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Welfare chauvinism in divided societies: the role of national identity in social policy preferences

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Abstract

What drives discriminatory welfare preferences against co-ethnics and intra-national groups in societies shaped by historical division? This article examines how welfare chauvinism—traditionally understood as opposition to granting welfare benefits to immigrants and ethnic minorities—extends to co-ethnics and intra-national groups. Focusing on Germany and South Korea, the study highlights how historical and political divisions shape attitudes toward welfare distribution. Western Germans and South Koreans exhibit discriminatory preferences against Eastern Germans and North Koreans, respectively. Through a comparative experimental approach, this article shows that these exclusionary tendencies align with constructs of national identity and perceptions of “authentic” membership in the nation-state. By situating the findings within the established welfare chauvinism framework, this study refines our understanding of how in-group boundaries and historical legacies influence welfare attitudes, offering insights into the persistence of discrimination even within ostensibly unified societies.

Keywords: national identity; welfare chauvinism; experiments; Germany; South Korea

What can welfare attitudes tell us about nationalism in divided societies? Welfare chauvinism explains natives’ opposition to granting welfare benefits or social assistance to immigrants, and welfare ethnocentrism explains opposition to the extension of benefits to ethnic minorities. Both concepts connect social policy with political attitudes and reflect beliefs that welfare benefits should be restricted to specific groups within a nation based on nativity, ethnicity, or citizenship status. Welfare chauvinism provides a useful framework for exploring exclusionary welfare preferences but has been underutilized in addressing intra-national forms of exclusion.

This study contributes to the welfare chauvinism literature by examining how historical and political divisions shape discriminatory welfare attitudes toward co-nationals.¹ These dynamics persist even in contexts

¹ Both Germany and South Korea have legacies of strong ethnic nationalism, although their trajectories diverge. Germany’s emphasis on ethnic descent diminished in the postwar period, especially after unification and EU integration, as part of a broader shift toward civic nationalism (Brubaker, 1992; Triadafilopoulos, 2011). By contrast, ethnicity was a foundational principle of South Korea’s nation-building project (Shin et al., 1999) and continues to underscore prevailing understandings of national identity. Survey evidence underscores this contrast: in the 2013 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) National Identity module, 70% of South Koreans agreed that shared ancestry is important for being “truly South Korean,” compared with just 40% of Germans who said the same about being “truly German” (ISSP Research Group, 2015). This suggests that co-ethnic affinity remains a more salient and socially endorsed basis of national belonging in South Korea than in Germany.

where national unification is formally recognized and where ethnic majorities constitute, or have constituted, the normative core of national identity. In settings where ethnic or racial distinctions are minimal or politically irrelevant, welfare exclusion reflects a form of intra-national chauvinism rooted in regional or historical division rather than in citizenship or ascriptive group boundaries. Building on existing work, we refine the concept of welfare chauvinism to account for exclusionary preferences directed at co-ethnics within the same polity. The analysis highlights how enduring political and historical cleavages continue to structure perceptions of national membership and shape attitudes toward the distribution of social benefits.

We employ a comparative experimental approach to investigate how welfare chauvinism manifests in Germany and South Korea, using a choice-based conjoint analysis to examine public attitudes toward redistributive policies for co-ethnics. This study refines the welfare chauvinism framework by examining how national identity constructs and historical legacies shape exclusionary welfare preferences within divided societies. Survey respondents evaluate hypothetical profiles based on individual attributes, including origin, age, and occupation, to determine their preferences for support. This method shows the individual and combined influence of these attributes on decision-making, with a primary focus on the quantity of interest: the candidates' origin.

Germany and South Korea are compelling cases for studying welfare chauvinism as they illustrate how historical and political divisions influence perceptions of “deservingness” among co-ethnics. In Germany, reunification created lingering intra-national divides, while in South Korea, the legal and constitutional recognition of North Koreans as citizens contrasts with public attitudes that often view them as outsiders. In both societies, national division is understood as having created distinct in-group and out-group dynamics within an otherwise shared national framework. Thus, they are ideal for exploring how historical and political divisions impact contemporary attitudes toward social policies.

The results show that candidates who originate from Eastern Germany or North Korea are significantly less preferred by Western Germans and South Koreans, respectively. Social discrimination is marked against those of North Korean origin, but the persistence of discrimination against Eastern Germans by those in the West underscores the enduring effects of national division. This division is not based on ethnicity but on perceived differences in national identity among nominally the same group. These distinctions lead to a form of chauvinism that prioritizes welfare benefits for those deemed part of the “true” nation, thereby excluding those from perceived “other” regions within the same national borders. Notably, we find that Western German discrimination toward those from Eastern Germany abates among younger Western Germans—those who came of age under a unified Germany.

No such change is observed for younger South Koreans toward their northern compatriots—division remains in effect. Supplementary analysis indicates that South Koreans with a strong ethnic identity are more likely to exclude non-native co-ethnics, giving rise to a distinct South Korean ethnic nationalism. This is evidence of a civic, constitutional, and territorial idea of a divided nation merging with ethnic ideas to exclude groups from the same ethnic group. Primordial pretensions notwithstanding, one nation has become two, not just in civic and territorial terms but ethnically.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we situate the research question within the welfare chauvinism literature and highlight the specific gap we aim to address in this literature. We also contextualize the chosen cases and explain the logic behind case selection. Then, we review the choice-based conjoint research method and its design, explaining why the method possesses construct validity and is designed to measure the theoretical concepts it is intended to assess accurately. We then report findings from the experiments run in Germany and South Korea. The article concludes with a discussion of the significance of our findings, entertains alternative explanations and potential criticisms, and reviews the research's main contributions.

