

# Illiberal Norms, Media Reporting, and Bureaucratic Discrimination: Evidence from State-Citizen Interactions in Germany

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## Abstract

Recent research on the rise of radical right-wing parties highlights the activation of deeply rooted illiberal norms in society, including hostility toward marginalized groups. Negative media reporting on immigration may reinforce this trend. Although previous studies have examined the effect of far-right normalization on voting, little is known about its broader societal impacts. Therefore, we ask how regional variation in anti-immigrant sentiments interacts with negative reporting to shape the behavior of street-level bureaucrats. Our theory posits that street-level bureaucrats are more likely to engage in discrimination if they work in areas with widespread anti-immigrant

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sentiments; a pattern that can be amplified by negative news on immigrants. To test our expectations, we conducted a preregistered survey experiment with 1400 German welfare caseworkers. Our findings reveal that regional norms significantly affect the likelihood of discrimination, especially after exposure to negative media frames. These results raise concerns about the impartiality of state institutions amidst rising illiberal norms.

## Keywords

radical right, anti-immigrant sentiment, bureaucratic discrimination, media framing, survey experiment

## Introduction

Over the past decade, many Western democracies have experienced the rise of the far right (Kitschelt, 2018; Valentim, 2021, 2024). In countries such as Germany, Denmark, and the United States, radical right-wing parties have enjoyed considerable electoral successes and become a persistent force in national politics. While a growing body of literature examines the social and economic roots of this rapid rise (Ferrara, 2023; Krause & Matsunaga, 2023; Kurer, 2020; Marx & Naumann, 2018; Wurthmann et al., 2021) as well as its political consequences (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Valentim, 2021), its broader societal impacts on the behavioral patterns of state agents and specifically *street-level bureaucrats*—a term coined by Lipsky (1980, 2010)—remain underexplored. However, assessing the effects of the rise of the far-right on public administrative behavior is of significant societal importance because caseworkers play a key role in delivering essential social services to residents, thus shaping the state's legitimacy and reputation.

Valentim (2021, 2024) suggests that the normalization of radical right-wing parties has allowed individuals to more openly express extremist views that were previously deemed socially unacceptable. Accordingly, we observe the large-scale revelation and manifestation of illiberal norms such as (1) xenophobia, (2) a preference for the exclusion of marginalized groups, and (3) the acceptance of social inequalities as natural (Mudde, 2022; Valentim, 2021). Media outlets, especially tabloids, are also crucial in this process by disproportionately reporting on crimes or welfare fraud associated with immigrants (Alesina et al., 2023; Eberl et al., 2018; Wirz et al., 2018). Persistent negative reporting of this kind heightens public concerns about immigration (Carvalho et al., 2024), fosters anti-immigrant attitudes (Igartua et al., 2012; Wirz et al., 2018), and increases voting intentions for populist parties (Štětka et al., 2021). Moreover, media discourses on immigration often carry negative (implicit) connotations or adverse (explicit) evaluations and

thus align with far-right rhetoric, further normalizing illiberal norms (Katsourides & Pachita, 2023).

While the effects of the normalization of radical right-wing attitudes on voting patterns have been comprehensively examined, little is known about how illiberal norms in conjunction with negative media framing of immigrants affect other politically relevant dimensions of government and public organization, particularly the behavior of state agents. This is a topic worthy of a rigorous investigation because these state bureaucrats operate against the background of regional cultural norms and are often deeply embedded in their region's social structures (Meyers et al., 2007; Pepinsky et al., 2017; Vogler, 2019). These circumstances could make them easily susceptible to shifts in societal sentiments toward and stereotypes about immigrants. Given the substantial discretion public officials hold in implementing policies (Lipsky, 1980, 2010), the reliance on stereotypes in administrative decision-making processes—a phenomenon known as *bureaucratic discrimination*—raises serious concern about the basic fairness of public institutions toward all social groups. Hence, this article poses a set of interrelated questions: How does regional variation in illiberal political sentiments affect the behavioral patterns of street-level bureaucrats? Do such sentiments increase the likelihood of discriminatory behavior on their part? And are these discriminatory practices further amplified by negative media reporting about immigration?

In this article, we specifically focus on how the interaction between radical right-wing attitudes and negative media reporting on immigration shape the treatment of immigrants through welfare state bureaucrats. Our theoretical framework synthesizes insights from two key literatures: First, bureaucratic discrimination studies highlight how regional political and societal factors lead to unequal decision-making (Adam et al., 2020; Gschwind et al., 2021; Gundacker et al., 2025; Schram et al., 2009; White et al., 2015). Second, the media framing literature reveals that negative reporting on immigration influences public attitudes (Bos et al., 2016; Eberl et al., 2018; Igartua et al., 2012). Although some prior research explores the impact of media on state actions (Spirig, 2023), we lack a unified theoretical framework and systematic quantitative evidence on how right-wing attitudes and media framing reinforce each other and drive bureaucratic discrimination.

Based on this theoretical foundation, we formulate several key hypotheses: First, we expect stronger discriminatory patterns in regions with widespread right-wing attitudes through two mechanisms: (1) in regions with strong right-wing sentiments, caseworkers themselves are more likely to hold such views or may feel compelled to conform to prevalent norms (Adam et al., 2020, 2021); and (2) if anti-immigrant sentiments are openly expressed and widespread within a region's population, it creates a permissive cultural environment for discrimination (Valentim, 2024). Second, we hypothesize that adverse media narratives further exacerbate the negative effect of both

factors on the treatment of immigrants by triggering preexisting stereotypical views of relevant subpopulations on the part of state agents. Finally, we also suggest a potentially moderating role of caseworkers' political ideology and assess nuances in the observed effects based on the ethnic group mentioned in the news coverage.

Empirically, we focus on unemployment benefits in a corporatist conservative welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990), namely the German welfare program *Citizen's Benefit*.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment benefits are a crucial tool to mitigate the social and economic consequences of job loss (Kupka & Osiander, 2017). In light of growing public awareness of discrimination within public institutions (DeZIM, 2022), understanding potential barriers to receiving welfare benefits is a matter of outstanding societal relevance. While much of the existing literature focuses on caseworkers' decisions to sanction clients due to non-compliance (e.g., Gschwind et al., 2021), less attention has been paid to the initial request stage, at which individuals seek to access the system. This stage is crucial as estimates suggest that 35 to 56 percent of all eligible individuals do not apply at all (Bruckmeier et al., 2021; Harnisch, 2019; Wilke, 2024), potentially due to perceptions of stigma, complexity, or biased procedures.

To address this major gap in existing research, we conducted a preregistered, original survey in June/July 2023 with 1400 caseworkers from a stratified sample of 60 of the 387 German job centers.<sup>2</sup> Our experimental setup is as follows: The experiment starts with the presentation of newspaper articles reporting on welfare fraud by Romanian individuals and clans. We then employ a paired conjoint experiment in which we randomly vary applicants' ethnic backgrounds and other attributes.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with our theoretical expectations, we find that in regions with pronounced far-right sentiments, discrimination against applicants with Romanian nationality is significantly more likely, particularly when caseworkers are exposed to negative news reporting.

This study makes four key contributions: First, it explores the practical consequences of the normalization of the far right for vulnerable population groups in a critical dimension of societal organizations (Valentim, 2021, 2024). Second, we connect regional variation in far right attitudes to the broader literature on welfare states and immigration (Gschwind, 2021; Slaven et al., 2021). Third, our article speaks to the important topic of the activation of negative stereotypes through newspaper reporting (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Simonsen & Bonikowski, 2022). Finally, we offer unique insights into the differential access to welfare services across social groups, contributing to the broader literature on street-level bureaucracy and welfare service provision (Adam et al., 2020; Bell et al., 2024; Gingrich, 2025; Halling & Baekgaard, 2024; Lee, 2018).

## Key Insights from the Literature on Bureaucratic Discrimination, Media Framing, and the Rise of Illiberal Norms

This section reviews the literatures on bureaucratic discrimination and media framing, highlighting how illiberal norms can shape discriminatory behavior among bureaucrats. Illiberal norms are typically characterized by xenophobic rhetoric, a preference for the exclusion of marginalized groups, and the belief in social inequalities as natural (Mudde, 2022; Valentim, 2021).

Existing research reveals variation in discriminatory patterns both across and within welfare state types, as well as the influential role of regional factors within individual countries. Concerning variation *across welfare states*, in the United States (USA)—which is classified as a liberal welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990)—Black and Latinx welfare clients are more likely to be sanctioned than White welfare clients, potentially driven by the use of stereotypes in ambiguous situations (Schram et al., 2009; Soss et al., 2008). In Denmark—which is considered a social-democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990)—similar biases against ethnic minorities can be observed (Pedersen et al., 2018).

At the same time, contrasting evidence from the social-democratic welfare state of Norway shows *positive* discrimination patterns toward ethnic minorities (Terum et al., 2018). The authors explain this surprising result with differences in the broader welfare state system in comparison with the USA. However, this does not fully explain the disparity between Denmark and Norway, which are both considered social-democratic welfare states, but exhibit differences in discriminatory behavior. Terum et al. (2018) suggest that these differences across comparable welfare states may be attributed to diverging portrayals of immigrants in the media. In this regard, Hagelund (2020) highlights that Danish media generally tends to frame immigration more negatively, whereas Norwegian media typically offers a more balanced perspective. This potential (partial) explanation for the observed patterns raises the question of whether caseworkers exposed to more adverse immigration narratives are more likely to engage in discriminatory behavior.

