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Border proximity and attitudes toward free movement in Africa

by Beth Elise Whitaker | June 2023

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Abstract

How does proximity to an international border influence attitudes toward the free movement of people in Africa? Often conceptualised as barriers, borders also represent opportunities for people to get higher prices for goods, pursue better services, or seek refuge from persecution. Border area residents are better able to take advantage of such opportunities but are also more likely to be affected by security threats and other risks. Analysing georeferenced Afrobarometer survey data from 44,807 respondents in 32 countries, I find that respondents who live in closer proximity to an international land border are more likely to support free movement than those living farther away. These findings hold even when accounting for interacting with people from neighbouring countries, having co-ethnics across the border, and living near a refugee camp, suggesting that the opportunities associated with border proximity tend to outweigh any risks. As African governments move toward visa-free movement throughout the continent, public support for such policies may vary significantly depending upon geographic location.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Despite predictions that globalisation would lead to a "borderless world" (Ohmae, 1990), borders remain an important organising structure for political and economic relations (Gravelle, 2018; Simmons & Kenwick, 2022). From the Americas to Europe to Africa, governments have securitised entry points, constructed walls, and strengthened policies to regulate the movement of people and goods across international borders. The COVID-19 pandemic has served to accelerate border-hardening trends that were already underway in many countries (Kenwick & Simmons, 2020). Borders also provide the basis for determining citizenship and the allocation of rights associated with membership in a designated political community. Far from being imaginary lines on a map, borders have clear meaning on the ground.

Borders are often conceptualised as barriers. They represent a line that cannot be crossed (legally) without documentation from the state exercising sovereignty over that territory. But borders also represent opportunities by delineating the end of the authority of one state and the beginning of the authority of another. Upon crossing that line, people are subject to different economic and political regimes than the ones they left. By exploiting these differences, farmers pursue higher prices for their crops, families get access to better health care, consumers pay lower taxes on purchases, currency traders negotiate marginal profits, and victims of persecution seek refuge. Particularly where governments adopt predatory economic policies, border areas often become thriving centers of trade, smuggling, and other transactions that allow people (and state officials) to survive despite the weaknesses of the formal economy (MacGaffey, 1991).

Yet the opportunities created by borders can also generate risks. When relations between neighbouring states deteriorate, for example, border areas are especially vulnerable to attack. Territorial disputes are a common cause of interstate conflict as rivals fight to redraw the border itself. Civil wars can generate security threats in border areas. Rebel groups often launch attacks from neighbouring countries or seek sanctuary therein (Buhaug & Gates, 2002; Salehyan, 2007). Large influxes of refugees may increase the likelihood of conflict involving the host country (Salehyan, 2008; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006), if only under certain conditions (Lischer, 2003; Onoma, 2013; Whitaker, 2003), though recent subnational analyses find less risk of violence in refugee-hosting areas (Fisk, 2014; Zhou & Shaver, 2021). Even without conflict, higher levels of migration in border areas can generate resentment and increase the sense of competition among different groups (Adida, 2011, 2014), creating a context in which non-citizens are often blamed for broader socioeconomic problems (Whitaker & Giersch, 2015).

People in border areas are better positioned to take advantage of opportunities created by the border, but they also are more exposed to any risks. This dynamic is likely to affect attitudes toward free movement, migration, and border security. This paper examines how proximity to an international border influences attitudes toward the free movement of people in Africa. Drawing on past research, I theorise that people living closer to international borders are more likely to support free movement than people farther away who are less able to take advantage of the opportunities. In contexts with heightened border-related risks, however, support for free movement may be tempered. The paper thus contributes to a growing body of literature exploring how public opinion is shaped by geographic place and space (Branton, Dillingham, Dunaway, & Miller, 2007; Cortina, 2020; Gravelle, 2014b, 2016, 2018; Kuhn, 2012; Mirwaldt, 2010).[1]

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[1] As explained by Gravelle (2018, p. 109), "Space here refers to location or area on the surface of the Earth, often rendered using coordinates. On the other hand, place refers [to] unique locales (or potentially regions) imbued with distinctive characteristics." In this paper, I suggest that proximity to international borders, a dimension of space, leads to distinctive opportunities in border areas, resulting in some commonality of place.

The focus on Africa is important for several reasons. First, the region often is overlooked in existing literature on attitudes toward migration. Despite a growing body of quantitative work on immigration attitudes in Africa (Cogley, Doces, & Whitaker, 2018; Fauvelle-Aymar & Segatti, 2011; Gordon, 2015, 2017; Gordon & Maharaj, 2015; Harris, Findley, Nielson, & Noyes, 2017; Whitaker & Giersch, 2015; Zhou, 2018), broader research on the topic focuses heavily on Europe and North America, where survey data are more readily available. The addition of migration-related questions to recent rounds of the Afrobarometer survey, conducted in countries throughout the continent, provides an opportunity to insert Africa more clearly into the conversation.

Second, borders in Africa are relatively recent impositions. European leaders at the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885 drew borders in Africa based largely on geographic features and geometric lines, dissecting some 177 cultural areas (Asiwaju, 1985). Despite promises to erase the resulting colonial borders, leaders of newly independent African countries pledged to stick with that map (Organisation of African Unity, 1964), thereby protecting their own turf and avoiding conflicts with neighbours (Herbst, 1989). With few changes, colonially imposed borders continue to serve as the organising structure for relations on the continent. Even among ethnic groups that were arbitrarily divided, borders came to have meaning through their creation of systems of inclusion and exclusion regarding the rights of citizenship (Weitzberg, 2017).

Third, and related to the previous point, African borders are comparatively porous. With the exception of South Africa, African countries have some of the most permissive border crossings in the world (Simmons & Kenwick, 2022). Some of this is due to limited state capacity to control external borders, particularly in countries facing internal threats. Regardless of the reasons, many borders in Africa are comparatively easy to cross, thus amplifying both the opportunities created by the border and the risks associated with it. For all these reasons, Africa provides a fascinating context in which to examine how proximity to international borders influences attitudes toward free movement across them.

African migration has received significant media attention in recent years, though much has been focused on the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to Europe. Overlooked in such coverage is the fact that approximately two-thirds of African migrants go to other countries within the region (Gonzalez-Garcia et al., 2016; Sanny, Rocca, & Schultes, 2020). Despite a long history of regional migration, xenophobia has been on the rise in many countries (Crush & Pendleton, 2004; Geschiere, 2009; Landau, 2011; Mitchell, 2012; Neocosmos, 2010; Nyamnjoh, 2006), and governments have sought to restrict cross-border movement (Whitaker, 2017), at times even constructing walls (Starkey & Carlstrom, 2016). Regardless of these trends, in early 2018, the African Union adopted a protocol promoting the free movement of people within Africa and the elimination of all visa requirements for fellow Africans within five years. Given the apparent contradiction between individual states' policies and continent-wide goals, it is especially important to consider the attitudes of African citizens themselves toward borders and migration.