Key concepts and theoretical framework

Exclusion and the boundaries of welfare: from chauvinism to nationalism

Motivated by the question of how welfare attitudes reflect national identity in divided societies, we begin by distinguishing between three overlapping but analytically distinct concepts: welfare chauvinism, welfare ethnocentrism, and welfare nationalism. Each captures a different logic of boundary-drawing in access to welfare but differs in scope, exclusion mechanisms, and assumptions about deservingness.

Welfare chauvinism, as formulated initially (Andersen & Bjørklund, 1990), refers to the belief that welfare benefits should be reserved for native-born citizens and denied to immigrants. It is often grounded in perceptions of economic threat, moral deservingness, or cultural incompatibility and is commonly

associated with right-wing populist rhetoric (Kitschelt & McGann, 1995; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Welfare ethnocentrism extends this logic by treating ethnic group membership—not legal status—as the principal axis of exclusion, targeting even legal citizens perceived as culturally non-belonging (Ford, 2016; Kros & Coenders, 2019; Nijs et al., 2023).

Empirical studies across European and North American contexts confirm the prevalence of exclusionary preferences associated with welfare chauvinism and ethnocentrism. Majorities often oppose welfare provision for perceived out-groups defined by race, religion, or immigrant background, particularly in the context of rising diversity (Donnelly, 2021; Kootstra, 2016; Mewes & Mau, 2012). These preferences are not marginal: they shape public discourse and policy, normalizing exclusionary attitudes rooted in group-based deservingness (Bell et al., 2023; Wigger, 2022) and activated by perceived threats to identity and cohesion (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Welfare nationalism, by contrast, has been deployed in multiple ways. Some studies treat it as synonymous with welfare chauvinism (Eger et al. 2020a; Ketola & Nordensvard, 2018), while others use it to describe an integrative project that links redistribution to national cohesion (Bay et al., 2016; Béland & Lecours, 2006; Keskinen, 2016). Cook (2024) advances this broader perspective, conceptualizing welfare nationalism as encompassing both exclusionary and inclusionary approaches to migrant incorporation, with the balance shaped by political institutions, migration regimes, and prevailing national narratives. When defined in integrative terms, welfare nationalism reflects the normative use of welfare to build solidarity across internal differences. It can entail exclusion, but that exclusion is often secondary to a primary goal of national cohesion. While welfare nationalism emphasizes the use of redistribution to foster nation-building, its integrative logic often presumes a shared or uncontested national identity. In contexts where internal unity is fragmented or co-ethnics are differentially incorporated, this assumption may not hold.

Our contribution builds on this insight by incorporating the integrative aims of welfare nationalism into a refined understanding of welfare chauvinism. Rather than focus on welfare exclusion directed at immigrants or ethnic outsiders, we examine how redistributive boundaries emerge within legally unified populations that are also largely co-ethnic. In such settings, internal divisions rooted in region, political history, or perceived cultural differences become the basis for denying welfare to those formally recognized as members of the national community. To address this, we refine the framework of welfare chauvinism to account for intra-national exclusion where legal and ethnic boundaries are held constant. This refinement shifts the framework's scope from exclusion based on foreignness or minority status to exclusion among nominal co-nationals, whose formal membership is recognized but whose national belonging is contested due to regionally and politically shaped histories of division.

Intra-national exclusion: refining welfare chauvinism in divided societies

We refine welfare chauvinism to capture exclusionary preferences toward co-ethnic nationals who are perceived as less than full members of the nation. In typically studied contexts, exclusion is aimed at migrants or ethnic minorities. However, in divided societies, exclusion may target populations who share citizenship and ethnicity but whose historical or regional background renders their belonging suspect.

This logic applies to both Germany and South Korea. In Germany, Easterners are full citizens and overwhelmingly ethnic Germans, members of the national majority whose shared ancestry with Western Germans has not prevented their portrayal as culturally and economically backward (Alesina & Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007; Campa & Serafinelli, 2019).²

South Korea, by contrast, remains constitutionally committed to national unity while administratively and socially divided from the North. North Koreans who resettle in the South are legally recognized as citizens under South Korean law.³ Even after legal recognition as citizens, they are frequently viewed with suspicion or condescension and face both structural and symbolic marginalization (Denney & Green,

² Official statistics from the German Federal Statistical Office show that foreign nationals make up less than 10 percent of the population across the eastern states (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024), reflecting the former GDR's ethnic homogeneity under socialism and its limited exposure to postwar immigration (Panayi, 2004). The Eastern population thus remains mainly comprising ethnic Germans.

³ Article Three of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea states: "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands," thereby asserting sovereignty over the entire peninsula. This constitutional provision forms the basis for recognizing North Koreans as citizens. The Constitutional Court confirmed this principle in Nationality Act Case 12-2 KCCR 167, 97Hun-Ka12, decided on 31 August 2000. However, this classification applies only after resettlement and official processing by South Korean authorities. As Greitens (2021) argues, citizenship acquisition for North Koreans is neither automatic nor unconditional, but rather an incremental and contingent process shaped by geopolitical and bureaucratic constraints.

