UK

	Percentages: allow some or many	
	Same	Different
<b>Social exposure:</b>		
<i>Immigrant friends</i>	#	#
Yes	76.3	66.5
No	51.5	40.0
<i>Immigrant colleagues</i>	#	#
Yes	72.4	60.6
No	56.7	46.4
<i>Current area of residence</i>	#	#
Many/some different race or ethnic group	64.4	57.0
Almost nobody different race or ethnic group	56.1	44.3
<b>Cultural marginality:</b>		
<i>Religious denomination</i>	#	#
Catholic	70.6	66.4
Protestant	47.9	34.8
<i>Membership of discriminated group</i>		#
Yes	60.5	58.4
No	58.1	46.0
<b>Economic self-interest:</b>		
<i>Social class</i>	#	#
Service	70.3	60.1
Intermediate	55.2	44.1
Working	51.1	41.6
<i>Employment status</i>		
Labour active	60.3	50.1
Non-labour active	56.0	44.3
<i>Feel about household income</i>	#	
Live comfortably	65.9	51.6
Coping	53.9	44.5
Finding it difficult	51.4	44.3
<i>Attitudes towards the economy</i>	#	#
Satisfied	72.6	61.7
In-between	54.7	42.1
Dissatisfied	52.3	47.7

Note: # Significant group differences at the 0.05 level or above.

Source: Northern Ireland European Social Survey (2003).

An almost identical pattern emerges when the economic self-interest hypothesis is investigated. As a group, the economically elite are notably more likely to express pro-immigration attitudes although, again, the evidence is not consistent across all

indicators. For example, whereas 70 per cent of respondents who were members of the service class demonstrated a pro-immigrant attitude in relation to immigrants of the same race or ethnic group and 60 per cent were in favour of the settlement of immigrants of a different race or ethnic group, the equivalent figures among working-class respondents were notably lower, at just 51 and 42 per cent respectively. A similar pattern emerges when attitudes towards the economy are considered: individuals who are satisfied with the current state of the economy are significantly more likely to express favourable attitudes towards immigrants than those who are not. By contrast, employment status fails to emerge as a significant discriminator of public preferences concerning the racial or ethnic background of immigrants to the UK and, only in relation to immigrants of the same race or ethnic background, is household income a distinguishing factor in explaining attitudes. Individuals who claim to be able to live comfortably on their household income are notably more likely to hold favourable attitudes towards immigrants of the same race or ethnic background than all other groups.

Turning now to our second measure, attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants in either a work or marital situation, Table 4 presents the results of this analysis. For the purposes of this investigation, only individuals who claim that they 'would not mind at all' have been included in the analysis. As in our previous investigation, attitudes toward personal contact with immigrants of either the *same* or a *different* race or ethnic group are presented separately. An overview of Table 4 suggests the importance of both the social contact and cultural marginality hypotheses in explaining attitudes in this instance. Individuals who have been previously exposed to immigrants and belong to the culturally marginalised groups in society are more likely to hold favourable attitudes towards contact with immigrants in either a work or marital situation. The economic self-interest hypothesis, in contrast, fails to emerge as a distinguishing factor in explaining attitudes.

Focusing initially on the social contact explanation, the results in Table 4 are conclusive and in the direction expected. People who have been previously exposed to immigrants, either as personal friends or in a work or residential situation, are more likely to demonstrate pro-immigrant attitudes than those who have not. Furthermore, there is no notable difference in attitudes between immigrants of either the same or a different race and ethnic group in relation to this issue. For example, whereas 53 per cent of respondents who had immigrant friends said that they would 'not mind at all' having a immigrant boss of either the same or a different race or ethnic group, the equivalent figures among respondents who did not have immigrant friends were only 39 and 35 per cent respectively. A similar pattern emerges when the culturally marginalised are considered. As a group, Catholics and individuals who described themselves as members of a discriminated group are more likely to adopt a pro-immigration stance in terms of contact with immigrants in either a work or marital situation than either Protestants or individuals who did not consider themselves members of a discriminated group. For example, whereas 56 per cent of

**Table 4.** The relationship between social exposure, cultural marginality and economic self-interest on attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants

