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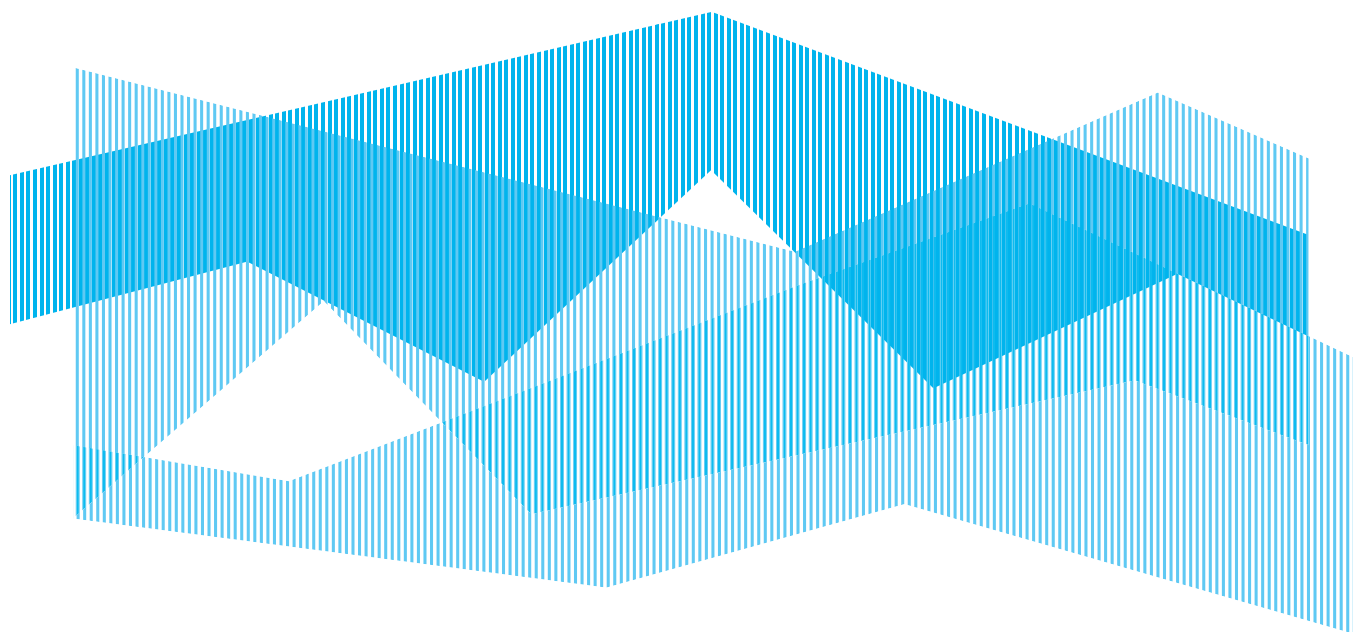
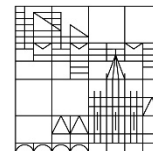
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# Priming and Prejudice: Experimental Evidence on Negative News Frames and Discrimination in German Welfare Offices

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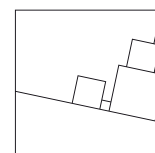
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## About the authors

Stefanie Rueß is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School of the Social and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Konstanz as well as a research associate since January 2022 in the project "Prejudices and Stereotyping in Job Centers? Benefits of the Basic Security for Job Seekers according to SGB II" at the chair of Prof. Dr. Gerald Schneider at the University of Konstanz. Within the framework of this research project, her dissertation deals with bureaucratic discrimination in job centers.

Gerald Schneider is Professor of International Politics at the University of Konstanz and Executive Editor of European Union Politics. His main areas of research are European Union decision making, the causes and consequences of armed violence, international political economy, bargaining and conflict management, as well as administrative inequality.

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# Priming and Prejudice: Experimental Evidence on Negative News Frames and Discrimination in German Welfare Offices

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## Abstract

Does the priming of street-level bureaucrats with negative news stories on immigration influence their decisions regarding unemployment benefits? Previous research has established that regional-level peer pressure on public employees and the national-level salience of immigration debates intensify bureaucratic discrimination. By synthesizing the media framing and bureaucratic discrimination literatures, we expect that the priming of street-level bureaucrats with a news frame about welfare fraud committed by ethnic minorities leads to discriminatory practices. To investigate the validity of our theoretical propositions, we conducted a preregistered conjoint experiment with a large dataset, namely a representative survey of German street-level bureaucrats working in unemployment offices. We observe negative discrimination against Romanian claimants after exposure to a negative article, even when they provide internally consistent applications, but not toward Moroccan claimants. These effects are particularly pronounced among caseworkers leaning to the political right and living in federal states whose populations exhibit strong anti-immigration attitudes.

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## Evidence for Practice

- Negative news about immigration lead street-level bureaucrats to perceive applications from ethnic minority applicants as less credible, especially those from the group mentioned in the news. They are also less likely to offer them additional help.
- This bias is more pronounced among caseworkers with right-leaning political views.
- To ensure fair treatment of the featured group in news, authorities should develop training courses for caseworkers 1) to mitigate their implicit biases and 2) promote their media competence to critically analyze media reports.
- Furthermore, authorities should consider the introduction of AI-tools for application processing which can assist caseworkers in the objective evaluation of applications.
- Our results show that the non-featured immigrant group in news can profit from minor positive cues. Authorities should 1) establish public programs offering support to ethnic minorities in filling out applications for state-granted benefits and 2) provide AI-based assistance to check the completeness of application documents.

Street-level bureaucrats deliver a multitude of public services to citizens, making wide-ranging decisions that affect the lives of their clients (Lipsky 1980, 2010). A case in point is social welfare, where caseworkers typically possess ample discretion concerning approving applications and distributing benefits. This leeway becomes problematic when administrators resort to stereotypes about client groups in their work routines. Such behavior can lead to unequal treatment of specific groups based on ethnicity, gender, or other characteristics. A rich literature shows that media outlets can foster such biases and thus likely contribute to discriminatory patterns. Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva (2023), for instance, argue that “immigrants who commit crimes or who free-ride on the welfare system may receive more media coverage than non-immigrants engaging in these same behaviours” (p. 37). Furthermore,

Igartua and Cheng (2009) show that negative reports on immigration result in adverse attitudes toward immigration. However, it is unclear how these frames affect street-level bureaucrats, and interact with caseworkers' political ideologies or regional political cultures. Thus, we examine whether reports on welfare fraud committed by foreign persons<sup>1</sup> influence decisions regarding unemployment benefit requests and to what extent personal views of caseworkers and contextual factors influence this process.

Our contribution connects studies showing how regional dynamics, such as the political mood, affect administrative decisions (White, Nathan, and Faller 2015, Adam, Grohs, and Knill 2020, Gundacker, Kosyakova, and Schneider 2024). However, only a few existing studies examine how news coverage on immigration affects bureaucratic decisions. For instance, Spirig (2021) shows that the salience of immigration in Swiss national debates affects asylum decisions of judges, while Ratzmann (2021) suggests in her qualitative study that German public discourses could shape decisions in welfare offices. Despite these studies, a unified theoretical framework and systematic quantitative evidence of how negative news coverage triggers discrimination is lacking. To address this gap, we synthesize insights from the framing literature with the public administration literature.

We expect that the exposure of caseworkers in German job centers (bureaucracies responsible for the allocation of unemployment benefits) to negative media frames activates stereotypes about ethnic minorities, leading to discrimination. We identify three factors that can moderate news frame effects: First, reporting about *regional* news events compared to *national* news events is more likely to influence caseworkers' decision-making, as their work is affected by regional public opinion. Second, the impact of news frames depends on the *specific minority group* mentioned in the news and minority applicants can offset negative news reporting with positive cues in their request. Third, media framing is more likely to intensify discriminatory

tendencies among *politically right-leaning* caseworkers, especially in states with strong *opposition to immigration*.

Empirically, we focus on unemployment benefits, namely the German welfare program Citizen's Benefit. Unemployment benefits are a crucial policy tool to mitigate the detrimental social and economic impact of job loss (Kupka and Osiander 2017). Accordingly, discrimination risks in their allocation are a topic of major public interest (DeZIM 2022). From June to July 2023, we conducted our survey with 1400 employees from a stratified sample of 60 of the 405 German job centers. To the best of our knowledge, no other study conducted in Germany has comparable access to actual job center employees.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this is the first contribution that presents a systematic analysis of these specific street-level bureaucrats' decision-making.

Our experimental setup is as follows: After presenting newspaper articles reporting on welfare fraud by Romanian individuals and clans, we employ a paired conjoint experiment where we randomly vary applicants' ethnic backgrounds (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). As we explore 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.

The results are partly in line with our expectations: There is persistent negative discrimination toward applicants with Romanian nationality after exposure to the media treatment. This manifests subtly in that caseworkers deem Romanian applications as less credible and offer no additional help to them even when they provide positive cues. Bureaucrats who lean to the political right and live in states with pronounced anti-immigrant sentiments are particularly likely to discriminate. However, we do not find a stronger effect of regional news reporting compared to national news reporting.

## **Regional Patterns of Discrimination in German Unemployment Benefit Decisions**

The *Citizen's Benefit* is a German welfare program providing a minimum of financial security for unemployed persons. It was introduced in 2005 and underwent a major reform in 2023 (shortly before the beginning of our study) (Kupka and Osiander 2017, Jahn 2023). As of January 2023, nearly half the recipients are persons with foreign citizenship (Statistik Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2023c). This is relevant because previous research found manifold bureaucratic discrimination against ethnic minorities (Gschwind, Ratzmann, and Beste 2021, Hemker and Rink 2017).<sup>3</sup>

Our study concentrates on the first administrative step, namely the request for receiving benefits, about which no systematic study exists. Despite clear eligibility requirements, caseworkers have the authority to pre-approve requests and can provide additional assistance. It would be desirable to examine observational data on the rate of rejected requests but such data are not collected. Hence, we illustrate how the implementation of the Citizen's Benefit varies across federal states at two crucial decision stages: entry into the Citizen's Benefit (Statistik Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2023c) and the imposition of sanctions (Statistik Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2023a), both in 2018.

[**Figure 1 here:** Regional variation in entry and sanction quotas for Citizen's Benefit cases in 2018]

Panel A of figure 1 shows that most entries into Citizen's Benefit are located in South Germany. When looking at persons with foreign nationality, the entry rate in the south remains at the same



level, while it is higher in the western states North Rhine-Westphalia and Hesse. 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 (Panel B). These stark regional differences may be due to various regional factors, such as the proportion of foreign persons. Yet, even with differences in the underlying composition of populations, this variation hints at possible unequal treatment of ethnic minorities across regions.

## **Bureaucratic Discrimination and Media Framing**

### **Key Insights from the Literature on Bureaucratic Discrimination**

Although we suggest that variation in entry and sanction rates could (partly) be explained by discriminatory behavior, this is far from certain. To avoid ecological fallacies, we need to assess the individual decision-making behavior of bureaucrats. In this respect, existing research reveals various forms of administrative discrimination across and within different welfare state types.

Schram et al. (2009) show that Black and Latinx welfare clients in the U.S. are more likely to be sanctioned than White welfare clients. A study in Denmark reaches similar conclusions regarding discrimination against ethnic minorities (Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018). Drawing on theories of racism and cognitive bias, the authors argue that population majorities often uphold stereotypes about ethnic minorities. If caseworkers consider these stereotypes in their decisions on welfare benefit applications and even view them as confirmed by cues associated with the submitted request (such as missing documents), bureaucratic decisions can result in racial disparities (Grohs, Adam, and Knill 2016, Schram et al. 2009). This proposition

is akin to the theory of statistical discrimination (Arrow 1973).<sup>4</sup> However, other research finds the opposite pattern, namely positive discrimination toward ethnic minorities, possibly due to different portrayals of immigrants in Norwegian compared to U.S. media (Terum, Torsvik, and Øverbye 2018). This suggests that caseworkers exposed to critical immigration stories might hold more negative stereotypes. However, this argument does not account for regional media variations that could result in differing discriminatory patterns *within* countries.

Another form of bureaucratic discrimination manifests more subtly. Hemker and Rink (2017) highlight that, while street-level bureaucrats respond to ethnic minorities as frequently as to Germans, they are less likely to formulate high-quality answers to ethnic minority clients. Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen (2021) study the willingness to help, finding that street-level bureaucrats deem the motivation of clients as more important than their competence.

Further insights from the literature relate to the regional context. White, Nathan, and Faller (2015) find that Latinx persons receive lower-quality information on changes to voter ID laws in conservative regions. Similarly, decisions on political rallies concerning same-sex marriage depend on the prevalence of Catholicism in German counties (Adam, Grohs, and Knill 2020). Schneider, Segadlo, and Leue (2020) show that deportations of rejected asylum-seekers are less likely in German federal states with left-wing governments. In addition, data from a German refugee survey reveal that regional attitudes toward migration influence the prospects of asylum seekers (Gundacker, Kosyakova, and Schneider 2024). Harrits (2019) shows that the usage of stereotypes by bureaucrats is conditioned by the social class heterogeneity of Danish municipalities. Consequently, several regional factors moderate discriminatory behavior by bureaucrats.

However, evidence regarding news reporting as a specific factor within the regional and national environment is scarce. Spirig (2021) demonstrates in a rare quantitative study that the salience of asylum in Swiss media leads to less favorable asylum adjudication. 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 and political rhetoric shapes caseworkers' perceptions and decisions. However, we do not know from the small number of cases whether these associations can be generalized, whether there is a difference between regional and national news, and which individual characteristics of bureaucrats moderate the media framing effect. Thus, we integrate these factors into a unified theoretical framework.

### **Key Insights from the Literature on Priming and News Frames**

The interrelated concepts of framing and priming have played important roles in communication research. Framing is concerned with how a specific piece of information is portrayed, meaning that it “selects and emphasizes certain aspects of reality” (Bos et al. 2016, 98). Priming refers to the “considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues” (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 11).

Most studies that examine the impact of media coverage of immigration focus on framing. Contributions to this literature show that adverse immigration crime frames lead respondents to view immigrants more negatively (Igartua and Cheng 2009, Igartua, Moral-Toranzo, and Fernández 2012). Since negative news have the potential to worsen attitudes toward ethnic minorities, it is important to analyze whether similar coverage affects bureaucratic decision-making.

Caseworkers might discriminate between ethnic groups which are covered disparately in the news. For instance, Hellwig and Sinno (2017) show that diverging immigration frames affect immigrant groups in Britain asymmetrically: Emphasizing the connection of immigration with crime shrinks support for Eastern European migrants more than for Muslim migrants. Building

upon these findings, we argue that group-specific framing affects perceptions of deservingness for different ethnic minorities.

Another strand of research that is relevant to building our theory demonstrates how contextual factors and respondents' ideologies moderate the influence of news frames. First, Gaines et al. (2007) show that the potential for belief changes due to new information regarding casualties in the Iraq War strongly depend on partisan affiliation. This is relevant in the bureaucratic context as Bell et al. (2021) reveal that the evaluations of administrative burdens differ between conservative and liberal bureaucrats. Second, the political orientation of media outlets and their geographic location influence migration frames, as an analysis comparing national and regional papers with diverging ideological slants has shown (Fryberg et al. 2012). Hence, we complement these results by analyzing whether bureaucrats with varying political orientations perceive frames differently.

### **Theoretical Expectations: News Frames, Bureaucratic Decisions, and Moderators**

Building upon these findings, we develop our theoretical expectations. The concept of statistical discrimination suggests that exposure to negative media reporting about immigration activates group-based stereotypes, which can result in discriminatory behavior (Arrow 1973, Schram et al. 2009, Assouline, Gilad, and Ben-Nun Bloom 2022). In particular, linking criminal activity to persons with foreign nationality has a strong potential to activate stereotypes (Gilliam Jr et al. 1996, Dixon and Maddox 2005). Bureaucratic discrimination can manifest in various ways: Discrimination can occur at the process stage, which encompasses the quality of interaction or provision of additional help (Hemker and Rink 2017), before bureaucrats make decisions on welfare benefit requests (Thomann, James, and Deruelle 2024). We suggest that media framing triggers these different forms of discrimination:

**H1: Negative news frames lead to bureaucratic discrimination.**

We identify three factors affecting news frame effects: First, reporting on *regional* news events should have a greater influence on bureaucratic decisions compared to reporting on *national* news event. Typically, regional reporting is about issues more directly relevant to caseworkers. Furthermore, due to frequent interactions with the local population, caseworkers are more directly exposed to local public opinion.

**H2: Regional news frames** have a greater effect than national news frames.

Second, the referencing of *specific ethnic minority groups* in news frames (linked to the activation of stereotypes about these groups) enhances the probability that their members will experience discrimination. On the other hand, the minority group not mentioned in the article might experience no negative or potentially even positive discrimination. Moreover, claimants can provide positive cues in their requests to counteract negative news frames. Based on the deservingness concept (Meuleman, Roosma, and Abts 2020, van Oorschot 2000), we suggest that document consistency can signal applicants' commitment, and bureaucrats might consider this during their evaluation process (Schram et al. 2009, Pedersen and Nielsen 2024).

**H3a: Group-specific news frames** (highlighting ethnic minority A) lead to negative discrimination against individuals belonging to minority A, and no negative or even positive discrimination against individuals belonging to minority B.

**H3b:** The potential effect of negative media framing is less pronounced when the request contains **positive cues**.

Third, concerning individual factors, we expect that politically right-leaning caseworkers hold more pronounced anti-immigrant attitudes (Gaines et al. 2007, Bell et al. 2021). As a contextual factor, we consider variation in regional public sentiment concerning immigration (Park and Favero 2023, Gundacker, Kosyakova, and Schneider 2024). Caseworkers in states with populations that exhibit more negative attitudes toward immigrants are more likely to have been exposed to adverse group stereotypes regularly, shaping their attitudes and beliefs. More

comprehensive previous exposure can be expected to intensify the activation and use of stereotypes through news framing.

**H4:** Negative news frames have a stronger effect among **right-leaning** caseworkers (H4a) in federal states with **greater opposition to immigration** (H4b).<sup>5</sup>

To summarize, our theory suggests that news frames have the potential to activate negative stereotypes about ethnic minorities and lead to discrimination by the primed caseworkers (see figure 2). We further argue that heterogeneity in the caseworkers' ideologies and regional context has significant potential to influence media framing effects.

[**Figure 2 here:** Theoretical framework: How regional public sentiment and news frames influence bureaucratic decisions]

## **Data and Research Design**

To study the influence of negative news coverage, we conducted a preregistered survey experiment with caseworkers in German job centers from June to July 2023.<sup>6</sup> In total, 1400 respondents from 60 job centers participated in the survey, resulting in 14,000 observations in our conjoint experiment (through which each respondent went multiple times). To the best of our knowledge, no comparable dataset of German caseworkers exists. This allows us to present the first large-N analysis of German street-level bureaucrats' decisions.

Two elements are central to our survey design: 1) a vignette experiment that varies the media portrayal of immigration; and 2) a paired conjoint experiment (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014) that approximates caseworkers' day-to-day choices.

### **Data Collection and Sample**

Respondents were selected through a multi-stage process. In the first step, we drew a stratified, proportional sample of 100 job centers (out of 405), considering both socio-political characteristics and the presence of xenophobia (see the appendix for details). 60 job centers agreed to participate in the survey. 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. Our target sample size was 750 respondents but we collected 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 displays the respondents' demographics. In eastern federal states, only 3.7% of caseworkers have a migration background, and there is a slightly higher proportion of caseworkers who identify as central or right-leaning on the political scale. In the appendix, we show that our sample is representative.

[Table 1 here: Respondents' characteristics]

### Experimental Design and Newspaper Treatments

Figure 3 summarizes our survey. First, respondents were asked standard demographic questions. In the next step, we introduced a 2x1 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).<sup>7</sup>

[Figure 3 here: Structure of the survey and experimental design]

Both news frames contain a report about foreign persons who commit welfare fraud, while we expose the placebo group to an article about administrative digitalization. We base this decision on prior studies that use crime frames (Igartua, Moral-Toranzo, and Fernández 2012, Hellwig and Sinno 2017). To create artificial newspaper articles, we used real-world articles about welfare fraud to approximate their language, style, and content.<sup>8</sup>

The two treatment newspaper articles have a common structure and similar headline (“Rising welfare fraud by foreign persons”/ “Rising welfare fraud by foreign persons in [federal state]”) but one is a regional and the other one a national newspaper, emphasizing different geographic areas. The exact wording is displayed in the appendix.

- 1) The first group receives an article from “Der Spiegel” with numbers about nationwide welfare fraud by persons with foreign citizenship. We describe a new method of welfare fraud by Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants and end with a direct quote from the



Federal Criminal Police Office about increased organized welfare fraud by Romanian and Bulgarian clans. We chose the well-known weekly magazine “Der Spiegel” because of its large readership and center-left political orientation.

- 2) The second group receives an article from a regional newspaper (depending on respondents’ federal states) with a reference to regional welfare fraud by persons with foreign citizenship. We describe a new method of welfare fraud by Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants in the respective federal state, and add a direct quote from the respective State Criminal Police Office about increased organized welfare fraud by Romanian and Bulgarian clans.

We then ask respondents about their media consumption to make the transition to the conjoint part more convenient and to cover our research interest. It is important to note that only 2% of respondents said they do not read the news, while 90% spend around 30 minutes with them. 65% of respondents said they read a newspaper daily, of which almost 90% read regional and 63% national news.

### **Conjoint Experiment**

The questionnaire continues with the 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 too but also add applicants’ names to mimic real-world requests.<sup>9</sup> 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 2023c, b). From the perspective of an EU member state, Moroccan people represent immigrants from so-called “third countries” and specifically Maghreb states (i.e., North Africa). 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 appear in table 2.

[Table 2 here: Attributes and attribute levels]

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 estimates suggest that 35 to 60 percent of eligible individuals do not apply (Wilke 2024). Similarly, Harnisch (2019) highlights that ethnic minorities are disproportionately less likely to apply. This underscores the importance of experimentally approaching the processing of applications to examine if ethnic minorities receive similar treatment as Germans when deciding to apply. 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. (...)*

We constructed the scenario in consultation with job centers to ensure its authenticity, as Clayton et al. (2023) suggest.<sup>10</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. Despite strict formal requirements, caseworkers have some leeway in assessing the requests' credibility, offering support, or pre-approving benefits (Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2023a, b).<sup>11</sup>

To measure how caseworkers use this leeway, we included rating tasks and a forced choice.

- First, to measure subtle discrimination, we include rating tasks on “*the information in the request is credible*” and “*the agency should provide additional assistance*”. This is measured on a 7-point scale where higher values mean increasing agreement with the statement.
- Second, the forced choice is 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”.

*“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).

As a quality measurement of caseworkers' response behavior consistency, following Clayton et al. (2023), we included a flipped version of the first choice 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) with the reference category of “German nationality”/ “German names” (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014).<sup>12</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 R’s “cregg”-package (Leeper 2018).

To test hypothesis 1, 2 and 3a, we conduct individual conjoint analyses across three subgroups (1 = national newspaper article, 2 = regional newspaper article, 3 = control group). We compute interaction effects (ACIEs) between supporting documents and the nationality of claimants to test hypothesis 3b.

As stated in our preregistration, we conduct a subgroup analysis with demographic variables, expecting that the political ideology of caseworkers and regional anti-immigrant sentiment moderate the relationship between media framing and bureaucratic decision-making. First, 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 has the advantage that it captures a broader spectrum of political orientations and not only the extreme ends.

Second, we employ a multi-layered approach to measure regional anti-immigration sentiment. We use the vote share for the far-right *Alternative for Germany* in the last federal election (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2022), the statement “foreigners enrich cultural life in Germany” from a representative survey (Baute et al. 2020), and xenophobic attacks per 1.000 inhabitants in federal states (Mut gegen rechte Gewalt 2023). We perform a principal component analysis, showing that the first component explains a significant percentage of the total variance (80.4 %) (see the appendix). Therefore, we create an additive index by rescaling the variables from 1

to 10, resulting in the anti-immigrant sentiment index ranging from 3 to 30. In our main analysis, we use a third-quartile split. To test hypothesis 4, we compute interaction effects between the treatment variable (for simplification, we build two groups: 1 = national *and* regional newspaper article, 2 = control group), the index of anti-immigrant sentiment and ideology.

## **Results**

Our primary purpose is to examine how the priming of caseworkers with negative news frames affects bureaucratic decision-making. Figures A7a-A7c in the appendix display the preferences for all attributes without looking at the treatment. While caseworkers do not delay 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 more financial means result in delays. Similar trends are observed for the credibility assessment and willingness to help.

### **Examining News Frames' Effects on the Credibility of Requests and Willingness to Help**

Figure 4 shows the effects of our news frame: We observe that exposure to a regional newspaper article leads respondents to perceive requests from claimants with Romanian nationality as less credible, and similarly, exposure to a national newspaper article has a comparable effect on requests from Moroccan applicants. While these effects are relatively small, they are akin in magnitude to the impact of higher levels of financial means. Notably, respondents in the control group do not demonstrate a bias against Romanian or Moroccan claimants, suggesting that negative newspaper articles evoke stereotypes about minority claimants, influencing the assessment of request credibility.

Regarding willingness to help, respondents want to offer additional assistance to claimants with Moroccan nationality or names, but not to those with Romanian nationality, following exposure to negative regional articles. This effect size is comparable to that of minor inconsistencies in the request. Thus, while primed respondents perceive both minority groups as less credible, they extend additional help to the ethnic minority group not featured in the article. This is an

interesting finding as prior studies found that featuring one immigrant group in a newspaper article leads to less negative attitudes toward non-featured immigrant groups (Hellwig and Sinno 2017), but not positive attitudes. Moreover, this raises concerns about the differential treatment of ethnic minority claimants, affecting their ability to submit all documents and receive benefits.

[**Figure 4 here:** News frame effects on the credibility of requests and the helpfulness toward requests (rating task)]

Further analysis (see figure A8 in the appendix) reveals that respondents exposed to negative newspaper articles are not more inclined to delay requests from ethnic minority clients (using 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. Hence, we can partly confirm hypotheses 1 and 3a.

To delve deeper into whether cues influence discrimination, we computed interaction effects between the nationality of claimants and attachments in figure 5. Respondents perceive a request from a *Romanian claimant* with *no inconsistencies* in their attachments as less credible by 0.25 scale points after reading the regional newspaper article compared to a similar request with *German nationality* and *no inconsistencies* (even when comparing to *German nationality* and *minor inconsistencies*, Romanian applicants without inconsistencies are not seen as more credible in the regional newspaper group, see appendix). On the other hand, respondents exhibit increased helpfulness toward *Moroccan applicants* with *minor inconsistencies* by 0.4 scale points in the regional newspaper group compared to the baseline (this effect also holds when

setting the baseline to *German nationality* and *minor inconsistencies*, see appendix). However, caseworkers do not help Romanian applicants with minor inconsistencies. Thus, we can only partly confirm hypothesis 3b: Moroccan applicants can improve their chances of support with minor positive cues, while Romanian applicants cannot counteract negative news with positive cues. Interestingly, in these cases, we observe a stronger framing effect from regional news reporting compared to national one.

