Local Communities, Distant Origins: How Cultural Distance and Local Context Shape Immigrant Ethnoreligious Infrastructures[1]

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Vibrant ethnoreligious infrastructures of businesses, associations, and places of worship are key elements of immigrant community life, providing crucial social and economic support for its members. But why do some immigrant communities establish dense organizational ecologies, while others do not? Analyzing 25,117 ethnoreligious organizations catering to 54 immigrant minorities across more than 4,900 local communities in Germany, the authors show that minority communities with similar population sizes can exhibit vastly different organizational ecologies. Contrary to claims emphasizing local context, category consolidation and community homogeneity do not go along with more ethnicity-focused organizations. Instead, various dimensions of cultural distance between immigrants' origins and the host society consistently predict organizational densities. Analyses produce mixed support for theories of reactive group formation. These findings highlight the importance of cultural distance and challenge prevailing perspectives emphasizing the primary role of local context for immigrant group formation.

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INTRODUCTION

Why do immigrant communities sometimes establish dense organizational infrastructures with ethnic businesses and civil society associations, while in other cases they lack such institutionalized community organization despite a comparable demographic presence? This question addresses two central strands of literature on immigrant integration: At a fundamental level, it engages with scholarship on ethnic group formation and boundary making. At a more concrete level, it contributes to urban research on "ethnic and religious enclaves" like Koreatown in Los Angeles (Zhou 2009), the Uzbek community in Ansan, South Korea (Massot 2013), or the Turkish community in Kreuzberg, Berlin (Schönwälder and Söhn 2009)—neighborhoods with high concentrations of ethnoreligious minorities that provide supportive community infrastructure, facilitated by an ecology of formal organizations (Marcuse 1997; Moya 2005). We refer to this organizational ecosystem as "ethnoreligious infrastructures" and investigate the conditions that lead to their varying density across local immigrant communities.

Our study specifically focuses on the behavioral dimension of ethnic group formation manifest in formal organization. We investigate why immigrant minorities formally organize as coethnics, coalescing into minority groups with the potential for collective action through building ethnoreligious infrastructures—an ecology of associations, businesses, and places of worship. We analyze the varying density of these infrastructures, understood here as the number of such formal organizations within local minority communities relative to their population size. This approach revives large-scale comparative research on the organizational ecology of immigrant communities, a topic that has waned despite long-standing debates, partly due to the predominance of survey- and interview-based research on other aspects of boundary making.

To this end, we challenge the "groupist" assumption that ethnic categories necessarily imply organized, internally homogeneous, and culturally distinct groups (Brubaker 2002; Wimmer 2008). We propose a novel framework for analyzing the formal organization of immigrant minorities that addresses the full spectrum of groupness, from mere nominal conationals to highly institutionalized immigrant communities. This approach overcomes a selection bias inherent in much of the existing literature, which tends to focus on successful immigrant organizations while neglecting those minorities that do not

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coalesce into organized groups. By addressing this shortcoming, we can reexamine a long-standing debate: To what extent is ethnic group formation driven by minority characteristics such as shared cultural heritage, societal factors like discrimination, or structural intersectionality processes like ethnic-occupational segregation that consolidate ethnic boundaries at the local level?

Contemporary scholarship on ethnic group formation recognizes that ethnicity exists on a continuum, ranging from imposed categories of descent to shared identities embraced by actors, and ultimately to formally organized groups capable of collective action (Brubaker 2002; Wimmer 2008). The degree to which ethnicity forms the basis of a self-identified and formally organized group versus remaining an externally imposed classification is the outcome of ethnic group formation processes. We use specific terms throughout this article to refer to different points along this continuum of group formation. We use "minority" to refer to members of an ethnoreligious category that may or may not form the basis of group formation dynamics. "Local community" refers to all members of a minority living in a given city or county, again without implying actual groupness. Finally, "group" is reserved for entities in the sociological sense—self-identifying, widely recognized, and to some degree formally organized and capable of collective action (Brubaker 2002).

This process of ethnic group formation encompasses both categorical and behavioral dimensions. The categorical dimension refers to the ethnic classifications individuals use to identify themselves and others, while the behavioral dimension concerns how ethnic classifications shape people's actions and networks (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2008). The ethnic boundary-making approach aims to identify the societal conditions giving rise to various categorical and behavioral forms of ethnic boundaries: classificatory struggles over ethnic categories (Schaeffer 2013; Mora 2014; Abascal 2020), the emergence and impact of salient ethnic identities on relationship formation (Carol 2016; Kruse and Kroneberg 2019; Leszczensky and Pink 2019), political mobilization and claims making of immigrant minorities (Koopmans and Statham 1999; Ebert and Okamoto 2013), and the conditions fostering the formal organization of immigrant communities (Okamoto 2003; Moya 2005; Vermeulen, Minkoff, and van der Meer 2016).

