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Unwelcome Neighbors: Poverty and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment in Morocco

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Abstract

Drawing on data from Rounds 7–10 of the Afrobarometer survey, conducted in Morocco between 2018 and 2024 ($n = 4,800$), this study examines the relationship between lived poverty and attitudes toward immigrants and foreign workers. Lived poverty is measured using an index that combines the frequency with which respondents and their household members lacked basic necessities such as food, water, medical care, cooking fuel, and cash income. Hostility is measured using responses to an item asking about respondents' willingness to have immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors, with answers recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly like" to "strongly dislike." Regression analyses reveal that higher levels of poverty are associated with greater reluctance to have immigrants as neighbors. These findings suggest that economic vulnerability may heighten perceived intergroup competition, which in turn could lead to anti-immigrant sentiment. By focusing on Morocco, a key node in North-South migration flows, this study contributes to broader debates on how structural inequality shapes public opinion toward migrants in the Global South.

JEL: F22, I30, J15, J61, J71

Keywords: Morocco, poverty, hostility, discrimination, immigrants, foreign workers

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1 Introduction

Morocco plays a critical role as a transit country for sub-Saharan African (SSA) migrants seeking to reach Europe, largely due to its strategic geographic position. Bordered by the Mediterranean Sea and sharing land frontiers with the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, Morocco is the only African country with direct land borders to a European Union member state. These

unique geopolitical conditions make it a key waypoint for migrants hoping to access European territory. Although these borders are heavily fortified with high fences topped by barbed wire and strictly monitored, many migrants continue to attempt the dangerous crossing—either by scaling these barriers or swimming along the coast. A particularly tragic example occurred in June 2022, when more than 2,000 migrants attempted to breach the fence into Melilla. The violent clash with Moroccan border guards resulted in the deaths of at least 23 migrants, with many more injured (Hedgecoe 2022; Human Rights Watch 2022). This incident highlights the intensifying risks and human costs associated with migration along the Morocco-EU frontier.

Yet Morocco's migration story is not only about those passing through. Many Moroccans—particularly youth and the unemployed—also undertake the perilous journey described in search of better opportunities (BBC 2021; Dombey & Saleh 2021; Parra & Elshamy 2021). Data from Round 10 of the Afrobarometer survey (2024) highlights how widespread these aspirations are: half of Moroccan adults report having considered emigrating to another country.¹ Among those expressing such a desire, Europe and North America (specifically the United States and Canada) emerge as the top destinations, being attractive to 60 and 26 percent of said prospective migrants respectively. The primary driver here was cited as the search for employment or improved job prospects.

This dual reality—Moroccans seeking opportunities abroad while others migrate into and through their native country—reflects its intermediate position in global development hierarchies. Despite its challenges, Morocco's socioeconomic conditions remain significantly better than those in many SSA countries. In 2023, Morocco recorded a Human Development Index (HDI) score of 0.71, notably higher than both the SSA regional average of 0.568 as well as the individual scores of most of the latter's constituent countries (United Nations Development Programme 2025). While Morocco is often characterized as a transit country for SSA migrants en route to Europe, its comparatively high level of development has increasingly positioned it as a destination in its own right (Buehler et al. 2023; Simoncelli et al. 2023; El Ghazouani 2019; Berriane 2015; Berriane et al. 2013). This shift underscores the complex and evolving nature of migration dynamics in North Africa, where economic disparities between regions shape patterns of movement and settlement due to perceptions of opportunity.

With Morocco's growing role as a destination country, the presence of migrants has provoked social tensions. Although immigrants in Morocco come from diverse regions—including conflict-affected Arab countries such as Syria and Iraq—the majority originate from SSA. Some estimates place the number of migrants hailing from the latter at around 700,000, representing approximately 2 percent of Morocco's total population (Berengaut 2021; El Ghazouani 2019). Notably, public opposition to migrants is particularly pronounced against those of SSA origins (Buehler & Han 2021; Buehler et al. 2020), reflecting both racial and social hierarchies (Gazzotti 2021; King 2019).