[Figure 5 here: News frame effects and the interaction of nationality and consistency in attachments]

### **Examining the Role of Political Ideology and Anti-immigrant Sentiment**

The left panel in figure 6 illustrates the interaction between respondents' political ideology and news framing. Right-leaning caseworkers demonstrate a significant tendency to discriminate against applicants with Romanian names following exposure to negative newspapers. This effect is substantial, with a Romanian-sounding name decreasing credibility by 0.25 scale points compared to a German-sounding name. Notably, there is no significant effect among right-leaning caseworkers in the control group and among left-leaning caseworkers in both groups. In figure A9c 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. We can thus observe patterns of negative and positive discrimination among right-leaning and left-leaning caseworkers.



In the right panel of figure 6, we examine the interaction between regional anti-immigrant sentiment and news framing. The upper panel presents the preferences of respondents in the treatment and control groups within contexts of high anti-immigrant sentiment. It becomes evident that respondents view requests from individuals with Romanian nationality as less credible after exposure to negative newspaper articles. This effect is not statistically significant among respondents in the control group and in contexts characterized by low anti-immigrant sentiment. To sum up, we confirm hypothesis 4, which posited that caseworkers' ideologies and contexts influence responses to negative framing.

**[Figure 6 here: News frame effects, political ideology and anti-immigrant sentiment]**

## **Discussion**

Our analysis offers many important findings. We observe that caseworkers view requests from individuals with Romanian nationality as less credible and they are less inclined to offer additional help following exposure to negative newspaper articles. Importantly, Romanian applicants are unable to mitigate these discriminatory tendencies even with a consistent request, whereas Moroccan claimants receive additional help when providing small positive cues. Therefore, discrimination occurs subtly. Further examination uncovers that caseworkers' political ideology and regional anti-minority sentiment exacerbate media framing effects.

Based on these findings, our study offers three substantial and one methodological qualification. First, we expand upon Hemker and Rink (2017), who observe that ethnic minorities receive lower-quality responses from welfare offices. We extend this by demonstrating that indirect discrimination occurs at other stages too, especially regarding the provision of additional assistance. This finding is plausible because supervisors can more easily audit the preapproval of requests than whether caseworkers offer additional help. Additionally, we show that subtle discrimination is triggered by news frames, 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 find this 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. Such perceptions may lead caseworkers to adopt stricter approaches in subsequent interactions.

Second, we show that caseworkers are more likely to assist immigrant groups not featured in negative 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: Framing intensifies negative sentiments and stereotypes toward the featured group while non-featured groups benefit indirectly, perhaps because negative stereotypes of them are not on the minds of caseworkers. Moreover, we find that claimants from the featured immigrant group cannot offset negative reporting with positive cues. This is concerning, given that immigrant groups are disproportionately covered in the news in real life, as noted by Alesina, Miano, and Stantcheva (2023). Such media coverage of immigration, coupled with actual or perceived high levels of immigrant populations, fosters negative attitudes toward these groups (Meltzer and Schemer 2021, Hopkins 2010). This underscores the importance of raising awareness among job center employees about the overrepresentation and framing of certain immigrant groups in the media. Third, we find some support that regional reports about welfare fraud increase discrimination more than national reports. We are among the few studies to examine how media framing in terms of *regional vs. national events* influence bureaucratic behavior. With that, we add to studies concentrating on how the *newspaper location* affects issue framing (Fryberg et al. 2012). Yet, our findings are inconclusive and a limitation is that we could show respondents only one article. In real life, they potentially read multiple articles with both positive and negative stories. In light of our findings, future research should 1) analyze real-world newspapers' framing of national and regional news events (and not only the newspapers' location), and 2) present respondents with a (randomized) mix of positive and negative news. A methodological innovation of our study is the usage of a novel measure of anti-immigration attitudes. While most studies use single indicators, our measurement of anti-immigrant sentiment includes diverse data sources, from vote shares for the extreme right to xenophobic attacks. Despite incorporating various data sources, our measurement has limitations such as

the state-level aggregation due to data protection constraints. Future research should aim for survey or administrative data at the county level.

Finally, our rather small effect sizes might be attributed to social desirability bias as respondents may have actively sought to avoid discrimination. Similar studies on bureaucratic discrimination report comparable small effect sizes and mixed findings (Grohs, Adam, and Knill 2016, Adam et al. 2021, Schram et al. 2009). Furthermore, our robustness checks show that the main treatment effects stay significant when excluding respondents who did not pass the awareness check (see figure A14a/b) and when using a more restrictive categorization of anti-immigrant sentiment and political ideology (see figure A12b/13b). Therefore, we consider that our small but significant effects are possibly even larger as at least some respondents want to avoid the detection of discrimination. Furthermore, we suggest that 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 negative news frames regarding immigration affect bureaucratic decisions regarding unemployment benefit requests. Crucial insights are that 1) discriminatory tendencies by street-level bureaucrats unfold in a relatively subtle manner, and 2) there is a multifaceted interplay between media framing, regional anti-immigrant sentiment, and caseworkers' political ideology. These insights advance existing research on how the regional environment (Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004, Adam, Grohs, and Knill 2020, Gundacker, Kosyakova, and Schneider 2024) and individual ideologies (Bell et al. 2021) affect bureaucrats.

As objectivity should guide administrative decisions, a key implication of this article is that it is essential to adjust the regional public discourse toward more objective news about

immigration. This emphasizes the need for welfare offices to 1) adapt their communication strategies and implement manual or AI-supported checks of request documents, 2) create new training courses regarding discrimination that should aim to (at least partly) address and counteract regionally prevalent stereotypes, and 3) standardize work practices across federal states. Furthermore, based on the insights from our study, the German Ministry of Labor could use internal data (that is 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 electoral gains of right-wing extremists across Europe since the 2010s. The identified patterns showcase the harmful impact of rising anti-immigrant sentiments on ethnic minorities' access to state services. This 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.

## Endnotes

1: We employ the term “foreign persons” in this case because it is closer to everyday German language usage. Importantly, we refer to this term only in the context of the newspaper articles displayed in the experiment because we assume that this term is more likely to trigger stereotypes. For the analysis of bureaucratic decisions, we otherwise adopt the term “ethnic minority” (as suggested on <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities>).

2: An exception is the study of Hemker and Rink (2017) who study information provision by German job centers by sending unsolicited E-mails to job centers.

3: Sanctions are an instrument that can be used to partially withdraw payment of unemployment benefits due to alleged violations of obligations.

4: Statistical discrimination builds on group stereotypes on which individuals rely their decisions under imperfect information (Arrow 1973, Assouline, Gilad, and Ben-Nun Bloom 2022). The approach suggests that caseworkers will discriminate less the more information they have about individual clients. The theory of taste-based discrimination, conversely, assumes that individuals hold (racial) prejudices against outgroups (Becker 1957, Assouline, Gilad, and Ben-Nun Bloom 2022).

5: 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.

6: 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 respective university.

7: This study does not focus on questions concerning work experience and discrimination perceptions which we collected for further studies.

8: 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), and <https://www.kreiszeitung.de/lokales/diepholz/von-eu-auslaendern-phantom-schueler-neuer-sozialbetrug-91645458.html>

9: Here you can find the real-world request: [https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/datei/antrag-rgb2\\_ba042689.pdf](https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/datei/antrag-rgb2_ba042689.pdf).

10: For instance, we did not specify which supporting document was missing. 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.

11: 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>

12: To check for the robustness of our results, we present Marginal Means (MMs) for the main models in the appendix (figures A23-A25). 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.

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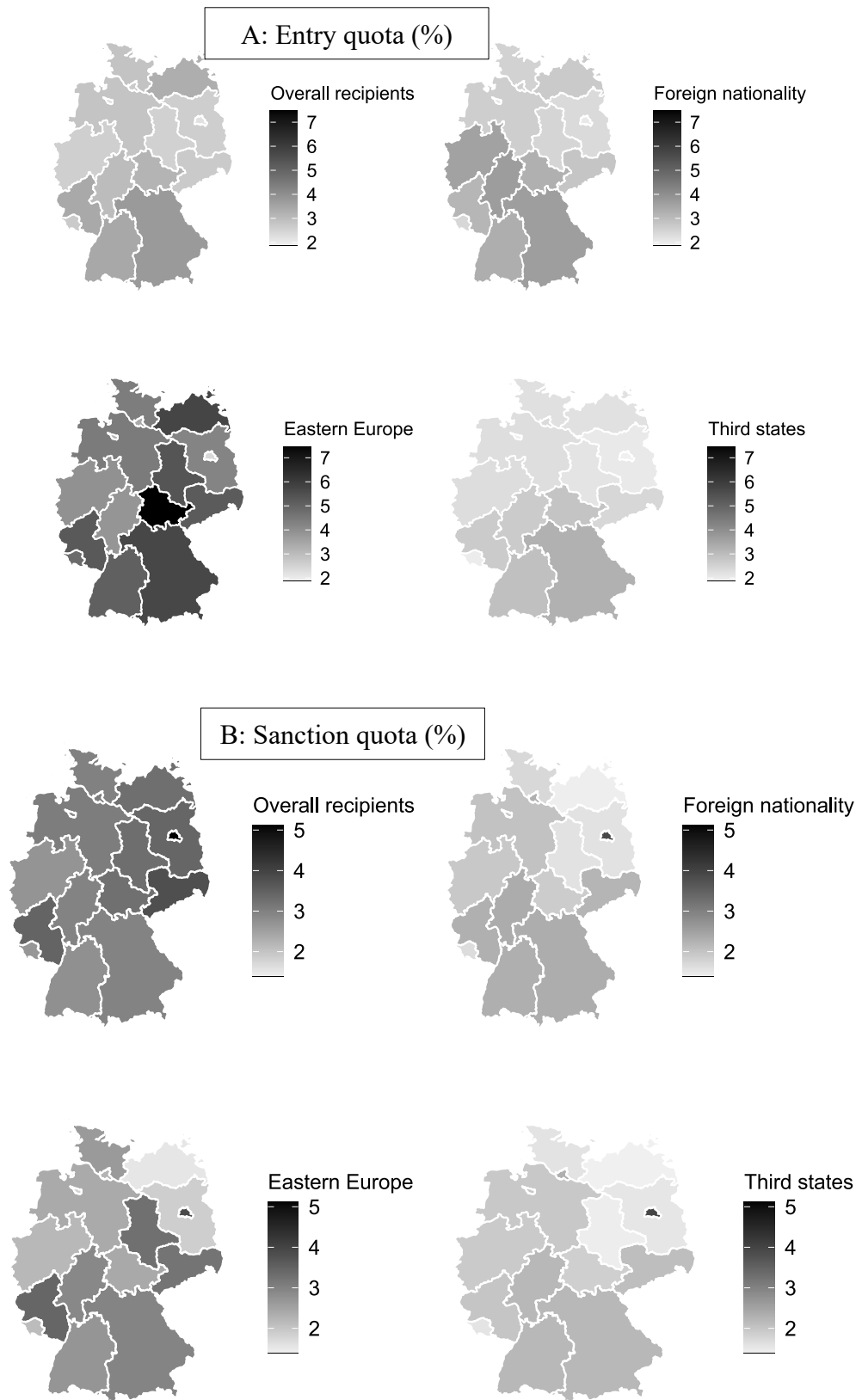
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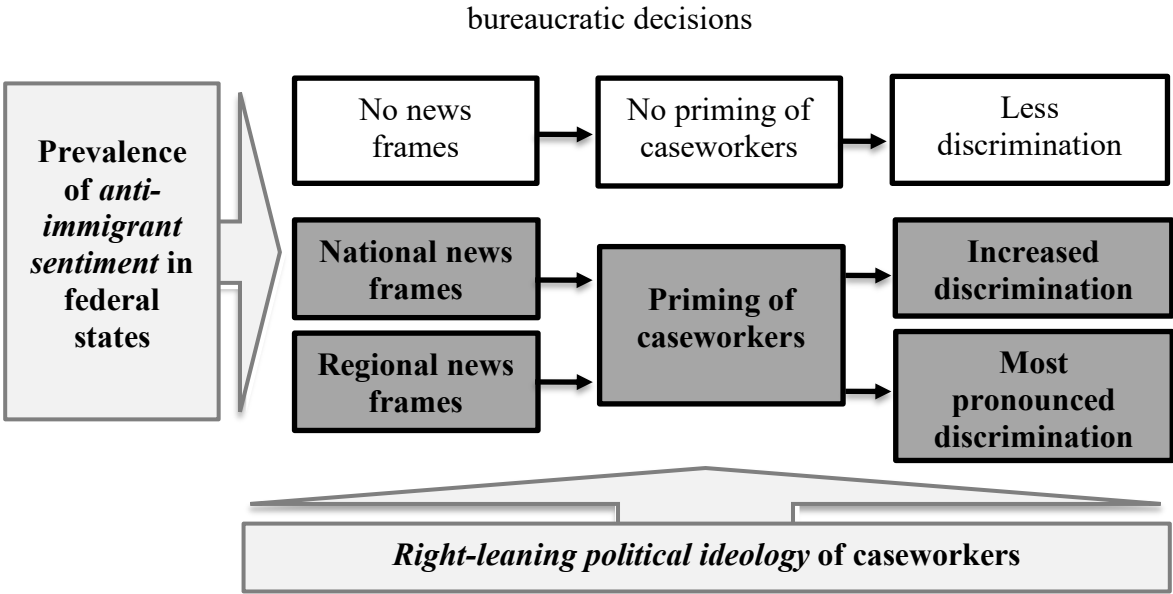
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## Figures and tables

**Figure 1:** Regional variation in entry and sanction quotas for Citizen's Benefit cases in 2018

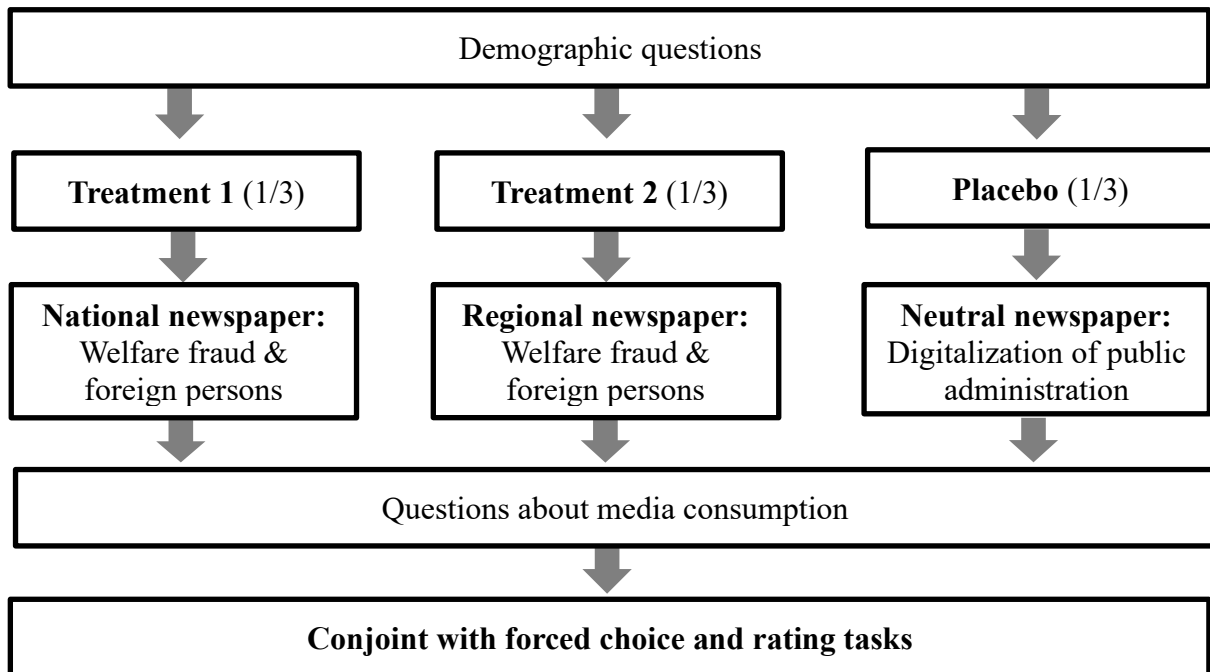


**Figure 2:** Theoretical framework: How regional public sentiment and news frames influence

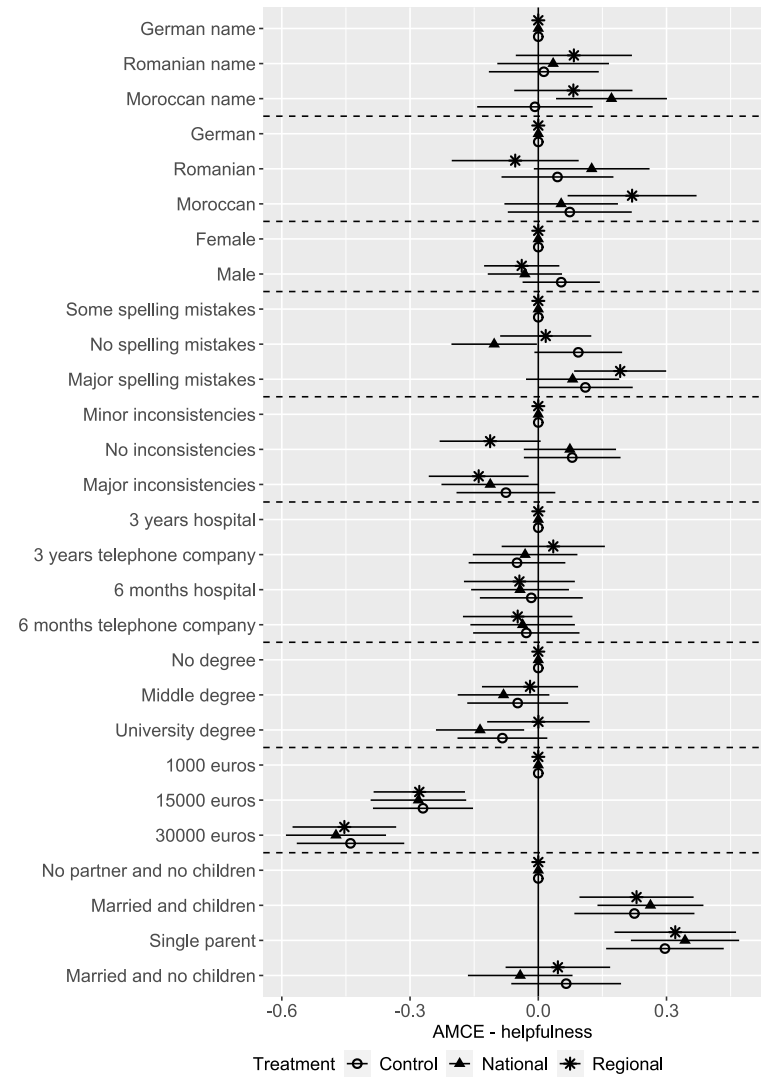
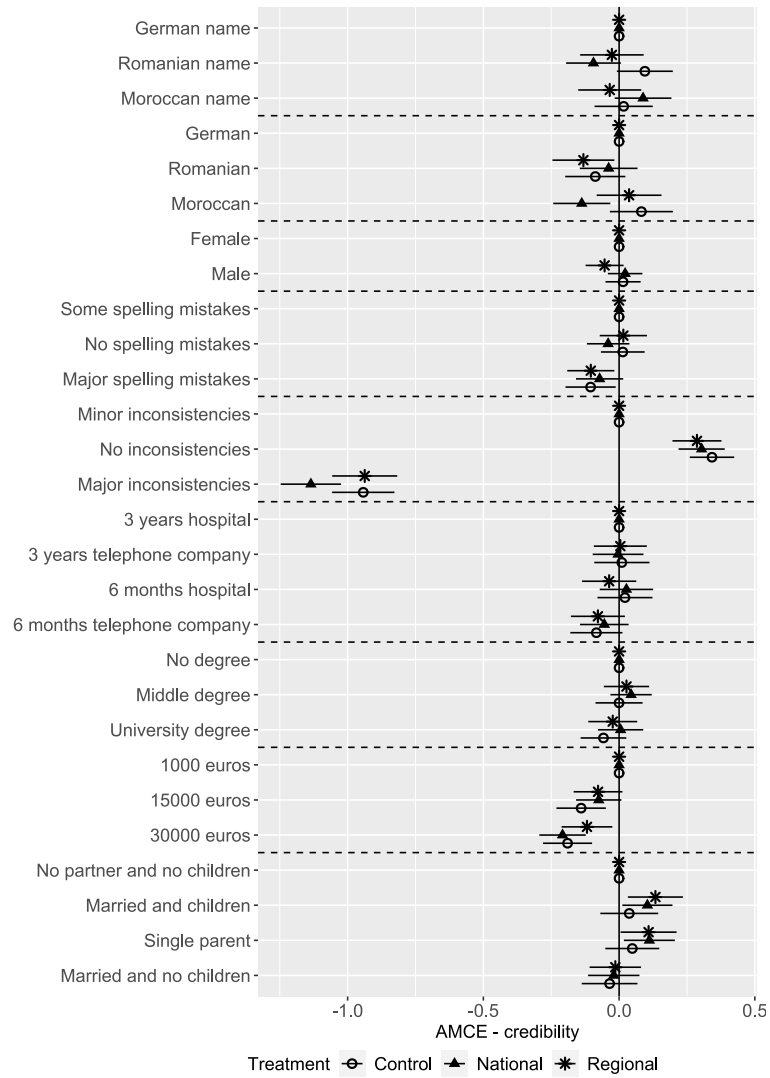




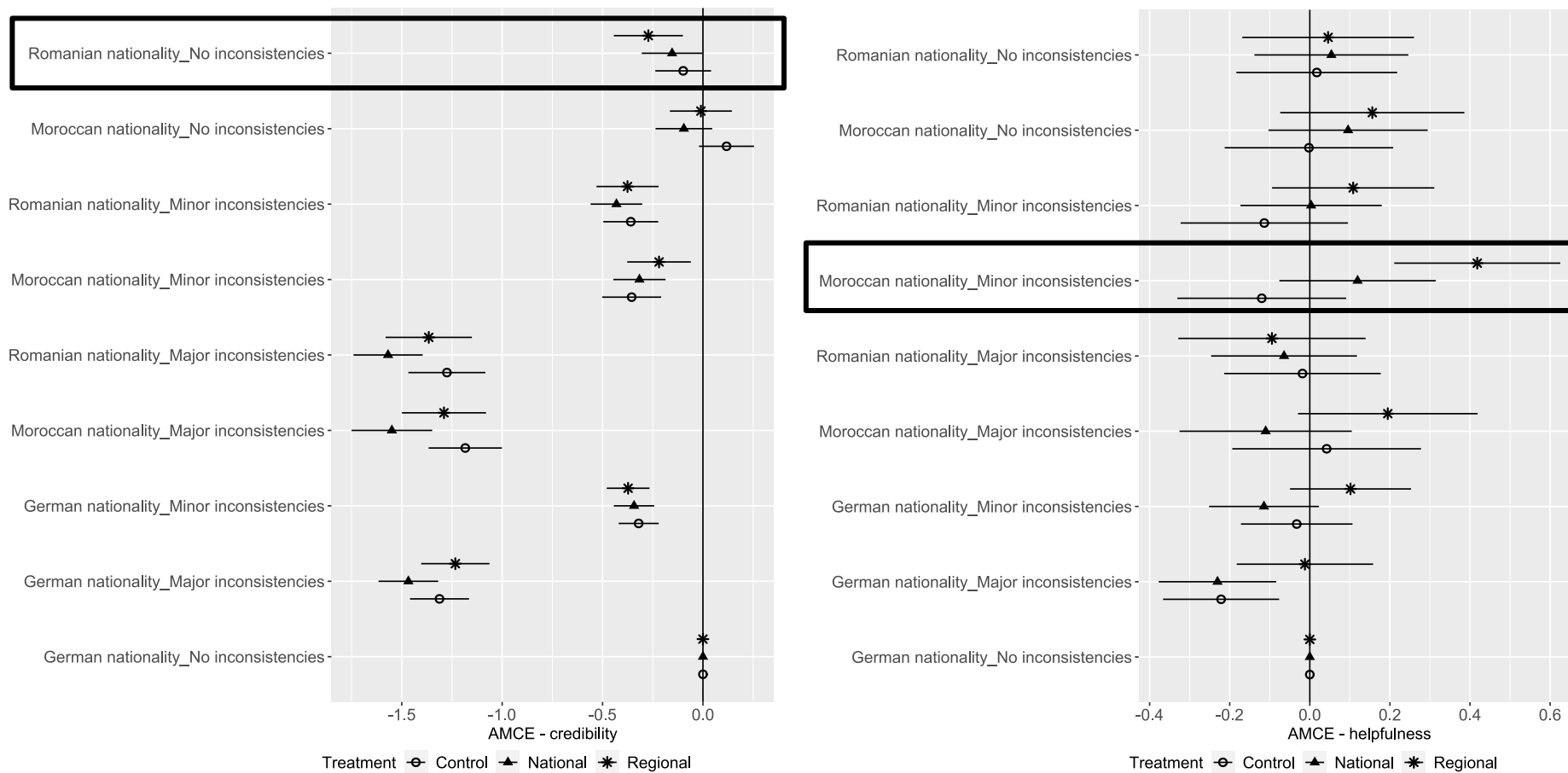
**Figure 3:** Structure of the survey and experimental design