In this paper, I examine whether proximity to an international border in Africa influences support for the free movement of people across borders. Drawing on existing literature, the next section develops a series of hypotheses regarding attitudes toward free movement. In the research design, I provide details about the Afrobarometer Round 6 survey, which gathered data from nearly 54,000 respondents in 36 African countries and georeferenced their locations. Analysing these data in the next section, I find that respondents living closer to an international border are significantly more likely to support free movement than those living farther away. These findings hold even when accounting for respondents' interactions with immigrants, co-ethnicity with people across the border, and proximity to refugee camps, suggesting that the perceived opportunities created by living near the border generally outweigh any perceived risks. The paper concludes with a discussion of limitations and avenues for future research.

Border proximity and public opinion

There has been growing scholarly attention to the question of how border proximity influences public opinion. One line of research focuses on attitudes toward regional integration. Building on findings that people in border regions are less likely to be Eurosceptic (Díez-Medrano, 2003; Gabel, 1998), Kuhn (2012) shows that border residents in Germany are more likely to support European integration than residents of non-border districts. Interestingly, Europeans who live farther away from Brussels are less likely to support European Union membership (Berezin & Díez-Medrano, 2008). Survey data from Canada and the United States show that border proximity influences attitudes toward the other country (Gravelle, 2014a) and North American integration (Gravelle, 2014b), though only when interacted with the respondent's partisan affiliation. Border area differences often are attributed to residents' involvement in transnational networks (Kuhn, 2012) and contact with people from neighbouring countries (Mirwaldt, 2010).

A second line of research explores how border proximity influences migration attitudes. Border state residents are more likely to identify immigration as the most important problem (Dunaway, Branton, & Abrajano, 2010), perhaps due to more negative media coverage (Branton & Dunaway, 2009). In California, Democrats closer to the U.S.-Mexico border supported anti-immigrant ballot initiatives more than those farther away, while most Republicans supported the initiatives regardless of location (Branton et al., 2007). In contrast, Gravelle (2016) finds that Democrats closer to the U.S.-Mexico border are more likely than Democrats farther away to support undocumented immigrants staying in the United States, while Republicans close to the border are less likely than those farther away to support them staying. This suggests that border proximity amplifies partisan differences on immigration.

Two recent articles examine how distance from the U.S.-Mexico border affects support for a border wall, though the authors reach different conclusions. Using data from seven surveys between 2006 and 2016, Gravelle (2018) shows that proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border increases support for the construction of a wall among both Republicans and Democrats. He attributes this to the heightened perception of threat due to the securitisation of border areas. In contrast, using survey data from 2017, Cortina (2020) finds that Republicans who "experience the 'here and now' of the border through direct contact" are less likely to support building a wall than Republicans farther away who rely on national partisan discourse to form their opinions.

Although focused on Europe and North America, these studies point to mechanisms that may influence border area public opinion elsewhere, including cross-border contacts, media coverage, security threats, and national political discourse. The limited research about geographic influences on migration attitudes in Africa has focused on proximity to refugees. Earlier research found that Tanzanians in refugee-hosting areas recognised both positive and negative effects of refugees' presence, whereas people in the main city held almost universally negative opinions, partly due to critical media coverage (Whitaker, 2006).[2] More recently, using Afrobarometer data from 22 countries, Zhou (2018) finds that citizens living closer to refugee communities are less likely to support birthright citizenship than those farther away.

Drawing on past research, I posit that people who live closer to international borders in Africa are more likely to support free movement. Residents of border areas tend to have more contact with people from neighbouring countries and engage more often in cross-border trade, potentially building familiarity and reducing negative attitudes (Allport, 1954; Cortina, 2019; Mirwaldt, 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). With more than 40% of Africans belonging to

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[2] Media coverage in Southern Africa is largely anti-immigrant in tone and fails to critically analyse immigration-related claims by political elites (Danso & McDonald, 2001; McDonald & Jacobs, 2005). To the extent that this pattern holds elsewhere, negative media coverage may contribute to anti-immigrant hostility, especially in capital cities where most African media outlets are based.

ethnic groups that were partitioned by colonial borders (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2016), the presence of co-ethnics across the border also may increase support for free movement.[3] The disproportionate number of conflicts and refugees in the region may heighten perceptions of threat in some border areas, but may also fuel sympathy in host communities. A nearby border may even be viewed as a possible escape route in the event of political instability at home.

Even as I expect border proximity to increase support for free movement in Africa, therefore, attitudes may vary depending upon the specific combination of opportunities and risks in different contexts. This line of reasoning leads to the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 1 (H1): People who live closer to an international border are more likely to support free movement across borders than people farther away.*
>
> *Hypothesis 2 (H2): People who interact frequently with immigrants and foreigners are more likely to support free movement across borders than those who do not.*
>
> *Hypothesis 3 (H3): People who identify as members of a partitioned ethnic group are more likely to support free movement across borders than those from other ethnic groups.*
>
> *Hypothesis 4 (H4): People who live close to a refugee camp are less likely to support free movement across borders than those who do not live near a refugee camp.*

Research design

To investigate the relationship between border proximity and attitudes, I use geocoded data from the Afrobarometer Round 6 (2014/2015) survey conducted in 36 countries. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 2,400 or 1,200, yielding roughly 54,000 respondents across the continent.[4] The questionnaire included the following question (Q76):

> *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
>
> *Statement 1: People living in [West/South/East/North/Central] Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries.*
>
> *Statement 2: Because foreign migrants take away jobs, and foreign traders sell their goods at very cheap prices, governments should protect their own citizens and limit the cross-border movement of people and goods.*