1 See: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>.

To better understand the roots of this animosity, this study draws on data from Rounds 7 through 10 of the Afrobarometer survey ($n = 4,800$), conducted in Morocco between 2018 and 2024. Specifically, it seeks to examine the relationship between lived poverty and hostility toward immigrants and foreign workers. Lived poverty is measured using an index that captures the frequency with which individuals and their household members were deprived across five basic dimensions during the past year: access to food, water, cooking fuel, medical care, and cash income. Hostility is measured using an item asking respondents about their willingness to have immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors, using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly like” to “strongly dislike.”

The descriptive analysis shows that roughly one-in-five Moroccans (22 percent) express an unwillingness to live near immigrants and foreign workers, a smaller number the opposite (19 percent), while the majority (59 percent) are indifferent. Regression analysis reveals a positive association between poverty and anti-immigrant hostility. In other words, the poorer Moroccans are, the more hesitant they become to have immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors. This might be because poor Moroccans view immigrants and foreign workers as economic competitors for limited resources such as jobs, housing, and state-provided services. Importantly, these findings remain robust across alternative measures of hostility and different estimation techniques.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows: First, I discuss the relevant theoretical framework and present the hypothesis. Next, I introduce the data, describe the key variables used in the regression analysis, and explain the analytical strategy adopted. The regression results are then presented and discussed. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses policy implications.

2 Theoretical Considerations

Intergroup threat theory (ITT) (Stephan & Renfro 2016; Stephan & Stephan 1985, 1996; Stephan et al. 2015) offers an important framework for understanding how and why individuals perceive outgroups as a source of danger, leading to prejudice, discrimination, and intergroup conflict. The theory posits that negative attitudes arise from perceived threats posed to the in-group—whether or not these threats are objectively real. Defensive responses are triggered in consequence, including increased in-group solidarity, heightened hostility toward outgroups, and support for exclusionary or aggressive policies. ITT distinguishes between two primary types of threats: realistic and symbolic. Realistic threats involve tangible concerns, such as competition over jobs, housing, or other economic resources, as well as threats to physical safety, national security, or public order. In contrast, symbolic threats relate to perceived challenges to the in-group’s values, beliefs, norms, or cultural identity. These include anxieties about moral or cultural incompatibility, perceived threats to religion, language, or national identity, and fears that an outgroup undermines traditional social norms.

While ITT highlights how perceptions of danger fuel intergroup hostility, scapegoating theory offers a complementary psychological perspective. It emphasizes how frustration and aggression—often stemming from deprivation—are turned toward less powerful groups who may have little or no responsibility for the underlying problems at hand. In his classic work *ABC's of Scapegoating*, Allport defines “a phenomenon wherein some of the aggressive energies of a person or group are focused upon another individual, group, or object; the amount of aggression and blame being either partly or wholly warranted” (1943, p. 11). He identifies poverty and a desire for self-enhancement as key drivers of such behavior. During times of war or crisis, when deprivation and frustration are widespread, people often become aggressive. Yet such sentiment is not always directed at the actual sources of hardship; instead, it may be projected toward another group or individual who is only partially responsible, if at all, for the situation in question. As Allport notes, “the scapegoat is made to pay not only for immediate and recent deprivations, in which he may have played some minor part, but also for frustrations of long standing, most of which have little to do with the current situation” (1943, p. 15).

Empirical research lends support for the validity of both ITT and scapegoating theory, while also underscoring the crucial role lived poverty plays in shaping hostile attitudes toward outgroup members. In a cross-national study covering France, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, and the US, Ciftci (2012) found that both perceived realistic and symbolic threats played a significant role in shaping anti-Muslim attitudes. Using representative survey data, Buehler et al. (2023) identify poor and less-educated Moroccans as more likely to perceive immigrants from SSA as a labor-market threat. Similarly, research in South Africa has shown how xenophobic attacks against African migrants—particularly those from Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, and Zimbabwe—are driven by widespread poverty, high unemployment, and perceived competition with locals for jobs, housing, and public services. As a result, migrants are often scapegoated as the source of ongoing socioeconomic hardship (Hlatshwayo 2023; Tarysayi & Manik 2020; Gordon 2015; Choane et al. 2011; Everatt 2011).