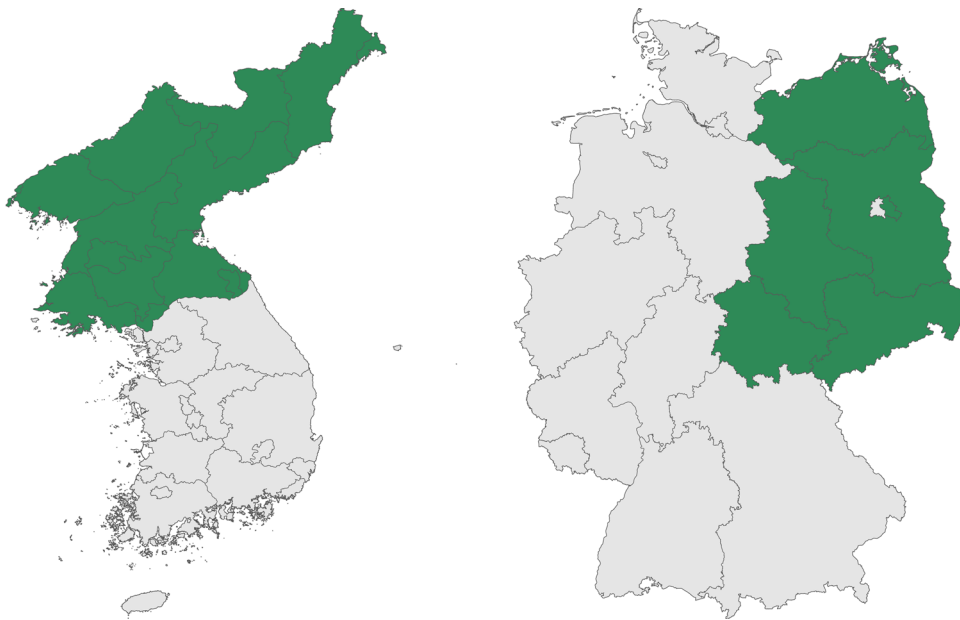


Figure 1. Maps of the Korean Peninsula and Germany. Note: Highlighted jurisdictions show current North Korea (L) and the former German Democratic Republic (R), including East Berlin. Data sourced from the GADM database with custom mapping for Berlin.

2024; Hough & Bell, 2020; Kim & Jang, 2007). Unlike the German case, where generational turnover has attenuated some exclusionary tendencies, exclusion in Korea remains deeply entrenched across age cohorts. This makes South Korea a particularly stark case of intra-national exclusion within a legal framework of unity. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the divisions under consideration, showing how region and history shape perceptions of belonging, whether across a dissolved border in Germany or a persistent geopolitical boundary in Korea, within states that claim national unity.

These cases show that citizenship and co-ethnicity do not guarantee inclusion. A growing body of research on co-ethnic return migration and hierarchical citizenship corroborates this insight. Studies in East Asia show that individuals with formal citizenship may still be marginalized due to perceived cultural or ideological differences shaped by regional origin, political incorporation, or historical migration status (Denney et al., 2023; He, 2022; Tsuda, 2022). Similarly, work on origins-based discrimination shows how internal boundaries persist within citizenship regimes (Denney & Green, 2021; Koopmans, Veit & Yemane, 2019; Scherr, 2015; Ward & Denney, 2022; Zick et al., 2008).

We modify the scope conditions of welfare chauvinism to account for exclusion directed at legally recognized co-nationals whose regional or political backgrounds render their national membership suspect. This conceptual extension backs the experimental design introduced in the following section, where we outline how we test for the kind of intra-national divisions that shape public attitudes toward redistributive support.

Data and methodology

Experimental methods, such as audit studies and correspondence experiments, can measure social discrimination. These approaches involve creating controlled scenarios in which individuals with different characteristics, such as criminal records or ethnic backgrounds, apply for the same job positions. The impact of these characteristics on employment opportunities can then be measured and analyzed (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003; Guul et al., 2019; Pager, 2003; Quillian et al., 2017). We take inspiration from existing studies in our own design.

The social discrimination experiment examines preferences for providing employment support in Germany and South Korea. We are not strictly interested in discrimination in the labor market but rather using a hypothetical scenario that leverages considerations about a hypothetical employment and job training program the state provides to measure what people think about national others. This experiment investigates social discrimination against co-ethnic citizens in the context of providing support for job training. Respondents are tasked with evaluating the profiles of two hypothetical candidates based on several attributes, including age, family status, sex, occupation, criminal record, and place of birth. After evaluating the profiles, respondents decide which candidate to prioritize for job support.

In this choice-based conjoint design (Bansak et al., 2021; Hainmueller et al., 2014), respondents are exposed to combinations of attributes across different profiles, enabling us to understand the attributes' individual and combined effects. The primary attribute of interest is the individual's origin—specifically, whether they are from the territory of the former GDR (now eastern Germany) or North Korea. Respondents are asked to imagine a new government jobs training program providing monetary and counselor support for human capital development. They are then tasked with prioritizing candidates for support by choosing among pairs of typical working-class people (i.e., those most likely to benefit from an employment-supporting intervention).

The attributes are designed for comparability across the Korean and German contexts, but the individual's origin matches the national context and geography. By assessing German respondents' reactions to these profiles, the design aims to identify any differential treatment or opinions arising from Eastern German origins, thus potentially revealing prejudice against individuals of Eastern descent. The same design logic holds for South Korea, where the focus is on individuals from North Korea. Table 1 outlines the design's attributes and values.

We administered surveys between September and November 2023 using (semi-)nationally representative samples from the online Qualtrics panel population in Germany and South Korea. 2,400 Germans completed six (6) tasks, and 2,000 South Korean respondents assessed seven (7) tasks. After careful quality checks, the final sample sizes were 1,882 for Germany and 1,768 for South Korea. Appendix A of the Supplementary Information provides a more detailed overview of the samples.