Explanations for immigrant organizational formation range along a spectrum from universal minority characteristics to specific local conditions, and this framework structures the analysis that follows. Essentialist perspectives, influential alongside other viewpoints until the late 20th century, interpret immigrant organizations as expressions of inherent cultural traits, suggesting that certain minorities have an innate proclivity for collective organization (Hofmeister 1976). Classic assimilation theory shifts the focus to the temporary needs arising from immigrants' "foreign" cultural heritage, which mainstream institutions fail to address (Breton 1964; Rex 1987). Another line of thought shifts the emphasis to mainstream societies' structural barriers,

such as discriminatory legal frameworks and informal practices of social closure, that impede the upward mobility of racialized immigrant minorities. These barriers to mainstream inclusion encourage the formation of ethnicity-based organizations that provide alternative avenues for resource mobilization and social support (Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Zhou 2009). A final perspective emphasizes the contingent nature of ethnic group formation. This perspective underscores how immigrants' ethnicity often intersects with other dimensions of social differentiation, resulting in minorities occupying distinct positions within a local context's social space—for example, concentrated in specific occupations or neighborhoods (Hechter 1978; Okamoto 2003; Legewie and Schaeffer 2016). This local and intersectional distinctiveness facilitates ingroup interaction and interest alignment and increases the salience of shared ethnicity (Kroneberg, Kruse, and Wimmer 2021; Zhao 2023), thereby fostering ethnic community organizations.

The study of ethnic community organizations, however, requires overcoming a paradoxical "groupist" selection bias that pervades much of the existing literature. By focusing on existing formal immigrant organizations, studies sample among the "successful"—like Hispanic garment entrepreneurs in New York City (Waldinger 1986)—while turning a blind eye to immigrant minorities that do not come together as groups. The challenge of overcoming such groupism lies in identifying a definition of nominal coethnicity as a nucleus of potential group formation processes that has universal plausibility but does not presume actual group formation. This nominal coethnicity needs to be universally understood and commensurate with institutional actors' classification grids (Wimmer 2013, p. 79) yet flexible enough to allow for nonmobilization. Our approach is based on identifying minorities and their local communities through their countries of origin, recognizing that this method may overlook nonnational minorities like Kurds and Rohingya (Light et al. 1993) or new forms of hybrid and multicultural organizations in superdiverse cities where blended identities transcend national categories (Vertovec 2007). However, focusing on these other types of coethnicity would again risk falling prey to groupist sampling of successfully mobilized identities. While acknowledging these limitations, our approach allows for the inclusion of panethnic or supranational organizations that serve multiple nationality-defined minorities (Okamoto 2003). This novel approach allows us to bring the formation of immigrant organizations back to center stage in the study of ethnic group formation.

Our study focuses on formal organizations, mapping 12,910 registered associations, 4,875 grocery stores, and 7,332 places of worship catering to Germany's 54 largest ethnonational minorities across 390 subnational counties. The resulting 20,751 local communities (not all 54 minorities have members in every county) form our principal unit of analysis. This approach is a priori agnostic regarding both the degree to which nominal minority membership

implies actual organization and the extent to which organizing varies within the same ethnic minority across different localities. This allows us to systematically compare minorities whose local communities typically have a prominent organizational presence across Germany's counties—such as Turkish or Vietnamese communities whose supermarkets and cultural associations are visible features even in midsized cities—to those with minimal organizational presence—like Polish or Belgian communities—despite similar population sizes.

Germany is a particularly compelling case for this study due to its diverse immigrant population, which comprises about a quarter of the total population and varies significantly in terms of histories of settlement, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic status. Moreover, Germany's unique history and federal structure have resulted in considerable regional variations in the local living conditions of minorities. The East/West divide after reunification offers a unique setting to examine how distinct sociopolitical contexts of reception and political opportunity structures, including differing histories of immigration, levels of far-right mobilization, and state integration regimes, shape minority organizational infrastructures, an aspect reflected throughout our empirical analysis.