Returning to the Moroccan case, I anticipate that lived poverty will increase the likelihood that Moroccans express an unwillingness to have immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors. This expectation stems from the idea that economically disadvantaged individuals may perceive immigrants as direct competitors for scarce resources, such as jobs, housing, and state-provided social services. The discussion so far leads to the following hypothesis:

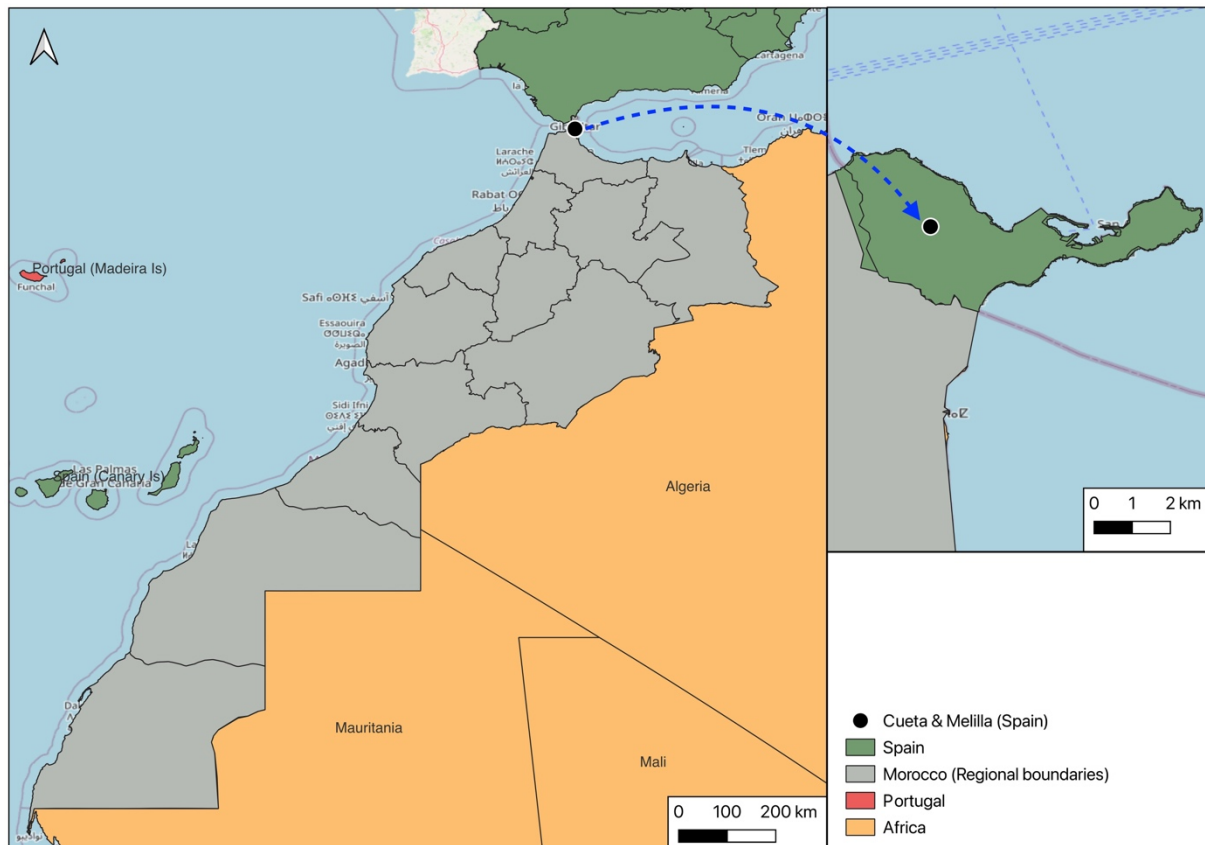
H1: Poverty positively correlates with hostility towards immigrants and foreign workers.