I convert the responses into a dichotomous variable, *Support for free movement*, that takes a value of 1 when the respondent expressed agreement with Statement 1 and 0 when they agreed with Statement 2 or neither.[5] Those who did not know or were not asked this question are dropped from the analysis. Support for free movement varies widely across the 36 surveyed countries (see Figure 1). Notably, 60% of respondents across all countries expressed support for free movement. This seems especially high given the wording of Statement 2,
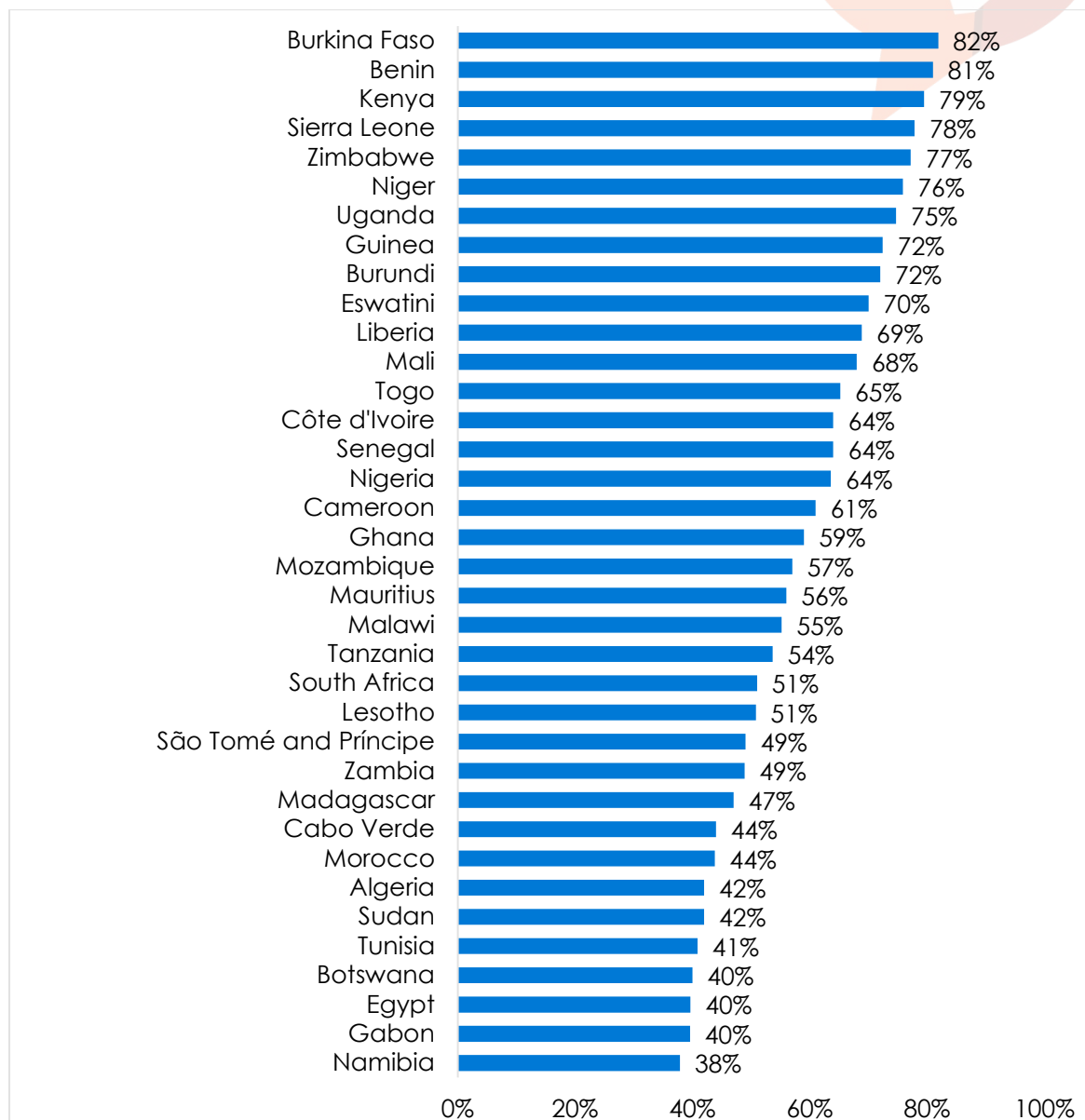
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[3] Shared ethnicity does not always generate more positive attitudes toward immigrants, however. Survey data from West Africa show that cultural proximity between immigrants and hosts actually exacerbates relations, as leaders of both communities highlight immigrant-host differences to protect their own areas of authority (Adida, 2011, 2014).

[4] Data collection was not possible in highly authoritarian and/or conflict-affected countries, so results may not reflect public opinion in such contexts. See www.afrobarometer.org for extensive information about surveys and methods.

[5] The decision to dichotomise the dependent variable reflects the focus here on whether people support free movement or not (as compared to their level of support). In addition, given how the question is worded, it is not clear that an ordinal scale would accurately capture the responses of people who agree with neither statement.

which provides specific reasons to oppose free movement. Because island countries do not share international borders with other countries, respondents in Cabo Verde, Madagascar, Mauritius, and São Tomé and Príncipe are excluded from the analysis.

Figure 1: Support for free movement across borders in Africa | 36 African countries | 2014/2015

Country	%
Burkina Faso	82%
Benin	81%
Kenya	79%
Sierra Leone	78%
Zimbabwe	77%
Niger	76%
Uganda	75%
Guinea	72%
Burundi	72%
Eswatini	70%
Liberia	69%
Mali	68%
Togo	65%
Côte d'Ivoire	64%
Senegal	64%
Nigeria	64%
Cameroon	61%
Ghana	59%
Mozambique	57%
Mauritius	56%
Malawi	55%
Tanzania	54%
South Africa	51%
Lesotho	51%
São Tomé and Príncipe	49%
Zambia	49%
Madagascar	47%
Cabo Verde	44%
Morocco	44%
Algeria	42%
Sudan	42%
Tunisia	41%
Botswana	40%
Egypt	40%
Gabon	40%
Namibia	38%

Percent of respondents who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with this statement: "People living in [West/South/East/North/Central] Africa should be able to move freely across international borders in order to trade or work in other countries."
*Source: Afrobarometer Round 6*

In recent years, Afrobarometer has partnered with AidData at the College of William and Mary to geocode data from Rounds 1-7 of the Afrobarometer survey.[6] The geocoding

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[6] In rounds 8 and 9, data captured electronically include geocodes. Because of concerns about respondent privacy, researchers must write a short proposal and apply for access to the geocoded data. More information can be found at http://afrobarometer.org/data/geocoded-data.

provides coordinates for the location at which each respondent was interviewed (see Figure 2). Using ArcGIS Pro to link this information with shapefiles mapping the locations of international borders in Africa, I calculated the distance in meters from each respondent's location to the nearest international border.[7] As with other studies on border proximity (Cortina, 2019; Gravelle, 2014b, 2016, 2018), I use the log of *Distance from border* for statistical analyses. In addition to this continuous variable, I created a dichotomous variable to enable comparisons between border areas and non-border areas. *Border area* takes the value of 1 if the respondent was located within 100 kilometres of an international land border and 0 otherwise.[8] More than half of the respondents in the sample (54%) were located within 100 kilometres of the nearest border.