Through this comprehensive research design, our study complements a rich tradition of carefully designed in-depth case studies that aim to trace the mechanisms of immigrant organizing in specific contexts (Bloemraad 2013). While this body of research has identified various local factors at play in specific cases, our comprehensive approach, by design free of groupist selection bias, allows us to test which of these factors are robust predictors of infrastructure density across thousands of communities. We can therefore adjudicate between competing theoretical explanations by assessing which mechanisms consistently shape community formation.

Our findings corroborate prior research on the role of socioeconomic resources in minority organizational formation, while challenging the common assumption in quantitative work that population shares are a valid proxy of ethnoreligious infrastructure densities. Even minority communities of the same population size differ widely in the extent of their infrastructure networks. Addressing the central debate between cultural and contextual perspectives on postmigration ethnic group formation, our results indicate that ethnoreligious infrastructure density is consistently influenced by indicators of distinct cultural heritage but not by measures of local sociostructural distinctiveness. In line with perspectives emphasizing coethnic infrastructures as alternatives to mainstream assimilation, permanent residence statuses are associated with significantly lower infrastructure density. However, other measures of societal rejection, like local far-right mobilization, are not or are negatively associated with infrastructure density, suggesting that ethnic minority residents in areas with prevalent discrimination face the double

burden of blocked mainstream assimilation and challenged integration in coethnic infrastructures ecologies.

BENEFITS AND TYPES OF ETHNORELIGIOUS INFRASTRUCTURES

This study engages with a long-standing tradition of urban sociological research on ethnic and religious enclaves. These enclaves, defined by Marcuse (1997, p. 242) as spaces where immigrant minority inhabitants "congregate as a means of enhancing their economic, social, political, and/or cultural development," constitute a core element of immigrant community formation and ethnic boundary making. While pioneering empirical work by scholars like Jane Addams (1895) and W. E. B. Du Bois (1899) laid crucial foundations for the study of urban immigrant and minority communities already in the 1890s, the systematic focus on such enclaves became a hallmark of the later Chicago school in the 1920s and 1930s. Their urban ecological model posited that different ethnic groups compete over scarce resources such as housing, jobs, and political representation within the urban landscape (Park and Burgess 1984), stimulating the formation of supportive community organizations (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918). While the terminology and focus on ecological competition has evolved, subsequent research has firmly established that proximity to a vibrant ethnoreligious community offers immigrants and their descendants important benefits, including jobs and other economic opportunities, the maintenance of cultural traditions, access to specialized ethnoreligious goods and services, and a sense of community and social embedding (Zhou 2009; Hanhoerster 2015; Meeus, Arnaut, and Van Heur 2019).

However, the advantages of enclaves must be considered in relation to the potential costs of social segregation and stigmatization from mainstream society, which limit residents' opportunities for upward mobility (Alba and Foner 2015). This can manifest in various ways, including slower language acquisition (Danzer et al. 2022) and reduced female labor force participation (Andersson, Musterd, and Galster 2019). These drawbacks are partly due to the strong social cohesion within enclaves that can sometimes lead to excessive social control and pressure to conform to community norms. Hanhoerster and Weck's (2016) study of descendants of Turkish immigrants identifies social control in public spaces as a key factor motivating individuals to leave enclave neighborhoods. Interestingly, Gans's (1962) classic study of Boston's West End, an Italian American community then perceived as a "slum," while describing an actually thriving and cohesive community also reveals a drawback: Limited connections to mainstream society hindered residents' ability to effectively oppose the urban renewal initiatives that endangered their community.

Contemporary scholarship nevertheless recognizes that ethnic and religious enclaves serve a dual purpose: They act as springboards for recent

immigrants navigating the challenges of settlement and integration (Meeus et al. 2019; Martén, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2019; Franz and Hanhörster 2020) while also functioning as vital cultural, economic, and social hubs for more established members of minority communities (Li 1998; Wiedner et al. 2022). While ethnoreligious enclaves thereby contribute to the formation and maintenance of ethnic boundaries and express a high degree of ethnic groupness of local immigrant communities, they can also serve as bridges between these communities and broader mainstream society.

Research highlights how the benefits associated with ethnic and religious enclaves are rooted in an ecology of immigrant organizations. Such organizational networks typically extend beyond the boundaries of a specific enclave neighborhood. Zhou (2009), for instance, shows how Los Angeles Korean and Chinese organizations serve a dispersed suburban coethnic clientele, a pattern also apparent among Berlin Turks (El-Kayed 2025). Similarly, networks of ethnoreligious minority organizations often span several neighborhoods (Zhou 1998).