3 Data and Methodology

This study uses, as noted, data from Rounds 7, 8, 9, and 10 of the Afrobarometer survey. Each round tallies 1,200 responses, resulting in a total sample size of 4,800 observations. Respondents were all at least 18 years old, with men and women evenly represented in a 50:50 ratio.

Data were collected from all 12 of Morocco's administrative regions (see Figure 1 below). Because Afrobarometer employs probabilistic sampling methods, the data are nationally representative of the Moroccan population. The following section describes the variables used to estimate the regression models.²

Figure 1. Morocco's Administrative Regions



Notes: Administrative boundaries of Morocco's regions shown, along with neighboring countries and the contiguous Spanish territories of Ceuta and Melilla—Europe's only land borders with Africa.

3.1 Operationalization of the variables

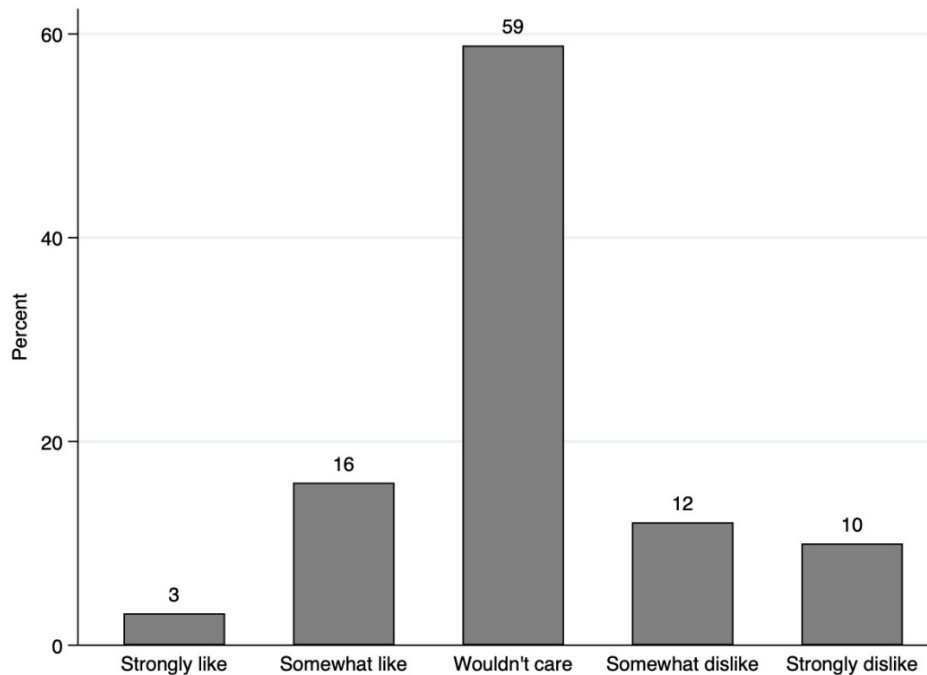
3.1.1 *Dependent variable*

The dependent variable—*Hostility*—was derived from the question: “For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbors, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers?” The responses were measured on a scale with five ordinal categories, ranging from “1 = strongly like” to “5 = strongly dislike.” Although the survey question mentions neither SSA migrants nor refugees from war-torn Middle Eastern countries explicitly, it is possible that respondents interpreted the terms

² For more information on Afrobarometer's sampling strategy, see: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/surveys-and-methods/sampling/>.

“immigrants” and “foreign workers” as referring primarily to individuals forming part of these demographics. This is because those from more affluent Western countries are rarely labeled “immigrants” and are instead often described using more prestigious terms such as “expatriates,” “experts,” or “tourists” (see, for example, Cranston 2017; Kunz 2016).

Figure 2. Hostility toward Immigrants and Foreign Workers in Morocco



Notes: The figure displays Moroccans' willingness to have immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors. The horizontal axis shows the various response categories, while the vertical axis shows the percentage of respondents corresponding to each category. The figure is based on data from Rounds 7, 8, 9, and 10 of the Afrobarometer survey.