The conjoint experimental design is particularly suited to assessing discriminatory attitudes based on origin. Notably, the conjoint design mitigates the potential effects of social desirability by presenting respondents with profiles that mirror residents in their respective countries without explicitly emphasizing any single origin (Horiuchi et al., 2022). Respondents may express their genuine perceptions without the psychological pressure of conforming to societal norms when presented with such profiles. For instance, a respondent who harbors biases might exhibit discriminatory judgments and feel more comfortable doing so, given the sensitive quantity of interest—origins—is embedded within the

Table 1. Attributes and levels for job training conjoint experiment

Attribute	Values	Motivation
Age	25; 35; 46; 62	Control attribute; captures possible age-based preferences or prejudices.
Family status	Single, no children; Married, 1 child; Married, 2 children; Single, 1 child	Control attribute; assesses preferences related to marital status and dependent care.
Sex	Male; Female	Control attribute; allows identification of gender-based bias.
Occupation	Part-time convenience store employee (ROK)/supermarket employee (DE); Department store employee; Security guard; Store manager	Control attribute; captures occupational status effects, from entry-level to supervisory roles.
Criminal record	No record; petty theft; tax evasion	Tests whether criminal history moderates support; may reflect a moral deservingness heuristic.
Origin at birth	Saxony, DE*; Hamburg, DE; Bavaria, DE; Bucharest, RO [Germany]; North Hamgyong, DPRK*; Busan, ROK; Gyeonggi Province, ROK; Hanoi, VN [South Korea]	Main attribute of interest. Compares native, intra-national, and foreign origins. Saxony and North Hamgyong marked (*) as primary quantities of interest, used to test intra-national discrimination.

multifaceted profile. Furthermore, by maintaining consistent attributes across both German and South Korean contexts—except for the origin variable—the design ensures that any response differences are most likely attributed to origin-based biases. This consistency enables a robust assessment of the discriminatory attitudes prevalent in both countries.

The order of the attributes and the values is randomly assigned. However, we place randomization constraints for the attribute “Criminal record” to better reflect reality. Seventy percent of all profiles contained the “No record” value, with 15% each rounding out some kind of record, either “Petty theft” or “Tax evasion.” Notably, we examine whether criminal records have a moderating effect on preferences (i.e., whether some people are more punished over others or if the past record enables more discriminatory attitudes). This study included the criminal record variable to explore its interaction with perceptions of deservingness in welfare allocation. Previous research suggests that criminality often intersects with moral judgments about entitlement to social benefits. Research finds that out-groups are considerably more punished for criminal behavior (Ousey & Unnever, 2012).

Country-specific contexts offer additional insights. In Germany, Eastern Germans may face harsher judgments due to lingering stereotypes associated with socialism, including perceptions of dependency or economic inefficiency. These stereotypes could amplify the punitive effects of a criminal record, particularly for Eastern Germans seeking welfare benefits. Similarly, in South Korea, North Koreans may face compounded discrimination, as their criminal record may reinforce existing biases rooted in their association with the North Korean state. These dynamics reflect how criminal records, as markers of deviance, intersect with broader intra-national stigmas, enabling the perpetuation of exclusionary attitudes. Figure 2 shows an example of the experimental design.

Our analysis computes the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) to analyze data derived from forced-choice responses in a choice-based conjoint design. This estimation strategy calculates the average effect of each attribute level on the probability of a candidate being chosen, relative to a baseline attribute level, by averaging over the distribution of other attributes. Using this method, we can assess the independent contribution of each attribute to the selection decision. AMCEs provide a clear interpretation of how different attribute levels compare to a fixed reference point, making them particularly valuable for understanding the relative influence of specific factors in decision-making processes within the conjoint framework. They also provide a straightforward method for conducting hypothesis tests. We specify the co-national origin of interest (North Hamgyong, Saxony) as the reference level and then examine whether

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Age	36	45
Family status	Single, no children	Married, 2 children
Sex	Male	Female
Current or recent occupation	Security guard	Store manager
Criminal record	No record	Petty theft
Origin at birth	Saxony, DE	Hamburg, DE
Which candidate would you prioritize?	☐ Candidate A	☐ Candidate B

Figure 2. The experimental design.

the differences in effect of the other origin levels are statistically significant.⁴ We also report the marginal means from the baseline model as a check on the main AMCEs model.⁵

The use of a forced-choice conjoint design enables comparative analysis of respondents' welfare preferences across multiple dimensions. While this design requires participants to prioritize one profile over another, which may not fully reflect real-world decision-making, it offers distinct methodological advantages for isolating preference structures and minimizing social desirability bias.⁶ Given our theoretical interest, we focus on Western German responses in the German sample and only those who identify as ethnically German.⁷ In the South Korean sample, we look at all responses.

Findings: welfare chauvinism and intra-national divides

Figure 3 presents the marginal means and AMCEs for the candidate attributes of criminal record and origin in Western Germany and South Korea. All attribute values for the marginal means are reported in Appendix C of the [Supplementary Information](#). The means are expressed as percentages, representing the probability that a candidate's profile, which contains the specified attribute, is preferred. Both populations heavily penalize candidates with a previous criminal record, with a likelihood of less than 35% for such profiles being selected. This equates to a 25–30 percentage point (pp) decrease in the probability of selection for candidates with any record. Candidates without a prior record are strongly preferred, all else being equal.

For the origin attribute, we find that both Western Germans and South Koreans exhibit significant discrimination against their national others—those from Saxony or North Hamgyong. This constitutes clear evidence of a particular form of welfare chauvinism. Eastern Germans were less preferred (a 3pp difference) compared with candidates from northern (Hamburg) or southern (Bavaria) Germany, although respondents expressed a stronger preference for candidates from the former GDR over immigrants from Romania (a 10pp difference). These patterns indicate durable national boundaries between East and West, shaped by the economic and social dynamics entrenched during and after reunification. These boundaries continue to structure perceptions of deservingness in the allocation of welfare benefits.