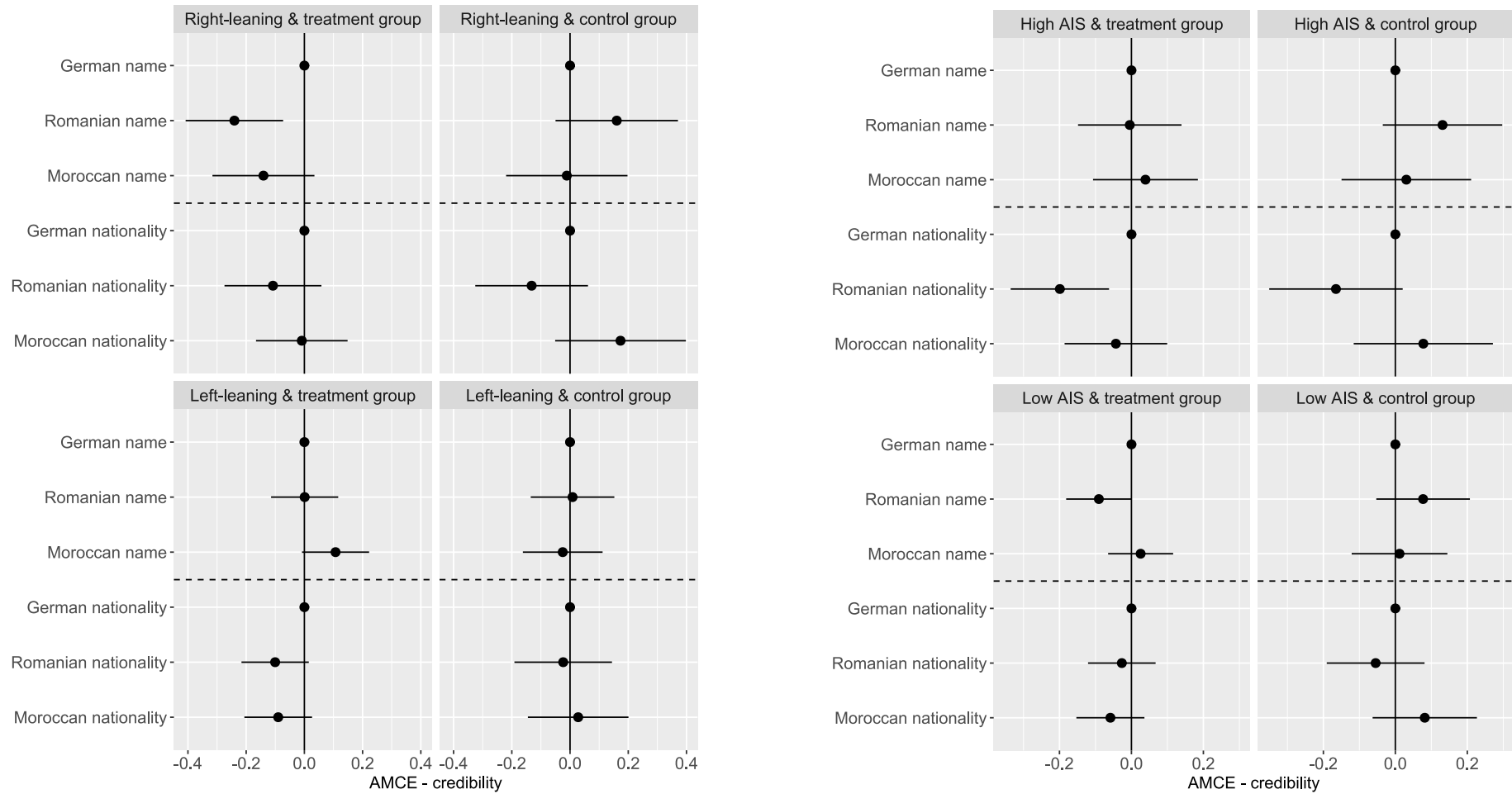
**Figure 4:** News frame effects on the credibility of requests and the helpfulness toward requests (rating task)



**Figure 5:** News frame effects and the interaction of nationality and consistency in attachments



**Figure 6:** News frame effects, political ideology and anti-immigrant sentiment



Notes: AIS = Anti-immigrant sentiment; Reduced plots are shown here and the full plots with all attributes can be found in the appendix figure A9b and figure A10b

**Table 1:** Respondents' characteristics

<b>Respondents' characteristics</b>		<b>Percentage</b>		
		<b>All</b> (N = 1400)	<b>Eastern</b> (N = 272)	<b>Other</b> (N = 1127)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	27.6	17.3	30.0
	Female	71.1	80.5	68.8
<b>Age</b>	18 to 24 years	3.1	2.2	3.4
	25 to 40 years	42.6	33.1	45.1
	41 to 60 years	47.4	58.1	44.9
	Over 60 years	6.6	6.6	6.6
<b>Migration background</b>	Yes	13	3.7	15.2
	No	83.2	93.7	80.6
<b>Education</b>	Regular graduation from school without further training or studies	3.0	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
<b>Work experience in job center</b>	Less than 1 year	5.8	2.2	6.7
	1 to 3 years	14.1	5.9	16.1

	4 to 6 years	16	7.7	18.0
	7 to 10 years	15.9	8.1	17.7
	More than 10 years	48.2	76.1	41.5
<b>Prior work</b>	Yes	59.4	59.2	59.5
<b>experience in public</b>	No	40.6	40.8	40.5
<b>administration</b>				
<b>Political ideology</b>	Left-leaning	44.5	40.6	45.3
	Central	27.4	30.1	26.7
	Right-leaning	28.1	29.3	27.8

*Note: Missing data not indicated.*

**Table 2:** Attributes and attribute levels

<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Levels</b>
<b>Nationality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– German</li><li>– Romanian</li><li>– Moroccan</li></ul>
<b>Name</b>	<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>Aalia Tahiri, ..., Wasif Cherkaoui, ...</i></li></ul>
<b>Gender</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Male</li><li>– Female</li></ul>
<b>Attachments and further supporting documents</b>	<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>
<b>Spelling in the request</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– No errors</li><li>– Few errors</li><li>– Many errors</li></ul>
<b>Duration / type of last work activity in Germany</b>	<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></ul>

- 3 years / in hospital
- Education**
  - No degree
  - Apprenticeship or training degree
  - University or technical college degree
- Saving assets**
  - 1.000 EUR
  - 15.000 EUR
  - 30.000 EUR
- Family situation**
  - Single/ without children
  - Single parent
  - Married/ without children
  - Married/ with children



## Appendix

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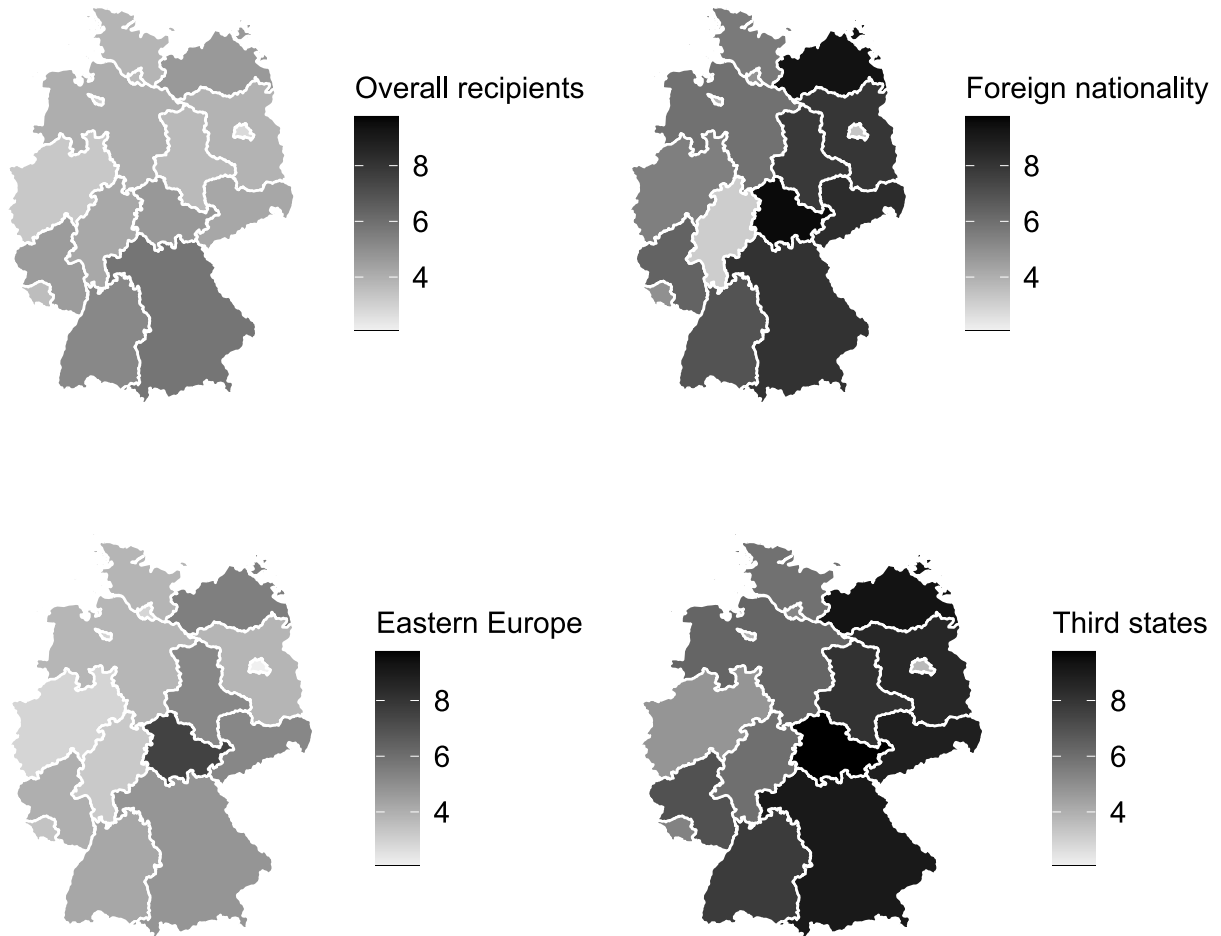
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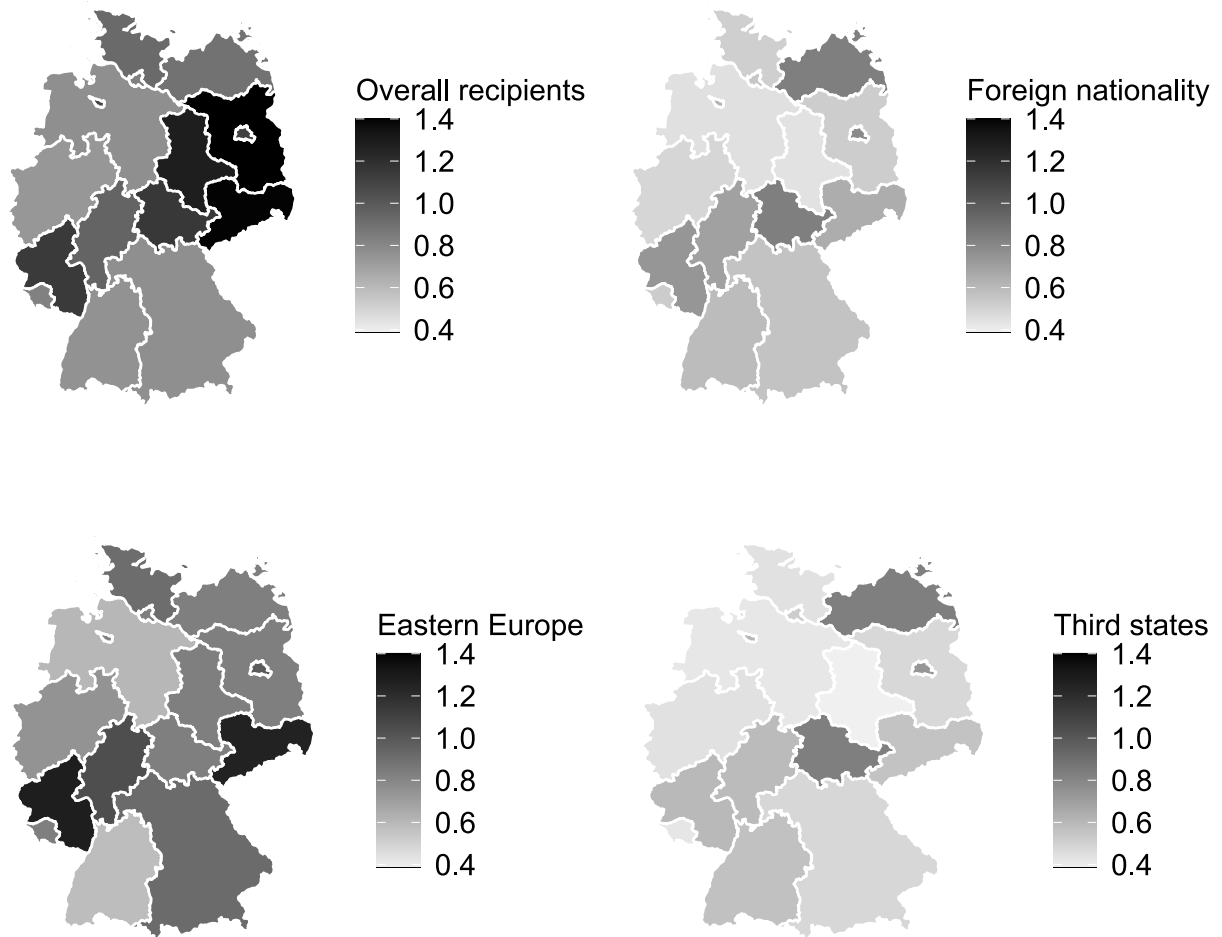
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## Regional Patterns of Discrimination in Unemployment Benefit Decisions in Germany

**Figure A1a** Regional variation in entry quota for Citizen's Benefit cases in 2022 (missing data for North-Rhine Westphalia for group of persons with foreign nationality; and for Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania for persons coming from Eastern Europe)



**Figure A1b** Regional variation in sanction quota for Citizen's Benefit cases in 2022



Figures A1a and A1b show the entry and sanction quota for the year 2022.

## Survey Experiment

### Data and Sample

Our sampling design primarily considers contextual factors of job centers, including both socio-political characteristics of and the presence of (or different levels of) xenophobia in municipalities where job centers are located. As we are interested in institutional bureaucratic discrimination (different practices across job centers/ federal states) and the effect of regional vs. national newspaper articles, sampling based on the municipality level is an appropriate strategy. The strata are constructed based on the following variables (all at the municipality level):

- **Socio-political dimension:** Proportion of foreign persons receiving Citizen's Benefit, electoral share for *Alternative for Germany* (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) in last federal election
- **Presence of (different levels) of xenophobia:** Recorded numbers of xenophobic attacks, proportion of refugees in the overall population

Based on these criteria, we selected a sample of 100 job centers (out of 405 job centers in Germany). The selected 100 job centers (out of 405 job centers) were contacted via letter and E-Mail by the research team with information on data protection. 60 job centers agreed to participate in the survey. Due to strict data protection obligations, we were not able to collect data on the precise location of the job center. Instead, we only have information on the federal state in which each job center is located. Our target sample size was  $N = 750$  respondents, which would have been 13 persons per job center (when 60 job centers participate) on average. But we were able to collect answers from  $N = 1400$  respondents which is a remarkably high response rate for a survey among street-level bureaucrats.

Table A1 shows the geographical and institutional representativeness of our sample. When compared to the population of job centers, we can see that our sample of respondents and job centers exhibits a high level of representativeness in relation to the overall population.

**Table A1** Comparison of our sample and the overall population of job centers

<b>Institutional characteristics</b>	<b>Sample of Sample</b>	<b>of Sample</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	
	<i>respondents</i>	<i>of job</i>	<i>of job centers</i>		
		<i>centers</i>			
<b>Federal states</b>	Eastern	273	9	75	19/ 15/ <b>19</b>
	Others	1127	51	312	80/ 85/ <b>80</b>
<b>Organizational structure</b>	Communal facility	372	13	99	26/ 21/ <b>25</b>
	Joint facility	1027	47	288	73/ 78/ <b>74</b>
<b>Location</b>	Urban	224	15	99	16/ 25/ <b>25</b>
	Rural	1176	45	288	84/ 75/ <b>74</b>

## Survey Design

Figure A2 Full structure of the survey and experimental design

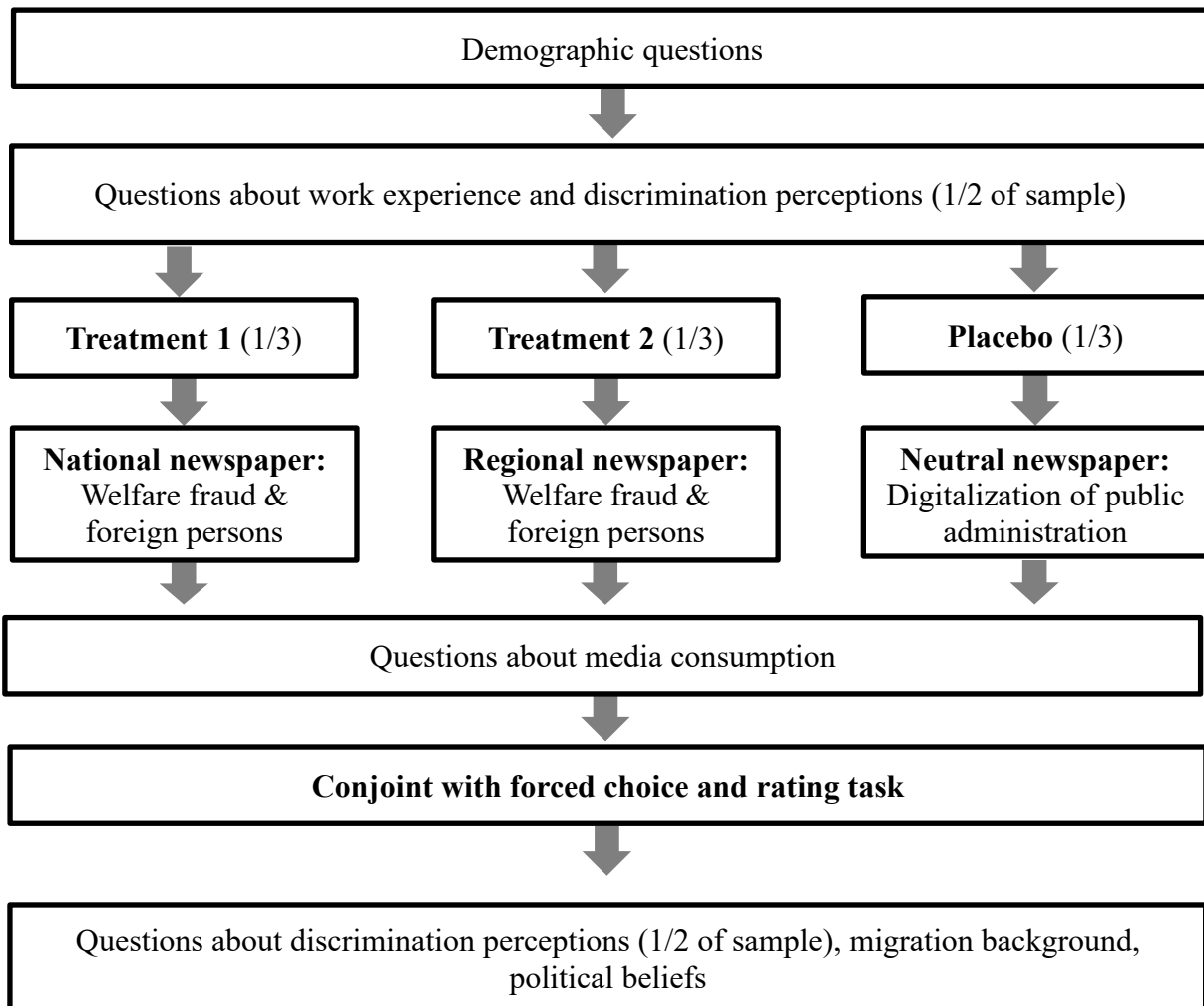


Figure A3 Snapshot of request form for Citizen's Benefit

# Hauptantrag

Antrag auf Bürgergeld nach dem Zweiten Buch Sozialgesetzbuch (SGB II)



Kreuzen Sie bitte Zutreffendes an.



Reichen Sie bitte grundsätzlich keine Originalbelege, sondern Kopien ein.



Beim Ausfüllen helfen Ihnen unsere Erklärvideos. Informationen zu unseren digitalen Angeboten, das Merkblatt SGB II und weitere Anlagen zum Antrag erhalten Sie unter [www.jobcenter.digital](http://www.jobcenter.digital).



Weitere Informationen finden Sie zu der jeweiligen Nummer in den Ausfüllhinweisen unter [www.arbeitsagentur.de/hinweise-sgb2](http://www.arbeitsagentur.de/hinweise-sgb2)

Die nachstehenden Daten unterliegen dem Sozialgeheimnis (siehe "Merkblatt SGB II"). Ihre Angaben werden aufgrund der §§ 60 - 65 Erstes Buch Sozialgesetzbuch (SGB I) und der §§ 67a, b, c Zehntes Buch Sozialgesetzbuch (SGB X) für die Leistungen nach dem SGB II erhoben. Datenschutzrechtliche Hinweise erhalten Sie bei dem für Sie zuständigen Jobcenter sowie ergänzend im Internet unter [www.arbeitsagentur.de/datenerhebung](http://www.arbeitsagentur.de/datenerhebung).

## 1. Persönliche Daten der Antragstellerin/des Antragstellers

Familienname		Vorname	
Geburtsname (sofern abweichend)		Geburtsdatum	
Geburtsort		Geburtsland	
Geschlecht	Staatsangehörigkeit		
<p>► Bitte tragen Sie hier das Datum Ihrer Einreise nach Deutschland ein, sofern Sie keine deutsche Staatsangehörigkeit haben.</p> Einreisedatum			
Rentenversicherungsnummer <sup>1</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/> Rentenversicherungsnummer ist noch nicht vorhanden und wurde beantragt.		
Straße, Hausnummer			
gegebenenfalls wohnhaft bei			
Postleitzahl	Wohnort		
<p>► Die Angaben zur Telefonnummer und zur E-Mail-Adresse sind freiwillig. <sup>2</sup></p> Telefonnummer   E-Mail-Adresse			

Bearbeitungsvermerke Nur vom Jobcenter auszufüllen
Eingangsstempel
Tag der Antragstellung
Kundennummer
Nummer der Bedarfsgemeinschaft
Dienststelle   Team
Antragstellerin/Antragsteller hat sich ausgewiesen durch <input type="checkbox"/> Personalausweis <input type="checkbox"/> Reisepass <input type="checkbox"/> sonstiges Ausweispapier (zum Beispiel elektronischer Aufenthaltstitel):
Gültig bis
AZR-Nummer
Personenkennnummer (bei rumänischen und bulgarischen Staatsangehörigen)
Daten in STEP geprüft am
Antrag vollständig am

(can be found at: [https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/datei/antrag-sgb2\\_ba042689.pdf](https://www.arbeitsagentur.de/datei/antrag-sgb2_ba042689.pdf))

## **Full Wording of Outcome Measure**

“You see here two requests for Citizen’s Benefit, which contain several pieces of information about the persons applying: Both persons have a similar age and are entitled to Citizen’s Benefit. 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 situation and need the money as soon as possible.

Now please imagine a hypothetical decision situation in which you can only pre-approve one of the two requests and have to put the other on hold due to a lack of resources.

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.”

*(Note: In the study, we added special emphasis to this last part to make sure that survey respondents now that they are meant to put one of the two requests on hold.)*

## **Full Wording of Newspaper Article**

### ***Treatment National***

#### **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 with 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.”

### ***Treatment Regional (Example for the Federal State Baden-Wuerttemberg)***

#### **Welfare fraud**

##### **Increased welfare fraud by foreign nationals in Baden-Wuerttemberg**

Last week, houses in several counties in Baden-Wuerttemberg were searched on suspicion of unauthorized receipt of Citizen’s Benefit. According to the police, the houses are mainly inhabited by people with 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 Baden-Wuerttemberg 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 Dieter Frisch of the State Criminal Police Office Baden-Württemberg told our newspaper, “Especially the abuse by criminal clans with Bulgarian and Romanian roots in Baden-Wuerttemberg is highly worrying.”

### ***Placebo***

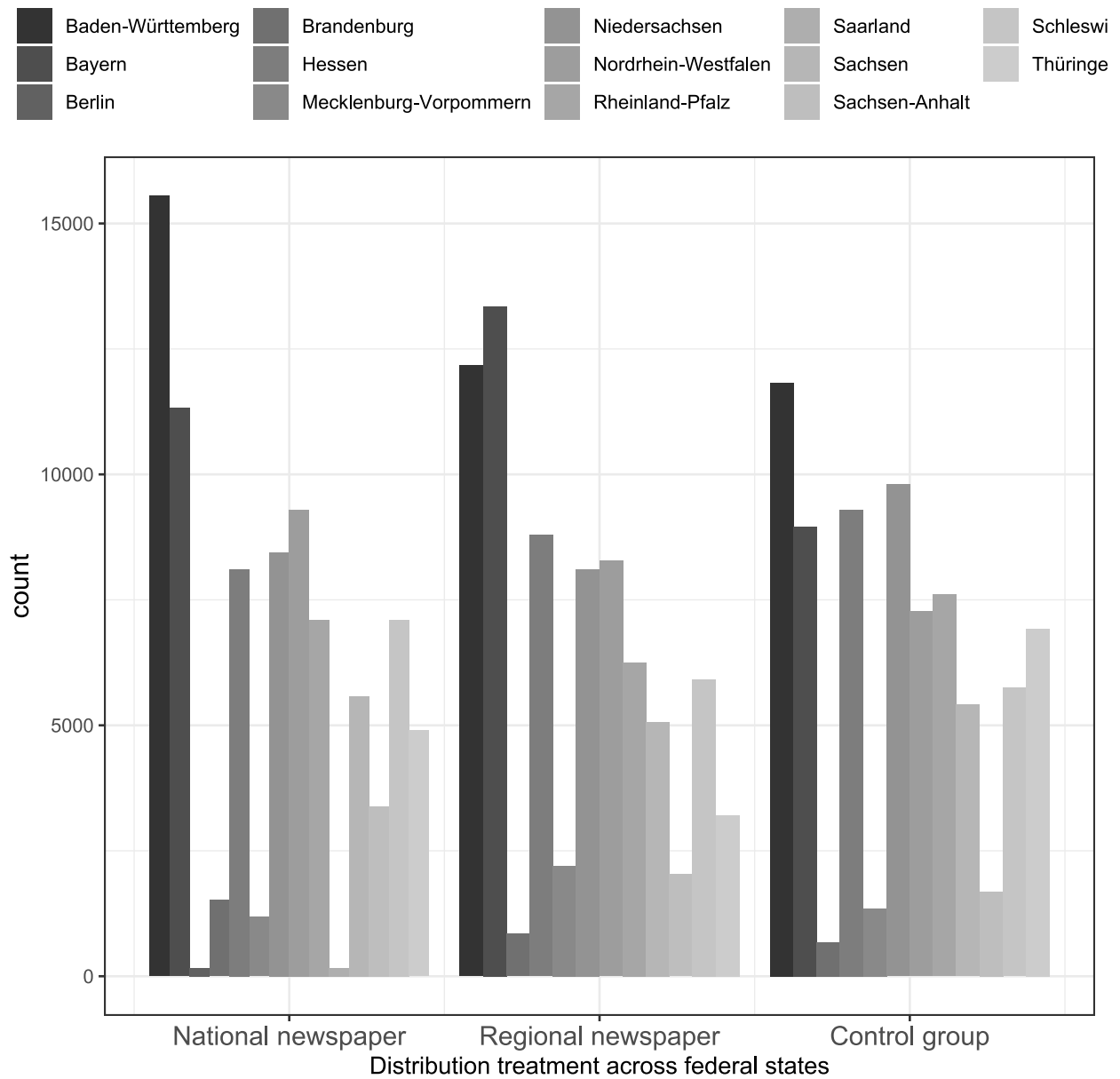
## **Digitization**

### **Faster digitization of public authorities demanded**

The digitization of administrative services is being delayed, even though the Online Access Act, calls for the digitization of 575 administrative services. The most popular online service so far is the conversion of the old driver’s license into a new one.

