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Why hidden xenophobia is surging into the open

Sociologist Mathew Creighton discusses how events in Europe in the past month are fed by people's covert prejudices.

By [Emma Marris](#) 



Riots in which people shouted anti-immigration chants occurred in Dublin on the 23 November. Credit: Brian Lawless/PA via Alamy

Anti-immigrant sentiment is playing a major part in current events across Europe and North America. Ireland is reeling from destructive far-right riots in Dublin in November. Also last month, the Dutch Party for Freedom, led by Geert Wilders – a staunch and unapologetic opponent of Islam and immigration – won 37 seats in the 150-seat House of Representatives, the nation’s lower house. In the past two years, Sweden, Italy and Finland have elected right-wing governments. And in the United States, a second Donald Trump presidency threatens.

Xenophobia is intolerance of foreigners or those perceived to be foreign, which can be expressed through discrimination in hiring, housing or education as well as rhetoric, policies and, sometimes, violence. Xenophobia is often explained as a response to economic insecurity¹ – a reaction to increasing competition for jobs and a related decline in wages, perceived to be exacerbated by immigration. But Ireland and the Netherlands have some of the world’s lowest poverty and unemployment rates. So what accounts for the apparent surge in xenophobia?

Sociologist Mathew Creighton at University College Dublin argues in his upcoming book, [Hidden Hate](#), that economic concerns are an “an excuse rather than a motive”. A percentage of the population harbours strategically hidden xenophobic sentiments, he suggests. As a result, what might look like a rise in hatred is often a reduction in the social stigma against expressing xenophobia publicly.

Nature spoke to Creighton about studying opinions that people deliberately hide.

If economic woes don’t cause xenophobia, why do we see a rise in hateful rhetoric about immigrants during recessions?

You might see a shift in overt public sentiment that tracks the economy, but the covert sentiment is relatively



Sociologist Mathew Creighton. Credit: Yasha Butler

stable. That was true in the United States when my colleagues and I compared survey responses from before and after the 2008 financial crisis. So this economic narrative that it's all about jobs and competition for jobs provides a kind of race-neutral or religion-neutral or sociocultural-neutral narrative. But it doesn't necessarily hold up to scrutiny that people are actually changing their mind about things.

Your work is survey-based.

How do you get participants to tell you that they are secretly xenophobic?

We provide people with the ability to express themselves under the cover of permanent, absolute anonymity. Importantly, they must realistically understand that their opinions cannot be disclosed. To do this, we use an experiment. First, we present people with a list of items. Rather than directly ask how they feel about any particular item, we ask how many items on the list they support.

We do this for two groups – a treatment and a control. For a control group, we only include issues unrelated to xenophobia, like the environment or taxation.

Respondents tell us how many items they support in total. For a treatment group, we add a focal item linked to xenophobia to the identical list of items that we gave to the control. For example, in the United States, we added a focal item about support for a closed border. This focal item is something that we suspect some people might be uncomfortable supporting overtly.

We now know the number of items each respondent supports in the treatment and control. Because these are two random samples, we can calculate the average response from each and directly compare. The difference between the average

response to the treatment and to the control, which only differ by a single item, provides an estimate of the proportion who support just the additional focal item. We now have a measure of support for the controversial item without ever requiring anyone to individually disclose their opinion. We can directly compare this estimate with a straightforward, direct question that offers no promise of anonymity to a respondent. The difference between the anonymous response and the direct response offers insight into how xenophobia is hidden.

Did your research prepare you for events in the Netherlands and Ireland?

I find the outcome in the Netherlands to have been fairly predictable. What surprises me more is how much the media characterized it as shocking. People haven't been paying attention. But the Netherlands was clearly on that trajectory for 15 years. When we did our surveys, the gap between what anonymity elicited in terms of response and what an overt response pattern was in the Netherlands was quite large.

But what's the most anonymous act? It's voting. I find the recent public expression of antipathy towards migrants to Ireland to suggest a similar trajectory. So I find Ireland troubling.

If your model is correct, then what we're seeing isn't necessarily a rise in xenophobia, but rather a loss of the mask hiding it. Why now?

The first part of the answer is about why these countries have had norms of tolerance. The norm of tolerance in the Netherlands came from a social-democratic model of equity and equality. In Ireland, it was more like: well, we all have a cousin who is a migrant.

So what has changed? First, there is the rhetoric of elite actors such as politicians. They normalize the narrative. You can signal it, you can dog-whistle it, which is more common today. The level of exposure to migration over time also has implications. In the Netherlands, it goes back a long way. In Ireland, it's relatively recent. This includes

migration after the 2015 European refugee crisis, which is high profile, but small. And then another layer is Ireland's housing crisis, which made housing of refugees come to the foreground. There's always a unique constellation of circumstances.

People are also sceptical of multinational organizations like the European Union and the United Nations. I think it's a very nationalistic moment in Europe, a very nationalistic moment globally. The nation state feels like it is on the march.

I think we'll see an upswing in populism. Ireland is not immune to a political party finding opportunity to consolidate using migration. I don't feel optimistic that, in the short or medium term, we're going to see anything but a greater acceptance of these narratives and a greater shift from covert to overt expression of them.

What can be done to combat the trend? Do you support the [proposed law](#) in Ireland that would criminalize hate speech and incitement to violence?

Policy needs to be careful. Addressing only overt xenophobia can push it underground rather than do anything substantively meaningful. You feel good because people don't say it as much. But you haven't changed anything.

In terms of the proposed law, if anything, it's going to create a sense of victimization among the those who have that sentiment. And that's a big misstep. There'd be more success if they looked at truth in social media. Rather than say "You can't say this," I think it's more effective when people say, "That's actually not true. That's not a thing."

In certain domains, you can use the stigmatization of intolerance. I always think about hiring, because work is one of the things that structures people's life. The more transparent you make the process, the harder it is for that stigma against xenophobia to not be applicable. It is better when the outcome is not determined by anonymous behavior.

But this approach doesn't work in all domains. You wouldn't want to include transparency and scrutiny in voting. Anonymity is part and parcel of a democratic

process.

Is there any way to eliminate xenophobia?

The key check on rising xenophobia is to limit the options for the xenophobe to enjoy the cover of anonymity. This could both blunt the current trends in xenophobia and limit many opportunities to socialize a new generation to be intolerant. Xenophobia deserves the same categorization as other widely reviled forms of bigotry.

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This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

References

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