Concerning *within-country variation* in bureaucratic discrimination, studies identify various social and political conditions at the regional level. For instance, in the USA, White et al. (2015) find that Latinx persons receive lower-quality information on changes to voter ID laws in politically conservative regions. Additionally, Park and Favero (2023) report that unequal educational outcomes materialize in US counties with stronger anti-minority sentiments. In Germany, decisions on political rallies concerning same-sex marriage depend on the regional prevalence of Catholicism (Adam et al., 2020). Finally, Gundacker et al. (2025) report that regional attitudes toward migration affect asylum seekers' chances of success in Germany. While

studies explore various regional factors that shape bureaucratic decision-making, the normalization of right-wing attitudes (Valentim, 2024) and the potentially associated creation of permission structures for discriminatory administrative actions—particularly in welfare service provision within corporatist-conservative welfare states—has not been explored in detail. This gap in the literature underscores the importance of examining micro-level mechanisms, namely how state bureaucrats respond to these trends and whether adverse immigration news have the potential to amplify the associated effects.<sup>4</sup>

Direct evidence regarding the relationship between news reporting and bureaucratic behavior is scarce. Spirig (2023) demonstrates in a rare quantitative study that the increasing salience of asylum in Swiss media worsens the prospects of asylum-seekers to achieve a reversal of an administrative courts' negative decision. Similarly, Rueß (2025) shows how different immigration-related media frame influence risks of benefit reductions for foreign benefit receivers in the German unemployment benefit system. Additionally, in a qualitative analysis, Ratzmann (2021) highlights that German welfare offices treat Eastern European applicants less favorably due to the prevalent stereotype that they are more likely to commit welfare fraud. The author concludes that the discursive framing of certain immigrant groups shapes caseworkers' perceptions and decisions. While the last study offers important insights, the small number of observed cases limits generalization, and we still lack an integrated understanding of how regional norms and news reporting interact in influencing decision-making at the street-level.

The second relevant body of research for our study is the media framing literature. "Framing" refers to the way information is presented in order to highlight "certain aspects of reality" (Bos et al., 2016, p. 98), thereby shaping the "considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). Studies on media framing reveal that immigrants are often portrayed unfavorably in news articles, sometimes associating them with economic or criminal threats (Eberl et al., 2018). For example, Igartua et al. (2012) find that crime-focused frames foster negative views of immigrants compared to frames emphasizing their economic contributions. Similarly, Wirz et al. (2018) show that negative news coverage of immigration-related issues leads to adverse beliefs. Expanding on this, Štětka et al. (2021) highlight that such coverage increases voting intentions for populist parties. In addition, immigration frames affect various ethnic, national, and religious groups asymmetrically. For instance, Hellwig and Sinno (2017) highlight that emphasizing the connection of immigration with crime reduces support for Eastern European migrants more than for Muslim migrants. Thus, since negative media framing has the potential to worsen attitudes toward ethnic

minorities,<sup>5</sup> it is important to analyze whether this coverage affects bureaucratic decision-making in a similar way.

However, the influence of media framing is not uniform, as effects typically depend on individual and contextual factors (De Vreese & Lecheler, 2019). At the individual level, partisan affiliation plays a critical role. For example, Gaines et al. (2007) demonstrate that belief changes in response to new information—such as casualties during the Iraq War—are strongly shaped by partisan affiliation. At the contextual level, norms and local discourses matter, as Fung and Scheufele (2014) argue that media effects likely vary among regions with different (emphasis on specific) norms. Furthermore, Wang and Johnston (1995) find that framing effects differ based on interpersonal discussions, while Feinholdt et al. (2017) highlight that the degree of contestation surrounding a political issue influences framing effects.

Media framing is also central to the normalization of far-right attitudes. Populist rhetoric has become increasingly visible in traditional mainstream media, amplifying its reach and impact, which can be understood as populism *through* the media (De Vreese et al., 2018; Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020). Especially media discourses on immigration often resonate with far-right rhetoric, further normalizing illiberal views (Katsourides & Pachita, 2023; Reinemann et al., 2016). Accordingly, the phenomena of illiberal norms and media reporting patterns appear closely intertwined, with the potential to influence bureaucratic behavior, especially in interaction with caseworkers' own political preferences.

## Theoretical Expectations on How News Frames Affect Bureaucratic Decisions

We develop our theoretical expectations regarding the normalization of far-right attitudes in administrative decision-making by synthesizing critical insights from the literatures on (1) bureaucratic discrimination and (2) media framing. Specifically, cognitive psychology and the racial classification model suggest that bureaucrats subconsciously match individuals with preexisting stereotypes, particularly under conditions of high cognitive load or ambiguity (Assouline et al., 2022; Fiske, 1998; Schram et al., 2009). We argue that two considerations are essential in this regard: First, in regions with more widespread illiberal norms, individuals are more likely to hold or conform to anti-immigrant biases in their decision-making (which is represented by our baseline framework below). Second, these stereotypes are often activated and further amplified by external stimuli that provide relevant, corresponding information, such as media framing (which is represented by our media framing model below).

Our baseline model suggests that bureaucrats operate within a complex policy, organizational, and community system. Thus, they are embedded in

social structures and navigate challenges such as limited resources, multifaceted daily tasks, and increasing client heterogeneity within a concrete cultural environment (Meyers et al., 2007; Vogler, 2019). The manifold demands placed on them, involving hundreds of potential client scenarios coupled with information from numerous sources on concrete situations, may require them to identify cognitive shortcuts to arrive at critical decisions (cf. Scheu & Vogler, 2025; Vogler, 2023). In line with this hypothesized state of embeddedness in regional structures, various aspects of the external environment, including regional public sentiment, have the potential to decisively shape bureaucratic behavior. Building on related insights (Ellermann, 2006; Gundacker et al., 2025; Park & Favero, 2023), we mainly consider variation in regional public sentiment concerning immigration. As studies suggest direct and indirect informational sources (Hopmann et al., 2010), we expect that caseworkers are aware of prevailing anti-immigrant attitudes in their region. This can manifest either directly through reading local news or indirectly through, for example, witnessing of discussions in everyday settings such as pubs or community spaces.

We propose two channels through which regional sentiment influences caseworkers' behavior: The first channel assumes that in regions with widespread right-wing attitudes, caseworkers are more likely to hold such views or may feel compelled to conform to regional norms (Adam et al., 2020, 2021); and, as the second channel, we suggest that such regions create normative "permission structures" for discrimination (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Valentim, 2024). Both theoretical channels shape perceptions of the desirability and appropriateness of specific actions, making them more likely to occur. If caseworkers perceive discrimination against minorities as normal in their region or if they believe that others, such as their regional peers, will judge their behavior in accordance with strong anti-immigrant norms, they will be more likely to engage in discriminatory actions. This can happen in subtle ways—such as lower quality answers or stricter scrutiny during welfare request evaluations (Hemker & Rink, 2017; Thomann et al., 2024)—that are difficult to detect.<sup>6</sup>

**H1: Bureaucratic discrimination against claimants with ethnic minority backgrounds is more likely in federal states with higher general levels of anti-immigrant sentiment.**

In a next step, we explore in our media framing model how negative news coverage functions as an external stimulus, activating stereotypes and fostering discriminatory tendencies. According to the racial classification model (RCM) (Assouline et al., 2022; Fiske, 1998; Schram et al., 2009), bureaucrats *subconsciously* match individuals with preexisting stereotypes under different types of stimuli. In contrast, the theory of statistical discrimination suggests



that bureaucrats often *consciously* rely on group stereotypes to make time-efficient decisions under conditions such as cognitive load (Arrow, 1973). Although these mechanisms operate through distinct pathways—subconscious stereotype activation in the RCM and deliberate processing in the statistical discrimination theory—both predict discriminatory outcomes in response to specific stimuli.

Based on these insights, we contend that exposure to negative media reporting about immigrants serves as one of the most powerful stimuli that can activate and reinforce stereotypes, thereby intensifying discriminatory behavior. Traditional newspapers, often regarded as reputable and legitimate sources of information, could play a key role in this process. Specifically, when such well-known and trusted outlets disseminate negative portrayals of immigrants, anti-immigrant attitudes might appear more strongly grounded in real circumstances and socially justified. This, in turn, shapes then how street-level bureaucrats perceive and assess cases involving ethnic minority clients.

In particular, linking criminal activity to persons of foreign nationality has strong potential to activate and amplify stereotypes (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Gilliam Jr. et al., 1996). Moreover, crime-related media frames elicit stronger anti-immigrant attitudes than economic frames (Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Igartua et al., 2012), likely because immigration is frequently and disproportionately associated with crime in news coverage.<sup>7</sup> Thus, these crime narratives tap into entrenched societal threat perceptions. For street-level bureaucrats, such frames can serve as mental shortcuts in the context of their complex daily responsibilities, especially when immigrant clients are involved. Consequently, we expect that negative news coverage, specifically in the form of crime-immigration frames, is likely to trigger discriminatory tendencies among bureaucrats.<sup>8</sup>

**H2a: Negative news frames on immigration lead to bureaucratic discrimination.**

Furthermore, we suggest that these media framing effects have the potential to interact with regional and individual factors. As Fung and Scheufele (2014) show, media effects likely differ across regions depending on local norms and levels of prior exposure. It is possible to extend this reasoning to our case: In areas where migrants are seen more negatively, the population (including street-level bureaucrats) is much more cognitively receptive to negative news and stereotypes about them. Hence, we expect that in regions with greater opposition to immigration, exposure to negative news frames intensifies the activation and use of stereotypes.