There are no concrete statements about when full provision of online services will be available. However, the federal and state governments expect that most administrative procedures will be able to be completed online in the foreseeable future.

**Figure A4** Division of respondents into treatment groups across federal states



This graph shows that the randomization of respondents into treatment groups among federal states was successful.

## Diagnostics of Conjoint Design

**Figure A5** Inconsistencies in “choice” between screen 1 and screen 6 for flipped proposal

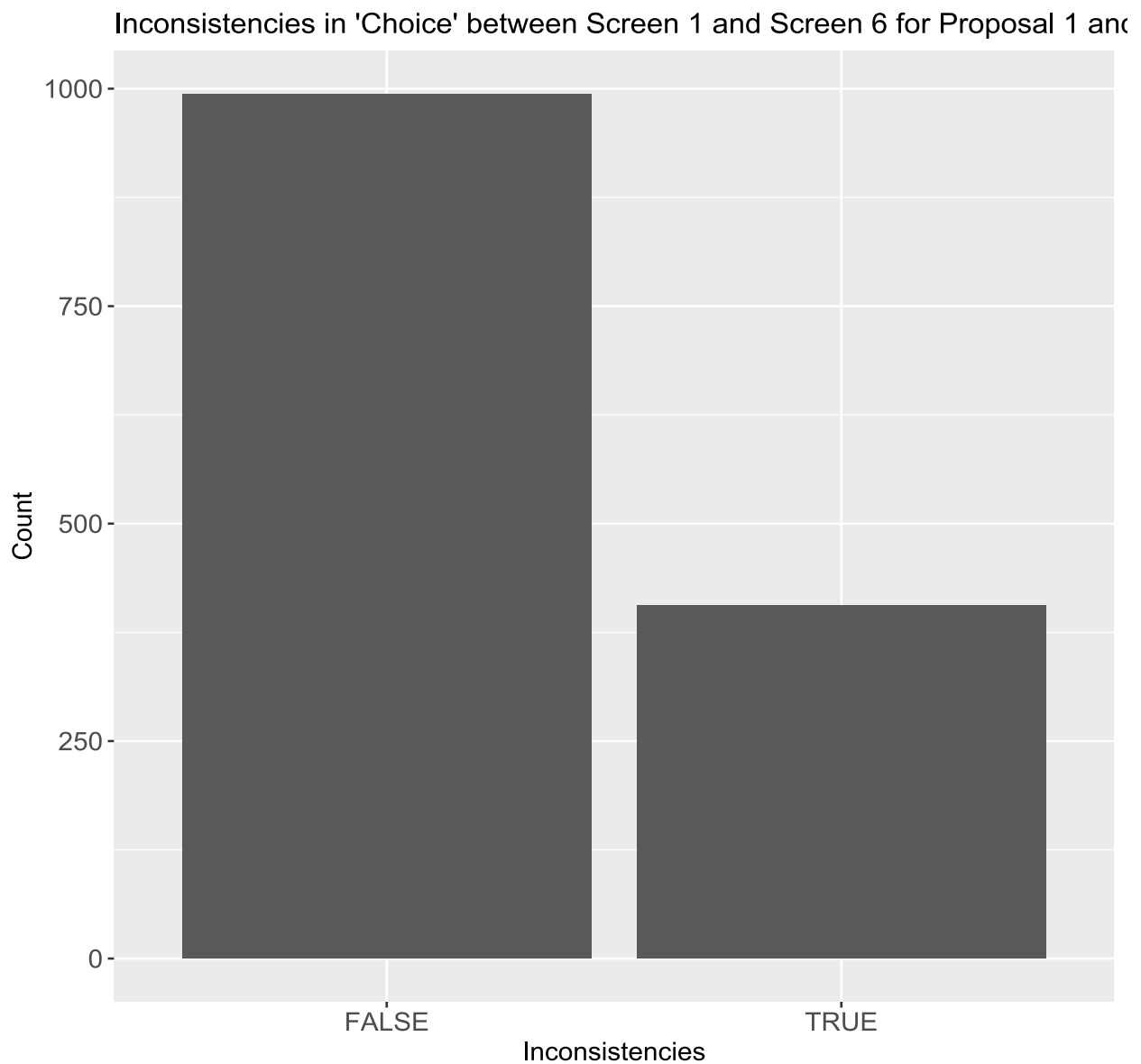
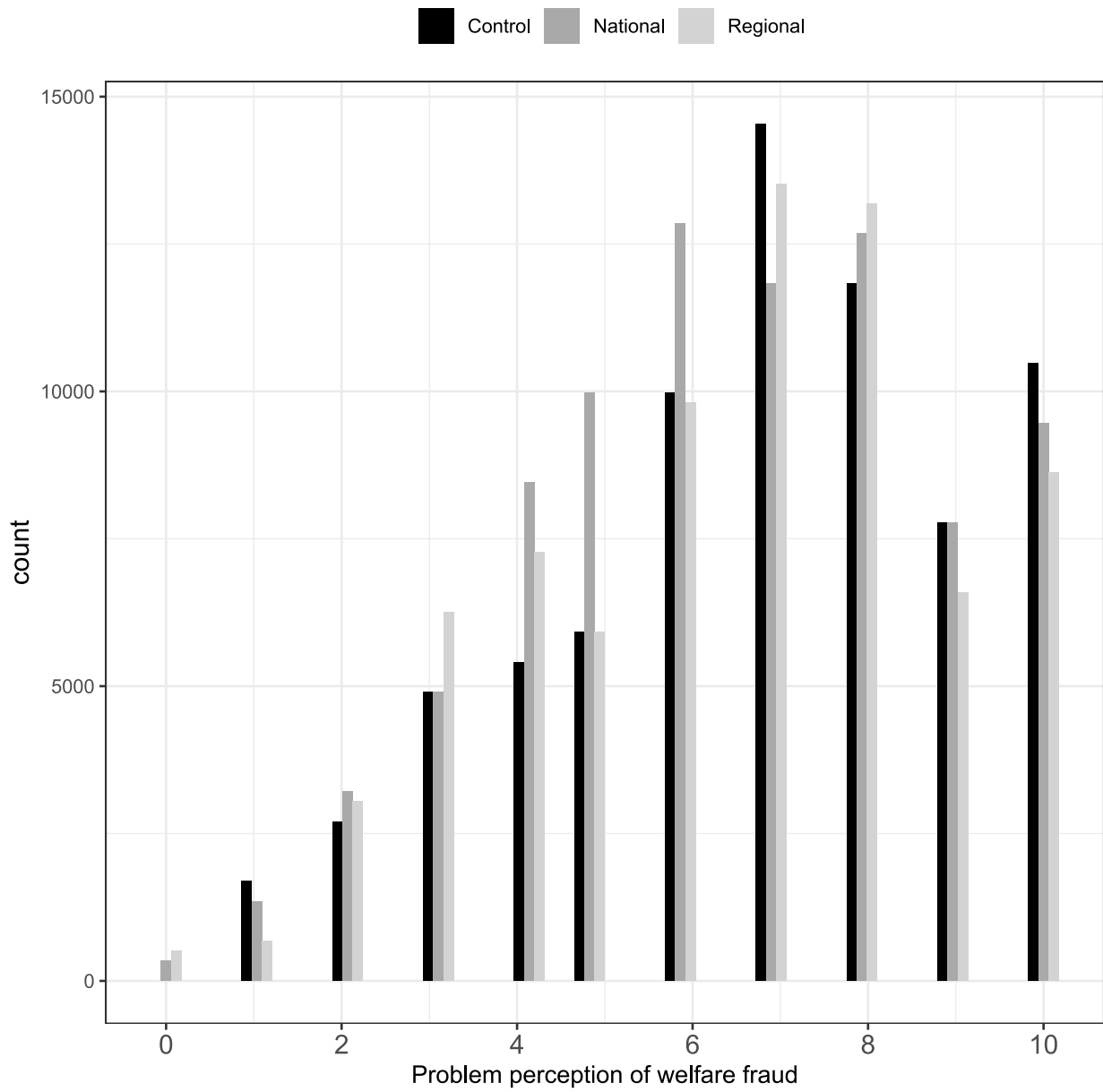


Figure A5 shows that two thirds of the respondents selected the same profiles when presented with a flipped version (category FALSE) (406 respondents did not, category TRUE).

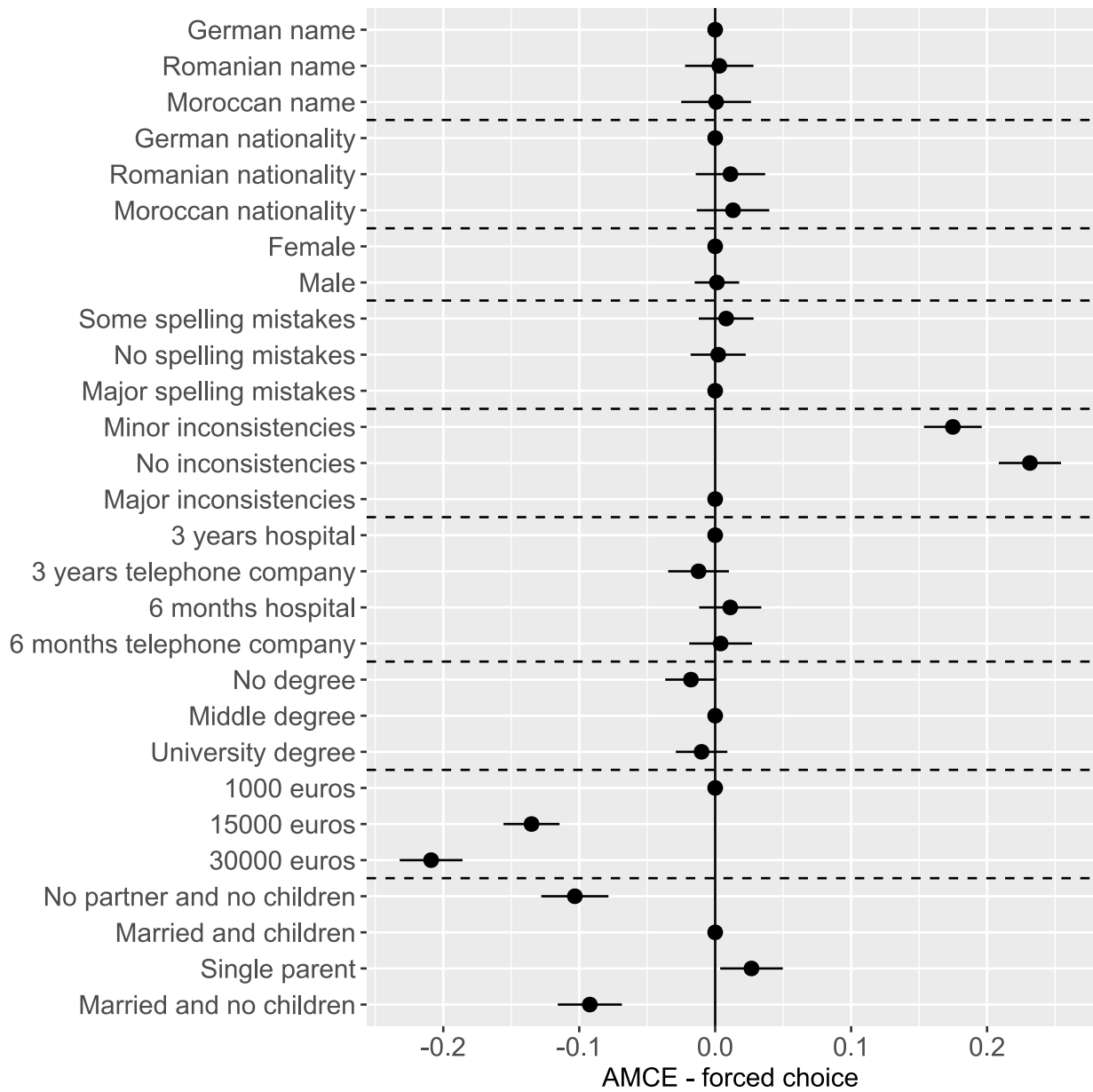
Moreover, we identified six respondents through open-ended responses indicating that they selected whom they preferred (and not whom they would reject) and we recoded the choices for them.

## Full Models

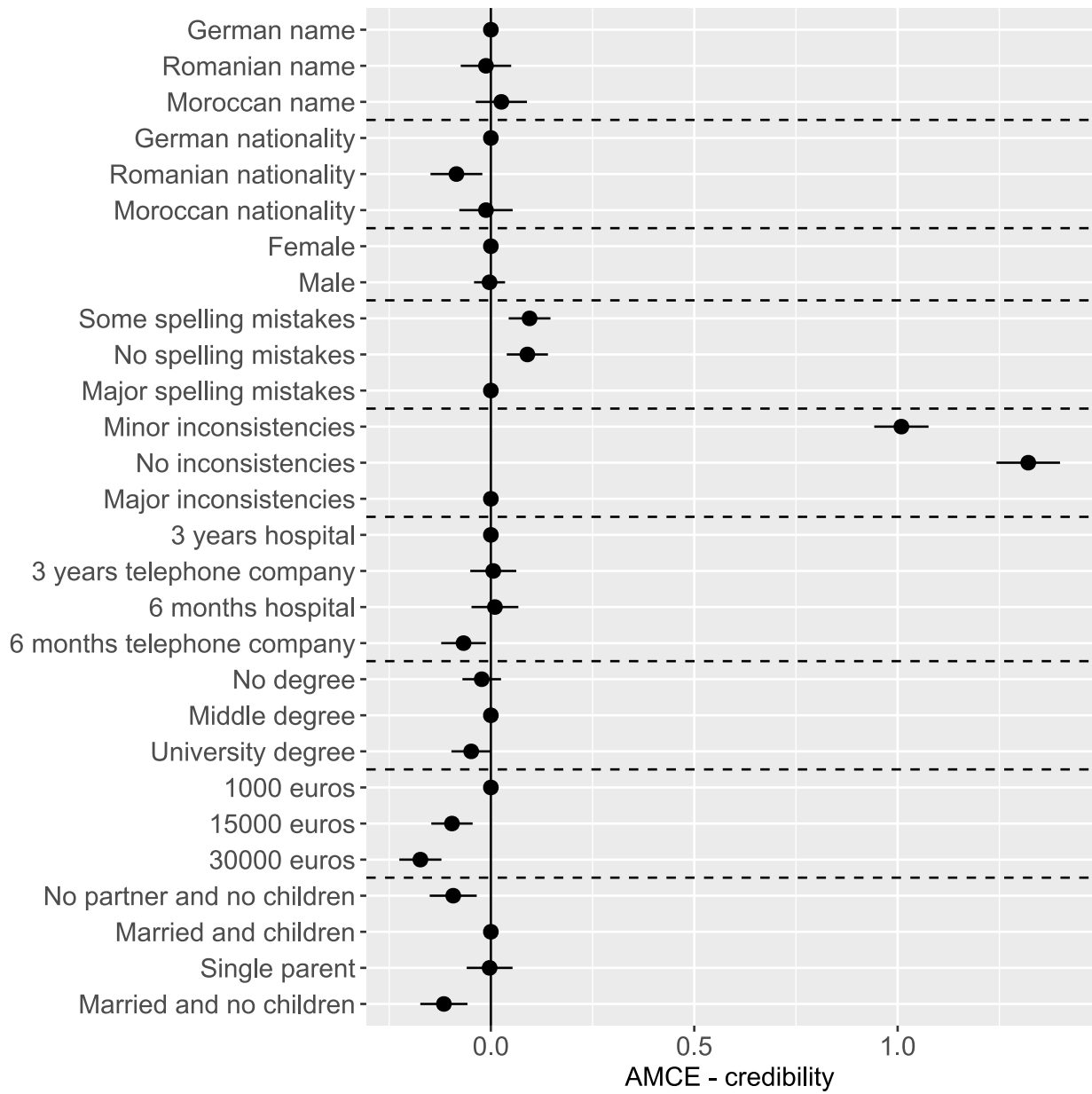
Figure A6 Post-treatment welfare fraud perception



**Figure A7a** Preferences for all attributes

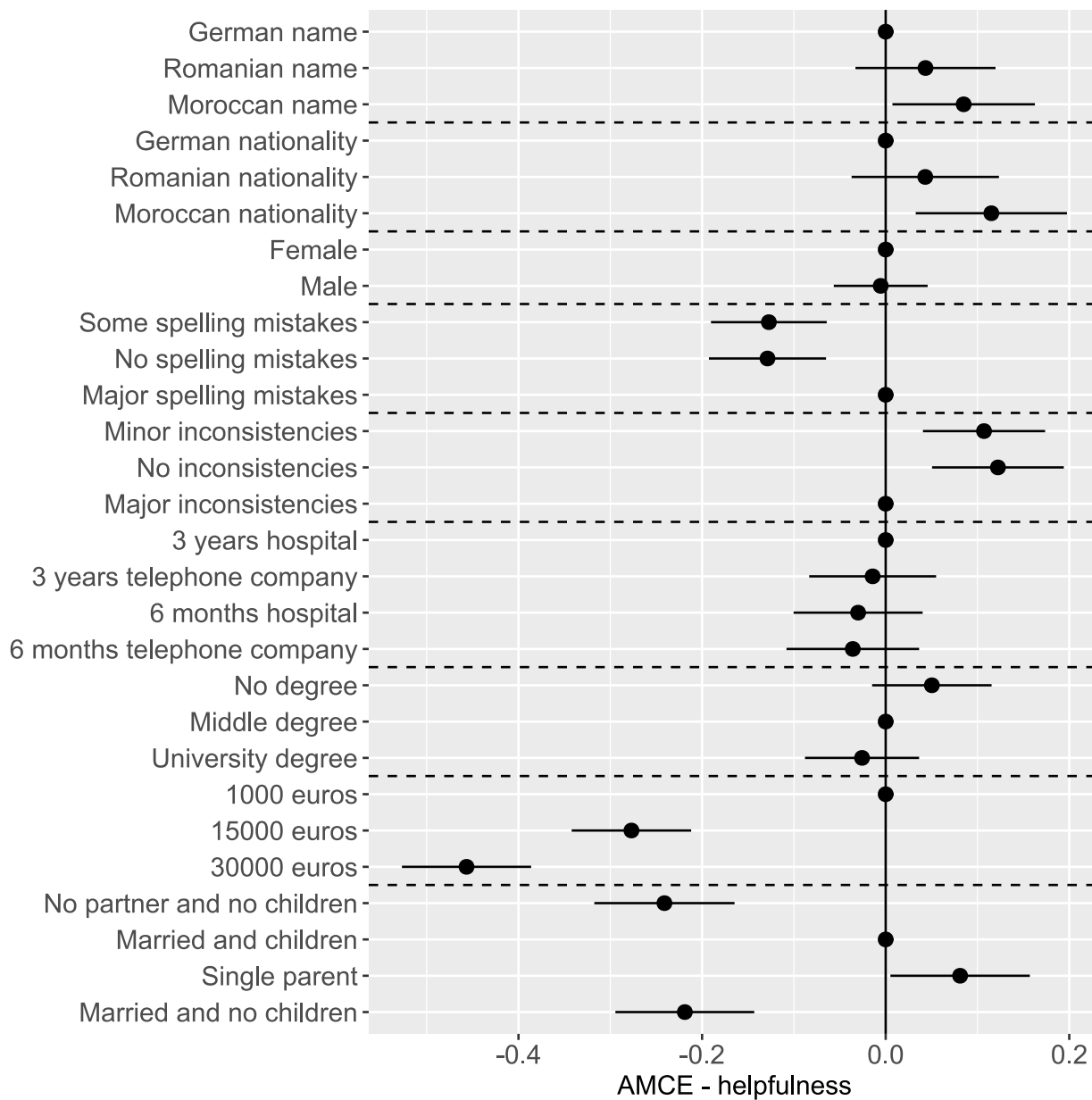


**Figure A7b** Preferences for all attributes

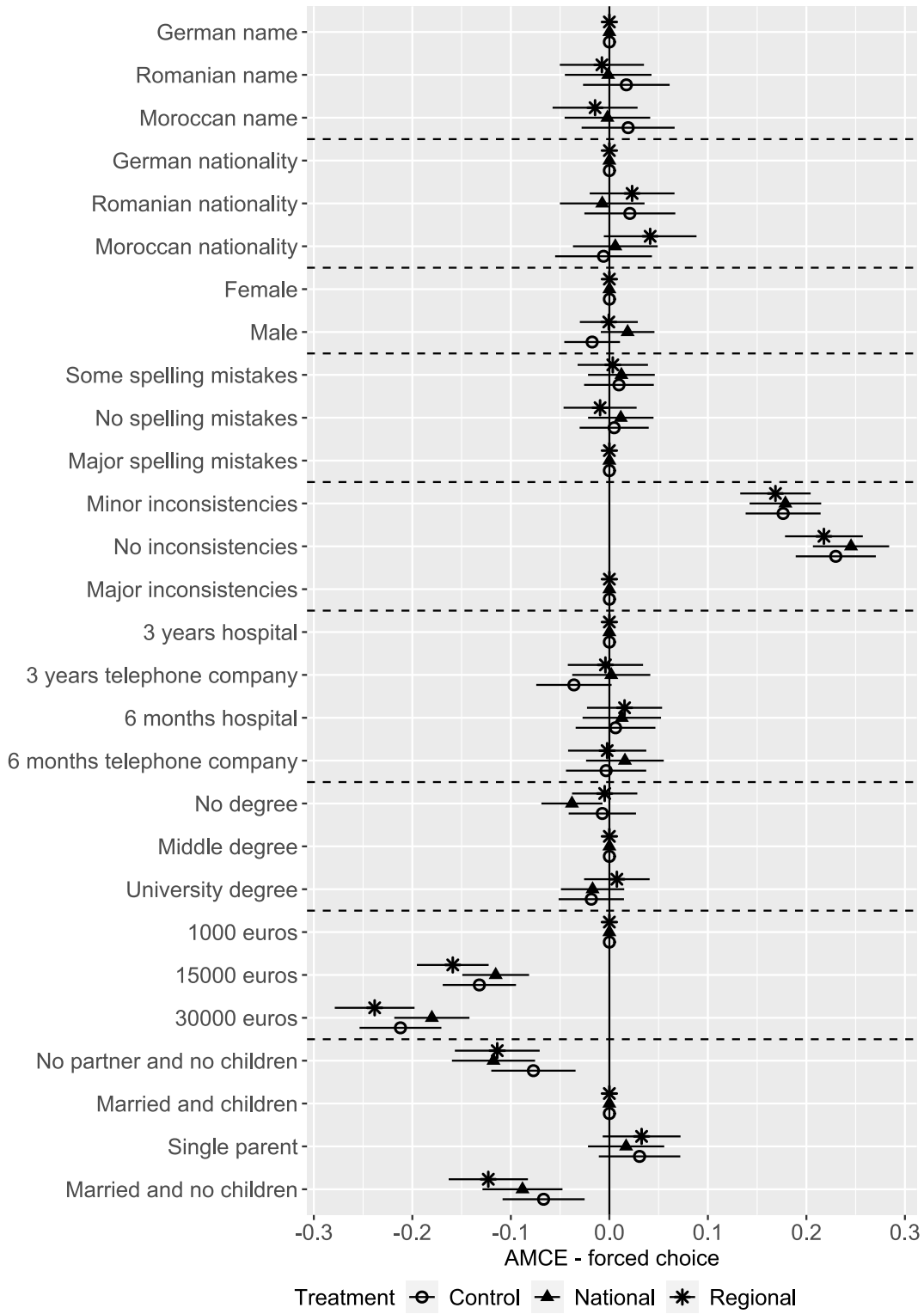




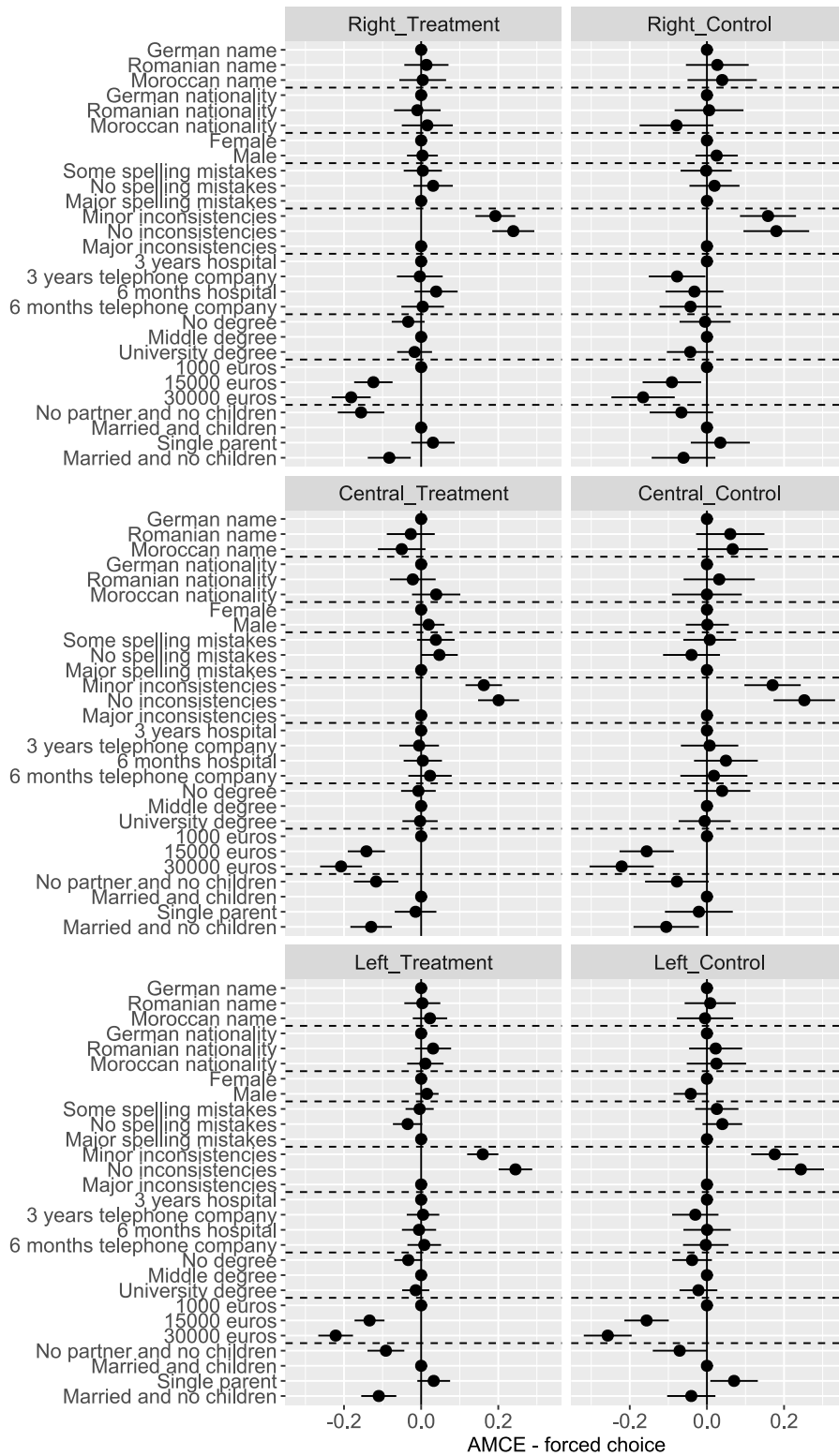
**Figure A7c** Preferences for all attributes