Figure 2 above presents a simple bar chart depicting the distribution of the dependent variable. As depicted, a majority of Moroccans express indifference toward having immigrants as neighbors (59 per cent). In contrast, 19 percent indicate seeing such an eventuality favorably, saying they would either “strongly like” or “somewhat like” having immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors. Meanwhile, 22 percent are of the opposing view, stating they would either “somewhat dislike” or “strongly dislike” such neighbors.

For robustness checks, I created a binary version of the dependent variable in which “strongly dislike” and “somewhat dislike” were coded as 1 and the remaining three categories of response as 0. The rationale for so doing is that only those responses coded as 1 explicitly convey unfavorable attitudes toward immigrants, whereas the others reflect either neutral or positive views hereon.

3.1.2 Explanatory variable

- *Lived poverty index.* Following Mattes et al. (2002), this variable measures the frequency with which respondents and members of their households have lacked the following five basic necessities over the past year: (a) food; (b) clean water for home use; (c) medical care; (d) cooking fuel; and (e) cash income. Each item was measured on a five-point ordinal scale ranging from “0 = never” to “4 = always.” I constructed the index by totaling up the ordinal values assigned to the responses received as they relate to all five items, resulting in a scale ranging from 0 to 20—where higher scores indicate greater levels of deprivation. The index revealed strong internal consistency with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.80.

3.1.3 Control variables

- *Economy good.* This variable measures respondents’ assessment of the current state of the Moroccan economy on a scale with five ordinal categories, ranging from “1 = very bad” to “5 = very good.” Research has shown that during periods of economic boom, there is less perceived competition between migrants and host populations, which can ease social tensions (Olier & Spadavecchia 2024).
- *Unemployed.* This variable is coded as 1 if the respondent is unemployed (regardless of whether they are actively seeking work) and 0 if they are employed (whether full-time or part-time). Unemployed individuals may be hostile here because they are of the belief that migrants are direct competitors for limited job opportunities. This resentment can be further fueled by the view that migrants are willing to accept lower wages, which drives down overall pay and worsens labor-market conditions for native individuals (Lee 2024; Hlatshwayo 2023; Harris et al. 2018).
- *Education level.* This variable is measured on an ordinal scale ranging from “0 = no formal schooling” to “9 = postgraduate.” Education can reduce said hostility by exposing individuals to diverse perspectives and accurate information about the phenomenon of migration, thereby challenging misconceptions and stereotypes. Additionally, it fosters critical thinking skills that enable people to question simplistic narratives or raw prejudice. Relatedly, research has found a negative association between education and anti-immigrant hostility (De Coninck et al. 2021; Kim & Kim 2021).
- *Age.* This variable is measured in years. Older individuals may be more hostile toward immigrants because they are more resistant to the social and cultural changes accompanying increased migration flows, such as shifts in language, customs, or demographic composition (De Coninck 2021; Strabac et al. 2013; Strabac & Listhaug 2008; Wilkes et al. 2008).
- *Gender.* This variable is coded as 1 for males and 0 for females. Prior research has found that men tend to hold stronger anti-immigrant attitudes than women (Hövermann & Messner 2019).