**H2b: Negative news frames have a stronger effect in federal states with greater opposition to immigration.**

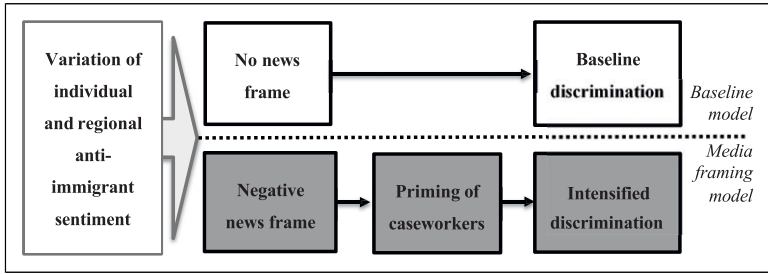
At the individual level, politically right-leaning caseworkers can be expected to hold more pronounced anti-immigrant attitudes (Hannuksela et al., 2024; Kessler & Freeman, 2005; Kiehne & Ayon, 2016). Moreover, those with anti-immigrant views are likely more inclined to seek information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, a behavior that can be described with the concept of “motivated reasoning” (Schulze, 2020; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Consequently, we hypothesize that negative news frames will have a stronger activation effect of existing negative stereotypes among politically right-leaning caseworkers, increasing the likelihood of discriminatory behavior.

**H2c: Negative news frames have a stronger effect among caseworkers with right-wing attitudes.**

Finally, we argue that the explicit referencing of *specific ethnic minority groups* in news frames affects perceptions of different ethnic minority groups *distinctively*. For instance, when immigration is framed with a special emphasis on crime, support for Eastern European migrants is reduced more than for Muslim migrants (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017). We extend this insight by arguing that such framing can simultaneously render attitudes toward the referenced immigration group more restrictive and encourage support for the non-mentioned immigration group. While negative stereotypes about the group mentioned in the news article therefore cognitively prime caseworkers, no such stereotypes are on their minds for groups that are not referenced. In relative terms, unmentioned groups may consequently be perceived as even more deserving welfare recipients. This mechanism is particularly relevant in welfare offices, where certain immigrant groups—such as Romanian immigrants in a German bureaucratic context (Adam et al., 2021; Ratzmann, 2021)—are often subject to harsher treatment due to differential pre-existing stereotypes. When the media explicitly references such groups, it can exacerbate these biases toward them, while non-mentioned groups may appear more deserving—precisely because negative stereotypes are neither pre-existing nor activated in the same way.

Therefore, we suggest that mentioning *specific ethnic minority groups* in news frames has the potential to enhance the probability that their members will experience negative treatment, whereas unmentioned group members may receive neutral or even preferential treatment.

**H3: Group-specific news frames** (adversely depicting ethnic minority A) lead to negative discrimination against individuals belonging to minority A, while no negative or even positive discrimination against individuals belonging to minority B can be observed.



**Figure 1.** Theoretical framework: How regional public sentiment and news frames influence bureaucratic decisions.

Figure 1 visualizes our multiple-component theoretical framework. The baseline expectation is that public employees are more likely to engage in discriminatory behavior in states with more prevalent anti-immigrant sentiments. Grounded in our media framing model, we expect that negative news frames have the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes about ethnic minorities and intensify discrimination in contexts of high anti-immigrant sentiment and among right-leaning caseworkers.

## Data and Research Design

To investigate the behavior of public employees and the influence of negative news coverage on it, we conducted a preregistered survey experiment with caseworkers in German job centers in June and July 2023.<sup>9</sup> 1400 respondents from 60 job centers participated in the survey, resulting in 14,000 observations of our conjoint experiment. Two elements are central to our survey design: (1) a vignette experiment that varies the media portrayal of immigrants; and (2) a paired conjoint experiment (Hainmueller et al., 2014) that approximates caseworkers' day-to-day choices on *Citizen's Benefit*, a German welfare program providing a minimum of financial security for unemployed persons. The program was introduced in 2005 and underwent a major reform in 2023 (shortly before the beginning of our study) (Jahn, 2023; Kupka & Osiander, 2017).

As of January 2023, nearly half the recipients of the Citizen's Benefit program are persons of foreign citizenship (Statistik Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023c). This is relevant because previous research found manifold bureaucratic discrimination against ethnic minorities but mainly focused on sanction risks (Gschwind et al., 2021; Hemker & Rink, 2017). Our study concentrates on the first administrative step, namely the request for receiving benefits, about which no systematic study exists. This stage is crucial for understanding discriminatory practices because estimates suggest that 35 to

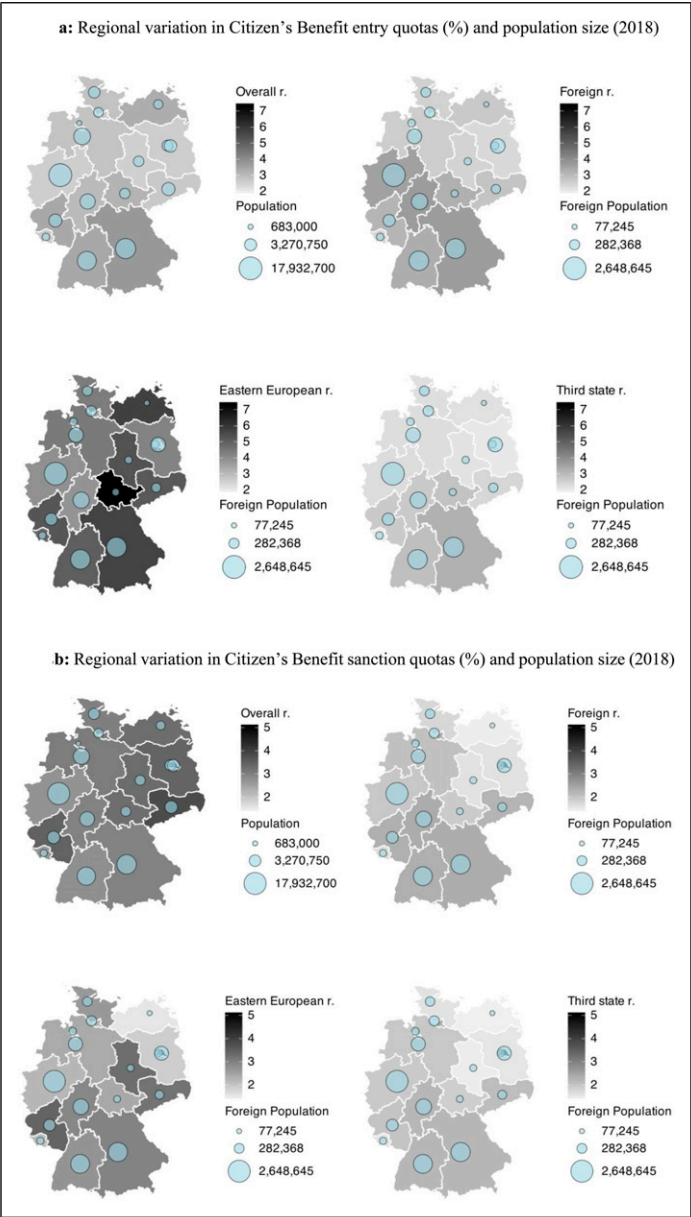
56 percent of eligible individuals do not apply for the program due to different reasons such as information costs or stigma (Bruckmeier et al., 2021; Bruckmeier & Wiemers, 2017; Harnisch, 2019; Wilke, 2024). Another possible reason could be that potential claimants anticipate biased procedures.

Results remain inconclusive on whether members of ethnic minorities are less likely to self-select into applying. For instance, while Harnisch (2019) argues that households with a migration background should have a lower probability of claiming welfare benefits, her statistical analyses rather find higher take-up rates, though not significant for all years. Bruckmeier and Wiemers (2017) do not find differences in take-up rates between natives and immigrants when controlling for unobserved heterogeneity. These mixed findings highlight the need to further study how caseworkers might treat members of different social groups unequally at the point of initial benefit application.

Despite clear formal eligibility requirements, caseworkers have the authority to pre-approve requests and provide additional assistance. Given this discretion, it would be desirable to examine observational data on the rate of rejected requests, but such data are not collected. Hence, in Figure 2(a) and (b), we illustrate how the implementation of the Citizen's Benefit varies across federal states at two crucial decision stages: entry into the scheme (Statistik Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023c) and the imposition of sanctions (Statistik Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023a), both in 2018 and with information on the population size to allow for interpretation against state-level demographics.

Figure 2(a) shows that most entries into Citizen's Benefit can be observed in South Germany. When foreign nationals are specifically considered, the entry rate in the south remains at the same level, while it is higher in the western states of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) and Hesse, as well as in Thuringia. Notably, although NRW has the highest number of foreign residents (2018: 2,648,645), Thuringia—despite having a much smaller foreign population (2018: 108,785)—exhibits a similarly high entry rate (NRW: 3.54%; Thuringia: 3.24%). This suggests that contextual factors, which might contribute to differences in entry quotas, cannot fully account for them. Thus, even with differences in the underlying composition of populations, the regional variation in entry rates hints at possible unequal treatment of ethnic minorities.

When examining entry rates of different groups, the entry rate of immigrants from Eastern European countries is higher than for immigrants from outside the EU (which are categorized as “third states”). For immigrants from Eastern Europe, we observe the highest entry rate in Thuringia and the lowest in Berlin. Similar regional variation can be observed concerning sanction rates (Figure 2(b)).



**Figure 2.** (a) Regional variation in Citizen's Benefit entry quotas (%) and population size (2018). Notes: The figure shows maps of the federal states, with shading indicating the entry quota per state. Circle size represents the number of residents (or foreign residents, respectively). The legend titles "Overall r.," "Foreign r.," "Eastern

European r.”, and “Third state r.” refer to recipients of Citizen’s Benefit (r. = recipients). “Population” and “Foreign Population” indicate the total number of residents or foreign residents, respectively. The legend shows three reference circle sizes (the minimum, median, and maximum population), while the actual circle sizes scale continuously. (b) Regional variation in Citizen’s Benefit sanction quotas (%) and population size (2018). *Notes:* The figure shows maps of the federal states, with shading indicating the sanction quota per state. Circle size represents the number of residents (or foreign residents, respectively).