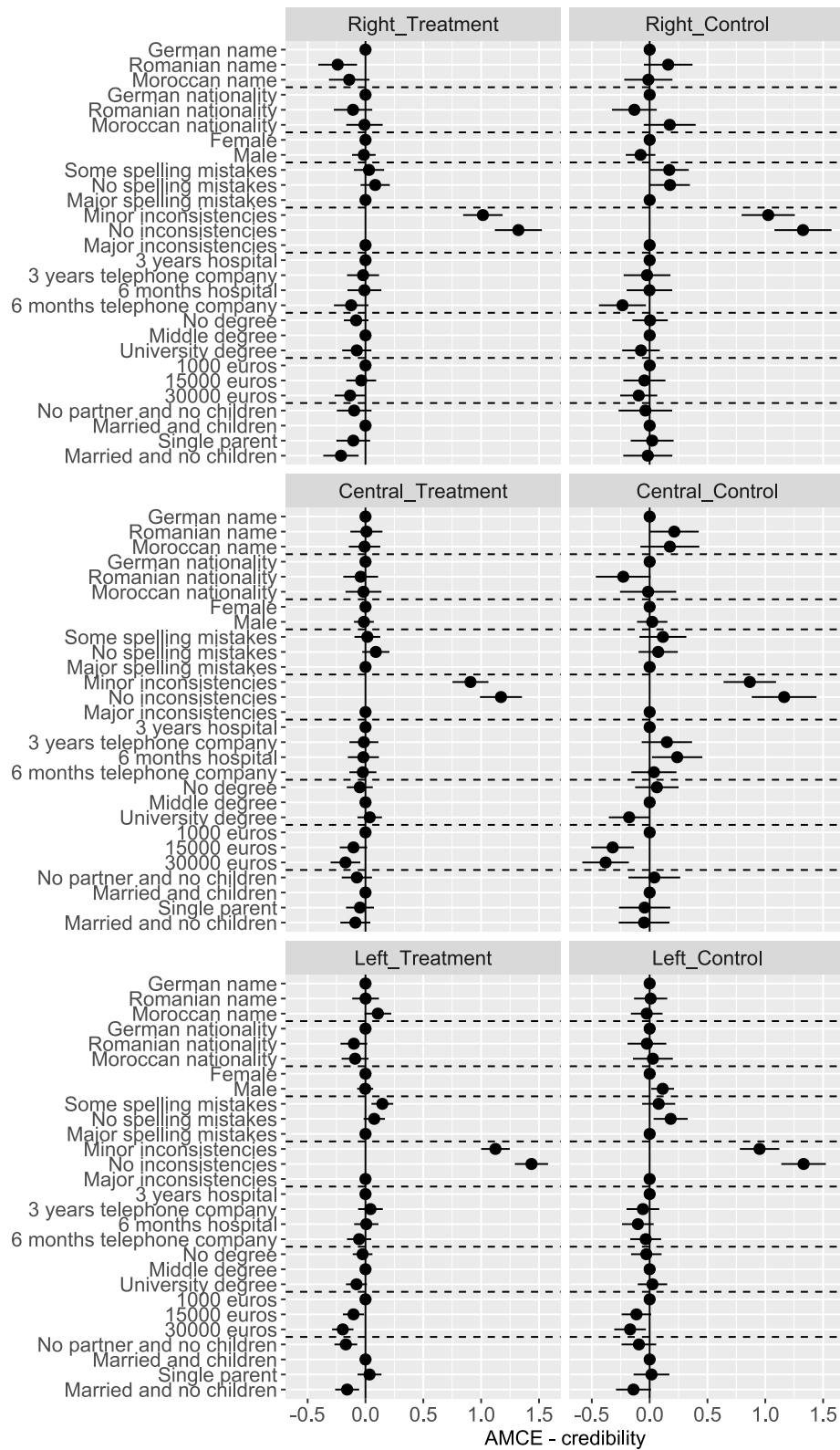
**Figure A8** News frame effects on the delay of requests (forced choice)



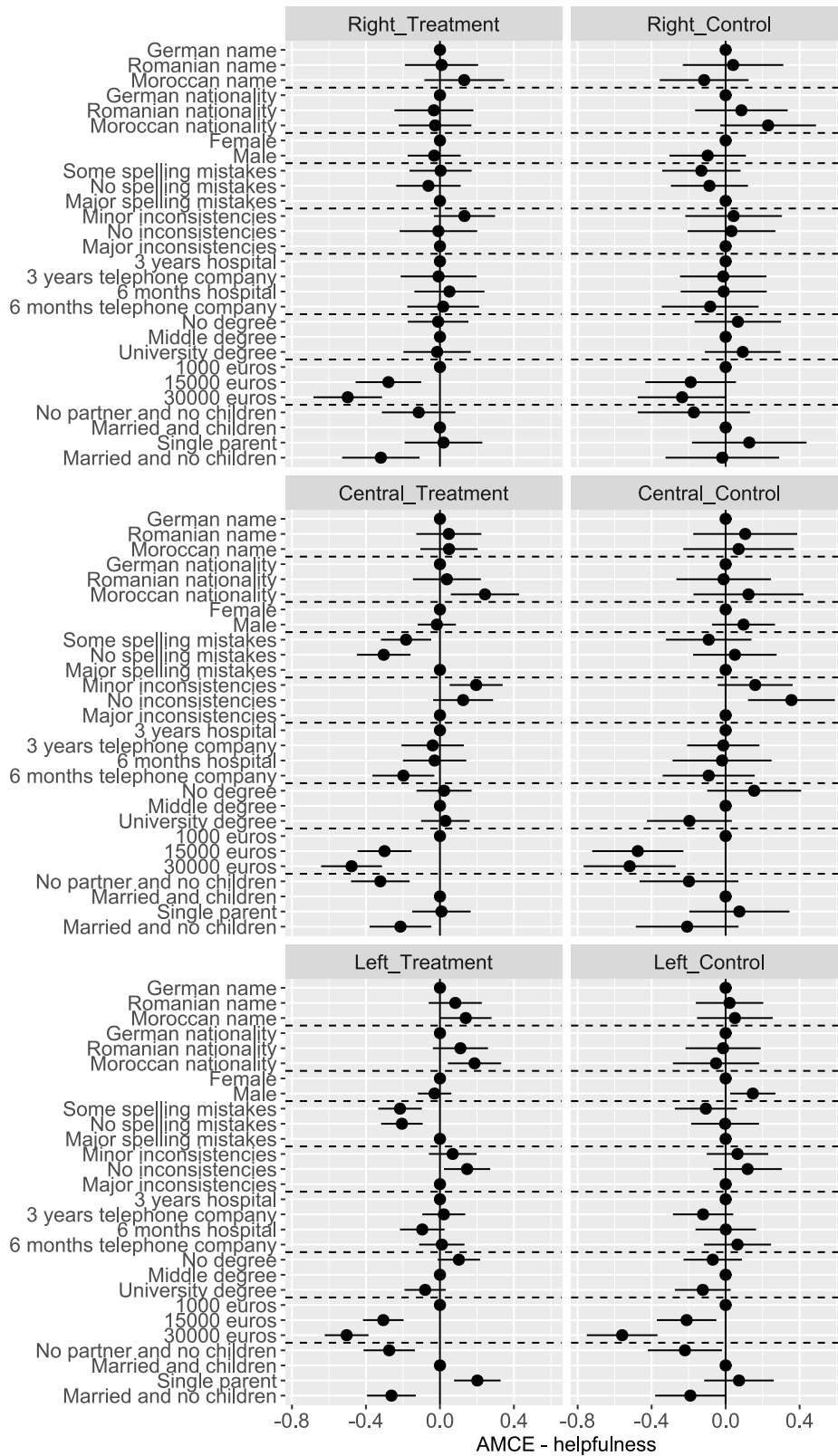
**Figure A9a** News frame effects and political ideology



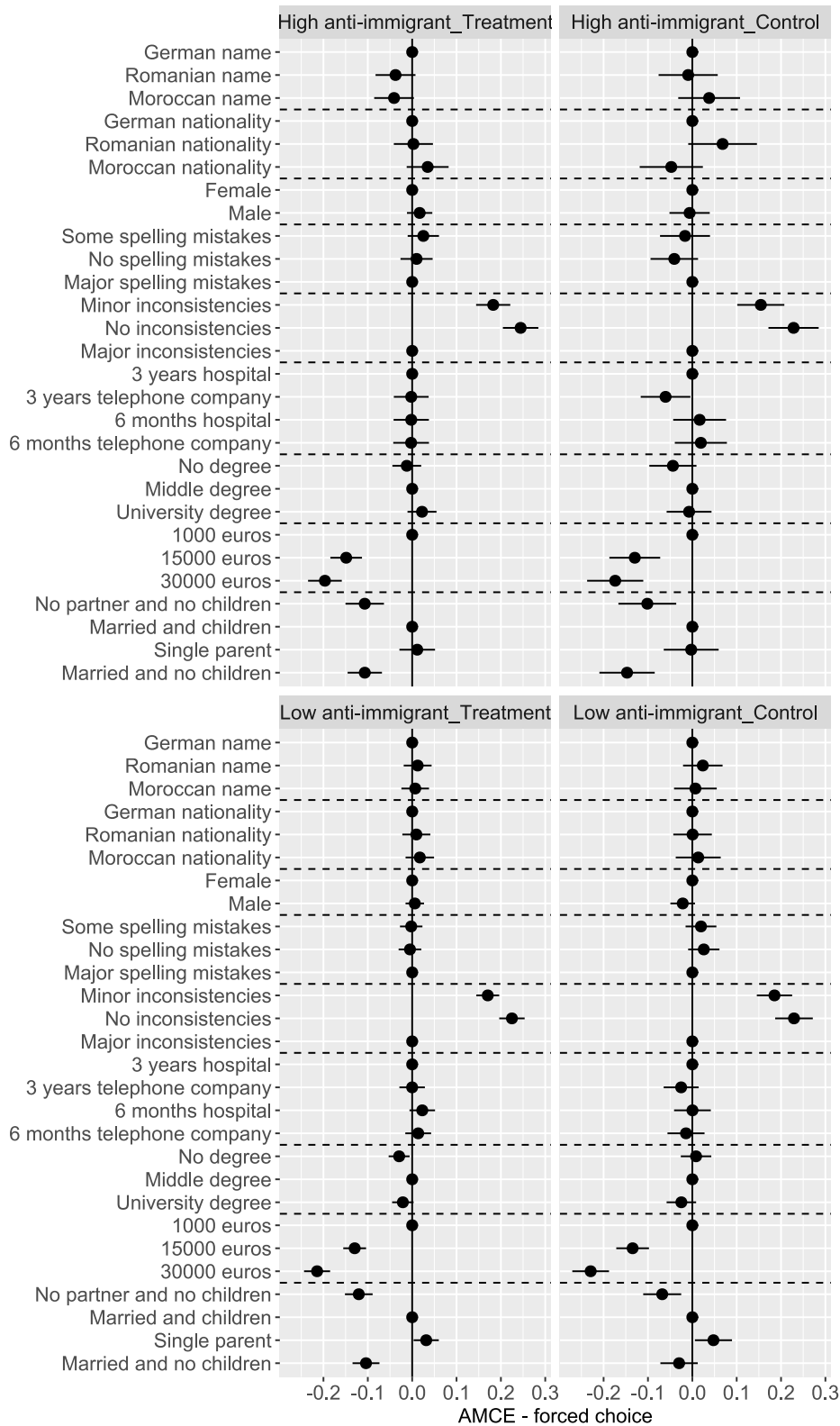
**Figure A9b** News frame effects and political ideology



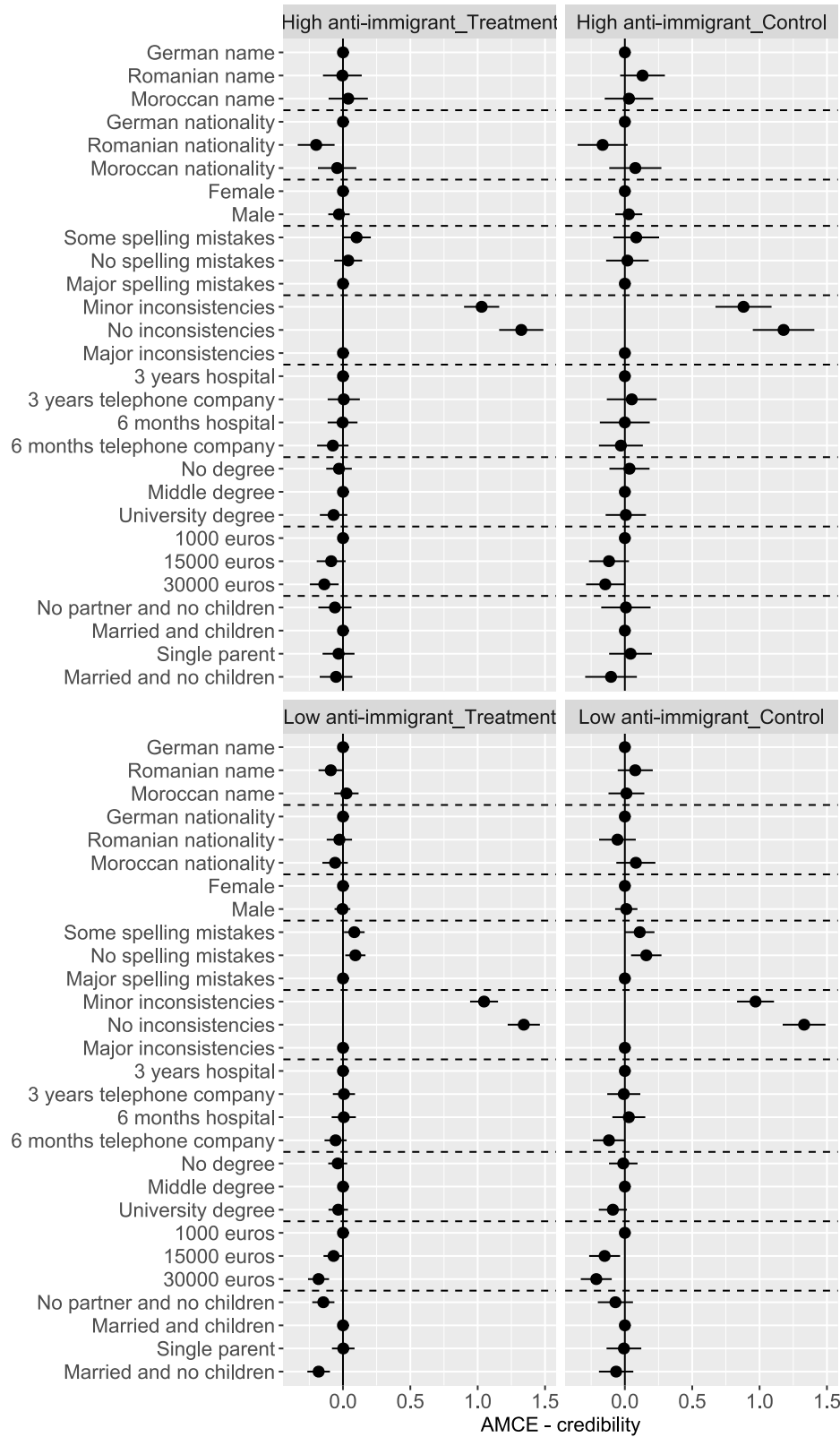
**Figure A9c** News frame effects and political ideology



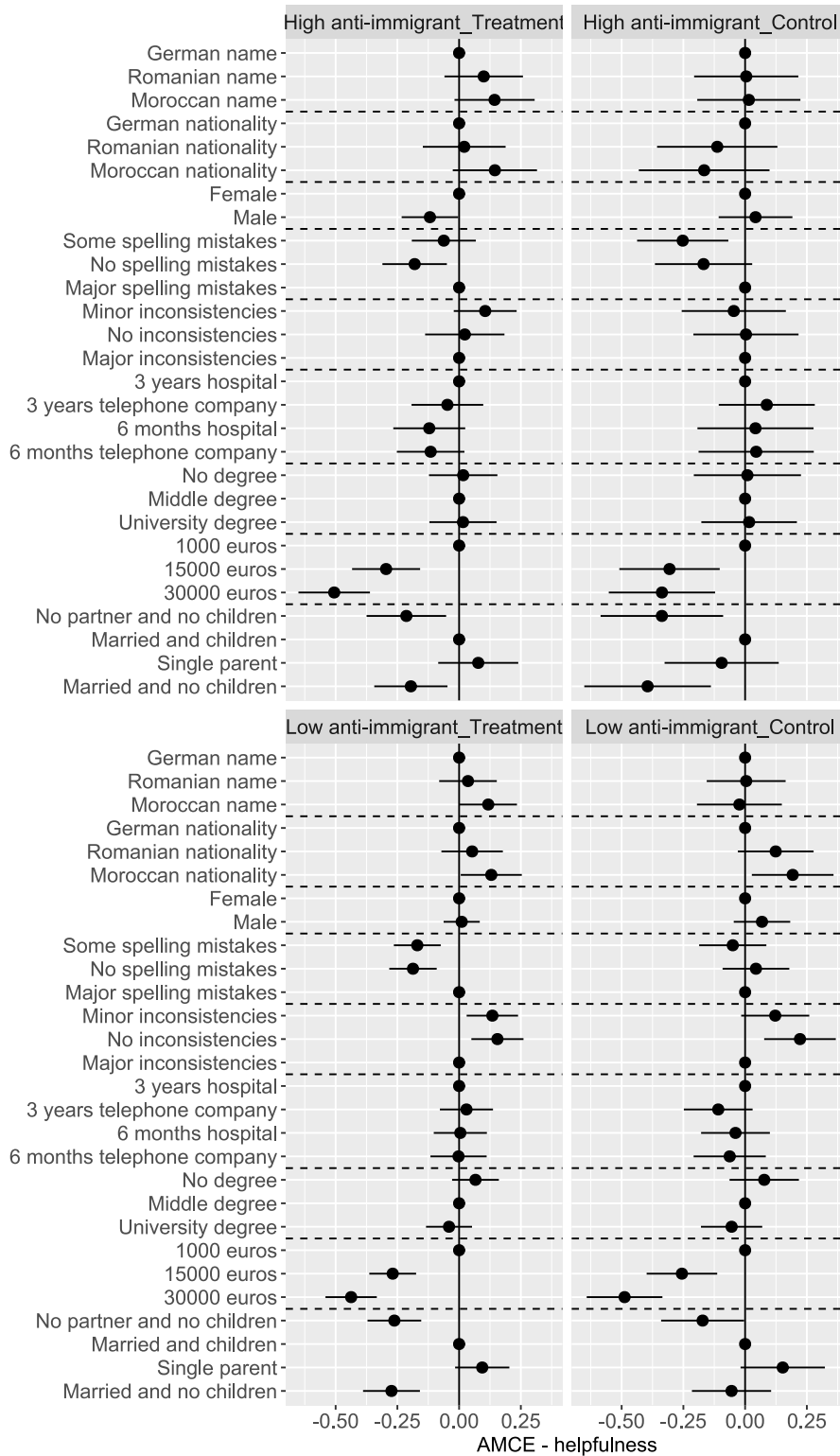
**Figure A10a** News frame effects and anti-immigrant sentiment



**Figure A10b** News frame effects and anti-immigrant sentiment



**Figure A10c** News frame effects and anti-immigrant sentiment





## Robustness Checks

### Alternative Measurement and Further Analysis of Anti-immigrant Sentiment

In this section, we show further statistics and analysis concerning our index of anti-immigrant sentiment.

**Table A2** Indicators for opposition to immigration across federal states

<i>Federal state</i>	<b>AfD vote share in % (2021)</b>	<b>Disagreement that foreigners enrich cultural life in Germany (2020)</b>	<b>Xenophobic attacks per 1.000 inhabitants (2020)</b>
Baden-Wuerttemberg	9,6 %	35 %	0,9 %
Bavaria	9 %	39,6 %	1,3 %
Berlin	8,4 %	23,2 %	0,9 %
Hesse	8,8 %	32,2 %	0,9 %
Lower Saxony	7,4 %	35,5 %	0,8 %
North Rhine-Westphalia	7,3 %	34,5 %	0,7 %
Rhineland-Palatinate	9,2 %	31,7 %	1,1 %
Saarland	10 %	27,6 %	1,4 %
Schleswig-Holstein	6,8 %	36,7%	1,6 %
Brandenburg	18,1 %	34,4 %	5,9 %

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	18 %	40,9 %	3,7 %
Saxony	24,6 %	37,2 %	2,9 %
Saxony-Anhalt	19,6 %	43 %	4,2 %
Thuringia	24 %	47,7 %	3,5 %

First, the descriptive data in table A2 show the highest vote share for the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the last federal election in Saxony, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. A recent representative survey of the German population also shows that the rejection of the statement that “foreigners enrich cultural life in Germany” is among the strongest in eastern German federal states but also Bavaria (Baute et al. 2020). Furthermore, eastern German federal states have the highest figures in xenophobic attacks per 1.000 inhabitants in federal states. This empirical evidence shows that anti-immigrant sentiment is much more pronounced in most eastern German federal states but no limited to it.

Hence, we show a different coding here where we change from the third quantile split to a mean split. This makes the category “high anti-immigrant sentiment” more exclusive.

Second, concerning the principal component analysis, table A3 shows the importance and loadings of the three variables, underscoring that it was feasible to use one component.

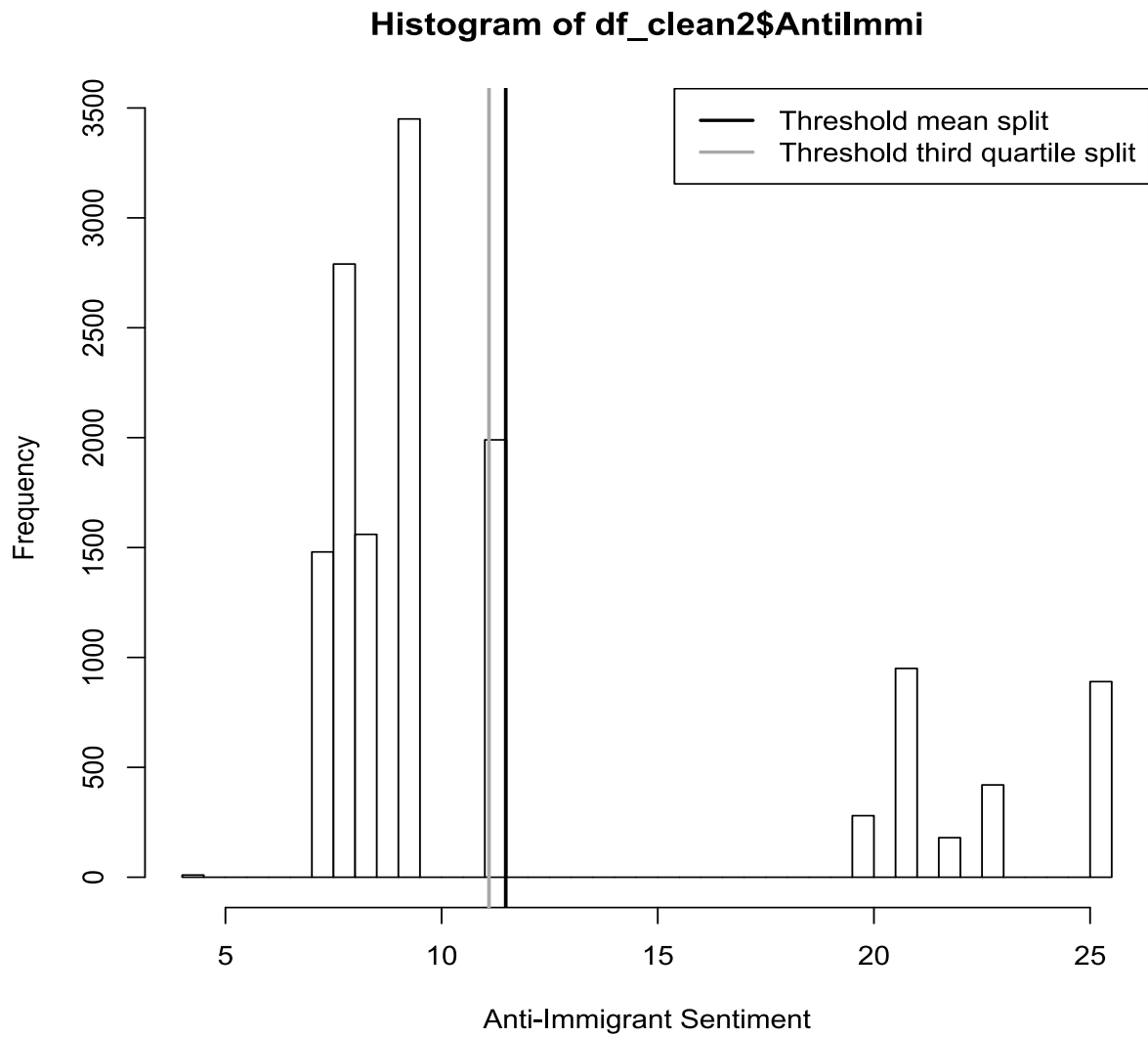
### A3 Importance of components and loadings of components

	<b>PC1</b>	<b>PC2</b>	<b>PC3</b>
<b>Standard deviation</b>	1.553	0.661	0.389
<b>Proportion of Variance</b>	0.804	0.146	0.050
<b>Cumulative Proportion</b>	0.804	0.950	1.000

<b>AfD vote share</b>	0.596	-0.404	-0.694
<b>Disagreement that foreigners enrich cultural life in Germany</b>	0.534	0.844	-0.034
<b>Xenophobic Attacks</b>	0.599	-0.351	0.719