In South Korea, welfare chauvinism is even more pronounced. Those of North Korean origin were only slightly more preferred than non-co-ethnic immigrants, despite their legal status as citizens. Their marginal mean is significantly less than 50%, indicating a high likelihood of exclusion from redistributive benefits. Notably, candidates of North Korean origin were 14 pps less preferred than those from Busan, and 13 points less preferred than those from Gyeonggi Province. This demonstrates a clear preference for native South Koreans. These disparities reflect entrenched national boundaries between North and South, shaped by the peninsula's political division and the enduring challenges of integrating North Korean migrants. These boundaries continue to structure perceptions of deservingness in welfare allocation and reflect attitudes toward "authentic" national membership.

Next, we examine the interaction between criminal record and origin (Figure 4). The interaction finding indicates that prior wrongdoing disproportionately amplifies exclusionary attitudes in South Korea compared with Germany. In South Korea, candidates of North Korean and Vietnamese origin with a criminal record face the strongest penalties, reflecting how cultural stigmas compound perceptions of deviance. In contrast, Western Germans penalize immigrants more than Eastern Germans, but the magnitude of

⁴ To assess the sensitivity of our results to the choice of reference levels, we conducted reference category sensitivity analysis using the "cregg" package in R (Leeper, 2023). Following best practices, we re-estimated our models using alternative reference categories for each attribute. The results remained consistent across these specifications, indicating that our findings are robust to the choice of reference levels.

⁵ Marginal means compute the average impact of each attribute level on the dependent variable, which in this case involves selecting a preferred candidate for job support. By averaging across other attribute levels, we isolate the effect of individual attribute levels, focusing on those of particular interest.

⁶ The forced-choice design is particularly well-suited for studying welfare chauvinism because it compels respondents to reveal their relative preferences, reducing the likelihood of socially desirable responses. Unlike rating or ranking tasks, which allow respondents to avoid difficult trade-offs, forced-choice designs mimic real-world policy decisions where resources are finite and prioritization is necessary (Hainmueller et al., 2014). By presenting respondents with realistic, multidimensional trade-offs, this method ensures more robust and interpretable results, even if it may exaggerate binary decision-making tendencies.

⁷ The jurisdictions constituting Western Germany are: Baden-Württemberg, Saarland, Rhineland-Palatinate, Hesse, Bavaria, Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Lower Saxony. We include only those who resided in a Western German jurisdiction at the age of 18. This simple measurement strategy is meant to capture those socialized under the institutions of the West. We include those who lived in West Berlin before unification, but otherwise exclude Berlin residents.

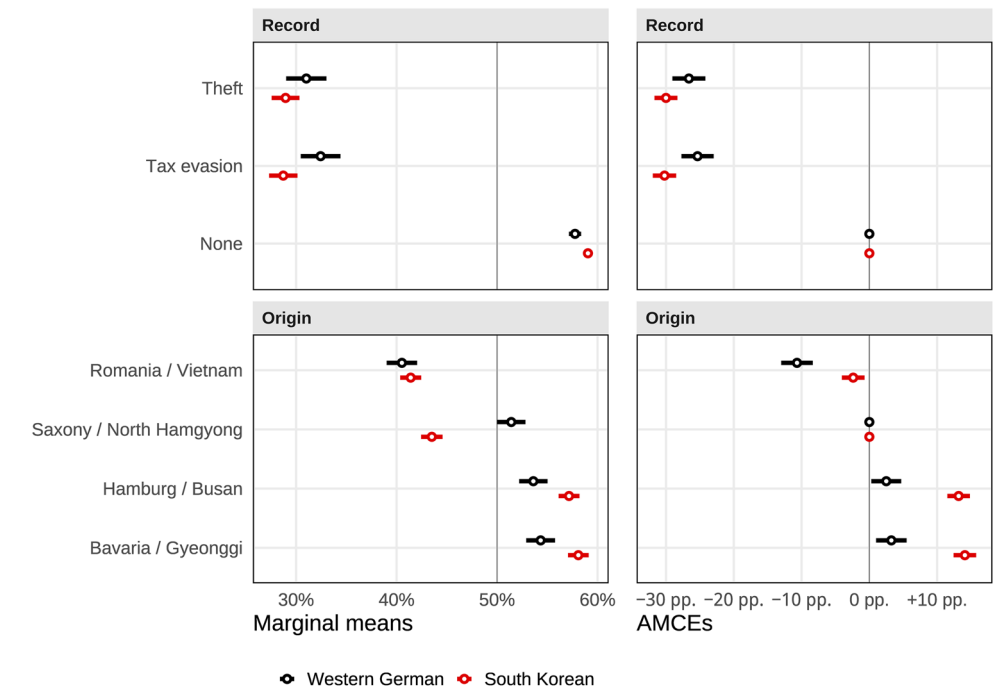


Figure 3. Marginal means and AMCEs of candidate attribute levels, with a focus on Record and Origin. Note: The analysis is based on the benchmark Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model with clustered standard errors. Marginal means represent the expected value of the outcome variable for each attribute level, holding all other attributes at their average levels. The AMCEs estimate the average change in the outcome variable associated with a particular attribute level, relative to a reference level, averaged across the distribution of all other attributes. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. AMCEs = average marginal component effects.