## Data Collection and Sample

In our survey of caseworkers, respondents were selected through a multi-stage process. In the first step, we drew a stratified, proportional sample of 100 job centers. The selection criteria included both socio-political characteristics and the presence of xenophobia (see the [Appendix](#) for details). Of these job centers, 60 job centers agreed to participate. As shown in [Table 1](#), the sample of participating job centers and caseworkers is representative of the overall population of unemployment bureaucracies.

Due to data protection obligations, we were not able to collect data on precise job center locations. Instead, we only have information on the federal state of each job center. Although this prevents a more local analysis, our theoretical perspective primarily focuses on regional variation in the relevant attitudes as both general cultural norms and bureaucratic guidelines primarily vary at the state level. A future extension to the local level (where technically feasible) is nevertheless desirable. Our target sample size was 750 respondents, but we were able to collect answers from 1400 respondents, which is a remarkably high response rate. Given the large sample, our empirical tests have sufficient statistical power (see for further details our preregistration report and [Appendix](#)).

**Table 1.** Comparison of Our Sample and the Overall Population of Job Centers.

Institutional characteristics		Sample of respondents	Sample of job centers	Population of job centers
Federal states	Eastern	272 (19%)	9 (15%)	75 (19%)
	Others	1127 (80%)	51 (85%)	312 (80%)
Organizational structure	Communal facility	372 (27%)	13 (21%)	99 (25%)
	Joint facility	1027 (73%)	47 (78%)	288 (74%)
Location	Urban	224 (16%)	15 (25%)	99 (25%)
	Rural	1176 (84%)	45 (75%)	288 (74%)

*Notes:* The percentages are presented in brackets and are calculated by dividing the sample of respondents by 1400, the sample of job centers by 60, and the population of job centers by 387.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Respondents' Characteristics and Overall Population of Caseworkers.

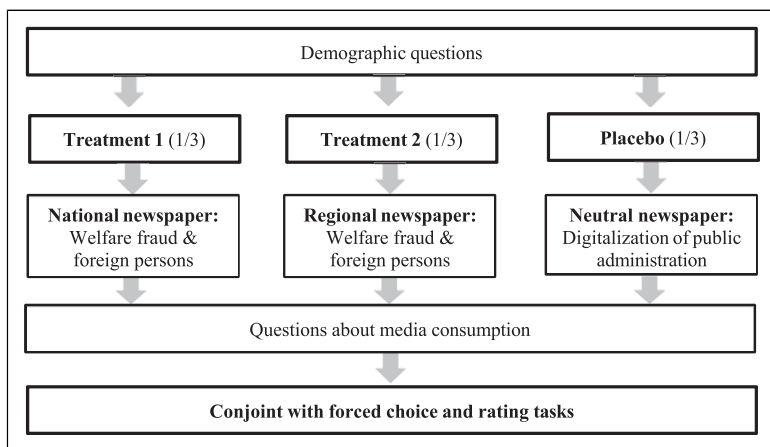
Respondents' characteristics		Population of case-workers			Other (N = 1127)
		All (N = 1400)	Eastern (N = 272)		
Gender	Male	28.6%	27.6%	17.3%	30.0%
	Female	71.4%	71.1%	80.5%	68.8%
Age	18–24 years	34%	3.1%	2.2%	3.4%
	25–40 years		42.6%	33.1%	45.1%
	41–60 years	57.3%	47.4%	58.1%	44.9%
	Over 60 years	8.7%	6.6%	6.6%	6.7%
Migration Background	Yes	3.1%	13%	3.7%	15.2%
	No	96.9%	83.2%	93.7%	80.6%
Education	Regular graduation from school without further training or studies	/	2.5%	1.5%	2.8%
	Still in vocational training	/	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%
	Still studying	/	0.9%	0%	0.1%
	Apprenticeship or comparable qualification	/	41.7%	48.9%	40.1%
	University or technical college degree	/	54.6%	49.3%	55.9%
Work experience in job center	Less than 1 year	/	5.8%	2.2%	6.7%
	1–3 years	/	14.1%	5.9%	16.1%
	4–6 years	/	16%	7.7%	18.0%
	7–10 years	/	15.9%	8.1%	17.7%
	More than 10 years	/	48.2%	76.1%	41.5%
Prior work experience in public administration	Yes	/	59.4%	59.2%	59.5%
	No	/	40.6%	40.8%	40.5%
Political ideology	Left-leaning	/	44.5%	40.6%	45.4%
	Centrist	/	27.4%	30.1%	26.7%
	Right-leaning	/	28.1%	29.3%	27.9%

Notes: Missing data not indicated.

Table 2 displays the demographics of the respondents. Our sample aligns closely with the population of caseworkers in terms of gender distribution (Zentrale der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2024). Concerning age and migration background, we observe an overrepresentation of caseworkers aged 18–40 years and those with a migration background.<sup>10</sup> For other demographic variables, data are not available as the statistical office of the employment agency does not collect them. Overall, our sample of caseworkers is broadly representative of the population of job centers and caseworkers, particularly in terms of gender distribution.

## Experimental Design

Figure 3 summarizes our survey structure. First, respondents were asked standard demographic questions. In the next step, we introduced a  $2 \times 1$  between-subject design by giving news frames to 2/3 of the respondents (of these subjects, 1/2 received a national newspaper article, and 1/2 a regional newspaper article). We then ask respondents about their media consumption to make the transition to the conjoint part more convenient and to directly account for our research interest in this matter. It is important to note that only 2% of respondents said they do not spend any time with reading news, while 90% spend around 30 minutes doing so. 65% of respondents reported that they read a daily newspaper, of which almost 90% read regional and 63% national news. These numbers imply that the consumption of newspapers is a common aspect of caseworkers' daily lives, further bolstering the authenticity of our treatments. Next, we present caseworkers with hypothetical decision-making scenarios on unemployment benefit requests in a conjoint experiment.



**Figure 3.** Structure of the survey and experimental design.



## Design of News Frames

The two news frames both report on welfare fraud committed by foreign nationals, while we expose the placebo group to an article about administrative digitalization. We base this decision on prior studies that use crime frames (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017; Igartua et al., 2012). To create the artificial newspaper articles, we used real-world articles about welfare fraud as the foundation, allowing us to approximate authentic journalistic language, tone, and content.<sup>11</sup>

The two treatment newspaper articles differ in geographical scope (indicated by the newspaper source: one is a national newspaper outlet and the other a regional one)<sup>12</sup> but have a common structure and topic, and a similar headline (“Increased welfare fraud by foreign persons”/“Increased welfare fraud by foreign persons in [federal state]”). Basing the articles on real-world examples enhances realism and strengthens external validity. However, given the necessity to create highly comparable treatments across all states, we needed to resort to a strategy of standardization and fictional texts. At the end of the survey, respondents were debriefed and informed that the newspaper articles were fictional.

The *first group* received an article from the weekly national magazine “Der Spiegel” with actual numbers published by the Scientific Unit of the German Bundestag about welfare fraud. In it, we describe a new method of welfare fraud by Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants—based on real-world news reporting on welfare fraud types. The article ends with a direct quote from the Federal Criminal Police Office about increased organized welfare fraud. We chose this well-known weekly magazine because of its large readership and center-left political orientation.

Below is the wording of the *national* newspaper treatment (the original text in German can be found in the [Appendix](#)):

### Welfare Fraud

***Increased welfare fraud by foreign persons.*** Last week, the Bundestag’s scientific service published the latest figures for cases of welfare fraud in the area of the Citizen’s Benefit. Across Germany, 118,665 cases of welfare fraud were identified. These figures are particularly worrying because, according to SPIEGEL information, it is mainly people of foreign citizenship who commit welfare fraud. The number of unreported cases, however, could be two to three times as high as research by SPIEGEL revealed.

In addition, Bulgarian and Romanian individuals are also resorting to new scams, such as falsely registering their children at school, in order to stay in Germany and receive social benefits. “However, many cases of this social fraud

method by Bulgarian and Romanian individuals remain undetected,” a spokesperson for the Association for Education and Training informed based on a survey of school principals. “Data protection does not allow exchanges between school authorities and job centers to detect these cases.”

According to SPIEGEL information, organized welfare fraud by foreigners is also on the rise. Press spokeswoman Lina Lehmer of the Federal Criminal Police Office told SPIEGEL: “Especially the abuse by criminal clans with Bulgarian and Romanian roots is highly worrying.”

The *second group* received an article from a regional newspaper, with the displayed newspaper name tailored to respondents’ federal state (e.g., “Stuttgarter Zeitung” (*Stuttgart Newspaper*) for participants in Baden-Wuerttemberg), reporting on regional welfare fraud by persons of foreign citizenship. We describe a new method of welfare fraud by Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants and add a direct quote from the respective State Criminal Police Office.

Below is the wording of the *regional* newspaper treatment:

## Welfare Fraud

*Increased welfare fraud by foreign nationals in [FEDERAL STATE].* Last week, houses in several counties in [FEDERAL STATE] were searched on suspicion of unauthorized receipt of Citizen’s Benefit. According to the police, the houses are mainly inhabited by people of foreign citizenship. According to information available to our newspaper, investigators are planning further raids in the coming days.

In addition, we have reports from several counties that Bulgarian and Romanian individuals are also resorting to new scams, such as false school registrations for their children. In this way, they want to stay in Germany and grab social benefits. “Such a case has become known at our school, but many cases remain undiscovered because data protection does not allow any exchange between school authorities and job centers,” a school principal from [FEDERAL STATE] shared. “I am not a friend of welfare fraud and especially not of welfare fraud by Bulgarian and Romanian people.”