These organizations can be categorized into three principal types. The first type are ethnoreligious minority associations, including organizations like cultural centers, hometown associations, professional societies, mutual aid clubs, and educational centers. By facilitating stable patterns of social interaction among coethnics, these associations encourage the formation of dense social networks that bridge kinship ties, neighborhood boundaries, and socioeconomic divisions within the community (Zhou 2009; El-Kayed 2025). They also serve as vital spaces for the preservation of ethnic identities and cultural heritage (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918; Breton 1964), playing a key role in transnational exchange and the maintenance of connections with countries of origin (Zhou and Lee 2013). Furthermore, they often function as central vehicles for political claims making and advocacy within the broader society (Koopmans et al. 2005; Bloemraad, Chaudhary, and Gleeson 2022). El-Kayed's (2025) study of political participation among Turkish immigrants and their descendants in Berlin highlights the pivotal role Turkish associations play in mobilizing those with limited German proficiency. The multifaceted nature of these associations underscores their contribution to the overall vitality and cohesion of ethnic and religious communities.

The second type are minority-owned businesses, encompassing a wide range of commercial activities, including grocery stores, restaurants, hair salons, and travel agencies, but also industrial factories or professional services such as medical practices (Light 1984; Aldrich and Waldinger 1990). Studies emphasize the role of these businesses in generating social capital (Zhou and Cho 2010), catering to specific cultural and religious consumption needs that may be unmet by mainstream providers (Benkheira 1995; Chiodelli 2015), and sustaining demand within a coethnic labor market that

provides crucial opportunities for individuals with limited host country qualifications (Wilson and Portes 1980; Edin, Fredriksson, and Åslund 2003). Waldinger's (1986) study of Hispanic immigrant entrepreneurs in New York City's garment industry in the 1980s illustrates how these entrepreneurs, by drawing on a reliable immigrant workforce, can revitalize declining industries and foster skills and knowledge transfer to their workers. While questions remain about the long-term economic potential of such businesses to offer viable pathways to upward mobility (Sanders and Nee 1996; Alba and Foner 2015), a thriving ethnic business sector delineates ethnic boundaries by expressing the distinct economic niche in which these minorities operate.

The third and final type comprises places of worship, such as temples, synagogues, mosques, and churches offering foreign-language services. While these spaces primarily serve spiritual needs, they also play a vital role in the social and cultural life of many immigrant communities. Places of worship function as centers of community life, providing institutionalized spaces for social interaction, mutual support, education, and the transmission of cultural values. Franz and Hanhörster's (2020) investigation of an "arrival neighborhood" in Dortmund provides numerous examples of how mosques and Islamic foundations offer informal interaction opportunities that help residents with housing, employment, and legal processes. Consequently, research has demonstrated the positive effects of religious infrastructure on various aspects of immigrant integration, including educational achievement (Carol and Schulz 2018), psychological well-being (Wiedner, Schaeffer, and Carol 2022), and overall community cohesion (Ehrkamp 2005).

Factors Influencing the Varying Density of Ethnoreligious Infrastructure

Observers as early as Breton (1964) recognized the substantial variation in the density of ethnoreligious infrastructure across immigrant communities. Nevertheless, the factors contributing to this heterogeneity remain a subject of ongoing debate. We organize our review of potential explanations by moving from those emphasizing universal minority characteristics or cultural origins (essentialism, cultural distance) to those focusing on societal reception (rejection) and, finally, to theories highlighting specific local conditions (structural consolidation).

Pioneering researchers, like Breton (1964) or Kosa (1956), focused primarily on minority characteristics such as group size, cultural distinctiveness, and socioeconomic position. This preoccupation with minority characteristics gradually gave way to a greater appreciation for the structural conditions offered by mainstream society (Yancey, Ericksen, and Juliani 1976; Wilson and Portes 1980). This development in enclave scholarship is paralleled by debates in the theory of ethnicity between "primordialists," who regard ethnicity as deeply

rooted in kinship, shared ancestry, language, durable cultural traits, and religion (Geertz 1973), and "constructivists," who argue that ethnic group formation is situationally highly variable (Barth 1969). Although describing the evolution of these theoretical perspectives as a linear progression—from an emphasis on stable minority characteristics to a focus on localized social processes—oversimplifies the debate, it nevertheless provides a useful framework for summarizing the core arguments.