	Percentages: not mind at all			
	Same		Different	
	Boss	Marry	Boss	Marry
<b>Social Exposure:</b>				
<i>Immigrant friends</i>				
Yes	#	#	#	#
No	53.4	58.7	53.2	55.7
<i>Immigrant colleagues</i>				
Yes	#	#	#	#
No	49.7	51.9	49.4	48.8
<i>Current area of residence</i>				
Many/some different race or ethnic group	#	#	#	#
Almost nobody different race or ethnic group	53.0	57.8	53.0	50.9
	39.0	42.2	34.5	34.5
<b>Cultural Marginality:</b>				
<i>Religious denomination</i>				
Catholic	#	#	#	#
Protestant	50.1	56.3	44.2	45.6
	37.4	39.4	35.5	32.1
<i>Membership of discriminated group</i>				
Yes	#	#		
No	54.7	60.0	44.6	44.6
	42.3	46.1	40.3	39.5
<b>Economic Self-Interest:</b>				
<i>Social class</i>				
Service				
Intermediate	42.0	47.9	41.1	43.6
Working	46.0	46.7	39.1	37.9
	40.3	46.4	40.4	37.9
<i>Employment status</i>				
Labour active				
Non-labour active	45.0	47.0	39.5	40.6
	42.4	48.9	42.3	39.9
<i>Feel about household income</i>				
Live comfortably	#			
Coping	37.2	42.8	35.9	37.3
Finding it difficult	47.8	50.0	43.4	41.6
	50.0	53.3	45.4	43.0
<i>Attitudes towards the economy</i>				
Satisfied				
In-between	45.2	45.2	43.2	39.0
Dissatisfied	40.8	47.1	38.6	40.5
	47.1	47.6	39.2	38.4

Note: # Significant group differences at the 0.05 level or above.

Source: Northern Ireland European Social Survey (2003).

Catholics claimed 'not to mind at all' if a close relative was to marry an immigrant of the same race or ethnic background, the equivalent figure among Protestants was lower, 39 per cent.

Multivariate analysis lends much support to these bivariate findings. As the data in Tables 5 and 6 clearly demonstrate, the strongest and most consistent predictors of attitudes in this instance are being a Catholic and having been previously exposed to immigrants in a friendship situation—indicators respectively of the cultural marginality and social contact hypotheses. For example, even when a range of other factors were included in the regression equations, both Catholics and individuals with immigrant friends were significantly more likely to allow individuals of both the *same* and a *different* race or ethnic group as the majority population to come and live in the UK than either Protestants or individuals who did not have established friendship

**Table 5.** The effect of social exposure, cultural marginality and economic self-interest on public preferences concerning the racial or ethnic background of immigrants to the UK

	Regression coefficients: OLS			
	Same		Different	
	b	beta	b	beta
<b>Demographic control variables:</b>				
Gender (men)	0.01	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)
Age (years)	-0.01	(-0.07)	-0.01	(-0.02)
Education:				
Tertiary	0.13**	(0.18)	0.14**	(0.19)
Secondary	0.01*	(0.13)	0.01**	(0.15)
No qualification (omitted category)	—	—	—	—
<b>Social Exposure:</b>				
Friends from another country (yes)	0.01**	(0.17)	0.12**	(0.19)
Colleagues from another country (yes)	0.01	(0.01)	-0.01	(-0.01)
Mixed area of residence (yes)	0.01	(0.02)	0.01**	(0.06)
<b>Cultural Marginality:</b>				
Religion (catholic)	0.11**	(0.22)	0.14**	(0.26)
Discriminated group (member)	0.01	(0.04)	0.01	(0.04)
<b>Economic Self-Interest:</b>				
Class:				
Service	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.02)
Intermediate	0.01	(0.02)	0.01	(0.01)
Working (omitted category)	—	—	—	—
Labour active (yes)	-0.01	(-0.06)	-0.01	(-0.02)
Household income (comfortable)	0.13**	(0.13)	0.01	(0.06)
Attitudes towards economy (satisfied)	0.01	(0.06)	0.01	(0.06)
Constant	0.295**		0.213**	
R-squared	0.192		0.227	
N	602		602	

Note: Standardised regression coefficients are in parentheses. \*, significant at the 0.05 level; \*\*, significant at the 0.01 level. The dependent variables are scored from 0 (allow none) to 1 (allow many).