According to information available to our newspaper, organized welfare fraud by foreign individuals is also on the rise. Press spokesman [(artificial) NAME] of the State Criminal Police Office [FEDERAL STATE] told our newspaper, “Especially the abuse by criminal clans with Bulgarian and Romanian roots in [FEDERAL STATE] is highly worrying.”

**Table 3.** Attributes and Attribute Levels.

Attributes	Levels	Restrictions
Nationality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– German</li> <li>– Romanian</li> <li>– Moroccan</li> </ul>	
Name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– German-sounding names: <i>Leonie Fischer, ..., Leon Wagner, ...</i></li> <li>– Romanian-sounding names: <i>Aurika Popa, ..., Sorin Radu, ...</i></li> <li>– Moroccan-sounding names: <i>Adia Tahiri, ..., Wasif Cherkaoui, ...</i></li> </ul>	German name with German nationality, Romanian name with Romanian or German nationality, Moroccan name with Moroccan or German nationality
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Male</li> <li>– Female</li> </ul>	Male names only with male gender, female names only with female gender
Attachments and further supporting documents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– No inconsistencies with the information in the request</li> <li>– Minor inconsistencies with the information in the request</li> <li>– Major inconsistencies with the information in the request</li> </ul>	
Spelling in the request	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– No errors</li> <li>– Few errors</li> <li>– Many errors</li> </ul>	
Duration/type of last work activity in Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 6 months/with telephone company</li> <li>– 3 years/with telephone company</li> <li>– 6 months/in hospital</li> <li>– 3 years/in hospital</li> </ul>	
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– No degree</li> <li>– Apprenticeship or training degree</li> <li>– University or technical college degree</li> </ul>	
Saving assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 1.000 EUR</li> <li>– 15.000 EUR</li> <li>– 30.000 EUR</li> </ul>	

(continued)

**Table 3.** (continued)

Attributes	Levels	Restrictions
Family situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Single/without children</li> <li>– Single parent</li> <li>– Married/without children</li> <li>– Married/with children</li> </ul>	

## Design of the Conjoint Experiment

To examine variation in bureaucratic behavior, the questionnaire includes a conjoint experiment with nine attributes to disguise the key attribute we are interested in (Bansak et al., 2021). A similar study by Adam et al. (2021) performs a conjoint experiment on German unemployment benefit request decisions with both a general population sample and a small subsample of administrators. Adam et al. (2021) include five attributes: Nationality, gender, language proficiency, profession, and age. We include nationality and gender as well but also add applicants' names and other attributes (see Table 3) to mimic real-world requests.<sup>13</sup> By including name and nationality, we can capture whether discriminatory behavior is rather driven by ascriptive ethnic cues, formal citizenship/nationality status, or both. This offers a more nuanced understanding of bureaucratic discrimination.

To assess immigrant heterogeneity, we include German, Romanian, and Moroccan nationality and German-, Romanian-, and Moroccan-sounding names. 9.5% of recipients with foreign citizenship come from Eastern European countries and over a quarter of Eastern European immigrants are from Romania (Statistik Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023b; 2023c). From the perspective of an EU member state, Moroccan people represent immigrants from so-called “third countries” and specifically Maghreb states (i.e., North African countries). Maghreb immigrants have a share of 1.4% of foreign Citizen's Benefit receivers (Statistik Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023c). They were selected because we did not want to include a country that experienced military conflict at the time of our survey as this may strongly influence caseworkers. The further dimensions of our conjoint setup are referenced in Table 3.

In light of the lack of official statistics on rejected requests, our focus is on the application process for the Citizen's Benefit. This stage is particularly relevant because results are inconclusive on whether members of ethnic minorities are less or more likely to apply. These circumstances underscore the importance of experimentally approaching the processing of requests to examine if ethnic minorities receive comparable treatment as Germans. We created the following decision scenario:

“Here you see two requests for Citizen’s Benefit, which contain several pieces of information about the persons applying. (...) However, one supporting document is missing from each of the two requests, namely, one of the three current bank statements. In addition, both individuals are in an emergency and need the money as soon as possible. (...)”

As suggested by Clayton et al. (2023), we constructed this scenario in consultation with job centers to ensure its authenticity.<sup>14</sup> The fictitious situation emulates a real-life case where a refugee family applied for an advance payment because of an emergency without submitting all documents. Considering our goal to construct a scientifically valid randomized experiment, we needed to resort to the presentation of fictional decision-making scenarios (that are nevertheless based on observed real-world dynamics). All respondents were told to imagine they were reviewing client requests in a hypothetical decision-making scenario, and at the end of the survey, they were also debriefed about the fictional character of the requests.

Despite strict formal requirements, caseworkers have some leeway in assessing the requests’ credibility, offering support, or pre-approving benefits (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2023a, 2023b).<sup>15</sup> To measure how caseworkers use this leeway and subtle discrimination, we include the following rating tasks, measured on a 7-point scale on which higher values mean increasing agreement with the statement:

- “The information in the request is credible.” (outcome measure 1: credibility)
- “The agency should provide additional assistance.” (outcome measure 2: helpfulness).

We subsequently focus our analysis on these two ratings.<sup>16</sup> As a research design quality measurement of caseworkers’ consistency in response behavior, following Clayton et al. (2023), we included a flipped version of the first choice scenario at the end of the conjoint block, which was passed by two-thirds of our respondents.

## Empirical Strategy

We estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) (Hainmueller et al., 2014), using “German nationality” and “German names” as the reference categories for the respective attributes.<sup>17</sup> This approach enables the analysis of discrimination by comparing the treatment of minorities to individuals with German background. We cluster standard errors at the level of the respondent and use 95% confidence levels in the R package “cregg”-package (Leeper, 2018).<sup>18</sup>

As stated in our preregistration, we conduct a subgroup analysis with demographic variables, expecting that regional anti-immigrant sentiment and the political ideology of caseworkers moderate the relationship between media framing and bureaucratic decision-making. First, we employ a multi-layered approach to measure anti-immigration sentiment at the federal state level. We consider the state (“Bundesland”) to be a meaningful reference unit for caseworkers, as they significantly vary in terms of media regulations, cultural norms, political sentiment, and bureaucratic guidelines, which are all crucial aspects of our theoretical framework.

Specifically, we use a combination of three distinct measures to create an additive index by rescaling the variables from 1 to 10, resulting in the anti-immigrant sentiment index ranging from 3 to 30: the vote share for the far-right party *Alternative for Germany* in the 2021 federal election (Der Bundeswahlleiter, 2022), results regarding the statement that “foreigners enrich cultural life in Germany” from a representative survey (Baute et al., 2020), and the number of xenophobic attacks per 1.000 inhabitants across federal states (Mut gegen rechte Gewalt, 2023) (see Table A5/A6 for further details on indicators and principal component analysis). In our main analysis, we use a third-quartile split to categorize federal states into those with “low anti-immigrant” and “high anti-immigrant” sentiment (see Appendix Figures A11, A12(a)-(c) for a more restrictive categorization with a mean-split; results do not change substantially). To test hypothesis 1, we conduct individual conjoint analyses across the two categories of anti-immigrant sentiment.<sup>19</sup>

Second, we measure the political ideology of respondents by asking them to place themselves on a typical left-right scale, ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). Our coding is intentionally generous, categorizing 0–4 as “left-leaning”, 5 as “center”, and 6–10 as “right-leaning”. This strategy addresses potential social desirability bias as respondents with more extreme left- or right-wing views may tend to place themselves closer to the center of scale to appear more moderate. Our threefold categorization reduces such tendencies by limiting respondents’ ability to strategically self-position and to provide a socially desirable answer.

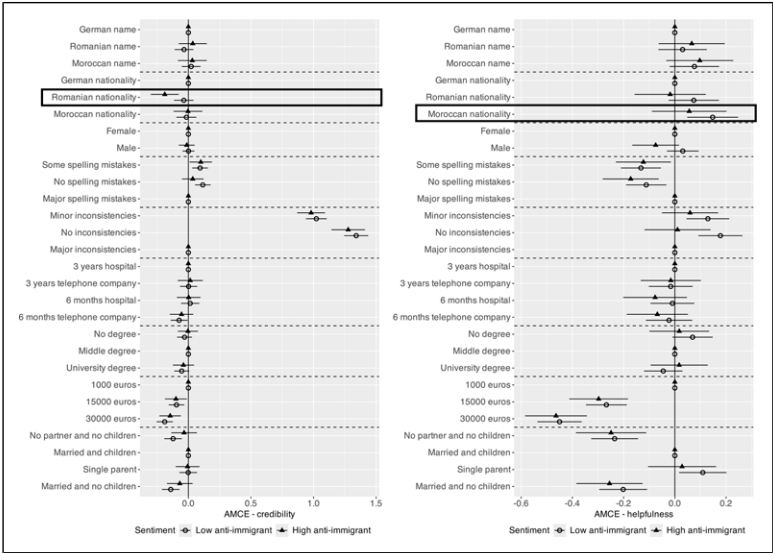
To test hypothesis 2a, we conduct individual conjoint analyses across two subgroups (“*Newspaper Group*” = respondents who have received the national or regional treatment newspaper article, “*Control Group*” = respondents who have received the placebo newspaper article).<sup>20</sup> To test hypotheses 2b and 2c, we compute interaction effects between the media group variable, the index of anti-immigrant sentiment, and political attitudes of respondents. For our main results, we present the regression results in Tables A2-A4 in the Appendix.