- *News index*. This variable assesses how frequently respondents consume news across different media platforms: (a) radio; (b) television; (c) print newspapers; (d) the Internet; and (e) social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp. Each item was measured on a five-point ordinal scale ranging from “0 = never” to “4 = every day.” I constructed the index by totaling up the ordinal values assigned to the responses as they relate to all five items, resulting in a scale ranging from 0 to 20—where higher scores indicate greater news consumption. The index yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.54, suggesting moderate internal reliability. Research has shown that news consumption, especially of media framing outgroup members as a threat, lead to negative attitudes here (Ferwerda et al. 2017).
- *Urban*. This variable is coded as 1 if a respondent resides in an urban center and 0 if they live in a rural area. Research has found that rural residents exhibit greater prejudice than their urban counterparts (Bunn et al. 2008; Chakraborti & Garland 2004).
- *Unsafe*. This is a binary variable coded as 1 if the respondent has felt unsafe while walking in their neighborhood at least once or twice in the past year and 0 otherwise. A sense of insecurity can heighten caution and suspicion, making individuals more receptive to narratives portraying migrants as criminals or a source of violence (Tarisayi & Manik 2020; Eberl et al. 2018; Hellwig & Sinno 2017; Esses et al. 2013).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Total observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Hostility	4757	3.098	0.892	1	5
Hostility (binary)	4757	0.221	0.415	0	1
Lived poverty index	4740	2.713	3.341	0	20
Economy good	4733	3.068	1.105	1	5
Unemployed	4781	0.55	0.498	0	1
Education level	4795	3.965	2.633	0	9
Age	4788	39.098	14.789	18	91
Male (Ref: Female)	4800	0.501	0.5	0	1
News index	4721	11.224	4.227	0	20
Urban (Ref: Rural)	4800	0.665	0.472	0	1
Unsafe	4799	0.315	0.465	0	1

Note: “Ref” indicates the reference category.

Table 1 presents the summary statistics of the variables used to estimate the regression model.

3.2 Analytical technique

To determine the relationship between lived poverty and hostility toward immigrants, I consider a model of the following general form:

$$\gamma_{ijt} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Lived poverty index}_i + \alpha_2 \varphi'_i + \Pi_j + \tau_t + \mu_i \quad (1)$$

In this equation, γ_{ijt} is the dependent variable which measures the willingness of Respondent i who lives in Region j at Year t to have immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors. φ' is a vector of control variables; α_0 is the intercept; α_1 and α_2 denote the coefficient of the explanatory and control variables, respectively; Γ_j denotes fixed effects for respondents' region of residence, capturing time-invariant characteristics that may influence attitudes toward immigrants. These regional factors include physical geography, distance from the capital, and proximity to the Mediterranean Sea. τ_t denotes year fixed effects, which capture time-specific shocks that affect all observations (e.g. changes in government migration policy) but vary across years. μ_i denotes the error term.

Because the dependent variable is measured on an ordinal scale with few categories, I estimated the model using an ordered logit regression (OLR). An advantage of this approach is that it allows me to determine the association between the explanatory variable and each category of the dependent variable. To assess the robustness of the findings, I conducted additional analyses using a binary version of the dependent variable to re-estimate the regression with a linear probability model (LPM). In all models, the standard errors were clustered at the regional level to account for potential intraregional correlation.

4 Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the results from OLR models examining the relationship between lived poverty and hostility toward immigrants. I begin with a baseline model that includes only the lived poverty index. The coefficient for this variable is positive and statistically significant at the 1 percent level. This finding, which supports H1, indicates that poorer Moroccans are more likely to oppose having immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors. A plausible explanation for this association is that economically disadvantaged individuals may view immigrants as competitors for limited resources such as employment, housing, and public services. Even when such competition is minimal or overstated, a perceived threat regardless can drive negative attitudes. Moreover, those experiencing material hardship may turn their frustration toward vulnerable outgroups such as immigrants rather than toward political or economic elites, particularly in environments where political discourse scapegoats minorities. This finding aligns with previous research (e.g. Buehler et al. 2023; Buehler & Han 2021; De Coninck et al. 2021).

In Table 2's model 2, the inclusion of control variables does not alter the main results. Among the controls, only education and news consumption are statistically significant. The negative coefficient for education suggests that higher levels thereof are associated with reduced hostility toward immigrants. This finding aligns with the widely documented liberalizing effect of education, which fosters tolerance by exposing individuals to diverse perspec-

tives, cultures, and social groups (e.g. Kim & Kim 2021; Hoevermann & Messner 2019; Rustenbach 2010). The negative coefficient associated with the news index indicates that the more Moroccans consume related media, the less hostile they are toward immigrants and foreign workers. This might be because regular news consumers are more likely to encounter factual, nuanced, and humanizing content, including statistics, policy analyses, and personal stories challenging prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions. For instance, news reports featuring interviews or human-interest narratives can foster empathy by presenting migrants as individuals with relatable experiences and struggles. Moreover, increased exposure to news may deepen public understanding of the structural drivers of migration, including poverty, conflict, and political instability.