Source: Northern Ireland European Social Survey (2003).

networks with immigrants. Furthermore, both these groups were also significantly more likely to endorse the view that they would not 'mind at all' if close family members were to marry an immigrant of either the same or a different ethnic group as the majority of the UK population. Clearly, both social exposure and cultural marginality are the two key explanations, independently important, in predicting pro-immigrant attitudes in Northern Ireland.

Of these two theoretical perspectives, however, social exposure stands out as the most consistent explanation of attitudes. For example, contrary to religious affiliation which failed to emerge as a discriminatory factor in determining attitudes towards the appointment of an immigrant boss, prior friendship networks among immigrants, and, to a lesser extent, residence in a racially or ethnically mixed area emerged as the key and sole predictors of attitudes in this instance. As expected, individuals who had already established friendship networks with immigrants were significantly more likely to endorse the view that they would 'not mind at all' having a boss who was of the same or a different racial or ethnic group as the majority of the population in the UK. A similar, albeit less pervasive, pattern emerged when respondents who were living in a racially or ethnically mixed area were considered. Here, only in relation to immigrants from a different racial or ethnic group did respondents who lived in a mixed residential area significantly endorse a pro-immigrant attitude in relation to this issue. In fact, individuals in mixed neighbourhoods were almost twice as likely (the exponential of 0.66) as those who were not to say that they would 'not mind at all' having an immigrant boss of a different racial or ethnic group as the majority of the population in the UK.

This is not to deny, however, the significant effect of other—albeit more secondary and less consistent—predictors, most notably in relation to public preference concerning the racial or ethnic background of immigrants. For example, whereas education emerges as a positive predictor in terms of attitudes towards immigrants of either the *same* or a *different* race or ethnic origin—the better educated being significantly more likely to welcome immigrants in both instances than their lesser educated counterparts—household income was a significant predictor of attitudes in relation only to immigrants of the same race or ethnic group. In other words, in partial support of the economic self-interest hypothesis, those who are more comfortable living on their household income are significantly more likely to welcome immigrants of the *same* race and ethnic group than those who are not. Overall, however, the results suggest that it is previous social exposure to immigrants and, to a somewhat lesser extent, membership of a culturally marginal group, which are the two key explanations of attitudes towards immigrants in Northern Irish society. This is in direct contrast to personal economic circumstances, or the economic self-interest hypothesis, which failed to emerge as an important predictor of attitudes in this instance.

What might explain this current lack of importance of the economic self-interest hypothesis in explaining attitudes towards immigrants in this society? There are two possible explanations for this result. First, in contrast to its British counterparts,



Table 6 (Continued)

	Logistic Regression Coefficients							
	Same				Different			
	Boss		Marry		Boss		Marry	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Labour active (yes)	0.15	(0.25)	-0.02	(0.25)	-0.31	(0.25)	-0.22	(0.26)
Household income (comfortable)	-0.47	(0.46)	0.15	(0.45)	0.04	(0.46)	0.31	(0.49)
Attitudes towards economy (satisfied)	-0.18	(0.50)	-0.20	(0.51)	-0.12	(0.51)	-0.07	(0.02)
Constant	-1.370*		-0.680		-1.037		-1.071	
% of cases correctly predicted	61.7		66.2		66.9		68.9	

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. \*, significant at the 0.05 level; \*\*, significant at the 0.01 level. The dependent variables are two dummy coded variables, scored 1 (not mind at all) and 0 (other).

Source: Northern Ireland European Social Survey (2003).

Northern Ireland has a very small immigrant population. As briefly referred to earlier, 96 per cent of the population are native-born UK residents. Second, although the number of immigrants coming to Northern Ireland has begun to increase in the last few years, particularly since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in 1998, the vast majority are concentrated in self-employed businesses such as catering outlets and are thus not in direct competition with the non-immigrant population in terms of their employment practices. This is not to deny, however, the recent increase in racist attacks, most notably against the Chinese community, which have been perpetuated predominantly by loyalist paramilitaries in working-class Protestant areas. It is these two factors—an extremely small immigrant population and their disproportionate concentration in self-employed businesses—which we suggest may account for the current lack of importance of the economic self-interest hypothesis in explaining attitudes towards immigrants within Northern Ireland.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past two decades, opposition to immigration has become increasingly politicised in many regions of Western Europe. This is also the case in the UK, where the openly racist and explicitly xenophobic BNP has recently emerged as a growing electoral force at the local level. And, while scholars of mass political behaviour have proposed various explanations for why an individual would oppose immigration and support a nativist political movement, the relative impact of these various explanations has rarely been assessed. It is with this omission in mind that this study assesses empirically three alternative theories in explaining attitudes towards immigrants within Northern Ireland: the social contact hypothesis, cultural marginality, and economic self-interest.