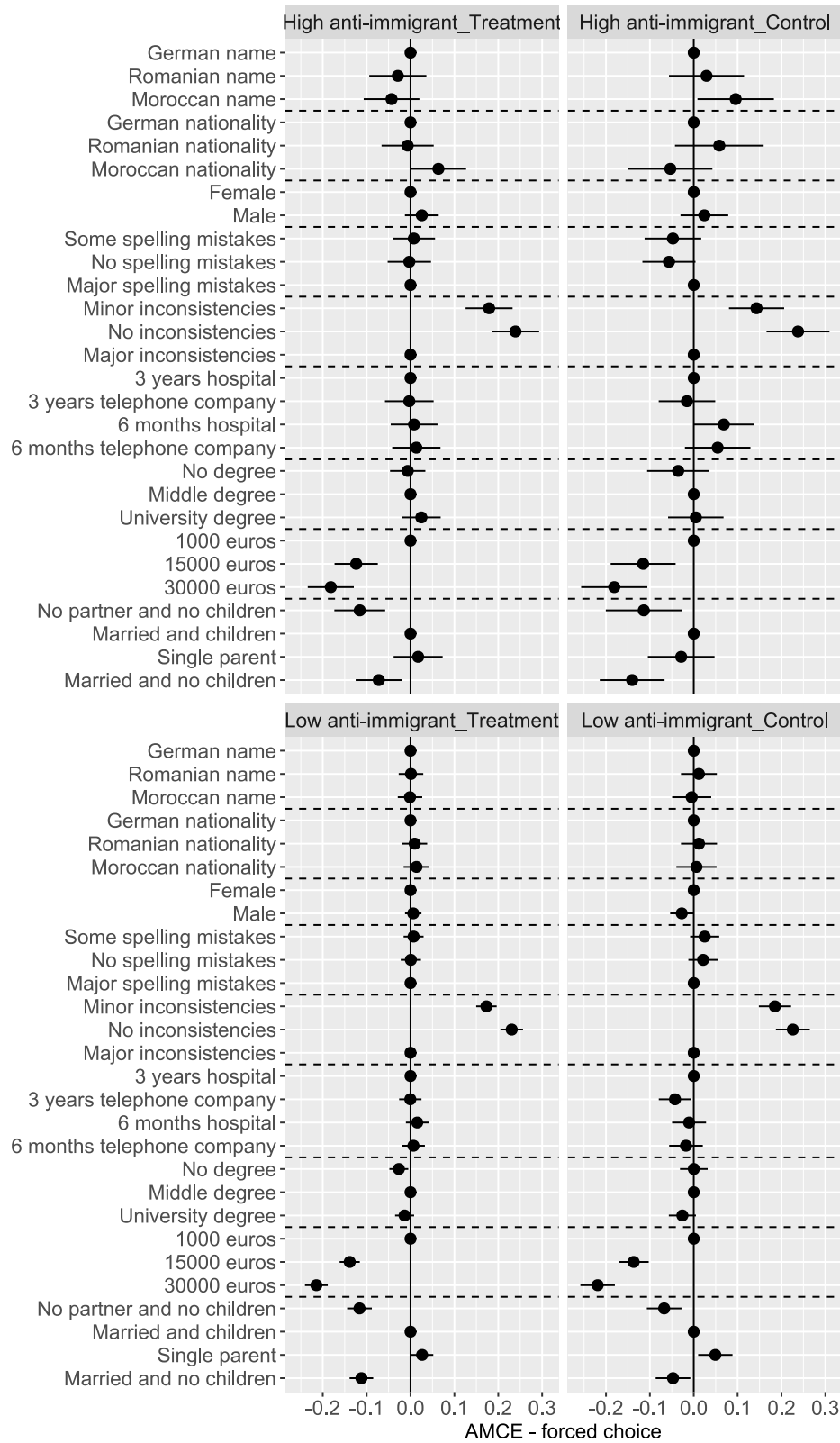
Third, figure A11 shows the distribution of anti-immigrant sentiment showing that the distribution is right-skewed. The light-grey line shows the cut-off point at the third quartile of 11.096, hence the category of high anti-immigrant sentiment contains mostly extreme values. Most of those federal states are eastern German federal states except of Berlin but also Bavaria. When changing the cut-off point to the mean, figure A11 shows that one federal state (Bavaria) is excluded from the category of “high anti-immigrant sentiment”.

**Figure A11** Distribution of anti-immigrant sentiment

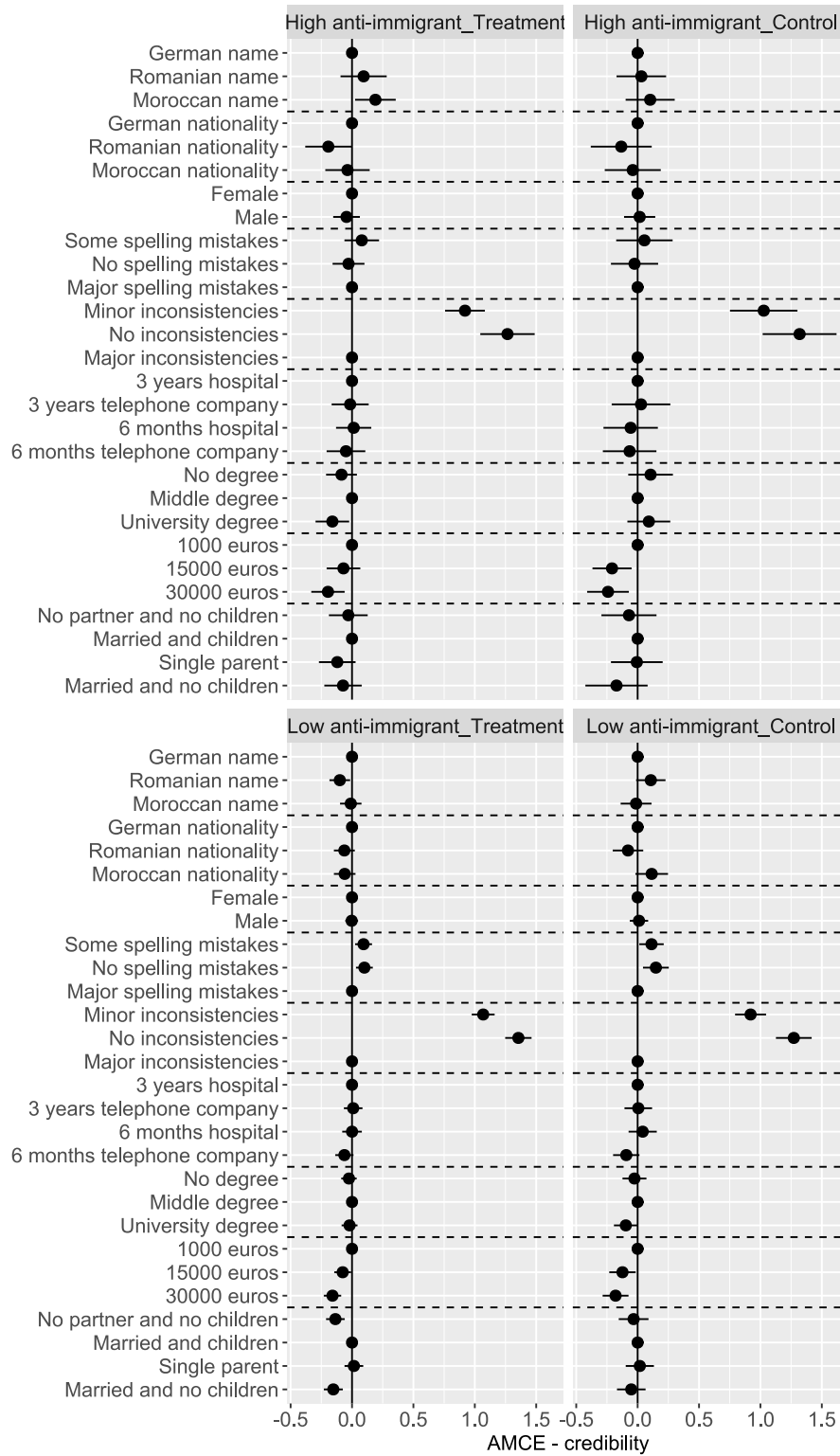


The following figures (A12a, A12b and A12c) show the main results with the more restrictive categorization of anti-immigrant sentiment, using a mean split.

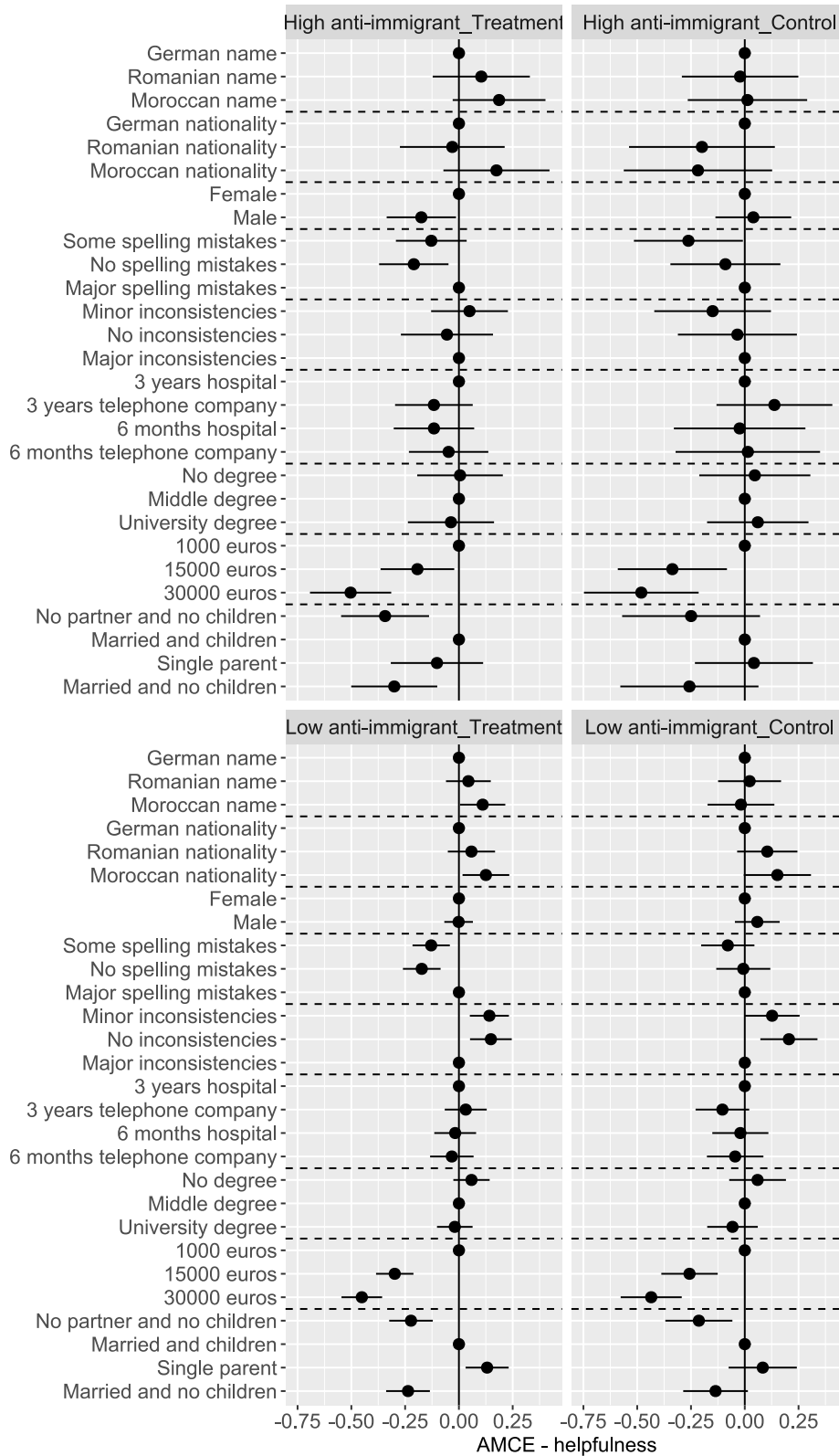
**Figure A12a** News frame effects and anti-immigrant sentiment (different categorization)



**Figure A12b** News frame effects and anti-immigrant sentiment (different categorization)



**Figure A12c** News frame effects and anti-immigrant sentiment (different categorization)

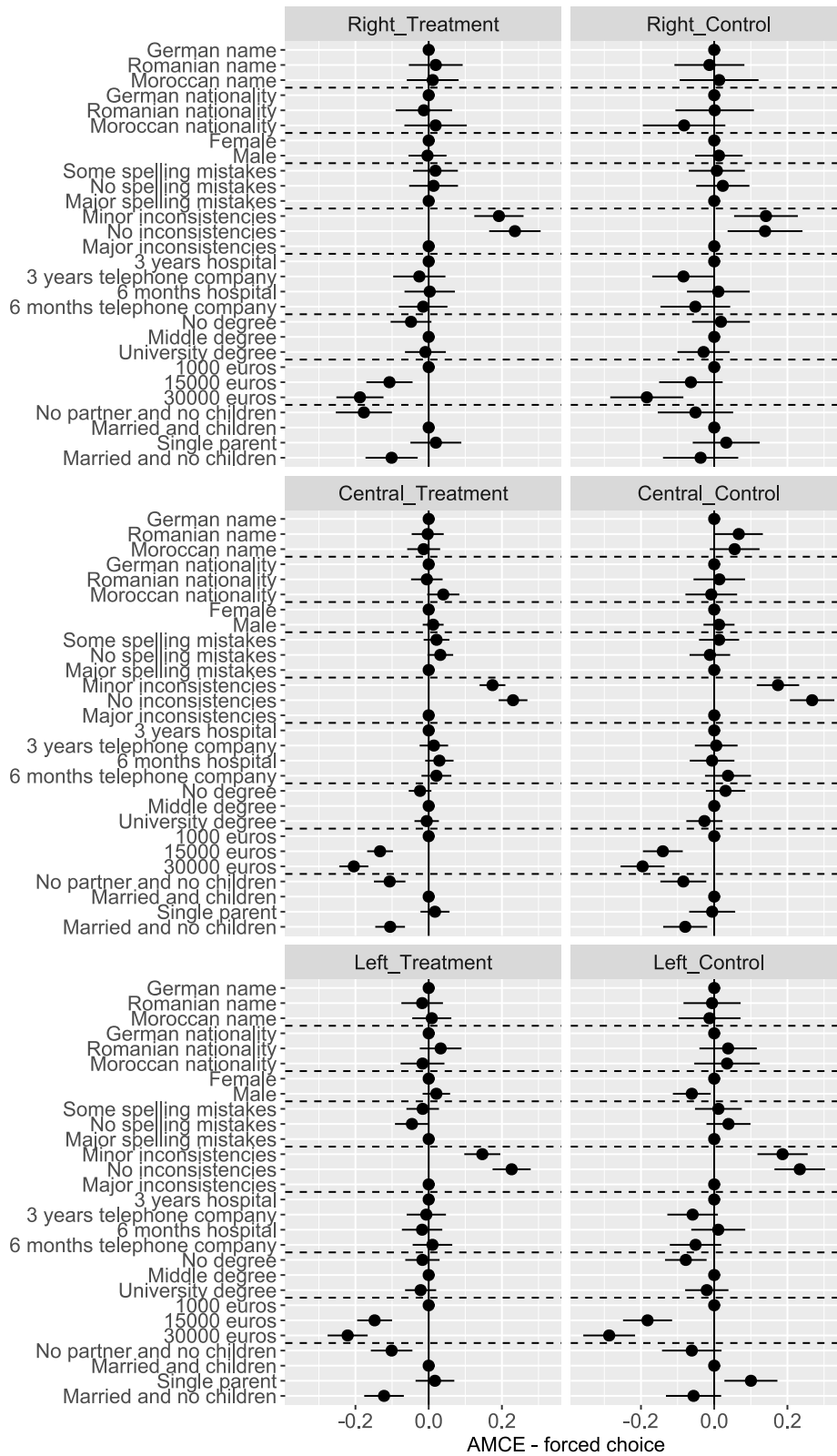




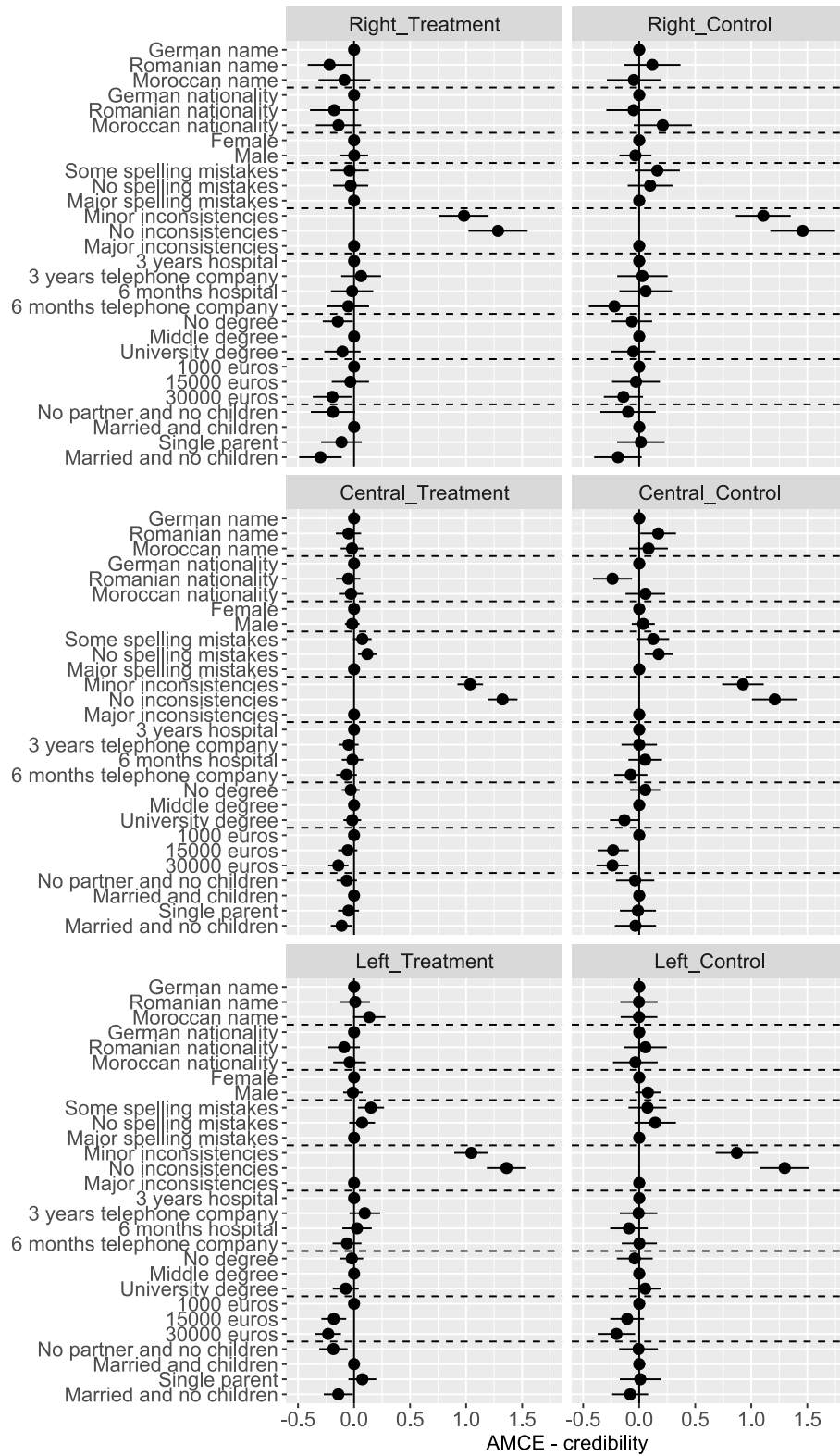
### **Alternative Measurement of Political Ideology**

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). Here we offer a different coding, categorizing 0-3 as left-leaning, 4-6 as center, and 7-10 as right-leaning.

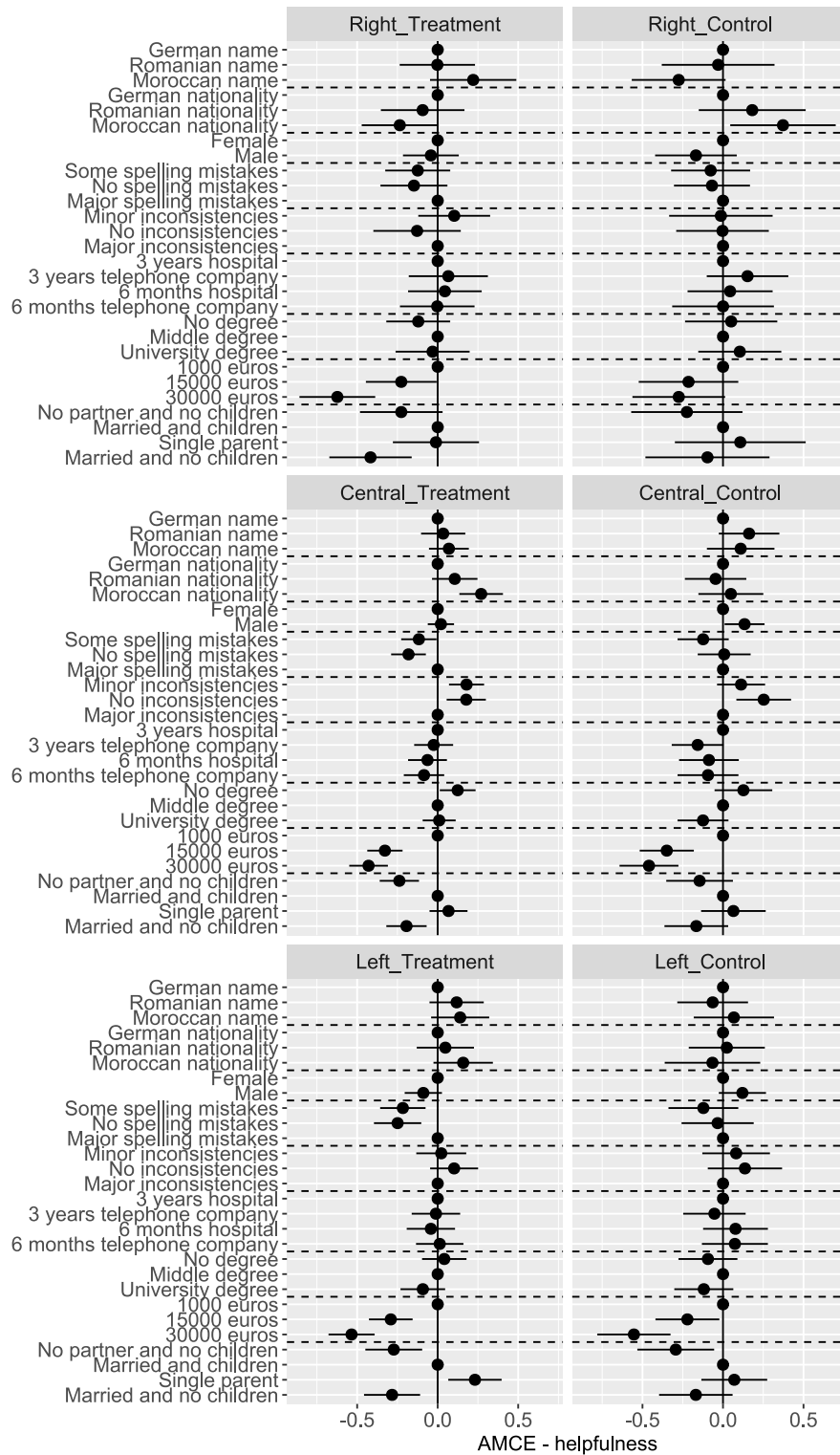
**Figure A13a** News frame effects and political ideology (different categorization)



**Figure A13b** News frame effects and political ideology (different categorization)



**Figure A13c** News frame effects and political ideology (different categorization)



## **Awareness Check**

**We included a treatment check which was passed by 1392 from 1400 respondents:**

What was the newspaper article about?

- Welfare fraud
- Digitization of public authorities
- Drug trafficking
- Damage to property
- None of the options mentioned here

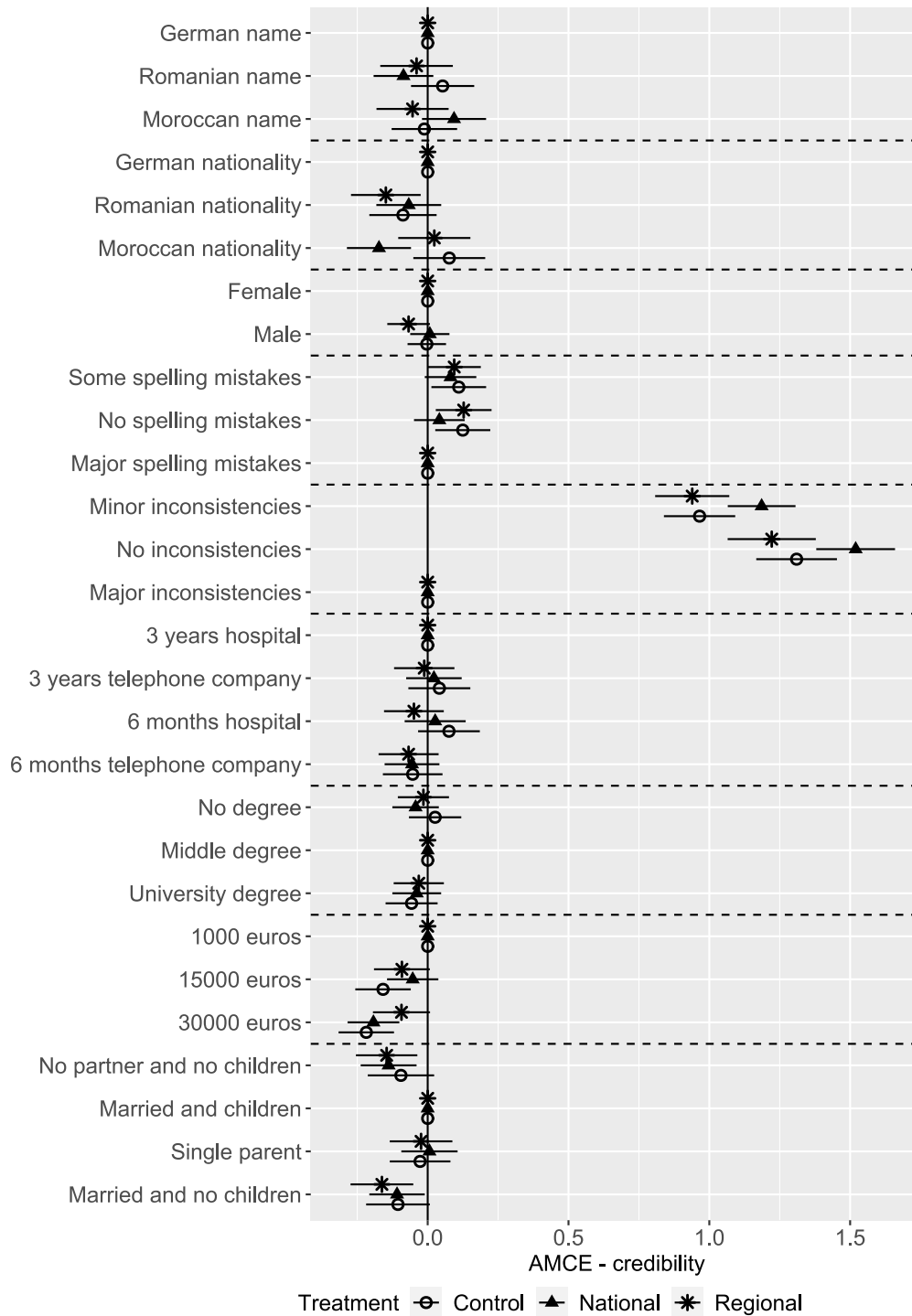
**We included the following awareness check:**

“Finally, we would like to know whether you read the questionnaire carefully. Please think back to the last question. What problems were mentioned in this one? You will see the answer option “No answer” below. To make sure we have your attention, please select the answer option “No answer”.”