Results

Our primary purpose is to examine (1) baseline discrimination in different German regions, and (2) how the priming of caseworkers with negative news frames affects bureaucratic decision-making and interacts with anti-immigrant sentiment. [Figures A7\(a\)-\(c\) in the Appendix](#) display the preferences for all attributes without considering our experimental treatment. In these overall statistics, while caseworkers do not delay the requests of ethnic minority more compared to German claimants, applications from Romanians are perceived as less credible. Conversely, caseworkers demonstrate an increased willingness to help Moroccan claimants compared to German claimants. Objective attributes such as consistent documents and having children increase the pre-approval of unemployment benefits requests, whereas possessing greater financial means results in delays. Similar trends are observed for the credibility assessment and willingness to help.

Examining the Influence of Regional Political Sentiments on Bureaucratic Decisions

This section explores how anti-immigrant sentiment at the federal state level influences caseworkers' behavior. First, respondents could list media topics they had recently engaged with, among others they mention “communal



**Figure 4.** Baseline ratings in regions with high and low anti-immigrant sentiment (see [Appendix Tables A2a/b](#)).

politics”, “the rise of the AfD [the far-right party *Alternative for Germany*]”, and “the district administrator election and the AfD”. These responses suggest that caseworkers are aware of regional political dynamics, and, thus, of prevailing anti-immigrant sentiment in their area.

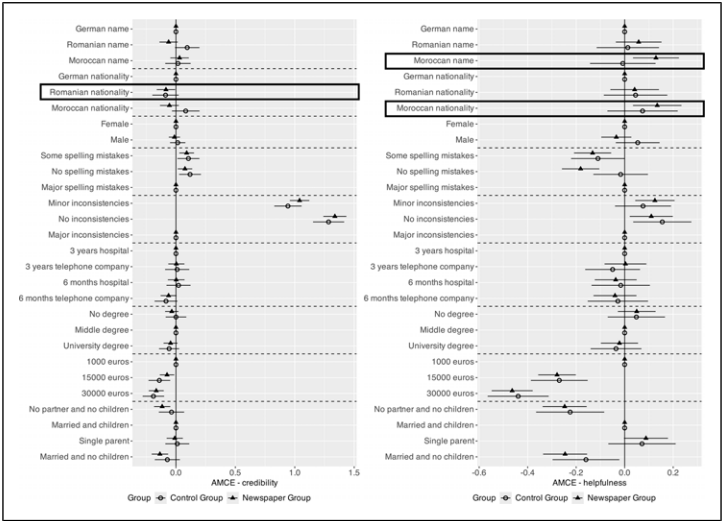
Second, Figure 4 illustrates the ratings of caseworkers in regions with low and high anti-immigrant sentiment (sentiment index based on three indicators: *AfD support*, *public statement on immigrants*, and *xenophobic attacks*). The left panel shows caseworkers’ assessments of the credibility of requests, revealing that caseworkers in regions with high anti-immigrant sentiment are significantly more likely to find hypothetical requests from individuals with Romanian nationality (compared to individuals with German nationality) to be less credible ( $-0.19, p < .01$ ). Among all the attribute levels, Romanian nationality has the strongest negative effect. These context-conditional findings suggest that the regional social environment in which caseworkers operate influences their decision-making processes.

Turning to the willingness to offer additional help, the right panel shows that caseworkers in regions with low anti-immigrant sentiment are notably more willing to assist applicants with Moroccan nationality compared to applicants with German nationality ( $0.15, p < .01$ ). This effect is nearly as strong as their willingness to support requests without inconsistencies, underscoring the importance of regional attitudes in shaping bureaucratic behavior. A possible explanation is that caseworkers in low anti-immigrant regions may seek to distance themselves from xenophobic attitudes by extending support to Moroccan applicants—who were not targeted in the news article. This aligns with recent findings on pro-social backlash effects among left-leaning individuals, who are more likely to volunteer for local-level social services and endorse democratic norms following electoral success of far-right parties (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Dennison & Kustov, 2023; Pulejo, 2023; Valentim et al., 2025). In sum, we find support for hypothesis 1 that regional variation in anti-immigrant sentiment significantly influences caseworker evaluations of clients with migration backgrounds.

## Examining News Frame Effects and Their Interaction with Anti-immigrant Sentiment

Next, we examine the results related to our news frame hypotheses. To create our media group variable, we created two groups: The “*Newspaper Group*” includes respondents who have received the national or regional *treatment* newspaper article on welfare fraud by (Romanian) immigrants; the “*Control group*” refers to respondents who have received the *placebo* story on digitalization. Figure 5 shows the specific effects of our news frame: We observe that exposure to a negative news frame leads respondents to perceive requests from claimants with Romanian nationality ( $-0.08, p < 0.05$ ) as less credible

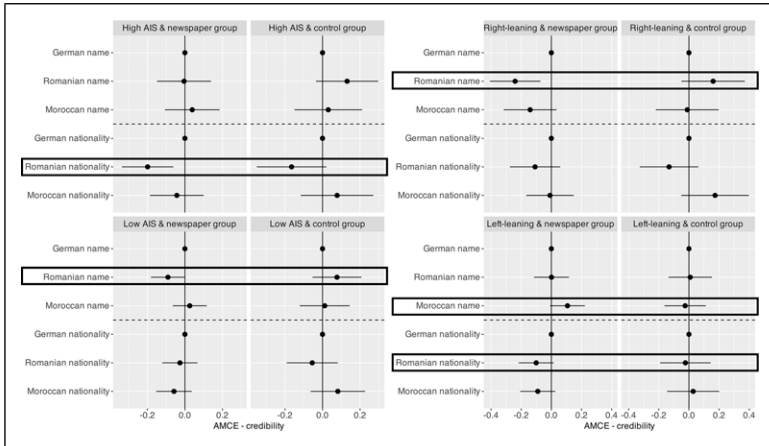




**Figure 5.** Baseline news frame effect (see [Appendix Tables A3a/b](#)).

compared to claimants with German nationality, which points in the same direction as the effect of high anti-immigrant sentiment.<sup>21</sup> These patterns support our theoretical claim (hypothesis 2a) that negative news reporting on immigration works as a stimulus in activating stereotypes, and caseworkers seem to subconsciously draw on these activated stereotypes by finding hypothetical requests from Romanian claimants as less credible. While these effects are relatively small, they are akin in magnitude to the impact of higher levels of financial means by a potential claimant. This is important to the success of requests because caseworkers view applicants with higher financial means typically as less needy (Jilke & Tummers, 2018). Notably, respondents in the control group do not demonstrate a statistically significant bias against Romanian claimants, suggesting that negative newspaper articles indeed evoke stereotypes about minority claimants.

Regarding willingness to help, following exposure to negative articles, respondents are willing to offer additional assistance to claimants with Moroccan nationality (0.13,  $p < .01$ ) or names (0.13,  $p < .01$ ) compared to claimants with German nationality or names, but not to Romanian claimants.<sup>22</sup> This effect size is comparable to that of observing minor inconsistencies in the unemployment benefit request, which is noticeable. Thus, in line with our expectations, primed respondents perceive only Romanian claimants—the featured ethnic minority group in the newspaper article—as less credible and extend additional help to the ethnic minority group not featured in the article, supporting hypothesis 3. This is an interesting finding as



**Figure 6.** Interaction of anti-immigrant sentiment, political ideology, and news frame (see [Appendix Tables A4a/b](#)). Notes: AIS = Anti-immigrant sentiment; Reduced plots are shown here. Full plots including all political ideology categories (including politically centrist respondents) are available in the [Appendix Figure A9\(b\)](#) and [A10\(b\)](#).

prior studies found that featuring one immigrant group in a newspaper article diminishes negative attitudes toward non-featured immigrant groups ([Hellwig & Sinno, 2017](#)), but does not lead to positive attitudes. This raises concerns about the differential treatment of ethnic minority claimants based on (dis-)proportional news reporting, affecting their ability to submit all documents and receive benefits.

Further analysis (see [Figures A8\(a\) and A8\(b\) in the Appendix](#)) reveals that respondents exposed to negative newspaper articles are not more inclined to delay requests from ethnic minority clients (considering the forced choice). While this is a desirable outcome, it is important to recognize that street-level bureaucrats may still carry their perceptions of request credibility into subsequent decision-making stages.

In [Figure 6](#), we examine the interaction between regional anti-immigrant sentiment and news framing on caseworkers' credibility assessment of their clients. For that, we compute interaction effects between the media group variable ("newspaper group" and "control group") and anti-immigrant sentiment variable ("low" and "high"). The upper panel on the left-hand side presents the preferences of respondents in the newspaper treatment and control groups within contexts of high anti-immigrant sentiment. When closely analyzing these results, it becomes evident that respondents view requests from individuals with Romanian nationality as less credible in a context of high anti-immigrant sentiment (compared to individuals with German nationality). This effect is already statistically significant among the

control group ( $-0.17, p < .1$ ) but is further amplified among respondents exposed to negative newspaper articles ( $-0.2, p < .01$ ). Hence, it appears that variation in norms indeed has the potential to create permission structures for discriminatory behavior (in line with reasoning by [Valentim \(2024\)](#)), further amplified by negative news reporting.

In the figure's lower panel, we analyze preferences in contexts of low anti-immigrant sentiment. Here, respondents also view Romanian claimants' requests as less credible following exposure to the negative newspaper article compared German claimants ( $-0.09, p < .1$ ). Thus, the newspaper article reduces credibility perceptions of Romanian claimants in both contexts. However, in high anti-immigrant sentiment contexts, there is already a stronger baseline bias against Romanian claimants, which the negative news framing reinforces even more. These findings confirm hypothesis 2b, which posited that contextual factors shape their responses to negative news framing.