Figure 2: Map of Afrobarometer survey respondents

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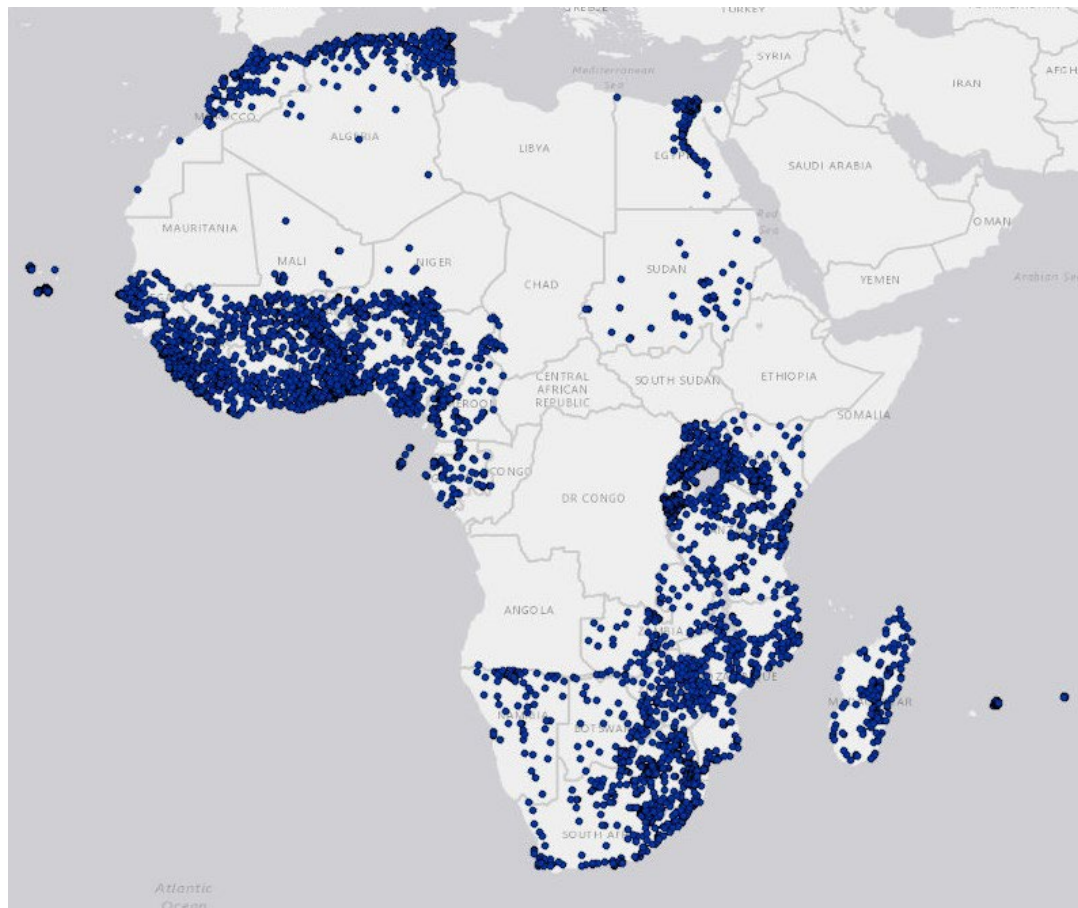
[7] The "near" tool in ArcGIS Pro calculates the distance to the closest international border "as the crow flies" and not by taking available roads from the respondent's location to an official border crossing point. Given the tendency of people in many African border areas to travel by foot and bike, and the porous nature of most borders in the region, this is a more reasonable method by which to calculate border proximity than one based on expected road and border infrastructures in Western contexts. Even so, the potential influence of variation in border infrastructure on the perceived proximity of the border and thus on attitudes toward movement warrants additional research.

[8] Although 100 kilometres is an arbitrary distance, people within that range of a border should be able to both take advantage of any positive benefits and experience any negative consequences associated with free movement. Even so, the results presented here hold when using alternative specifications, including 50 kilometres and 150 kilometres.

While investigating the influence of border proximity on support for free movement, I also seek to understand related factors that may affect the strength and direction of this relationship. One mechanism that could link border proximity to migration attitudes is the frequency of interactions with people from neighbouring countries. Unfortunately, the Afrobarometer Round 6 survey did not include a specific question about respondents' interactions with foreigners. As a rough proxy, I rely instead on a question (Q89E) about attitudes toward having different groups of people as neighbours:

> *For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: Immigrants or foreign workers.*

Responses ranged from "strongly dislike" (1) to "strongly like" (5), with the middle value (3) indicating "would not care." I create a dichotomous version of the variable, *Like immigrant neighbours*, which takes a value of 1 when the respondent said they would like or strongly like having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours and 0 otherwise. While liking immigrant neighbours is quite different from having actual contact with immigrants, it seems plausible that individuals might have had some contact to select this response. For unexplained reasons, the Afrobarometer survey only asked this question in 29 of the 32 non-island countries,[9] resulting in a reduced number of observations in models using this variable.

I also consider the possibility that border area residents share cultural ties with people in neighbouring countries, making them more receptive to free movement. Starting with a list of 230 ethnic groups that were partitioned by colonial borders in Africa (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2016), I use responses to an Afrobarometer question about ethnicity (Q87) to generate a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent identifies as a member of a *Partitioned ethnic group* (1) or not (0). Due to non-responses and the question not having been asked in four countries (Burundi, Egypt, Sudan, and Tunisia), the inclusion of this variable reduces the number of observations to respondents in 28 countries.

To better understand how potential security risks affect attitudes, I examine the impact of proximity to a refugee camp on support for free movement. As a result of ongoing conflicts, Africa is home to a disproportionate number of the world's refugees. This could both amplify security concerns and generate sympathy among host populations. Geocoded data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2021) indicate that there were 54 refugee camps/settlements in 15 of the 32 sample countries when the Afrobarometer survey was conducted in 2014/2015. I use ArcGIS Pro to calculate the distance of each respondent in those countries to the nearest refugee camp. I then generate a dichotomous variable, *Refugee camp area*, indicating whether the respondent was located within 100 kilometres of a refugee camp (1) or not (0); all respondents in countries that were not hosting refugee camps were coded as 0.

While testing these independent variables, I control for several individual- and country-level factors that may shape public opinion regarding free movement across borders. People who work as traders may be more likely to support free movement, especially given the focus in Statement 1 on trading in other countries. The Afrobarometer survey asked respondents for their main occupation (Q96A) and provided broad categories from which to choose. *Trader* is coded as 1 if the person responded that they were a "trader/hawker/vendor" and 0 if their main occupation was in any of the other categories (agriculture, fishing, retail, etc.). Respondents who receive remittances from people in other countries benefit directly from migration and thus may be more likely to support free movement. Drawn from Afrobarometer question Q9, *Remittances* takes a value of 1 when the respondent reported

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[9] According to the Round 6 Afrobarometer codebook, this question was not asked in Algeria, Egypt, or Sudan.

receiving remittances from friends and relatives outside the country with any level of frequency and 0 if they never did.

Past research has found that opposition to immigration is higher among people with lower socioeconomic status (Burns & Gimpel, 2000; Pettigrew, Wagner, & Christ, 2007; Whitaker & Giersch, 2015), less education (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007; Richey, 2010; Scheve & Slaughter, 2001), older people (Chandler & Tsai, 2001; O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006; Richey, 2010), and, in some cases, women (Mayda, 2006; O'Rourke & Sinnott, 2006).[10] The Afrobarometer survey does not include a direct measure of income, in part because it would be difficult to standardise across countries. Instead, I use its measure (Q5) of *Relative living conditions*, which ranges from 1, indicating that the respondent viewed his/her living conditions as "much worse" than those of others in their country, to 5, indicating "much better" relative conditions.[11] *Secondary degree* takes a value of 1 if the respondent completed a secondary degree or higher (Q97) and 0 if not. *Age* (Q1) and *Female* (Q101)[12] also are drawn from the Afrobarometer survey.

Given the wide variation across countries in support for free movement (Table 1), I also control for country-level variables that may influence public opinion. A past study using cross-national survey data from Africa found higher opposition to immigration in more democratic countries and in wealthier countries (Whitaker & Giersch, 2015). *Level of democracy* standardises and averages democracy scores from Freedom House (2018) and the Polity IV project (Marshall, Jaggers, & Gurr, 2018). It ranges from 0 (least democratic) to 10 (most democratic). *GDP per capita* in constant 2010 dollars and *Population* are obtained from the World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2017); I use the log of each. For these three variables, I use the value for the year in which the Round 6 Afrobarometer survey was conducted in each country (2014 or 2015). *International migrant stock* indicates the percent of the country's population that was born in another country.[13] It is compiled every five years by the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (United Nations, 2017). I use the 2015 value of this variable for all countries.[14]

Country-level variables were obtained from the Quality of Government Standard Dataset (Teorell et al., 2019) and merged with Afrobarometer data after standardising country codes. Finally, I include a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent's country was a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at the time of the

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[10] Several cross-regional studies have found that women are more likely to oppose immigration, while studies using data from just the United States and Europe have found the opposite (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2008; Fetzer, 2000).