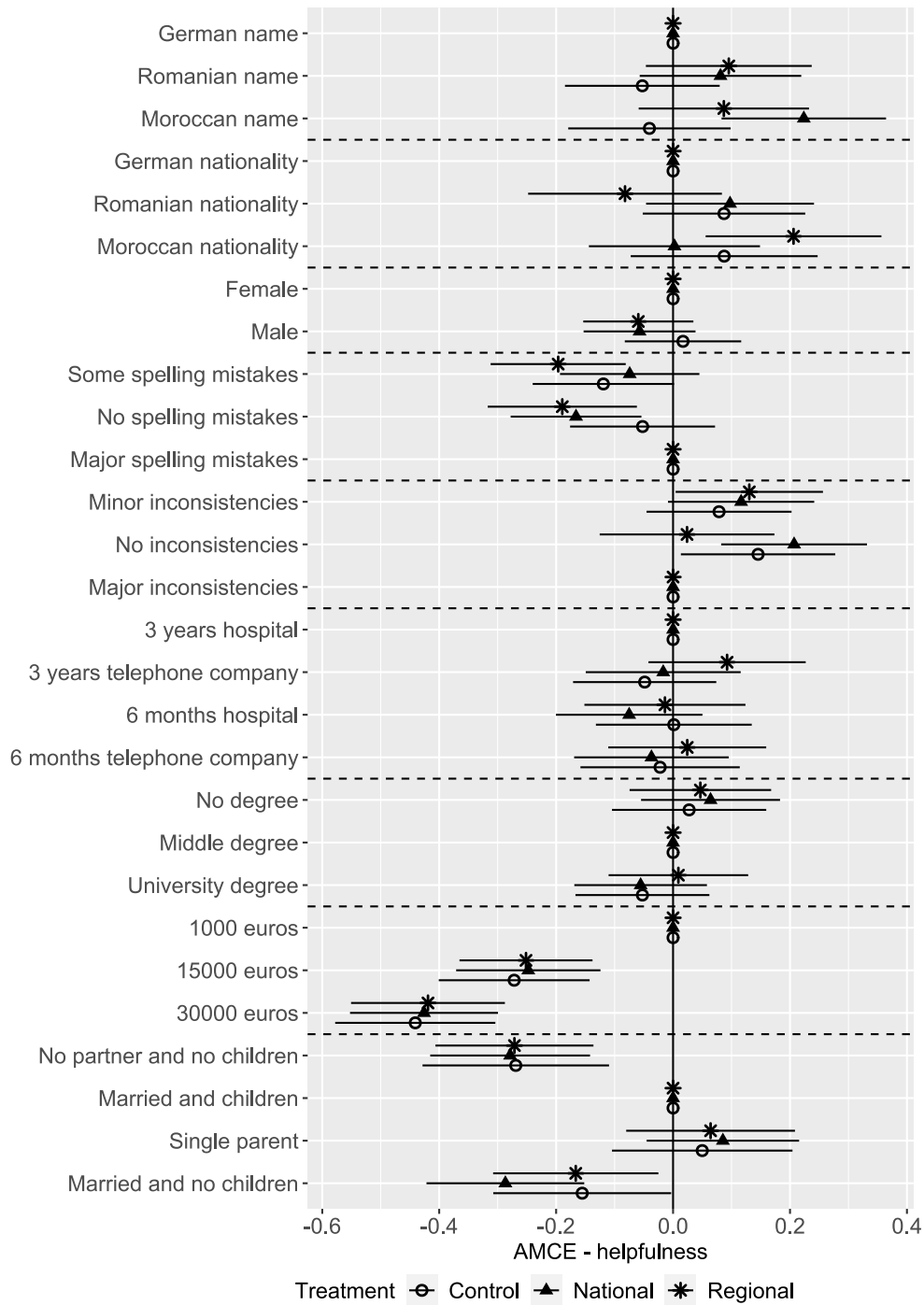
212 respondents did not pass the awareness check by not selecting “no answer”. Hence, below we show the results for the respondents who passed the awareness check.

The following models present the main models excluding respondents who did not pass the awareness check (who did not select “no answer”).

**Figure A14a** Effects of main attributes on preference for request in treatment groups



**Figure A14b** Effects of main attributes on preference for request in treatment groups

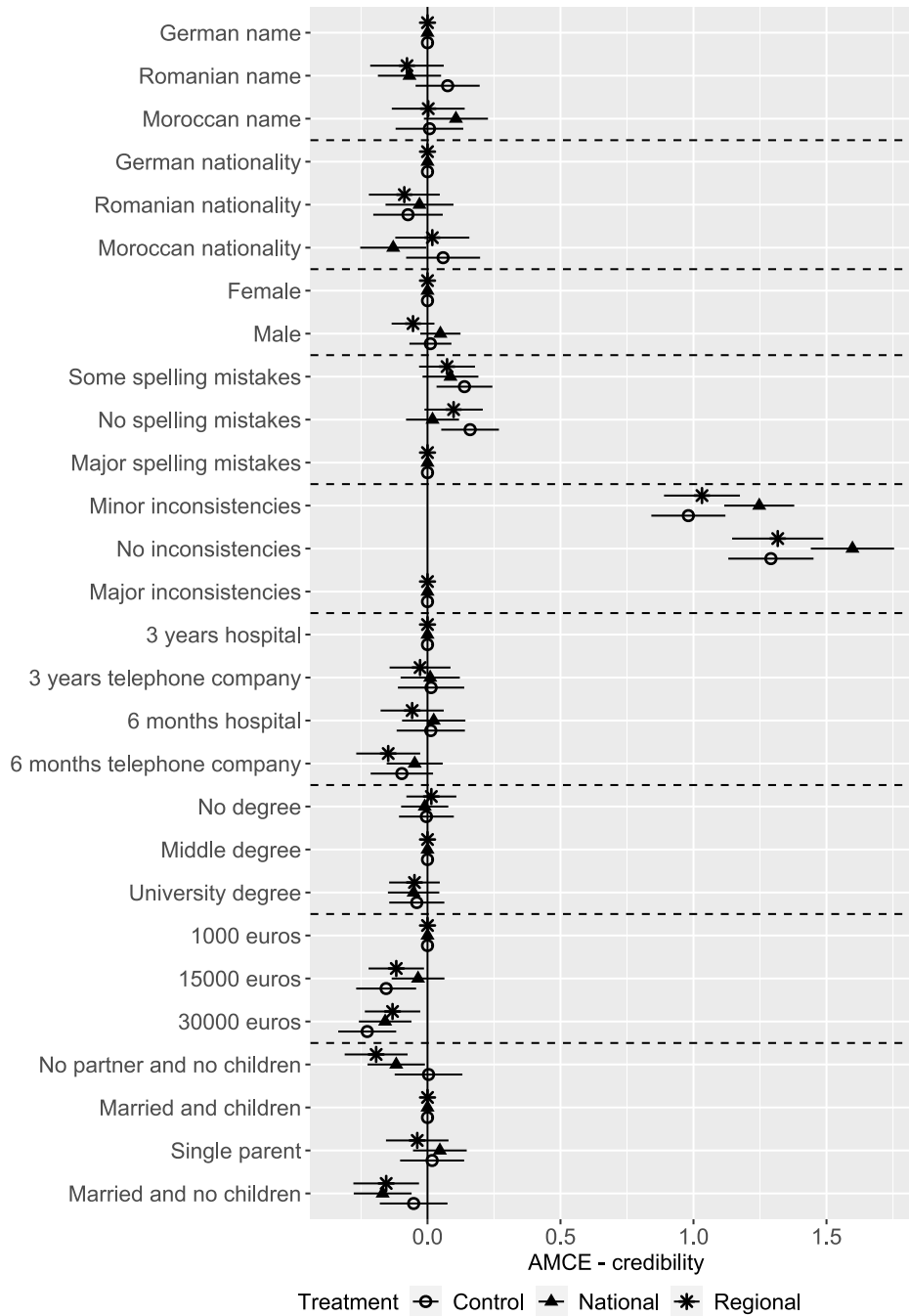


The main treatment effects of finding requests of Romanian claimants less credible and offering additional help to Moroccan claimants stay significant after being exposed to the negative newspaper article.

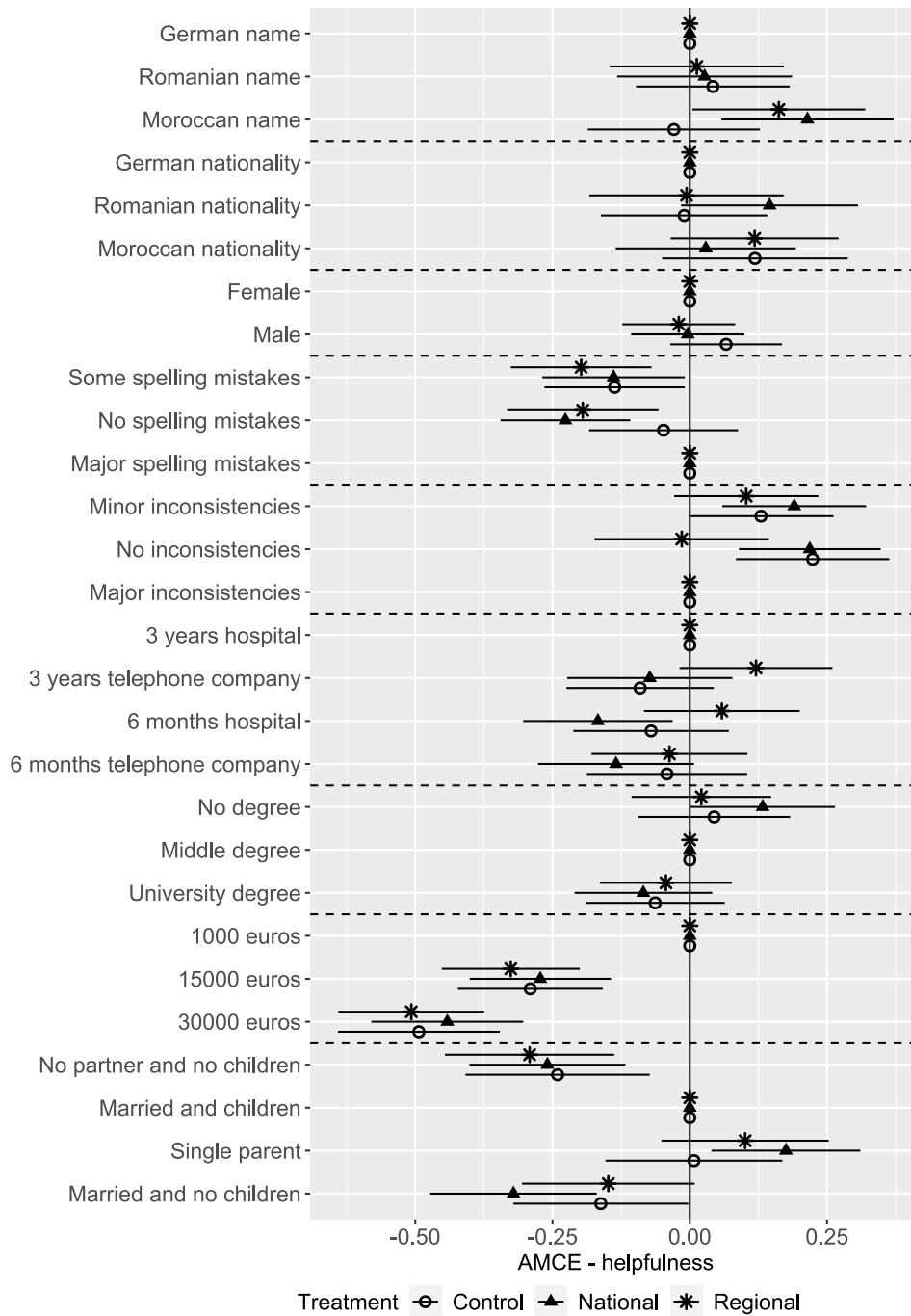


The following figures show the models when excluding respondents with inconsistent decision-making (who did not select the same profile when presented with a flipped choice).

**Figure A15a** Effects of main attributes on preference for request in treatment groups



**Figure A15b** Effects of main attributes on preference for request in treatment groups

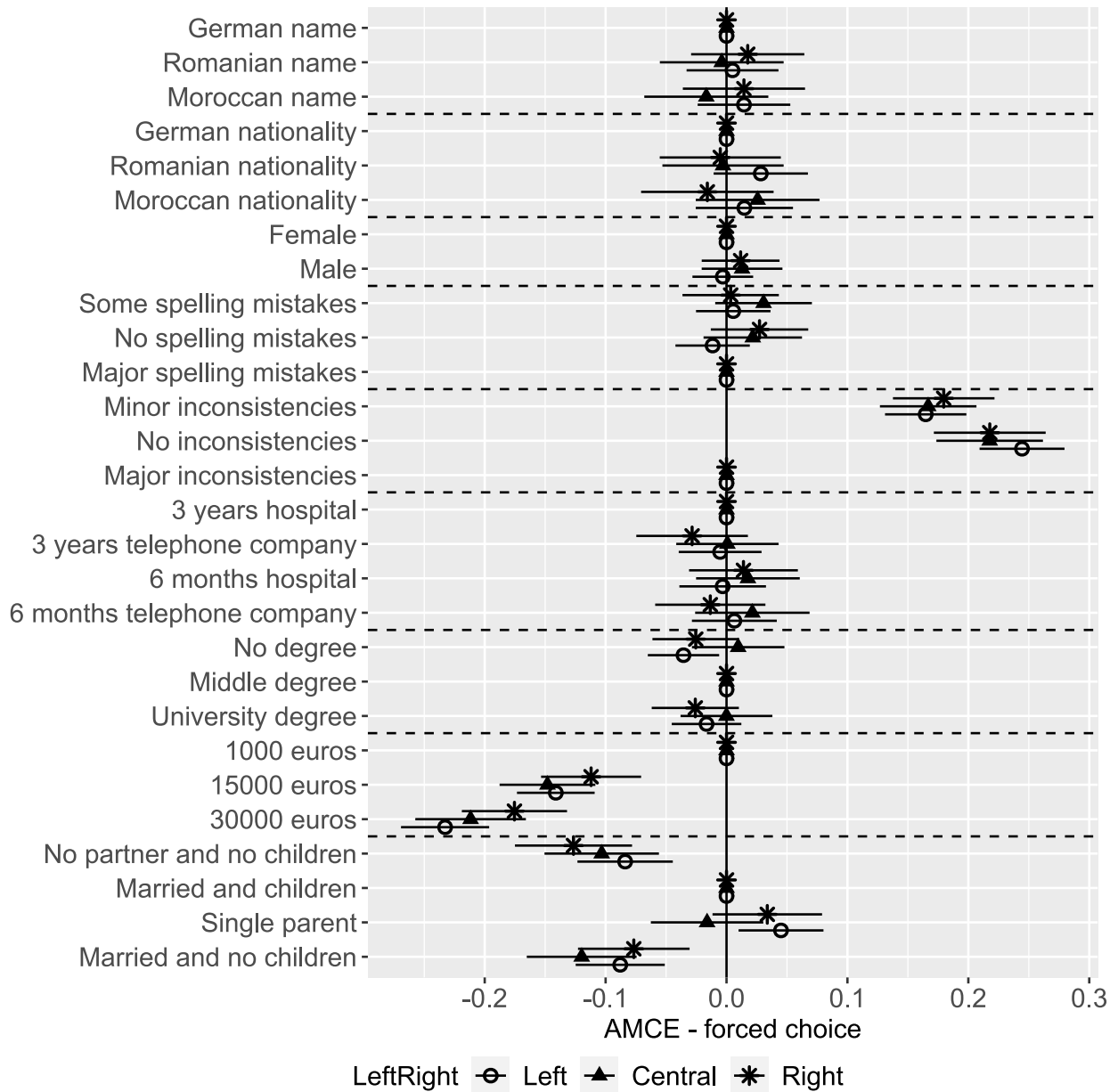


The treatment effect of offering additional help to Moroccan claimants stays significant after being exposed to the negative newspaper article. The treatment effect of finding requests of Romanian claimants less credible turns insignificant but stays negative.

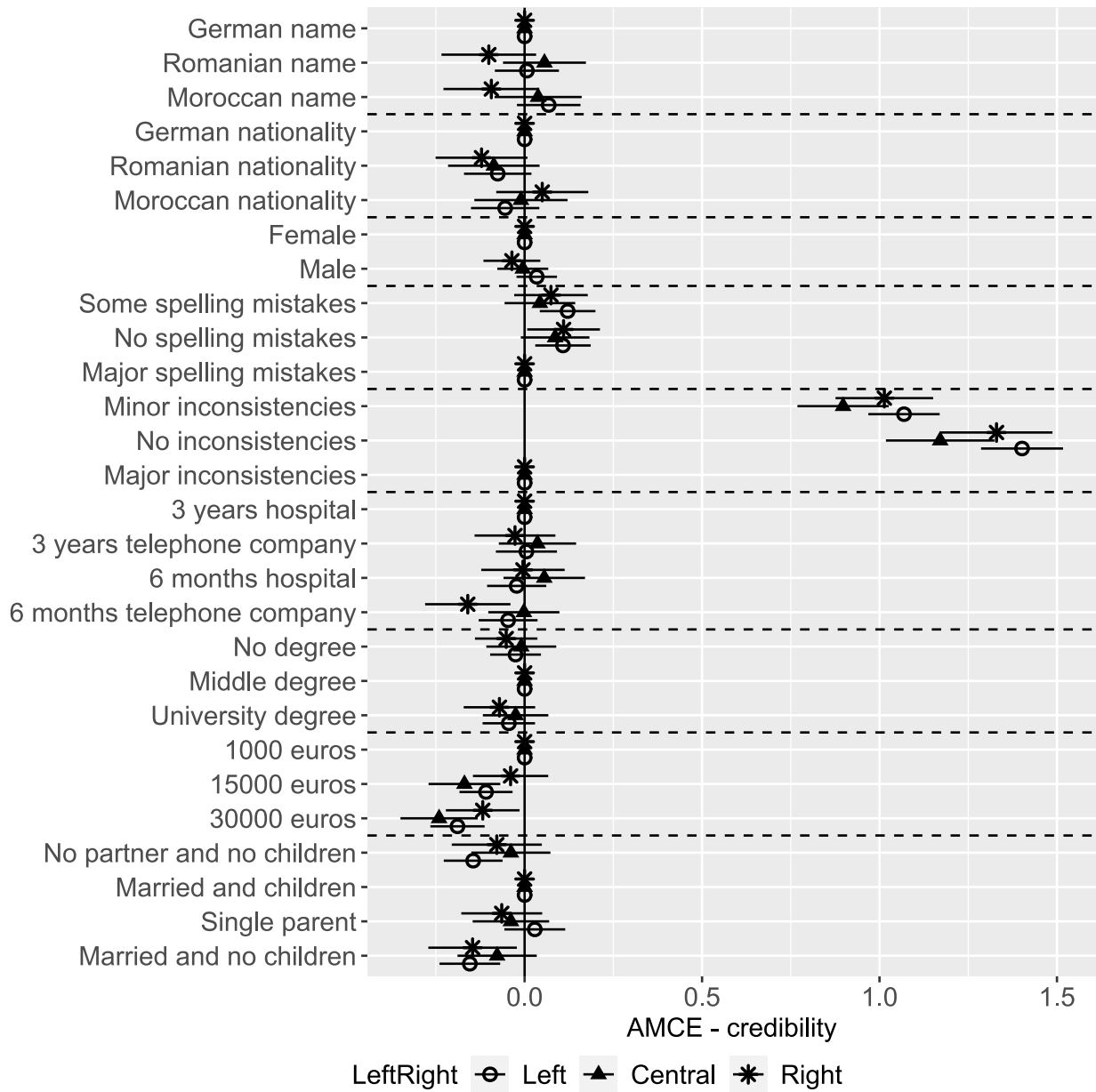
## Additional Models

### Preferences by political ideology of respondents

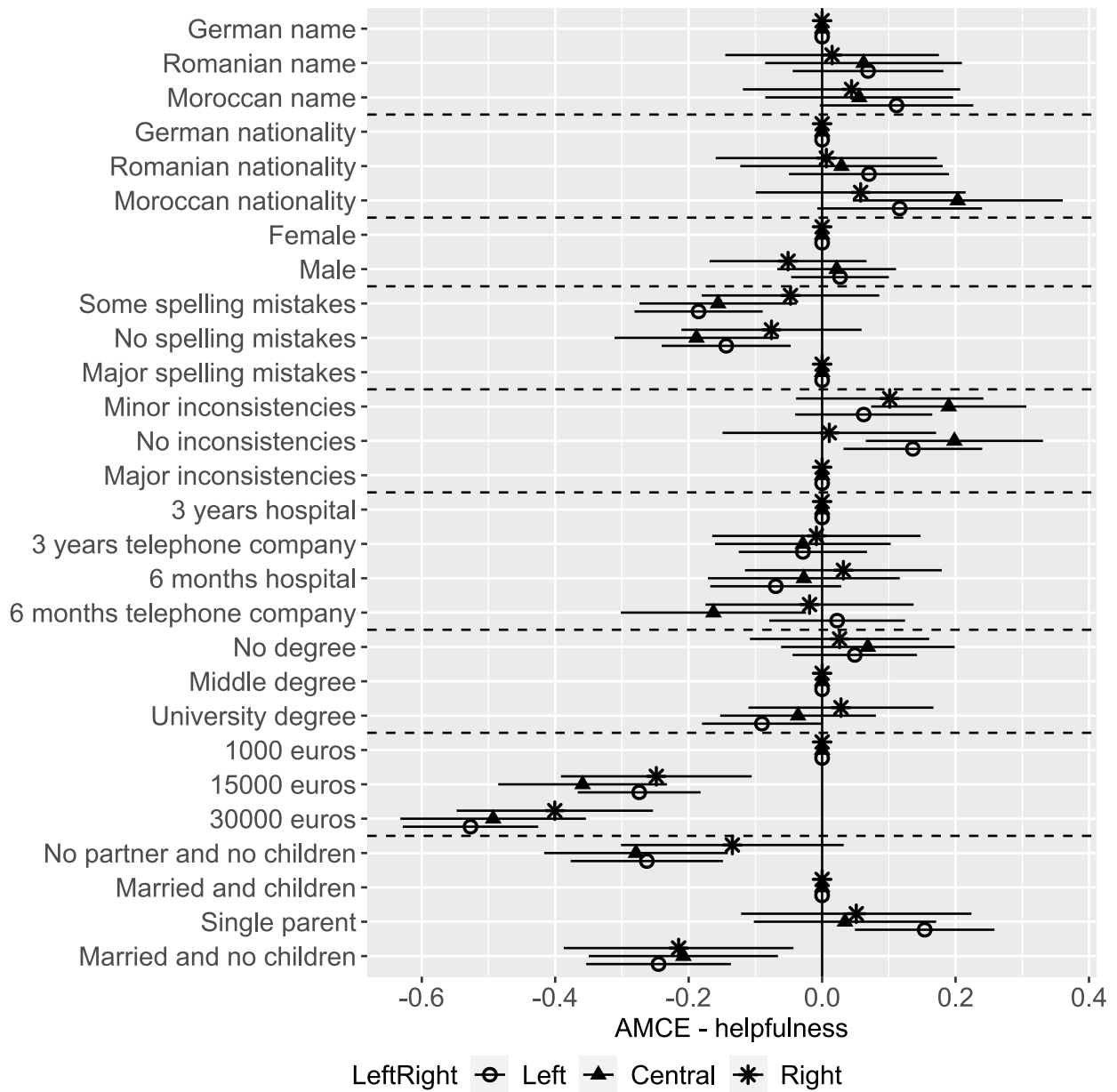
**Figure A16a** Effects of main attributes on preference for request by the political ideology