Essentialism and Inherent Cultural Traits

The first, essentialist, argument posits that culture, understood as a set of inherent ethnic traits (Geertz 1973; Isaacs 1975), predetermines organizational patterns. This line of argumentation is evident in Weber's (1930) classic theory of the Protestant ethic, which links the economic success of Protestant sects to their cultural values of thrift, profit-seeking, and diligence. Similarly, the proclivity of 19th-century German immigrants in the United States toward associational life was often explained by invoking inherent ethnic traits, captured by the phrase "Put three Germans together and in five minutes you'll have four clubs" (Hofmeister 1976, p. 144). As Light (1984) explains, this approach attributes the high rates of ethnic entrepreneurship among immigrant minorities like Koreans to their "collectivist" cultural heritage, which fosters a strong family orientation alongside enforceable norms of ethnic solidarity and trust, both of which can be mobilized as forms of social capital. Bonacich's (1973) classic model of the middleman minority also refers to distinctive social and cultural traits that promote both strong family ties, ethnic solidary communities, and an orientation toward entrepreneurial roles: "Family, regional, dialect, sect, and ultimately ethnic ties are used for preferential economic treatment. The 'primordial tie' of blood provides a basis for trust, and is reinforced by multi-purpose formal and informal associations" (Bonacich 1973, p. 586). But in contrast to classic essentialist arguments, this model suggests that immigrant minorities ultimately maintain strong "collectivist" ethnic and family orientation due to a desire to return to their homeland or an enduring feeling of estrangement from mainstream society. While controversial, various forms of essentialist explanations persist in contemporary scholarship, notably in attempts to explain the educational attainment of the children of Asian immigrants (Lee and Zhou 2015). However, this essentialist perspective ultimately subscribes to a groupist ontology. It treats ethnic groups and their traits as exogenous and preexisting to any postmigration processes of group formation or reconstitution. Nevertheless, if ethnic traits can indeed explain the tendency to form organizations, a natural starting point is to look for transnational continuities in associational behavior. Applied to our research question, this perspective suggests hypothesis 1:

HYPOTHESIS 1 (essentialism).—*Immigrant minorities originating from societies with high levels of civic organizing should bring this "culture" with them and form denser ethnoreligious infrastructures in their country of settlement.*

Cultural Distance and the Demand for Alternative Resources

A second cultural argument is often associated with classic assimilation theory, which posits acculturation—the adoption of mainstream society's "core culture"—as a prerequisite for immigrant minorities' structural assimilation and upward social mobility (Gordon 1964). Because of its focus on acculturation, this perspective is concerned not with the specific content of cultural traits, although immigrant cultures were frequently characterized as "premodern" or "backward," but rather with the degree of cultural dissimilarity or distance between immigrant minorities and mainstream society. Cultural distance, it is argued, increases individuals' demand for special goods and services offered by coethnics over those provided by mainstream society (Breton 1964; Babis 2016). Consequently, classic assimilation theory viewed these organizations with caution, suggesting that by compensating for the lack of supply of minority goods and services by mainstream institutions, immigrant organizations could potentially slow the process of acculturation (Gordon 1964). Aside from this cautious view of immigrant organizations, however, the relational core of this argument lies in the reactive nature of infrastructure development, emphasizing how it responds to the specific social situation of immigrant minorities facing cultural barriers and the need to compensate for majority organizations that do not cater to minority needs. For example, the emergence of halal butcheries can be seen as a response to the need for control over meat preparation in countries where dietary practices differ from those prescribed by Islam (Benkheira 1995; Chiodelli 2015). Similarly, the "protected market hypothesis" (Light 1972) posits that the initial market for ethnic entrepreneurs arises within the ethnic community itself, as coethnics have an advantage in serving the specific needs and preferences of their community (Bonacich and Modell 1980). Thereby, this argument offers a valuable counterpoint to essentialism and suggests hypothesis 2:

HYPOTHESIS 2 (cultural distance).—*Members of any minority may form denser infrastructures when confronted with greater cultural distance from mainstream society.*