In Table 2's model 3, which incorporates fixed effects for survey year and region of residence, the Akaike Information Criterion statistic drops to 10,629. This statistic, which is lower than those in the preceding models, indicates that model 3 has the best fit. Although the main results remain largely unchanged, the statistical significance of the news index decreases to the 10 percent level, suggesting a somewhat weaker association with hostility. Age emerges as a statistically significant predictor for the first time, with a positive coefficient suggesting that older individuals are more likely to express animosity toward immigrants. Similar patterns have been observed in Canada (Wilkes et al. 2008) as well as in Turkey and Western Europe (Coninck et al. 2021). Model 4 shows that the main results are robust to using a binary measure of hostility and to the use of the LPM as an alternative estimation method.

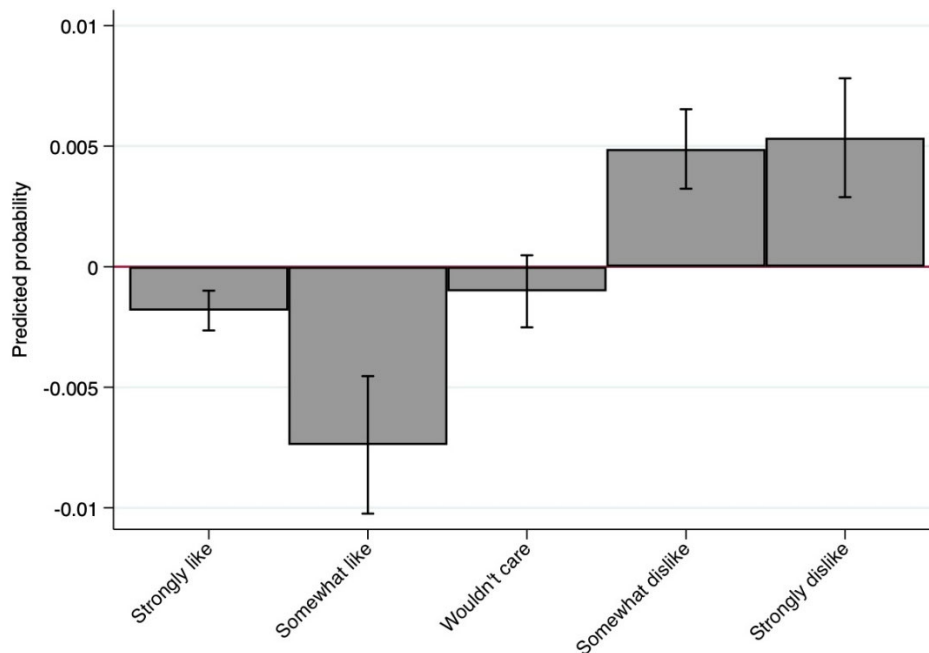
To aid interpretation of the OLR results reported in Table 2, I plotted the predicted probabilities from the baseline model (model 1) in Figure 3 below. The association depicted therein between lived poverty and hostility toward immigrants is statistically significant in all categories of the dependent variable, except the neutral response—"wouldn't care." Moreover, the association is positive in the hostile responses (i.e., "somewhat dislike" and "strongly dislike"). Specifically, a 1-unit increase in the lived poverty index increases the probability of an individual choosing the "strongly dislike" response by 0.53 percentage points and increases the probability of choosing the "somewhat dislike" response by 0.49 percentage points. In contrast, the association is negative as regards the warm responses (i.e. "strongly like" and "somewhat like"). Specifically, a 1-unit increase in the lived poverty index reduces the probability of an individual choosing the "strongly like" response by 0.18 percentage points and reduces the probability of choosing the "somewhat like" response by 0.74 percentage points. These patterns reinforce support for H1's validity.