[11] Studies find that immigration attitudes are influenced less by actual economic circumstances than by individuals' perceptions of those circumstances (Chandler & Tsai, 2001; Sides & Citrin, 2007), suggesting that respondents' evaluations of their own relative living conditions are a better way to assess the influence of socioeconomic status on attitudes. Nevertheless, as a robustness check, I also ran the models with two measures of *Lived poverty* (Mattes, 2020): Q8A on how often respondents or their family members have gone without enough food and Q8E on how often they have gone without a cash income. The results were unchanged with the exception that *Relative living conditions* was positive and significant in one model (Model 3) while the *Lived poverty* variables were not significant in any models. The sign and significance of all other variables remained the same.

[12] The Afrobarometer question about the respondent's gender was answered by the interviewer and was not self-reported by the respondent. Male and female were the only response options.

[13] It would be ideal to control instead for the percent of foreign-born individuals living in the region or district where each respondent resides, but such local-level data are not available consistently across all 32 countries under examination here, nor does Afrobarometer include a question that could be used as a proxy.

[14] For countries in which the Round 6 Afrobarometer survey was conducted in 2014, the 2015 measure of international migrant stock is probably more reflective of migrant levels that year than the earlier 2010 measure.

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survey. In 1979, ECOWAS adopted a Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment giving citizens of member states the right to move freely within the community. Although implementation has been slow and uneven, the attitudes of respondents in ECOWAS countries may be influenced by years of discussions regarding progress toward that goal. Descriptive statistics for the dependent, independent, and control variables can be found in Table 1. Complete data are available for 44,807 respondents in 32 countries.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Observations	Mean	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum
Support for free movement	44,807	0.609	0.488	0	1
Distance from border (km)	44,807	117.507	107.856	.049	641.682
Border area (100 km)	44,807	0.539	0.498	0	1
Like immigrant neighbours	41,499	0.459	0.498	0	1
Partitioned ethnic group	37,289	0.315	0.464	0	1
Refugee camp area (100 km)	44,807	0.089	0.285	0	1
Trader	44,807	0.092	0.289	0	1
Remittances	44,807	0.198	0.399	0	1
Relative living conditions	44,807	2.896	1.044	1	5
Secondary degree	44,807	0.326	0.469	0	1
Age	44,807	37.016	14.344	18	103
Female	44,807	0.494	0.500	0	1
Level of democracy	32	6.058	2.088	1.083	9.083
GDP per capita	32	2192.163	2393.146	243.102	9598.441
Population	32	3.18E+07	3.78E+07	1319011	1.81E+08
International migrant stock	32	2.563	2.888	0.257	15.556
ECOWAS	32	0.346	0.476	0	1

Analysis and discussion

To assess the influence of border proximity and related factors on support for free movement, I conduct a series of multilevel mixed effect logistic regressions using *Support for free movement* as the dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 2. Individual-level variables are centered so that calculations are based on holding other variables at their means. Logistic regression models with country fixed effects yield similar results for the individual-level variables and are available in Table A.1 in the Appendix.

Model 1 provides a baseline using the continuous independent variable, *Distance from border*, and individual- and country-level controls. As a respondent's distance from the closest international land border increases, their likelihood of supporting free movement decreases. In other words, respondents living closer to the border were significantly more likely to support free movement than those farther away. Among the individual-level controls, people who worked as traders were significantly more likely to support free movement, and women were less likely to do so. For the country-level variables in Model 1, only GDP per capita and ECOWAS membership are significant. In line with previous studies showing more opposition to immigration in wealthier African countries (Whitaker & Giersch, 2015), Afrobarometer respondents in countries with higher per capita incomes were less likely to support free movement than those in countries with lower per capita incomes. Respondents in ECOWAS member countries were more likely to support free movement, perhaps due to

the fact that their governments have permitted some level of mobility within the community for decades.

Table 2: Support for free movement

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Individual-level variables					
Distance from border (log)	-0.031***	-0.024**	-0.024**	-0.032***	-0.024**
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)
Like immigrant neighbours		0.094***			0.098***
		(0.009)			(0.009)
Partitioned ethnic group			-0.110***		-0.103***
			(0.027)		(0.028)
Refugee camp area (100 km)				-0.060	-0.048
				(0.043)	(0.047)
Trader	0.097***	0.102***	0.084**	0.096***	0.082**
	(0.036)	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.036)	(0.039)
Remittances	0.029	0.017	0.036	0.028	0.030
	(0.026)	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.026)	(0.030)
Relative living conditions	0.013	0.016	0.019*	0.013	0.014
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.011)
Secondary degree	-0.010	-0.007	-0.002	-0.010	-0.015
	(0.024)	(0.025)	(0.026)	(0.024)	(0.027)
Age	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	-0.049**	-0.043**	-0.028	-0.049**	-0.024
	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.020)	(0.023)
Country-level variables					
ECOWAS	0.347**	0.318*	0.284*	0.339*	0.253
	(0.175)	(0.169)	(0.167)	(0.174)	(0.169)
Level of democracy	-0.009	-0.049	0.009	-0.009	0.001
	(0.034)	(0.037)	(0.039)	(0.034)	(0.040)
GDP per capita (log)	-0.382***	-0.311***	-0.425***	-0.389***	-0.382***
	(0.089)	(0.092)	(0.096)	(0.089)	(0.105)
Population (log)	0.016	0.059	0.110	0.017	0.122*
	(0.068)	(0.068)	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.069)
Intl. migrant stock (% of pop.)	0.021	0.008	0.035	0.022	0.028
	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.029)
Constant	2.794**	1.910	1.437	2.844**	1.023
	(1.303)	(1.324)	(1.313)	(1.297)	(1.347)
Observations	44,807	41,499	37,289	44,807	36,423
Number of groups	32	29	28	32	27
Log likelihood	-28306	-26019	-23392	-28305	-22774
Chi^2	68.94	170.5	81.88	71.35	179.6

*Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10*

Figure 3 plots the predicted probability of supporting free movement depending on a respondent's distance from the border while controlling for other individual-level variables (see Model 9, Table A.1 in the Appendix). Because the independent variable is log

transformed, the odds ratio is calculated by considering a relative change in the predictor (x) and is equivalent to x^β (see Cortina, 2020). Thus, a 20-fold increase in a respondent's distance from the border decreases the odds of supporting free movement by 1.127 ($20^{0.040}$), or nearly 13%. Interestingly, Figure 3 shows a sharp decline in support for free movement from right by the border to about 50 kilometres away, after which further distance has less impact. This suggests that the potential benefits of cross-border movement are relatively concentrated in border areas. Together, Model 1 and Figure 3 provide initial evidence in favour of the first hypothesis (H1) that people who live closer to an international border are more likely to support free movement.