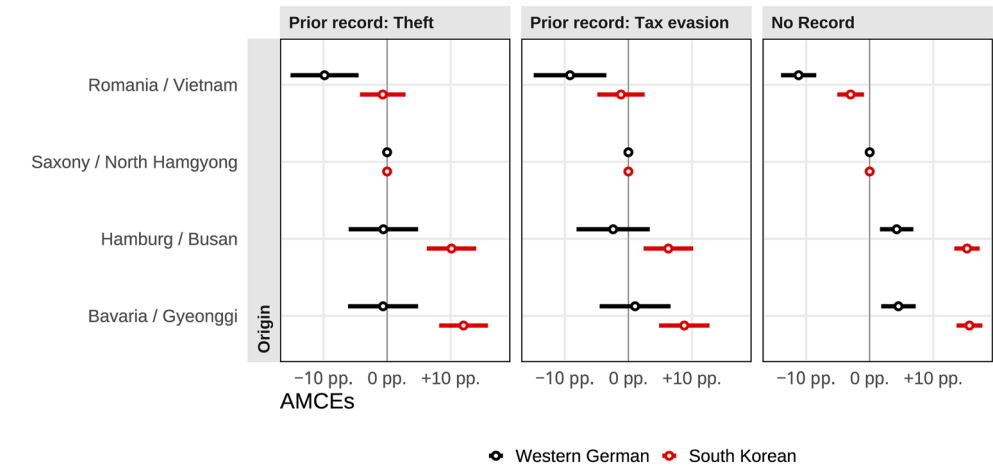


Figure 4. AMCEs for the attribute levels of the interaction (Record * Origin). Note: The analysis is based on an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model with clustered standard errors. The AMCEs estimate the average change in the outcome variable associated with a particular attribute level, relative to a reference level, averaged across the distribution of all other attributes. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. AMCEs = average marginal component effects.

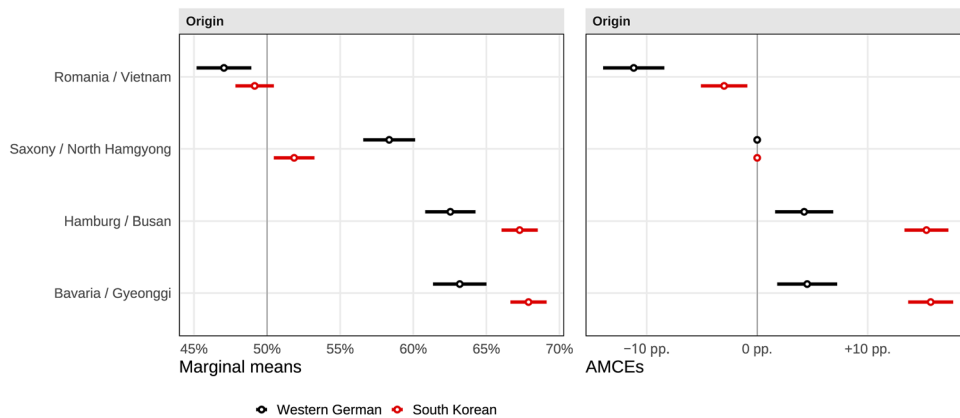


Figure 5. Marginal means and AMCEs for the attribute levels of Origin (“No record” profiles only). Note: The analysis is based on an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model with clustered standard errors. Marginal means represent the expected value of the outcome variable for each attribute level, holding all other attributes at their average levels. The AMCEs estimate the average change in the outcome variable associated with a particular attribute level, relative to a reference level, averaged across the distribution of all other attributes. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. AMCEs = average marginal component effects.

the effect is smaller (10pp). These results suggest that criminal records exacerbate welfare chauvinism where broader stigmas about cultural or regional identity already exist.

To emphasize the primary findings, we isolate candidate preferences by origin for profiles with “no record” only, as shown in Figure 5, and plot the AMCEs again. The focus on profiles without criminal records reflects the most typical and realistic scenarios, given that most individuals do not have a criminal history. By focusing on these profiles, we highlight the central patterns of welfare chauvinism that emerge from the data.

The results highlight moderate welfare chauvinism among Western Germans toward co-nationals from the East, with a 4.5–5pp difference in preference relative to candidates from the West. This suggests that, while Eastern Germans are penalized compared with Western Germans, they are still favored over immigrants, reflecting enduring regional biases. In South Korea, welfare chauvinism is more pronounced, with North Koreans facing significantly greater exclusion. Candidates of North Korean origin are 15–16pp less likely to be preferred compared with native South Koreans from Busan or Gyeonggi Province. These findings indicate how cultural and linguistic differences, as well as lingering associations with the North Korean state, might amplify exclusionary attitudes.⁸

Subgroup analysis: ethnocentrism and national identity strength

Having established the primary results, we now examine theoretically and intuitively motivated subgroup analysis to assess the robustness and relevance of the findings. Appendices A and B in the [Supplementary Information](#) provide an overview of the questions and measurements used here. First, we assess the role of ethnocentrism in discriminatory attitudes, with a particular focus on whether co-ethnics who are also co-nationals face exclusionary welfare attitudes among those with ethnocentric views. For this purpose, ethnocentrism is measured by respondents’ views on the importance of common ancestry and being born in the country as important to being “true” nationals (Kunovich, 2009). From a national identity battery of questions, we count those who think both are “very” or “somewhat” important on a 4-point Likert scale as ethnocentric respondents.