[Figure A10\(c\) in the Appendix](#) examines the willingness to offer additional help. In contexts of high anti-immigrant sentiment, exposure to negative newspaper articles surprisingly increases caseworkers' willingness to help claimants with Moroccan names ( $0.14, p < .1$ ) and Moroccan nationality ( $0.15, p < .1$ ) compared to German claimants. This unexpected finding may indicate a compensation effect, meaning that when being aware of the topic of immigration, caseworkers find requests of *Romanian* applicants as less credible but are at least willing to offer additional help to *Moroccan* claimants. In contexts of low anti-immigrant sentiment, we observe similar effects in the treatment group ( $0.13, p < .05$ ) as well as a high baseline willingness to help in the control group ( $0.19, p < .05$ ). These findings further support our theoretical expectation that regional variation in anti-immigrant sentiment decisively influences bureaucratic decision-making, in this case, the influence works in a positive direction.

The right panel in [Figure 6](#) illustrates the interaction effect between the media group variable ("newspaper group" and "control group") and respondents' political ideology ("left-leaning", "central" (only shown in [Figure A9\(b\) in Appendix](#)), "right-leaning"). As expected, right-leaning caseworkers demonstrate a statistically and substantially significant tendency to discriminate against applicants with Romanian names compared to applicants with German names following exposure to negative newspapers ( $-0.24, p < .01$ ). In addition (and unexpectedly), we also observe a smaller but statistically significant tendency among left-leaning caseworkers to negatively evaluate Romanian applicants compared to German applicants ( $-0.1, p < .1$ ). While this effect is less pronounced than that observed for right-leaning caseworkers, it raises the possibility that certain segments of the political left may hold anti-immigrant attitudes, or at least differ in their approaches to immigration ([Harris & Römer, 2023](#); [Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018](#)). This interpretation is in line with the recent emergence of left-wing parties adopting anti-immigrant

positions. Notably, there is no significant effect for either ideological group in the control group concerning Romanian claimants, indicating that the discriminatory behavior is activated by negative news framing, but the strength of the effect depends on the political ideology of the individual caseworkers.

At the same time, left-leaning caseworkers in the treatment group are more likely to find requests from Moroccan claimants more credible ( $0.11, p < .1$ ) compared to German claimants. Furthermore, in [Figure A9\(c\) in the Appendix](#), we observe that central and left-leaning caseworkers express a willingness to offer additional support to claimants with Moroccan nationality by 0.2 scale points after exposure to negative news mentioning Romanian individuals. This suggests that politically left-leaning caseworkers differentiate in their reactions depending on the group referenced in the news article. Specifically, we observe two parallel dynamics: a pro-social backlash effect ([Pulejo, 2023](#)) toward the group that was not mentioned, and more exclusionary behavior toward the immigrant group explicitly referenced in the media frame. We can thus partly confirm hypothesis 2c that caseworkers' political ideology shapes how they respond to the news frame.

## Discussion

Our analysis offers numerous critical findings. Most importantly, we find comprehensive evidence in favor of our baseline hypothesis that the regional social context shapes the behavior of caseworkers. In regions with high levels of anti-immigrant sentiment within the population, clear patterns of discrimination are observed: Caseworkers view requests from individuals with Romanian nationality as less credible and are less inclined to offer additional help. Moreover, these discriminatory practices are amplified when preexisting stereotypes are reinforced through negative newspaper reporting. Overall, we obtain clear evidence in favor of our two primary hypotheses (H1 and H2b), and that caseworkers' political ideology further exacerbates the media framing effects (H2c). Furthermore, the impact varies depending on whether a specific immigrant group is mentioned in the news media (H3).

Based on these results, our study offers four substantial insights and one methodological qualification. First, in line with the recent literature on the normalization of the radical right ([Valentim, 2021, 2024](#)), we find that not just the political behavior of the broader population, but also professional administrative decisions of public employees are affected by variation in illiberal norms. Specifically, a high regional prevalence of such norms generates incentives and permission structures for discriminatory practices against members of ethnic minorities in these areas, resulting in lower credibility assessments of their requests and a lack of additional help.

Additionally, in accordance with our media framing hypothesis, we show that news reporting has the potential to activate preexisting stereotypes,

especially against Romanian claimants, which were covered in our artificial newspaper article. This aligns with [Ratzmann's \(2021\)](#) observation of adverse stereotypes regarding Romanians in German job centers, as well as [Adam et al.'s \(2021\)](#) finding that requests from Danes are prioritized over those from Romanians in a German survey with a small subsample of bureaucrats. While we cannot confirm this form of open discrimination (potentially because [Adam et al. \(2021\)](#) do not specifically survey job center caseworkers), the perception of lower credibility regarding Romanian claimants is concerning. These perceptions may lead caseworkers to withhold additional help, or to adopt stricter approaches in subsequent interactions.

Second, we reveal subtle forms of discrimination, building on [Hemker and Rink \(2017\)](#), who observe that ethnic minorities *more broadly* (i.e., regardless of regional context) receive lower-quality responses from welfare offices. We extend this by showing that indirect discrimination also occurs at other stages—here, during initial access to benefits—which is markedly influenced by regional variations in illiberal norms. This finding is plausible because supervisors can more easily audit formal steps like the preapproval of requests than more discretionary aspects, such as how caseworkers assess the credibility of requests.

Third, we observe that media framing effects depend on which immigrant groups are referenced in news coverage: caseworkers—especially those in low anti-immigrant contexts and who identify as politically left-leaning—are more likely to assist immigrant groups that are *not* featured in news stories. This finding is surprising because [Hellwig and Sinno \(2017\)](#) observe that attitudes toward Muslim migrants are less influenced by crime frames than those toward East-European migrants, but they do not report a positive attitude change. Our results demonstrate that media framing can have both negative and positive effects: whereas framing intensifies negative sentiments and stereotypes toward the featured group, non-featured groups benefit indirectly, perhaps because negative stereotypes of them are not on the minds of caseworkers. These asymmetric effects are concerning, given that immigrant groups are disproportionately covered in news in real life ([Alesina et al., 2023](#); [Eberl et al., 2018](#)). Our results underscore the importance of raising awareness among job center employees about this skewed media representation. Future research should further examine how the bias and frequency of media coverage across different immigrant groups reinforce discriminatory patterns.

Within this broader dynamic, the differential behavior among politically left-leaning caseworkers stands out as complex phenomenon and warrants further attention: On the one hand, they show a pro-social backlash effect ([Pulejo, 2023](#)) toward the non-mentioned immigrant group, potentially as a way to signal distance from illiberal norms. On the other hand, these left-leaning caseworkers exhibit some exclusionary behavior toward the group referenced in the news article as well, suggesting the potential for anti-

immigrant sentiment within specific segments of the political left (see e.g., [Harris & Römer, 2023](#); [Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018](#)). Thus, future research should disentangle these complex patterns by distinguishing between subgroups on the political left—such as social democrats, greens, or the radical left—and explore how these subgroups respond to the normalization of illiberal norms and negative news in their everyday bureaucratic practices.

Fourth, we experimentally varied the geographical scope of the newspaper article (regional vs. national), but the empirical patterns regarding which level exerts a stronger influence on caseworker remain inconclusive. This could be because participants were exposed to only a single article, which may not have aligned with their preferred media source. Future research could explore this further by tailoring media treatments more precisely, for instance, by identifying and subsequently incorporating respondent's preferred or most trusted media sources at the local, regional, and national levels. This would allow to test at which geographical level reference groups operate (or potentially interact), and where normative cues exert the greatest influence on behavior.

A methodological contribution of our study is the usage of a novel measure of anti-immigration attitudes. While most studies use a single indicator, our measurement of anti-immigrant sentiment includes a combination of diverse data sources at the state level, from vote shares for the extreme right to xenophobic attacks. We consider the federal state to be a meaningful reference unit for caseworkers in Germany, as states vary in terms of media regulations, cultural norms, political sentiment, and bureaucratic guidelines. These structural, political and cultural differences can shape caseworkers' immigration attitudes, their response to media frames, and finally their decision-making behavior. At the same time, we acknowledge that the state-level aggregation has limitations and is not experimentally manipulated. Due to data protection constraints for this specific study, we could not collect the survey data at the county level. Therefore, future research should ideally examine similar data more granularly to answer the empirical question of whether caseworkers are more strongly influenced by norms at the regional or local level.

Finally, some of our rather small effect sizes may be attributed to social desirability bias, as respondents could have actively sought to avoid the revelation of discriminatory patterns. Similar studies on bureaucratic discrimination report comparable small effect sizes ([Adam et al., 2021](#); [Grohs et al., 2016](#); [Schram et al., 2009](#)). Our robustness checks confirm that the main effects—variation in anti-immigrant sentiment and its interaction with media framing, leading to discriminatory behavior—remain significant. This holds true when excluding respondents who failed the awareness check ([Figures A14\(a\) and \(b\)](#)), those with inconsistent decision-making ([Figures A15\(a\) and \(b\)](#)), and when applying a more restrictive categorization of anti-immigrant sentiment ([Figure A12\(b\)](#)). In addition, the case of Germany may plausibly be

viewed as a “hard test” context for our purposes since [Dahlström and Lapuente \(2022\)](#) classify it as a “Weberian bureaucratic system.” In these kinds of bureaucracies, regulations and laws should more strongly limit the discretion of bureaucrats than in other public administrative systems, potentially reducing individual bureaucrats’ space for discrimination of minority groups. Hence, the observation of discrimination in a tightly regulated Weberian bureaucratic system, as revealed in this article, may plausibly represent the lower bound of the magnitude of related behavioral patterns across various kinds of administrative states. In sum, we consider that our small but significant effects underestimate the true magnitude as at least some respondents likely seek to avoid the detection of discrimination. Furthermore, we suggest that—in the future—individual case files should be collected and analyzed to validate the experimental results, which was not possible at this stage due to data protection constraints.