Figure 3: Predicted probability of supporting free movement by distance from border
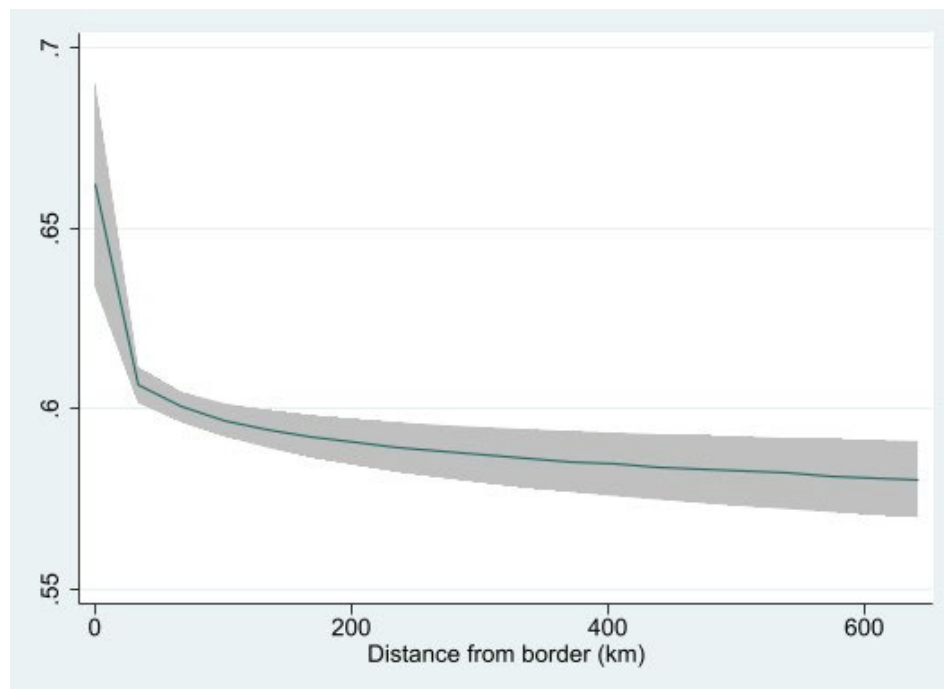
To explore whether public opinion in border areas is shaped by interactions with people from neighbouring countries, Model 2 adds to the baseline model a variable indicating respondents' preferences for having immigrants or foreign workers as neighbours. While this is a less-than-ideal proxy for cross-border interactions, it seems reasonable to assume that people who express support for having immigrants as neighbours may have interacted more frequently with this population in the past. As expected, respondents who like having immigrants as neighbours were significantly more likely to support free movement across borders. Even so, people living farther from the border were still significantly less likely to support free movement. This suggests that attitudes toward free movement are driven not only by interactions with immigrants but also by other opportunities associated with proximity to an international border.

To investigate the influence of co-ethnicity on public opinion in border areas, Model 3 considers the effects being a member of a partitioned ethnic group on support for free movement. Even after accounting for co-ethnicity, people closer to an international border were significantly more likely to support free movement than those farther away. Moreover, and counter to the expectations presented above, people who identify as part of a partitioned ethnic group were significantly *less* likely than other respondents to support free movement. This finding is consistent with past studies showing that hosts are not necessarily more welcoming toward co-ethnic immigrants (Adida, 2014; Kibreab, 1985), though the

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effect on border attitudes warrants more research. A recent study using Afrobarometer data finds that people from partitioned groups have stronger national identities than those from non-partitioned groups (Conroy-Krutz & Houle, 2022), which could help explain reduced support for free movement. Regardless of the mechanism, these analyses show that co-ethnicity does not drive the relationship between border proximity and support for free movement, suggesting that it is motivated by other factors.

Model 4 examines how living within 100 kilometres of a refugee camp influences attitudes toward free movement. The expectation above was that the nearby presence of a refugee camp would heighten the salience of security issues associated with international borders, thus reducing support for free movement across them. The sign of the coefficient for proximity to a refugee camp is indeed negative, but the finding is not statistically significant. As in previous models, support for free movement declines as distance from the border increases, while traders are more likely to support free movement and women are less so. The findings of this model suggest that the risks of living near a refugee camp do not necessarily outweigh the benefits of residing near an international border.

Model 5 in Table 2 includes all four independent variables, reducing the number of observations to 36,423 respondents in 27 countries. The results are largely consistent with the previous models. Specifically, people are more likely to support free movement when they live closer to an international land border and when they enjoy interacting with people from neighbouring countries. Interestingly, people who identify with an ethnic group that was partitioned by the border are less likely to support free movement, a finding to which I return below. Among the controls, only an individual's occupation as a trader and their country's GDP per capita are significant in this full model. Overall, the consistency of findings across model specifications in Table 2 provides strong evidence in favour of the first hypothesis (H1) that people who live closer to an international land border are more likely to support free movement.

To better understand the influence of proximity to an international border on public opinion, I test the effects of interactions between living within 100 kilometres of an international land border (the dichotomous *Border area* variable) and three individual-level variables: occupation as a trader, membership in a partitioned ethnic group, and proximity to a refugee camp. Complete results for the multilevel mixed effect logistic regression models (Table A.2) and logistic regression models with country fixed effects (Table A.3) can be found in the Appendix. For ease of interpretation, I present the findings of these interactions in a series of figures based on the country fixed effects models.

Figure 4 shows the predicted probabilities of supporting free movement based on the interaction between border area and occupation as a trader (Model 14, Table A.3). Outside of border areas (left side of the figure), traders (depicted by the red dot) are significantly more likely to support free movement than people working in other occupations (blue). The predicted probability of supporting free movement increases substantially for both groups when they are in border areas (right side of the figure), and the gap between the two groups increases slightly. Notably, non-traders in border areas have about the same likelihood as traders in non-border areas of supporting free movement.

Figure 5 depicts the predicted probabilities of supporting free movement based on the interaction between border area and membership in a partitioned ethnic group (Model 15, Table A.3). Starting with respondents in border areas (right side of the figure), there is little statistical difference in the predicted probability of supporting free movement between people who belong to partitioned ethnic groups and those who do not (as indicated by the overlapping confidence intervals). More interesting, however, are the findings for non-border areas (left side of the figure), where respondents from partitioned ethnic groups are significantly *less* likely than those from non-partitioned groups to support free movement across international borders. It is difficult to determine what may be driving this finding, but it seems possible that some people could feel that the relative advantages of having co-

ethnics across the border would be undermined if everyone, regardless of their ethnicity, was able to move freely across borders. This is an interesting possibility that warrants further research.