**Figure A16b** Effects of main attributes on preference for request by the political ideology

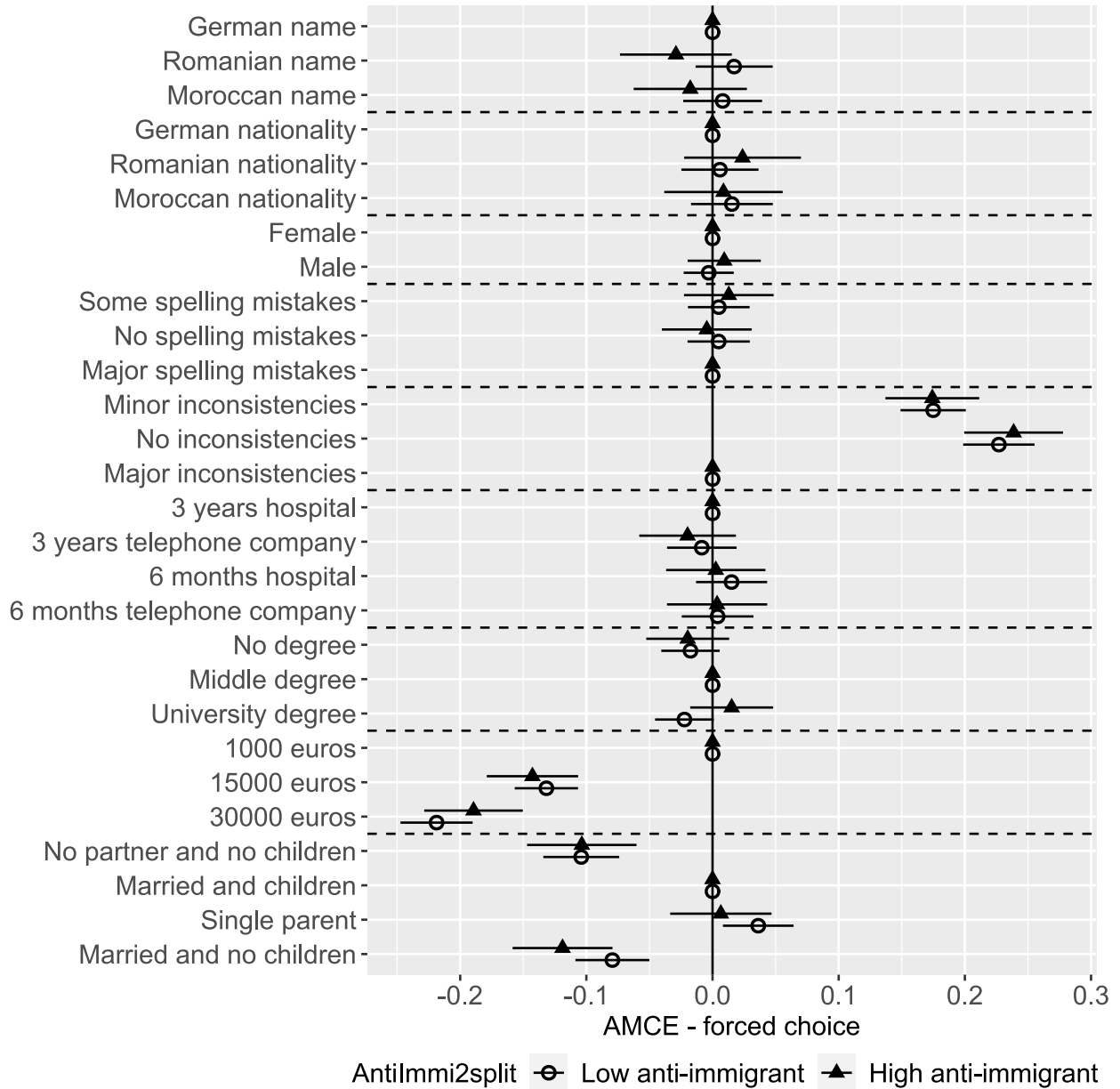


**Figure A16c** Effects of main attributes on preference for request by the political ideology

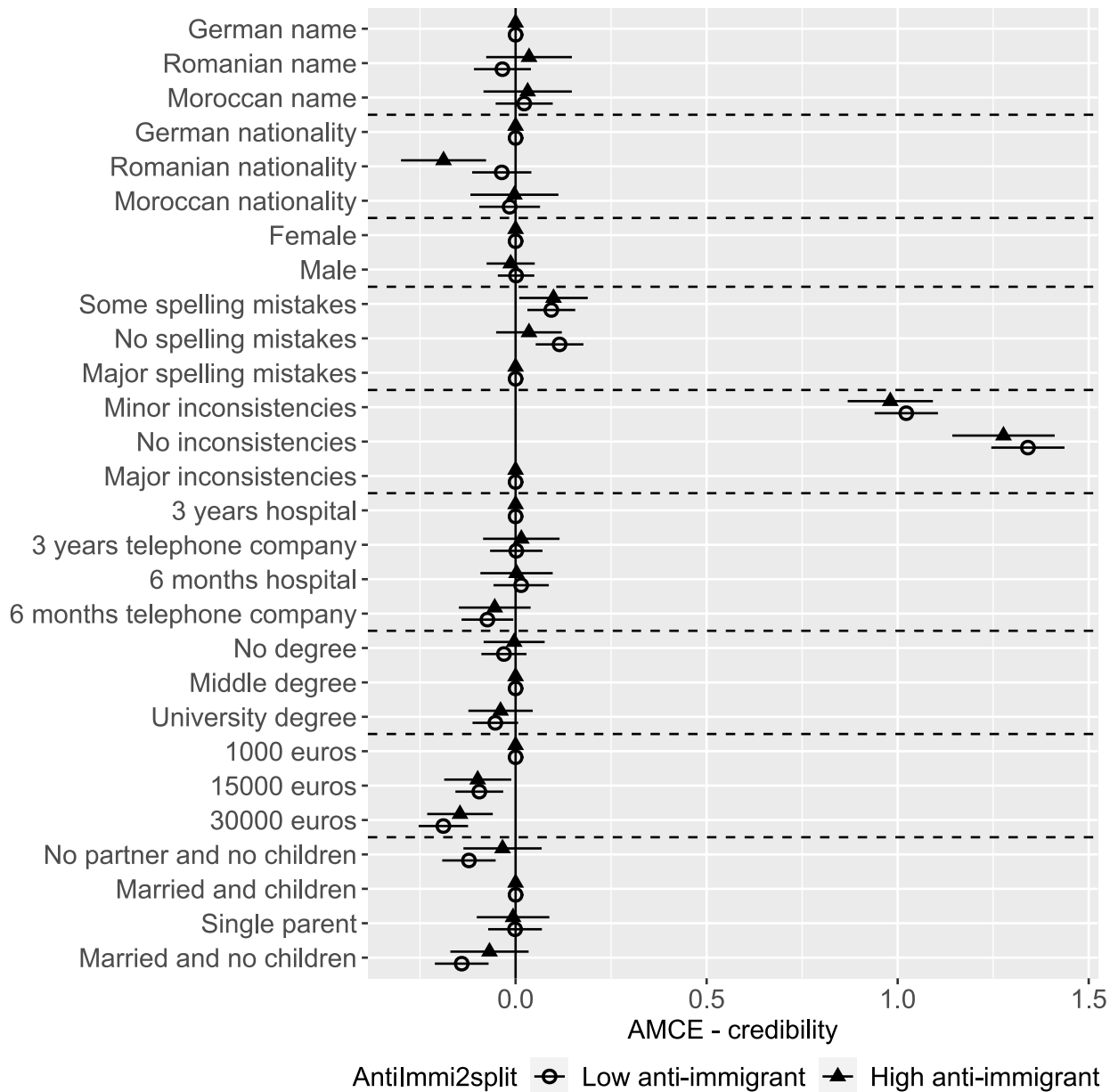


## Preferences by regional anti-immigrant sentiment

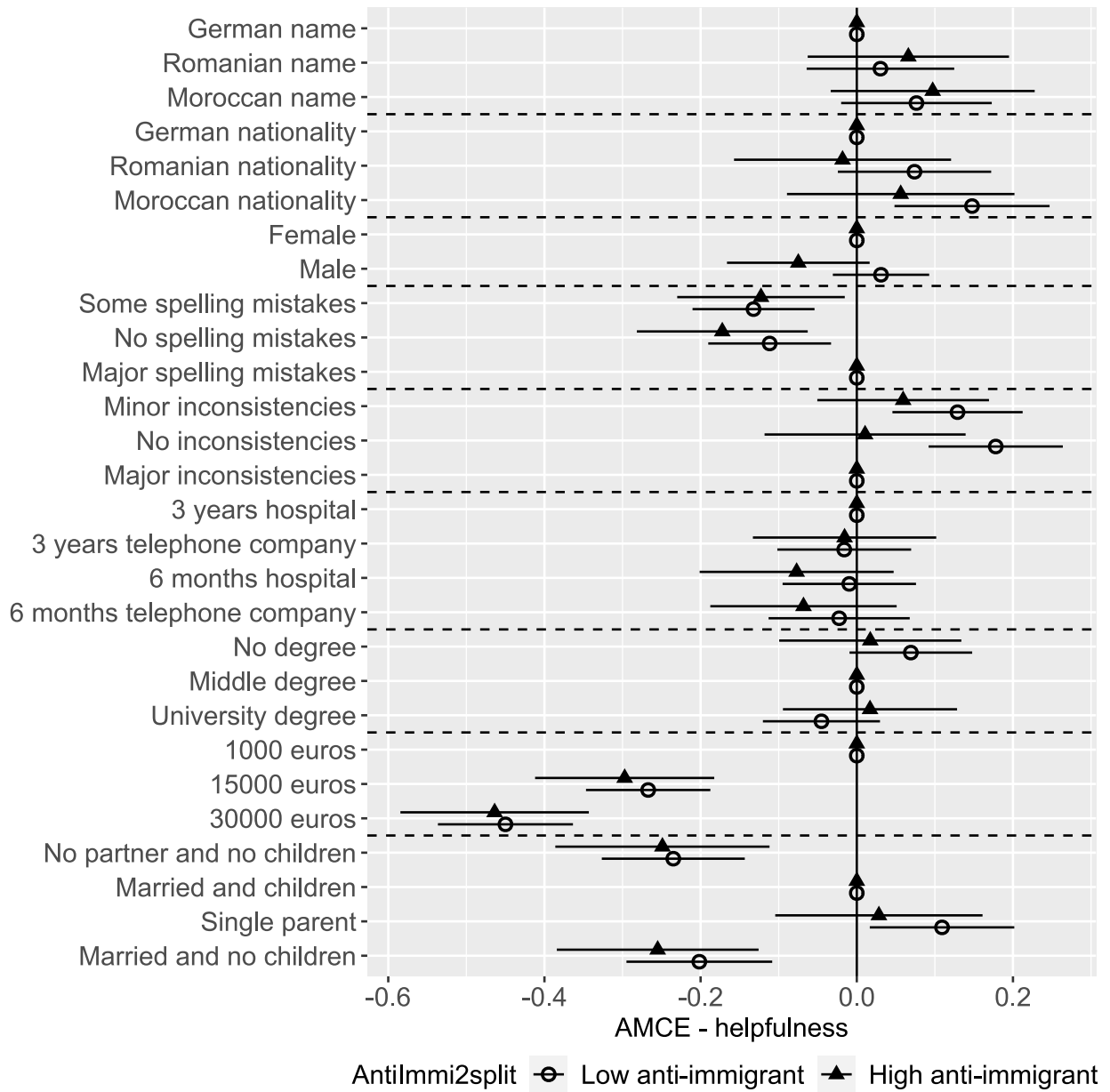
Figure A17a Effects of main attributes on preference for request by anti-immigrant sentiment



**Figure A17b** Effects of main attributes on preference for request by anti-immigrant sentiment



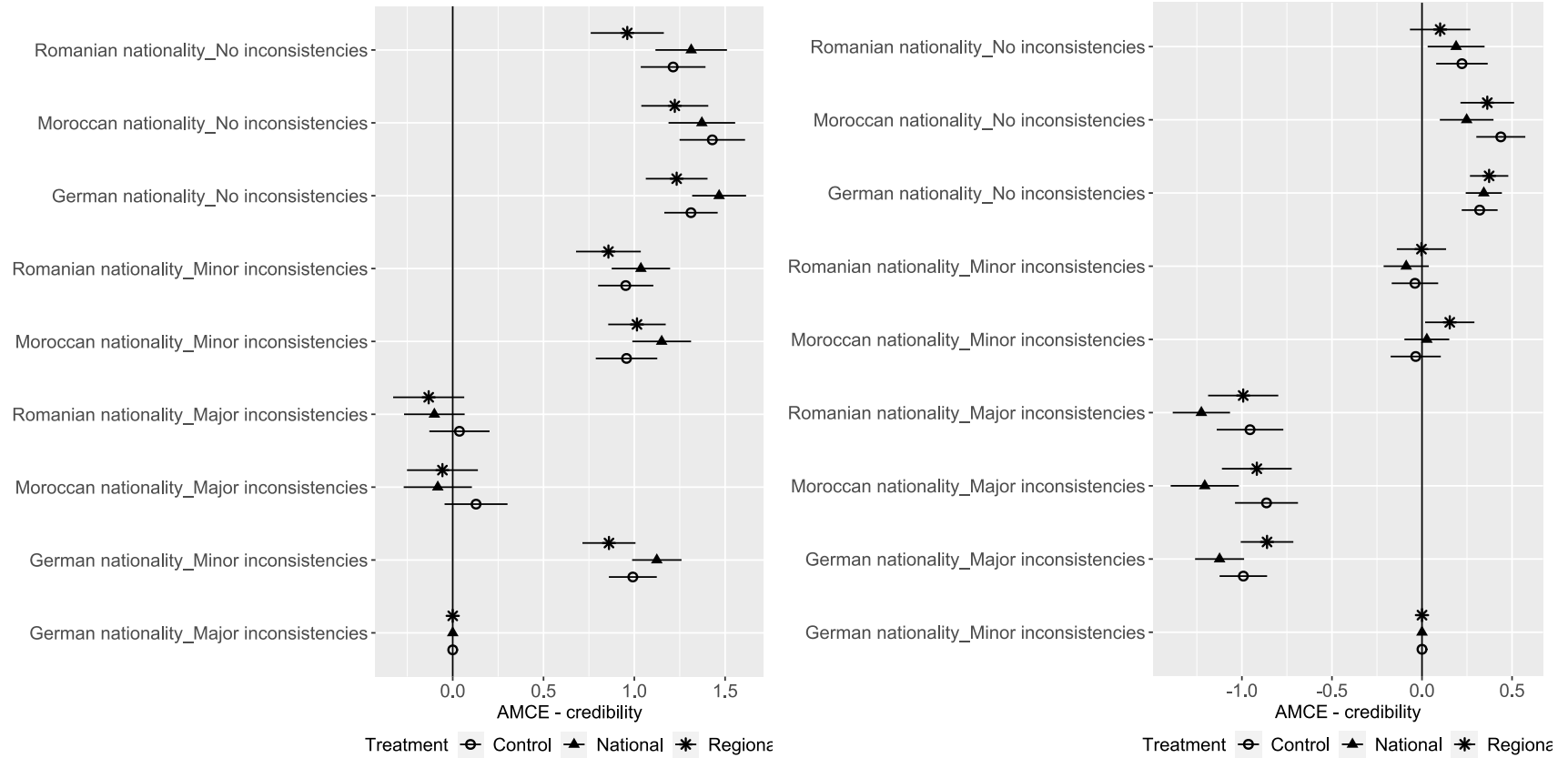
**Figure A17c** Effects of main attributes on preference for request by anti-immigrant sentiment



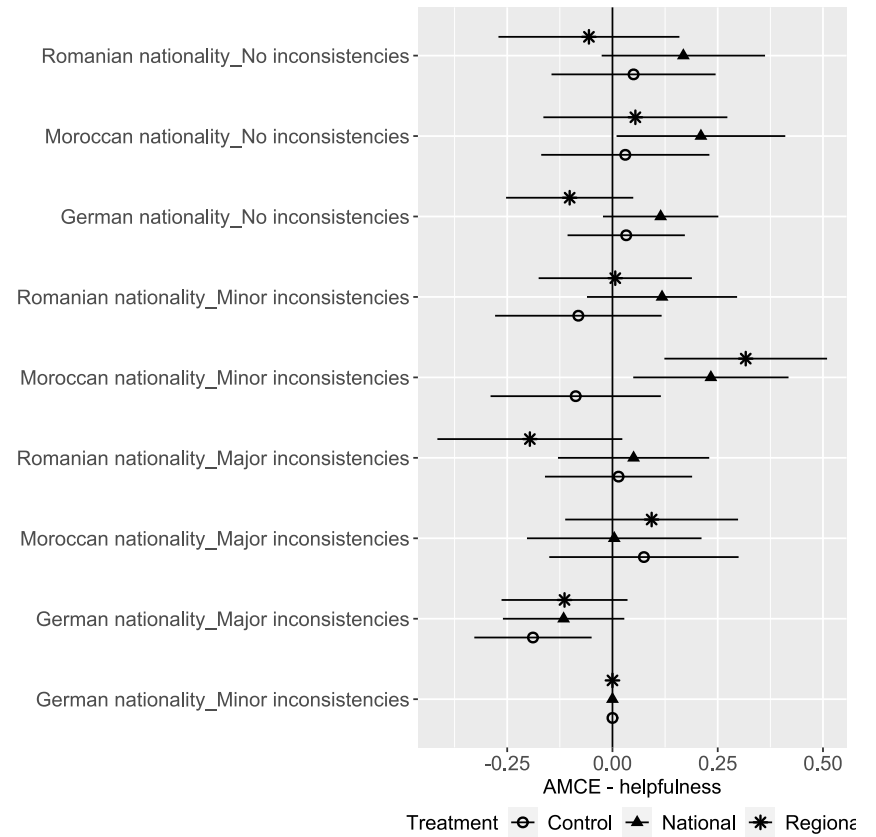
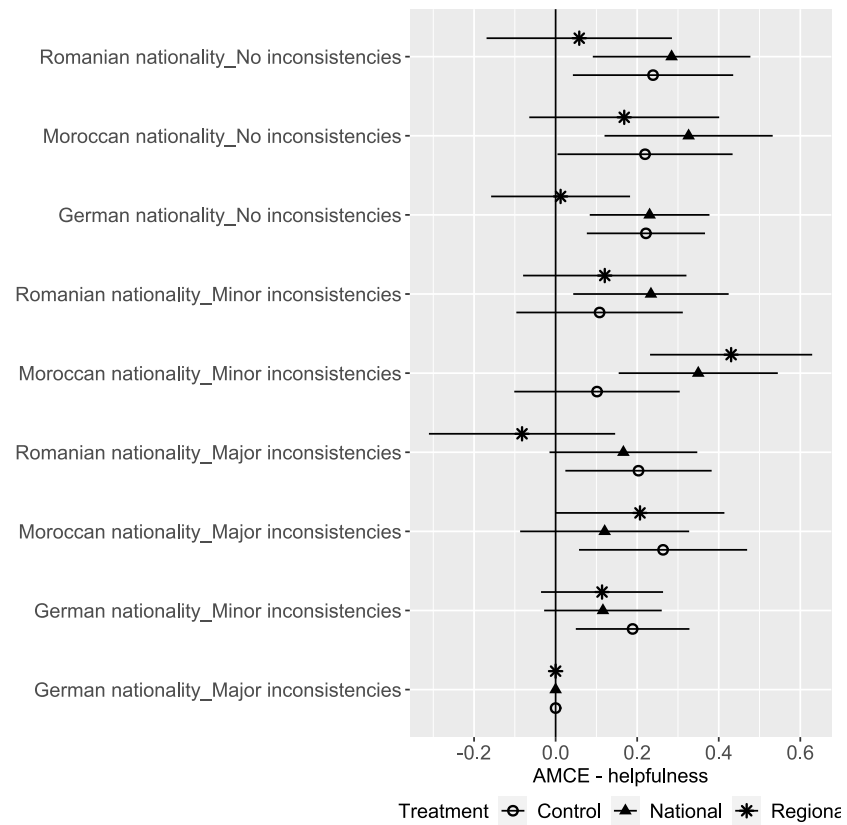


## Interaction effects nationality and attachments

**Figure A18a** Interaction effect between nationality and attachment with baseline category “German and major inconsistencies/ minor inconsistencies” for outcome measure credibility

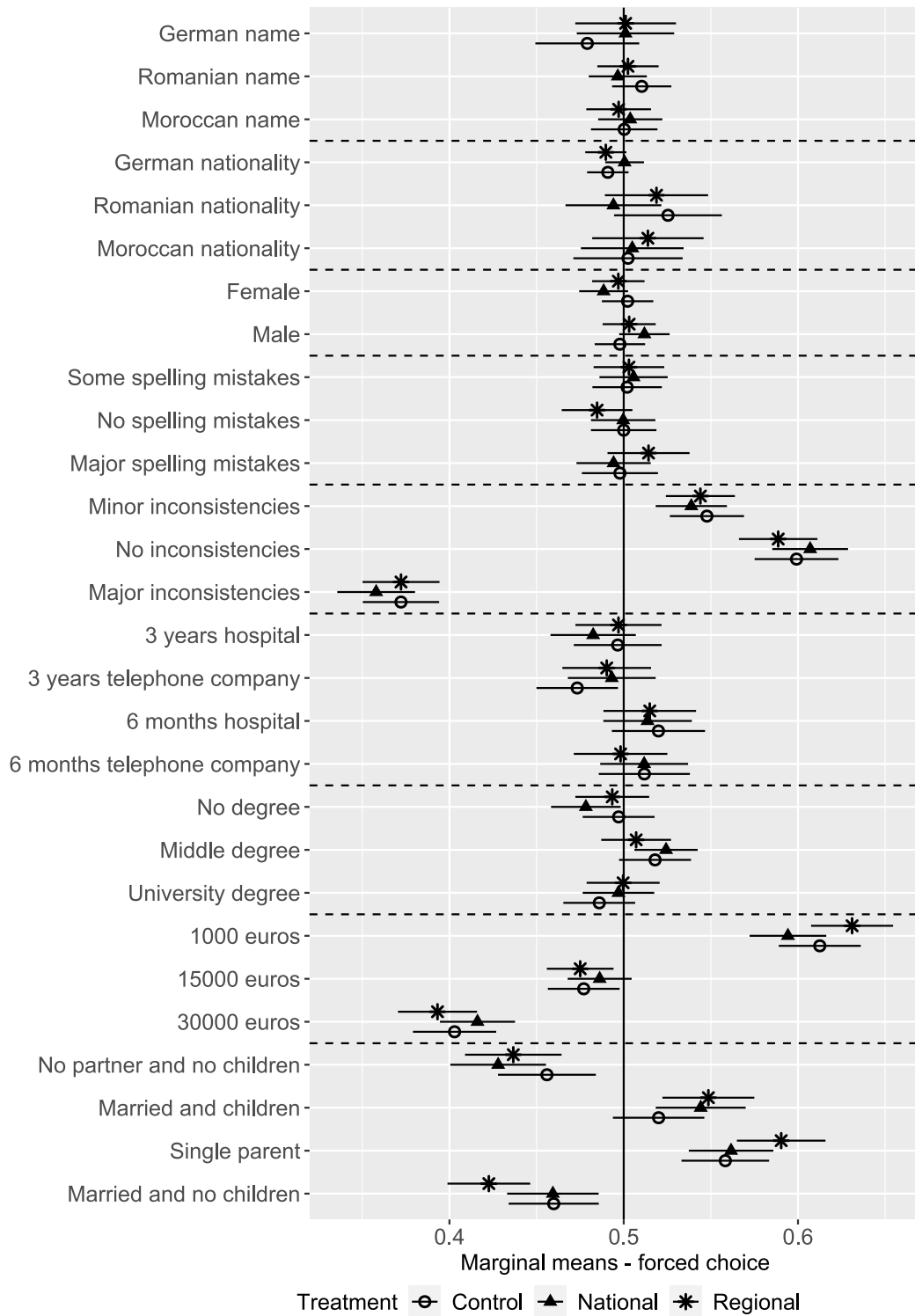


**Figure A18b** Interaction effect between nationality and attachment with baseline category “German and major inconsistencies/ minor inconsistencies” for outcome measure helpfulness

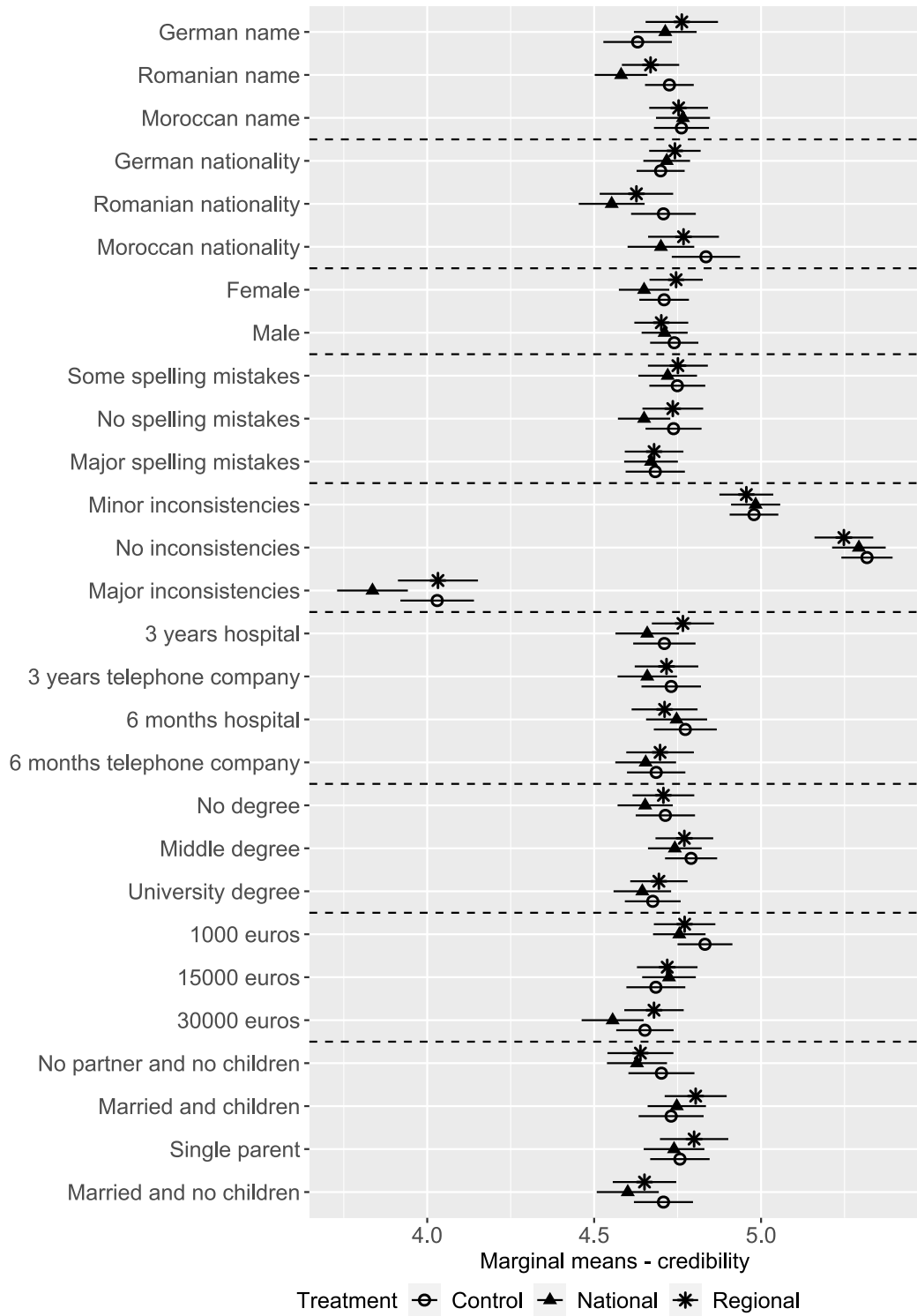


## Main Models with Marginal Means

Figure A19a Effects of main attributes on preference for request



**Figure A19b** Effects of main attributes on preference for request



**Figure A19c** Effects of main attributes on preference for request