Table 2. Ordered Logit Models Regressing Lived Poverty and Hostility toward Immigrants and Foreign Workers in Morocco

Hostility ^Φ	(1) Ologit	(2) Ologit	(3) Ologit	(4) LPM
Poverty index	0.06*** (0.011)	0.034*** (0.011)	0.033*** (0.01)	0.01*** (0.002)
Economy good		-0.052 (0.065)	-0.035 (0.07)	0.001 (0.01)
Unemployed		0.011 (0.075)	-0.026 (0.088)	0.003 (0.02)
Education level		-0.073*** (0.011)	-0.078*** (0.012)	-0.014*** (0.002)
Age		0.002 (0.001)	0.003* (0.001)	0.00 (0.00)
Male (Ref: Female)		0.107 (0.075)	0.085 (0.076)	0.022* (0.01)
News index		-0.029*** (0.01)	-0.02* (0.011)	-0.006*** (0.002)
Urban (Ref: Rural)		0.075 (0.079)	0.01 (0.076)	-0.004 (0.017)
Unsafe		0.032 (0.081)	0.088 (0.072)	0.001 (0.015)
Constant				0.351*** (0.046)
Intercept 1	-3.289*** (0.095)	-3.977*** (0.284)	-4.283*** (0.264)	
Intercept 2	-1.3*** (0.081)	-1.976*** (0.274)	-2.268*** (0.249)	
Intercept 3	1.442*** (0.098)	0.82*** (0.283)	0.577** (0.28)	
Intercept 4	2.387*** (0.14)	1.773*** (0.303)	1.544*** (0.3)	
Region FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Year FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	4701	4553	4553	4553
Pseudo R ² or R ²	0.004	0.012	0.022	0.05
Log pseudolikelihood	-5593.674	-5358.61	-5302.576	
AIC statistic	11197.35	10741.22	10629.15	4632.711
BIC statistic	11229.63	10818.3	10706.23	4709.793

Notes: Φ indicates the dependent variable; “Ref” indicates the reference category; “FE” denotes fixed effects. Clustered robust standard errors are in parentheses. *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.10. Models 1, 2, and 3 are estimated using ordered logit (Ologit) regression, while model 4 is estimated using a linear probability model (LPM). The dependent variable in models 1 to 3 is measured on a five-point ordinal scale ranging from “1 = strongly like” to “5 = strongly dislike.” In model 6, the dependent variable is binary. AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion. The regression models are based on data from Rounds 7, 8, 9, and 10 of the Afrobarometer survey, conducted in Morocco between 2018 and 2024.

Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities Showing the Association between Lived Poverty and Hostility toward Immigrants and Foreign Workers



Notes: The figure, based on model 1 in Table 2, illustrates the association between the lived poverty index and each category of the dependent variable. The horizontal axis represents the different levels of hostility, while the vertical axis shows the predicted probabilities. Confidence intervals are set at the 95% level. Data drawn from Rounds 7, 8, 9, and 10 of the Afrobarometer survey.

5 Conclusion

Using Afrobarometer data, this study examined how lived poverty relates to Moroccans' willingness to have immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors. Descriptive results reveal that most Moroccans (78 percent) are either indifferent to or express a willingness to entertain this possibility, while approximately one-in-five Moroccans (22 percent) saw living near such individuals as undesirable. Regression results indicate that higher levels of poverty are associated with a greater likelihood of hostility toward immigrants, possibly because economically disadvantaged individuals may view the latter as competitors for limited resources such as housing, employment, and social services.

These results suggest that reducing economic vulnerability is not merely a key concern in its own right but also vital for combating prejudice and fostering social cohesion at large. Governments should prioritize alleviating citizens' sources of economic insecurity through social-protection measures, employment programs, and housing support, as these interventions can also help reduce anti-immigrant sentiment. When individuals feel more economically secure, they are less likely to view migrants as competitors for essential goods and services, thereby reducing zero-sum thinking.

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