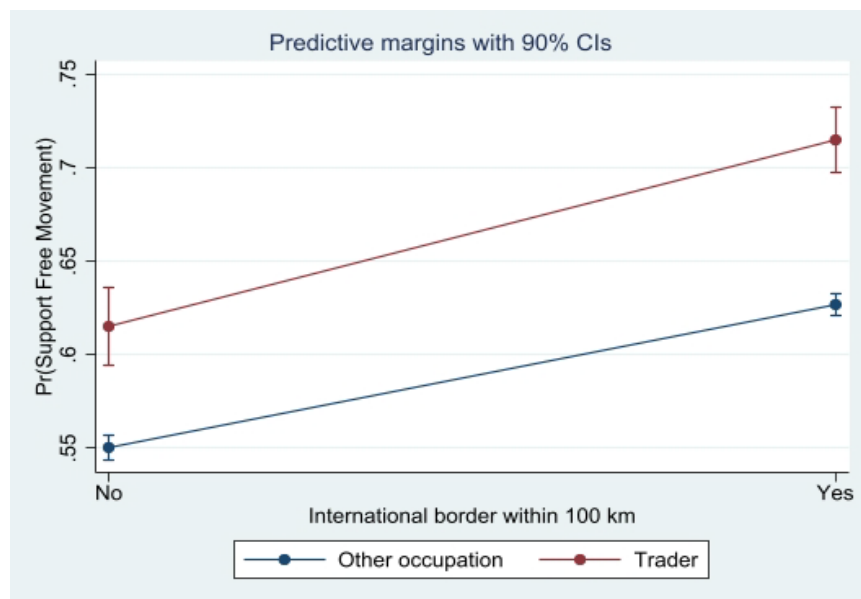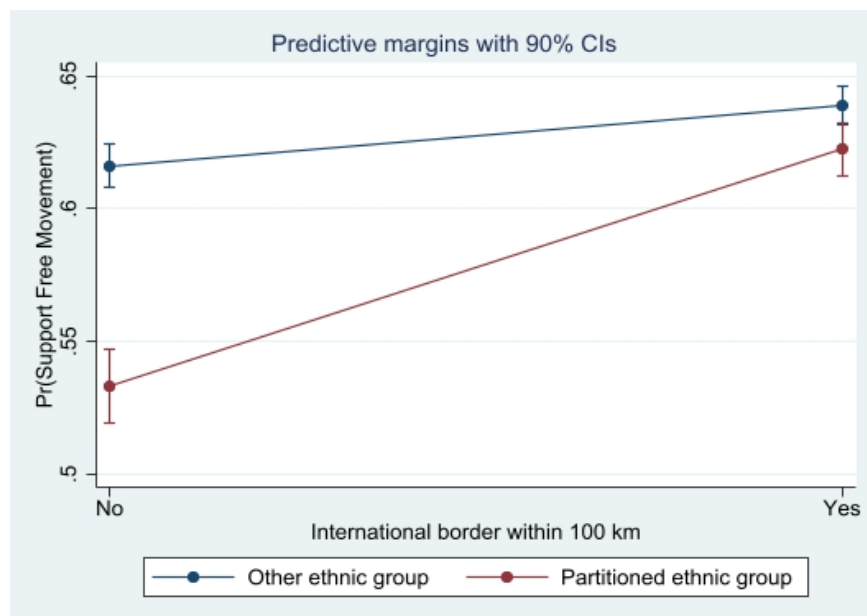**Figure 4: Predicted probability of supporting free movement by border area and occupation**

Predictive margins with 90% CIs

Figure 5: Predicted probability of supporting free movement by border area and partitioned ethnic group

Predictive margins with 90% CIs

Figure 6 shows the predicted probabilities of supporting free movement based on the interaction between being in a land border area and a refugee camp area (Model 16, Table A.3). In non-border areas (left side of the figure), people living within 100 kilometres of a refugee camp were significantly less likely than other respondents to support free movement. This is consistent with the idea that refugee camps may be associated with perceived security risks from having conflicts in neighbouring countries. Remarkably, however, when we

move to border areas (right side), the results change: People living within 100 kilometres of a refugee camp were significantly *more* likely than other respondents to support free movement across borders. Although further research is needed to investigate this dynamic, it is possible that refugee camps in border areas are newer and still attracting international humanitarian assistance,[15] which often benefits host populations in addition to refugees (Whitaker, 2002). Recent research finds evidence of higher levels of development as a result of economic activity, infrastructure, and aid in refugee-hosting areas (Zhou & Shaver, 2021). More broadly, the finding suggests that the benefits of living in a border area outweigh any costs associated with hosting refugee camps.

Figure 6: Predicted probability of supporting free movement by border area and refugee camp area
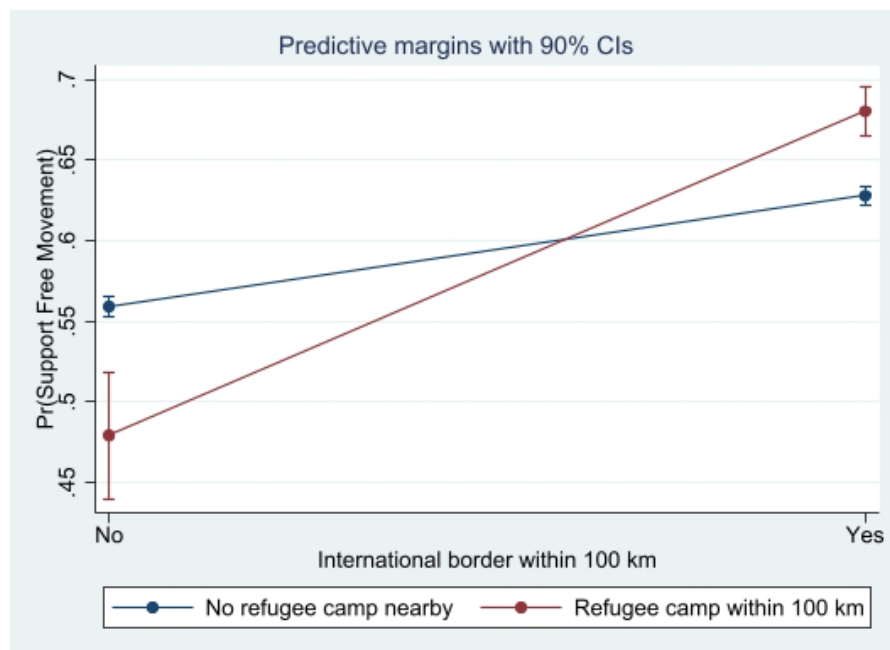
Overall, these analyses provide considerable evidence that proximity to an international border is associated with more favourable attitudes toward free movement. According to the logic presented above, people living closer to an international border are better able to take advantage of opportunities created by the border, even as they may be more exposed to accompanying risks. On average, the results indicate, the opportunities of border proximity tend to outweigh such risks. Additional analyses show that the relationship between border proximity and support for free movement holds even when accounting for interactions with foreigners (or at least liking foreigners as neighbours), co-ethnicity, and the presence of refugees, though the exact mechanisms remain unclear. Finally, without longitudinal data, we cannot rule out the possibility of reverse causality, i.e. that people who are more supportive of free movement move to border areas. Even so, it is unlikely that people would move to border areas simply because they support migration, but rather because they want to take advantage of the full range of economic opportunities in such areas. This possibility thus returns to the initial theory that border areas offer unique opportunities for economic and social interaction that are less common elsewhere.