## Conclusion

In this article, we explore whether and how illiberal norms, which have been associated with the rise of the radical right, influence the decisions of street-level bureaucrats. Our main insight is that they do. In regions with high levels of anti-immigrant sentiments, bureaucrats are significantly more likely to engage in discriminatory practices toward welfare requests of ethnic minorities. This suggests that not just the general political behavior of the population as a whole, but also very specific administrative decisions of state agents are shaped by the prevalence of illiberal attitudes. Our results are a reason for concern: Unemployment benefits represent a critical tool to help financially struggling individuals avoid impoverishment. From a normative perspective, their allocation should not be influenced by ethnicity, but only by objective factors such as actual need. Moreover, as levels of trust in the state are shaped by the quality of its services, affected minority groups (that experience systematic state discrimination) may lose their trust in and reduce their political support for public (welfare state) institutions, with potentially highly detrimental long-term consequences for state development and public service quality ([Bell et al., 2024](#); [Bustikova & Corduneanu-Huci, 2017](#); [Cornell & Grimes, 2015](#); [Gingrich, 2025](#); [Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015](#)).<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, the societal and normative relevance of our findings is extraordinarily high.

Additionally, we find that negative news reporting regarding immigration can further reinforce existing stereotypes, resulting in the intensification of discriminatory practices. In this regard, key insights from our empirical analysis are that (1) discriminatory tendencies by street-level bureaucrats manifest in a relatively subtle manner, and (2) there is a multifaceted and complex interplay between media framing, regional anti-immigrant

sentiment, and caseworkers' political ideology in practical administrative outcomes. Overall, our primary empirical findings advance existing research on how both the regional environment (Adam et al., 2020; Gundacker et al., 2025; Keiser et al., 2004; Vogler, 2019) and individual ideology (Bell et al., 2021) affect bureaucrats' day-to-day decision-making.

As objectivity should guide administrative decisions, a key practical implication of this article is the desirability of adjusting the regional public discourse toward more balanced news about immigration. Simultaneously, awareness of biases in reporting go hand in hand with the need for welfare offices to (1) adapt their communication strategies and implement manual or AI-supported checks of request documents, (2) create new anti-discrimination training courses that should aim to (at least partly) counteract regionally prevalent stereotypes, and (3) standardize work practices across federal states to achieve the most discrimination-free environment possible. Furthermore, based on the insights from our study, the German Ministry of Labor could use internal data (that is currently not accessible to scholars) for a more comprehensive analysis and regional comparison that can subsequently guide targeted interventions.

Finally, our study carries timely relevance, particularly in light of the significant and sustained electoral gains of right-wing extremist parties across Europe since the 2010s. The identified patterns showcase the harmful impact of rising anti-immigrant sentiments on ethnic minorities' access to essential state services, which in turn highlights the potentially critical role of individual caseworker training in countering stereotypes tied to ideology and regional sentiments. Therefore, this study has wide-ranging scholarly, practical, and policy implications.

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## Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Board of the University of Konstanz. Before starting the survey, respondents were informed that they participate in a scientific study, how their data is processed (they could click on a link to read the data protection information which was approved by the data protection representative of the University of Konstanz and the legal office of the University of Konstanz) and had to give informed consent to participate in the survey (see pre-registration report for exact wording on page I: [https://osf.io/3h5fj/?view\\_only=9e30f6bf0d42489482f9c51d05a16651](https://osf.io/3h5fj/?view_only=9e30f6bf0d42489482f9c51d05a16651)).

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## Data Availability Statement

Replication files are available at CPS Dataverse. To maintain confidentiality of respondents, the authors can only release aggregated data.

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. In 2023, *Unemployment Benefit II* (commonly known as *Hartz IV*) was replaced by the new *Citizen's Benefit* (Bürgergeld) (Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2023). In autumn 2025, the new government decided to replace the *Citizen's Benefit* with the *Basic Security* (*Grundsicherung*) (tagesschau, 2025). In this article, however, we focus on the rules of the *Citizen's Benefit*, as this was the primary scheme of unemployment benefits during our observation period.
2. To the best of our knowledge, no other study conducted in Germany has comparably large-scale access to actual job center employees, offering unique insights into their role in the allocation of unemployment benefits. An exception is the study of Hemker and Rink (2017) who study information provision by German job centers by sending them unsolicited emails.
3. As we focus on discrimination based on ethnicity, our examination encompasses (1) individuals with foreign-sounding names and German citizenship, and (2) individuals who belong to an ethnic minority with foreign citizenship. This offers a more nuanced understanding of bureaucratic tendencies.
4. The issue of discrimination through bureaucracies is also closely related to the concept of "administrative burden," which is frequently more pronounced for minority groups. For examples and an overview of the literature, see Herd and Moynihan (2019) and Halling and Baekgaard (2024). For analyses of the concrete effects on minority groups as well as consequences for the welfare state, see Bell et al. (2024) and Ray et al. (2023).
5. While most studies highlight negative media framing effects, there is also the potential to generate more favorable outcomes through positive frames. For example, Van Klinger et al. (2015) find that news coverage exerts a stronger influence than factual immigration statistics, with positive-toned coverage improving public attitudes toward immigration. However, given its substantive societal relevance as outlined in the introduction and literature review, we have chosen to focus on the negative effects of media framing.
6. The preregistration report mentions that we would conduct an exploratory analysis with relevant respondent characteristics. We added a contextual factor in the form of a respondents' federal state and the political ideology of respondents to the preregistered hypotheses.
7. For instance, in Germany, a study finds that in 2023, 82% of the crimes covered by newspapers involved foreign suspects, whereas the share of crimes where foreigners are named suspects is lower in official police statistics with 33.3% (Ehlers, 2025; Hestermann, 2023).
8. In our pre-registration, we included more hypotheses which will be tested in an additional paper.
9. A blinded version of the preregistration report, also containing the questionnaire, can be found here: [https://osf.io/3h5fj/?view\\_only=9e30f6bf0d42489482f9c51d05a16651](https://osf.io/3h5fj/?view_only=9e30f6bf0d42489482f9c51d05a16651). The study was approved by the Ethics Board of the University of Konstanz.

10. Note that the data on employees in job centers is only available for the joint facilities. This could explain the differences in age structure.
11. Exemplary newspaper articles are:— <https://wuppertal-total.de/stadtleben/razzia-gegen-sozialbetrug-in-barmen-und-elberfeld/>— <https://www.waz.de/staedte/dortmund/grossrazzia-wegen-sozialbetrug-schwerpunkt-in-dortmund-id236556505.html>— [https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/frauenhandel-jobcenterbetrug-raubzuege-wie-roma-clans-nun-mitten-in-deutschland-eine-parallel-gesellschaft-aufbauen\\_id\\_180426656.html](https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/frauenhandel-jobcenterbetrug-raubzuege-wie-roma-clans-nun-mitten-in-deutschland-eine-parallel-gesellschaft-aufbauen_id_180426656.html)— <https://www.kreiszeitung.de/lokales/diepholz/von-eu-auslaendern-phantom-schueler-neuer-sozialbetrug-91645458.html>.
12. For a similar procedure on varying news sources for the same artificial news text, see Nyhan and Reifler (2010), and the Appendix for a further discussion on using newspaper labels.
13. Real-world requests can be found here: [https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/datei/antrag-sgb2\\_ba042689.pdf](https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/datei/antrag-sgb2_ba042689.pdf).
14. For instance, we did not specify which supporting document was missing in a first draft of the survey. One job center caseworker recommended that we should indicate bank statements as the missing document, which we then included in our outcome measure for the main study.
15. Detailed information about the eligibility requirements can be found here:—<https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/en/financial-support/citizens-income>.— <https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/arbeitslos-arbeit-finden/buergergeld/finanziell-absichern/voraussetzungen-einkommen-vermoegen>.
16. We also implement a forced choice, representing a realistic scenario because the workload in the job centers is high. To allow for an easier interpretation, we code “putting an application on hold” as a value of “0”, and the advanced profile with “1”. The results for this outcome measure can be found in the Appendix. *“If you can only pre-approve one request, which one would you rather **put on hold** for now out of concern for fraud? Even if you are not completely sure, please indicate **which request you would be more likely to put on hold for now.**”* (See full wording in Appendix).
17. To check for the robustness of our results, we present Marginal Means (MMs) for the main models (H1 and H2b) in the appendix (Figures A19(a) and A19(b)) as well. Note that we stated in the preregistration report that we would compute MMs as our main model and the AMCEs with German names/German nationality as the baseline as robustness checks. To offer a consistent analysis, we decided to report the AMCEs in the main part of the article for the rating tasks because they are easier to interpret.
18. Replication materials and code can be found at Rueß et al. (2025).
19. We acknowledge that exposure to regional anti-immigrant sentiment is not experimentally manipulated. To counter the alternative explanation that our findings might reflect self-selection—that caseworkers’ behavior is driven by who chooses to work in certain regions rather than by regional context—we show in Table A6a in the Appendix that caseworkers’ personal political views are more left-leaning

and less far-right than the regional voting behavior of the population in most federal states. This strengthens our argument that the observed effects are mainly driven by contextual influences.

20. **Figures A8b-8d** in the Appendix test H2a with three subgroups: “National” = *national treatment* newspaper article, “Regional” = *regional treatment* newspaper article, and “Control” = *placebo* newspaper article.
21. **Figure A8c** in the Appendix shows the results for the two treatment groups (national vs. regional newspaper article) and highlights that the effect is mainly driven by the regional newspaper article.
22. **Figure A8d** in the Appendix shows the results for the two treatment groups and highlights that the effect for claimants with Moroccan name is mainly driven by the national newspaper article while the effect for claimants with Moroccan nationality is mainly driven by the regional newspaper article.
23. On the tremendous importance of reputation for public administration in general and state-citizen interactions in particular, see also [Carpenter and Krause \(2012\)](#), [Corbacho et al. \(2016\)](#), and [Lerman \(2019\)](#).

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