This approach clarifies an understanding of ethnocentric discrimination in welfare policies by discerning whether negative attitudes toward co-ethnics arise from ethnocentric views rather than from broader national identity factors. By focusing on respondents who prioritize shared ancestry and nativity, we can more rigorously test our claim that co-ethnic nationals—those from Saxony in the former GDR

⁸ The enduring symbolic threat South Koreans associate with North Korean migrants is not a main focus of this article, but the finding aligns with previous research (e.g., Denney & Green, 2024).

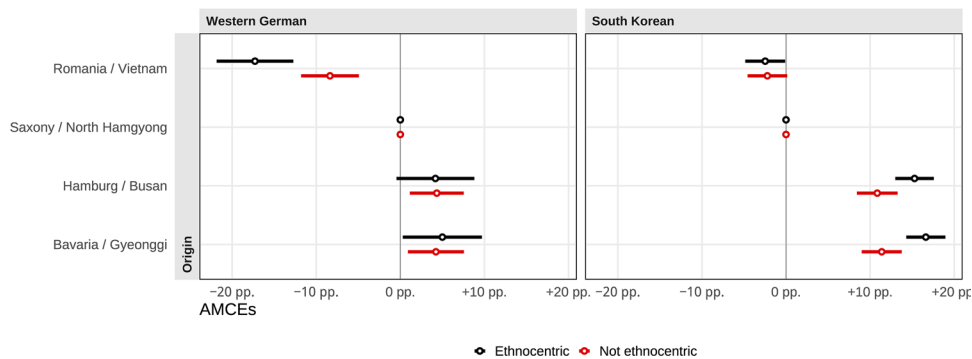


Figure 6. AMCEs of Origin attribute levels by subgroup, based on ethnocentrism (“No record” profiles only). Note: The analysis is based on an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model with clustered standard errors. The AMCEs estimate the average change in the outcome variable associated with a particular attribute level, relative to a reference level, averaged across the distribution of all other attributes. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. AMCEs = average marginal component effects.

and North Hamgyong in North Korea—are subject to national othering. In these cases, individuals from these regions are technically part of a unified national identity, yet they often face exclusion as if they were from a separate nation. The findings are reported in Figure 6.

For both samples, ethnocentrism does not significantly moderate exclusionary attitudes, but some notable patterns emerge. Non-ethnocentric Western Germans are less likely to discriminate against immigrants, reflecting a broader rejection of welfare chauvinism among this group. Similarly, non-ethnocentric South Koreans demonstrate slightly lower exclusionary attitudes toward North Koreans, although preferences for native South Koreans remain pronounced. These findings suggest that while ethnocentrism intensifies exclusionary attitudes, welfare chauvinism also operates independently, shaped by national and regional constructs.

We further test the idea that co-national discrimination is driven by welfare chauvinism and national exclusion by examining subgroups defined by the strength of national identification. By differentiating between individuals with relatively strong vs. weak national identities, we aim to further probe the motivations behind exclusionary welfare policy preferences more closely. This distinction helps specify whether attitudes are shaped by heightened in-group preferences tied to national identity, thereby affirming its central role in exclusionary welfare attitudes.

Furthermore, examining the attitudes of those with strong national identities may show the extremes of welfare chauvinism. If the strongest expressions of national identity are associated with the most exclusionary welfare attitudes, it would significantly strengthen the argument that heightened allegiance to the in-group intensifies support for discriminatory welfare policies. This finding underscores the impact of national identity constructs on social policy orientations within a nation.

We use a 10-point scale to measure the strength of national identity. Respondents scoring above the median value, established at 8 for both populations in our samples, are counted as having a strong national identity. Those scoring below this threshold are considered to lack a strong national identity. Figure 7 shows the outcome.

For the German sample, the level of welfare chauvinism and nationalist exclusion varies with the strength of national identity. Among those with a weaker national identity, Romanian candidates face less discrimination. Saxony-born residents are equally preferred as those from Bavaria and only slightly less preferred than candidates from Hamburg; however, the difference with Hamburg is not statistically significant, as the 95% confidence interval includes zero. Most notably, for those with strong German identities, the discrimination toward Easterners persists and, in fact, slightly increases.

The strength of national identity conditions welfare chauvinism in Germany but not in South Korea. In the German sample, exclusionary attitudes toward Romanian and Eastern German candidates are more pronounced among those with stronger national identities, suggesting that heightened in-group identification amplifies internal boundary-making. In South Korea, however, exclusionary attitudes

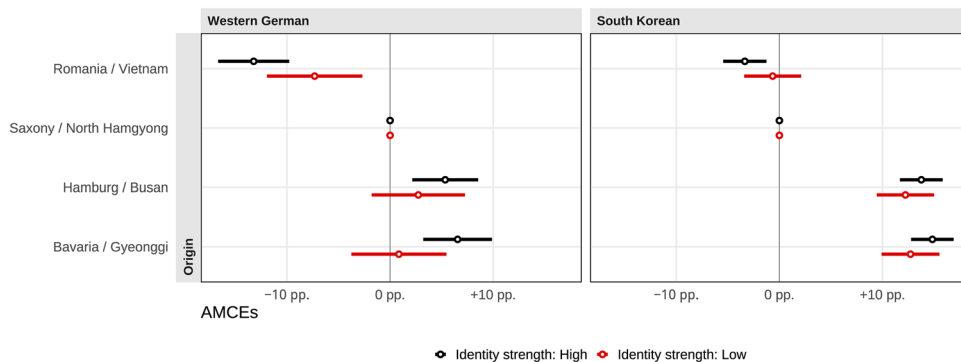


Figure 7. AMCEs of Origin attribute levels by subgroup, based on strength of national identity (“No record” profiles only). Note: The analysis is based on an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model with clustered standard errors. The AMCEs estimate the average change in the outcome variable associated with a particular attribute level, relative to a reference level, averaged across the distribution of all other attributes. The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. AMCEs = average marginal component effects.

toward North Koreans remain consistent regardless of identity strength, indicating that national exclusion is deeply entrenched. These findings underscore how national identity interacts with context-specific legacies of division and institutional boundary construction to shape intra-national welfare exclusion.