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[15] In recent decades, many African governments have been reluctant to move refugee camps deeper into their territories despite international recommendations.
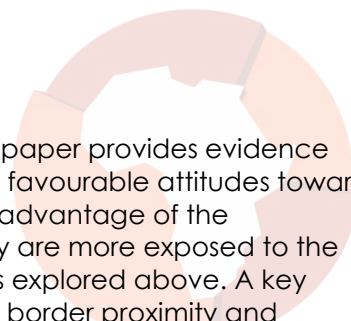
Conclusion

Using georeferenced survey data from 32 African countries, this paper provides evidence that proximity to an international border is associated with more favourable attitudes toward free movement. People in border areas are better able to take advantage of the opportunities associated with international borders, even as they are more exposed to the risks. These findings are robust to various model specifications, as explored above. A key contribution of this paper is that it tests the relationship between border proximity and migration attitudes in a large number of countries. They are all located in a single region, however, raising questions about generalisability. Due to its history, Africa's borders are perceived as arbitrary, often dividing ethnic groups across multiple countries. Many borders are also minimally guarded and do not have a heavy security presence, perhaps affecting threat perceptions.

Yet Africa also faces many of the same trends as other regions: rising numbers of international migrants, growing anti-immigrant hostility, and increasing politicisation of borders and immigration-related issues. Similar to populist leaders in Europe and North America, African politicians often scapegoat immigrants and refugees, blaming them for economic and social woes to deflect criticism of their own policy failures (Mitchell, 2012; Neocosmos, 2008; Whitaker & Giersch, 2015). Given that migration attitudes vary geographically based on border proximity, as this paper shows, it seems likely that the language used by politicians also varies depending on where they are campaigning (Whitaker, 1999). Future research could consider whether the tone and content of political rhetoric is different in border areas than elsewhere.

Moving forward, insights from the African context can help us better understand the politics of borders globally and contribute to a growing body of literature about the comparative politics of borderlands (Braun & Kienitz, 2022). This paper explores the ways in which proximity to an international border independently shapes political attitudes, specifically with respect to migration and free movement. To the extent that border areas are important in determining the national balance of power in any given country, the views of people in those areas are likely to influence policy decisions regarding border security, infrastructure construction, and the ease with which people are permitted to cross.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.
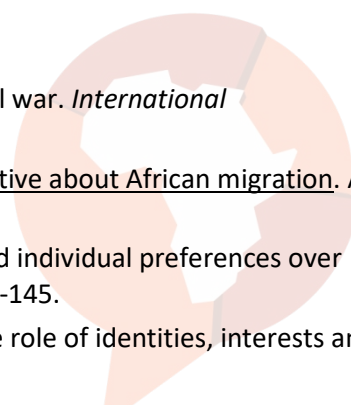
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Appendix

Table A.1: Support for free movement (country fixed effects)

Variables	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12	Model 13
Distance from border (log)	-0.040***	-0.037***	-0.036***	-0.041***	-0.036***
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Like immigrant neighbours		0.119***			0.149***
		(0.026)			(0.028)
Partitioned ethnic group			-0.105***		-0.104***
			(0.031)		(0.032)
Refugee camp area (100 km)				-0.061	-0.049
				(0.054)	(0.060)
Trader	0.116***	0.121***	0.099**	0.115***	0.098**
	(0.042)	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.042)	(0.045)
Remittances	0.055*	0.039	0.054	0.055*	0.046
	(0.030)	(0.032)	(0.033)	(0.030)	(0.034)
Relative living conditions	0.007	0.015	0.019	0.007	0.016
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.013)
Secondary degree	-0.011	-0.007	-0.020	-0.011	-0.024
	(0.027)	(0.029)	(0.031)	(0.027)	(0.031)
Age	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	-0.043*	-0.046*	-0.020	-0.044*	-0.021
	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.026)	(0.023)	(0.026)
Constant	0.516***	0.430***	0.465***	0.531***	0.446***
	(0.155)	(0.158)	(0.167)	(0.155)	(0.171)
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	44,807	41,499	37,289	44,807	36,423
Number of countries	32	29	28	32	27
Pseudo R^2	0.0637	0.0603	0.0622	0.0637	0.0601
Chi^2	2796	2458	2234	2798	2103
Log likelihood	-22140	-19949	-17630	-22139	-17093

*Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10*

Table A.2: Support for free movement with interactions (multilevel models)

Variables	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Individual-level variables			
Border area (100 km) * Trader			
Border area (0), Trader (1)	0.021 (0.052)		
Border area (1), Trader (0)	0.070*** (0.026)		
Border area (1), Trader (1)	0.240*** (0.053)		
Border area (100 km) * Partitioned ethnic group			
Border area (0), Partitioned group (1)		-0.134*** (0.041)	
Border area (1), Partitioned group (0)		0.078** (0.030)	
Border area (1), Partitioned group (1)		-0.020 (0.036)	
Border area (100 km) * Refugee camp area (100 km)			
Border area (0), Refugee camp area (1)			-0.132 (0.081)
Border area (1), Refugee camp area (0)			0.078*** (0.025)
Border area (1), Refugee camp area (1)			0.033 (0.052)
Remittances	0.028 (0.026)	0.038 (0.029)	0.027 (0.026)
Relative living conditions	0.012 (0.010)	0.017 (0.011)	0.011 (0.010)
Secondary degree	-0.008 (0.024)	0.001 (0.026)	-0.008 (0.024)
Age	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Female	-0.049** (0.020)	-0.023 (0.022)	-0.045** (0.020)
Country-level variables			
ECOWAS	0.349** (0.175)	0.297* (0.167)	0.354** (0.174)
Level of democracy	-0.009 (0.034)	0.008 (0.039)	-0.010 (0.034)
GDP per capita (log)	-0.381*** (0.089)	-0.417*** (0.096)	-0.387*** (0.089)
Population (log)	0.015 (0.068)	0.114* (0.068)	0.015 (0.067)
Intl. migrant stock (% of pop.)	0.020 (0.028)	0.033 (0.027)	0.020 (0.028)
Constant	2.764** (1.302)	1.324 (1.313)	2.811** (1.299)
Observations	44,807	37,400	44,940
Number of groups	32	28	32

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

Table A.3: Support for free movement with interactions (country fixed effects)

Variables	Model 14	Model 15	Model 16
Border area (100 km) * Trader			
Border area (0), Trader (1)	0.032 (0.060)		
Border area (1), Trader (0)	0.093*** (0.030)		
Border area (1), Trader (1)	0.282*** (0.061)		
Border area (100 km) * Partitioned ethnic group			
Border area (0), Partitioned group (1)		-0.104** (0.047)	
Border area (1), Partitioned group (0)		0.125*** (0.035)	
Border area (1), Partitioned group (1)		0.015 (0.042)	
Border area (100 km) * Refugee camp area (100 km)			
Border area (0), Refugee camp area (1)			-0.317*** (0.109)
Border area (1), Refugee camp area (0)			0.091*** (0.029)
Border area (1), Refugee camp area (1)			0.117* (0.064)
Remittances	0.054* (0.030)	0.055 (0.033)	0.053* (0.030)
Relative living conditions	0.006 (0.012)	0.017 (0.013)	0.005 (0.012)
Secondary degree	-0.010 (0.027)	-0.018 (0.031)	-0.011 (0.027)
Age	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Female	-0.045* (0.023)	-0.014 (0.026)	-0.039* (0.023)
Constant	0.020 (0.073)	0.006 (0.078)	0.013 (0.073)
Country fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	44,807	37,400	44,940
Number of countries	32	28	32
Pseudo R^2	0.0638	0.0622	0.0637
Chi^2	2802	2244	2810
Log likelihood	-22138	-17676	-22197

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

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