Our results suggest that social exposure and cultural marginality are the two key explanations, independently important, in predicting pro-immigrant attitudes in Northern Ireland. Of these two theoretical perspectives, however, social exposure, particularly in terms of a previously established friendship network with immigrants, stands out as the most important and consistent explanation of attitudes. Irrespective of whether public preferences concerning the racial or ethnic background of immigrants or attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants in either a work or marital situation were considered, individuals who have immigrant friends were significantly more likely than those who had not to welcome immigrants and also to endorse the view that they 'would not mind at all' either the appointment of an immigrant boss or if a close family relative were to marry an immigrant. Furthermore this relationship held, irrespective of whether immigrants from the same or a different racial or ethnic background to the majority population were considered. In fact, at least as far as attitudes towards the appointment of an immigrant boss are concerned, prior friendship networks among immigrants and, to a lesser extent, residence in a racially or ethnically mixed area, emerged as the sole predictor of attitudes in this instance.

A similar, albeit less pervasive, pattern emerged when the culturally marginalised, or membership of a religious minority, were considered. Even when a range of other background factors were included in the regression equations, Catholics were significantly more likely than Protestants to welcome immigrants and to endorse the view that they 'would not mind at all' if a close relative was to marry an immigrant. Again this relationship held, irrespective of whether immigrants from the same or a different racial or ethnic background were considered. This was not the case, however, regarding attitudes towards an immigrant boss. Here, irrespective of whether immigrants from the same or a different racial or ethnic background were considered, there was no difference between Catholics and Protestants in relation to this issue.

There are two possible explanations for this absence of a significant religious denominational effect on public attitudes in relation to the appointment of an immigrant boss. First, as previously explained, Northern Ireland has a long tradition of promoting social contact between the two religious communities and this is particularly the case in relation to the work situation. Unlike other areas of potential interaction such as geographical locations of residence, where the amount of contact between the two religious communities has actually decreased over time, inter-religious contact within a work situation, as well as favourable attitudes towards such contact, have increased, albeit somewhat unevenly, since the late 1980s (Breen and Devine 1999; Hughes and Carmichael 1998; Hughes and Donnelly 2003). Second, since the introduction of the Fair Employment Act in 1976, Northern Ireland has introduced a series of anti-discrimination laws specifically related to the promotion of religious equality in the work place. These two factors, we suggest, explain the absence of a religious denomination effect in terms of attitudes towards the appointment of an immigrant boss in the workplace.

The economic self-interest hypothesis, in contrast, failed to emerge as an important predictor of attitudes. As in previous research on anti-immigration sentiment in both Europe and the United States (Citrin *et al.* 1997; Fetzer 2000a, 2000b; Hoskin 1991), individual-level economic effects such as social class, employment status and even subjective views on the economy and household income had little to no effect on either public preferences concerning the racial or ethnic background of immigrants or attitudes towards personal contact with immigrants in either a work or marital situation. In fact, only in relation to public preferences concerning immigrants of the same racial and ethnic group did household income emerge as the sole, albeit secondary, predictor of attitudes. Thus, as is also the case in both the US and Europe, personal economic circumstances are of little importance in determining attitudes towards immigrants within Northern Ireland. Rather, the key predictors in this instance are prior social exposure to immigrants as well as membership of a culturally marginalised group. It is to these two issues, most notably prior social exposure, that pro-immigrant politicians and policy makers should direct their attention. As the results of this analysis clearly show, more so than any other factor, prior contact with immigrants, particularly in terms of established friendship networks, is by far the best

predictor of an overall welcoming attitude towards immigrants and of their acceptability in both a work and marital situation.

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