Conclusion and discussion

Welfare chauvinism and ethnocentrism intersect with social policy and socio-political attitudes, shaping the belief that welfare benefits should be restricted to native-born or ethnic majority residents (Careja & Harris, 2022; Ford, 2016). However, these concepts fail to fully capture exclusionary dynamics that arise within ethnic or national groups. In contexts where ethnic differences are not the primary division—such as Western vs. Eastern Germans or South vs. North Koreans—exclusionary welfare preferences are shaped by national or regional distinctions rooted in perceptions of identity (Denney & Green, 2021; Koopmans, Veit & Yemane, 2019; Scherr, 2015; Seol & Skrentny, 2009; Zehring & Domahidi, 2022; Zick et al., 2008). Recognizing these dynamics necessitates revising welfare chauvinism to account for intra-national divisions driven by historical legacies and perceptions of national identity.

By drawing on welfare nationalism research (Béland & Lecours, 2006; Keskinen, 2016; McEwen, 2002, 2006; Suszycki, 2011), we build on the idea that welfare provision can serve integrative or exclusionary purposes depending on how national identity is perceived. While welfare nationalism emphasizes the use of redistribution to consolidate national cohesion, it often presumes a shared national identity or overlooks divisions within the ethnic majority. These limitations make it less suitable for analyzing exclusionary preferences among legally recognized co-ethnics in divided societies.

Instead of proposing a new concept, this study proposes refining welfare chauvinism as a framework to encompass intra-national dynamics. Some studies (e.g., Eger et al., 2020b) treat welfare nationalism as interchangeable with welfare chauvinism, but the latter, when revised, offers a clearer account of exclusion within formally unified, ethnically homogeneous settings. This expanded framework better captures how perceived national inauthenticity, rather than ethnic or legal difference, can structure exclusionary preferences in contexts shaped by internal historical and political divisions.

Our findings demonstrate that welfare chauvinism manifests in intra-national contexts. Western Germans and South Koreans, for example, are less likely to prioritize welfare support for co-nationals from historically divided regions—Eastern Germans and North Koreans—relative to dominant in-group members. These preferences reflect exclusionary attitudes not rooted in ethnic or citizenship status, but in contested national identity and the enduring legacies of political division.

Additional analysis presented in Appendix C of the [Supplementary Information](#) provides further context for understanding the nature of welfare chauvinism in Germany and South Korea across political

and socio-demographic subgroups (Supplementary Figures C.1-C.10). Two findings are particularly notable.

First, opposition to extending welfare to intra-national and co-ethnic groups cannot be explained by perceptions of prior sufficiency in aid. While some discriminatory attitudes may stem from “assistance fatigue,” this rationale does not account for the broader patterns observed. Many respondents simultaneously support general welfare provision while opposing assistance for these specific groups (see Supplementary Figure C.3). These findings underscore the role of selective exclusion in welfare preferences, even within nations ostensibly committed to equality. In both Germany and South Korea, historical legacies and contested national identity constructs shape redistributive preferences in ways not reducible to ethnic or migrant distinctions. This aligns with research showing that the integration of migrants—including co-ethnics—depends not only on formal legal status or structural incorporation but also on the psychology of national belonging (Hur, 2022).

Second, demographic factors, particularly generational differences, show significant differences in welfare attitudes in Germany. Western German cohorts who grew up in a reunified nation generally exhibit less welfare chauvinistic attitudes and, specifically, notably less intra-national discrimination compared with the older, pre-unification generation. These generational differences, detailed in Supplementary Figure C.6, suggest that as historical divisions become less salient over time, discriminatory attitudes may gradually erode.

Moving beyond the two cases and the supplementary analysis, we see reason to expect similar patterns in other regionally contested polities where national belonging remains unsettled, such as Scotland in the United Kingdom, Québec in Canada (McEwen, 2006), and Catalonia in Spain (Keating, 1996). In such contexts, welfare policies may reflect and reinforce pre-existing social identity boundaries, contributing to narratives of belonging and exclusion and, in turn, to broader patterns of social fragmentation. Addressing these divides requires policy approaches and public narratives that emphasize shared membership and civic inclusion. Future research could investigate how regionalist or separatist movements interact with welfare chauvinism. For instance, do exclusionary welfare attitudes extend to non-Scottish Britons who oppose welfare provisions for hypothetical Scottish claimants? Similar investigations in Québec, Catalonia, and other divided societies might clarify how welfare chauvinism operates in contexts of internal division.

Future research could also examine how demographic change, political realignment, and shifting national narratives affect the expression of welfare chauvinism within divided societies. Tracking how redistributive preferences evolve in relation to generational turnover, regional mobilization, or institutional reform can clarify the scope conditions under which intra-national exclusion persists or recedes. Such work would deepen understanding of welfare chauvinism’s foundations and clarify its relevance in contexts where internal boundaries, rather than ethnic or migratory differences, shape perceptions of deservingness.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Policy and Society* online.

Data availability

The data underlying this article are available in Denney, Steven. 2025. “Replication Data for: Welfare Chauvinism in Divided Societies: The Role of National Identity in Social Policy Preferences.” Harvard Dataverse. <https://doi.org/doi:10.7910/DVN/WYBIAK>.

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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