Societal Rejection and Protective Infrastructures

While cultural explanations locate the impetus for immigrant organization within the minority group itself, an alternative perspective emphasizes the

role of societal rejection and discrimination in shaping ethnic boundaries and driving the formation of immigrant organizations. This perspective highlights the structural barriers, such as discriminatory legal frameworks and informal practices of social closure, that impede the upward mobility particularly of racialized immigrant minorities and limit their access to mainstream institutions and opportunities. While seemingly disparate, cultural and societal rejection perspectives agree on the adaptive function of immigrant organizations. For culturalists, these organizations help immigrants navigate a new and culturally unfamiliar social environment that may not cater to their specific needs and preferences. For those emphasizing societal rejection, these organizations provide a buffer against a xenophobic or racist host society, offering resources and support in the face of discrimination (Phillips 2006; Olzak and West 1991). By considering minority group characteristics such as visual distinctiveness, scholars like Breton (1964) and Kosa (1956) implicitly also acknowledge the impact of discrimination. Yet scholars like Portes and Rumbaut (1990) completely shift the perspective by explicitly emphasizing the role of racialized "contexts of reception" in shaping immigrant experiences and organizational strategies. Crucially, the concept of a racialized context of reception encompasses not only overt expressions of rejection, such as anti-immigrant mobilization, but also structural barriers like restrictive legal frameworks and precarious legal statuses. When immigrants and their descendants encounter racialized "contexts of reception," their identity, cultural practices, and opportunity seeking may become concentrated within the coethnic community, leading to what Portes and Zhou (1993) term "selective assimilation." In some cases, this can even lead to attempts to revive ancestral cultural practices. Wimmer and Soehl (2014) demonstrate that while immigrants often arrive with values that diverge from those of the native-born population, cultural heterodoxy among the second generation is primarily a consequence of sociolegal discrimination and "blocked acculturation." This emphasis on societal rejection is also echoed in neoassimilation theory, which acknowledges that when general status-seeking strategies—through employment, entrepreneurship, education, or residential integration—are systematically obstructed by formal or informal discrimination, retrenchment into the ethnic enclave becomes a rational response (Alba and Nee 2003).

In positing societal rejection as a primary driver of ethnic boundary formation, this perspective suggests that minority communities will establish denser ethnoreligious infrastructures as a form of collective self-protection in response to hostile societal contexts. Specifically, this argument leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a (anti-immigrant mobilization).—*Minority communities exhibit denser ethnoreligious infrastructures in local contexts with stronger far-right anti-immigrant mobilization.*

HYPOTHESIS 3B (legal status).—*The density of ethnoreligious infrastructures is positively associated with the share of minority members with insecure legal status*.

Structural Consolidation and Ethnic Boundaries in Local Contexts

A third perspective highlights the contingent nature of ethnic group formation, focusing on processes within specific local contexts. Drawing on classic arguments about category consolidation and ideal conditions for intergroup contact (Allport 1954; Hechter 1978; Blau and Schwartz 1984), this perspective emphasizes how various forms of segregation along ethnic lines and within-minority homogeneity contribute to the consolidation of ethnic boundaries by creating distinct positions within a local context's social space for minorities (Legewie and Schaeffer 2016; Kroneberg et al. 2021; Zhao 2023). This distinctiveness, in turn, increases the salience of ethnic boundaries by fostering visibility and ingroup interaction, facilitating interest alignment, and promoting a shared sense of identity. This argument can be motivated from several theoretical traditions.

Central to our focus on ethnoreligious infrastructures is the theory of the cultural division of labor, developed by Hechter (1978) and further elaborated by Okamoto (2003, 2006). This theory posits that ethnic boundaries become salient and enduring when they correspond to a cultural division of labor and resulting occupational status differentials between minorities and the majority (Yancey et al. 1976; Hechter and Okamoto 2001). Ethnic occupational segregation fosters boundary formation through two primary mechanisms. First, it increases the likelihood of ingroup interactions and the development of dense, ethnicity-based informal networks, as members of a minority occupy distinct positions within social space, making encounters with coethnics more probable. Second, it creates an overlap between ethnic identity and shared economic interests, enabling the mobilization of ethnicity along class lines. This second mechanism resonates with Bonacich and Modell's (1980) classic study of Japanese American small business owners, which analyzes how ethnic solidarity can be mobilized in pursuit of shared economic goals. These two processes—network density and shared class interests—are mutually reinforcing, contributing to the consolidation of ethnic boundaries and the potential for collective action. From this perspective, ethnoreligious infrastructures represent institutionalized expressions of collective action organized around shared ethnicity. For instance, Okamoto (2006) demonstrates how, in the presence of communal segregation that transcends national origin, Asian communities in the US are more likely to establish pan-Asian organizations, particularly when concentrated within the lower echelons of the occupational structure. A similar argument is a classic in

political science, positing that overlapping cleavages, by concentrating political interests along a single dimension, exacerbate social divisions and increase the likelihood of conflict (Lipset 1981; Dunning and Harrison 2010).

Another sociological theoretical tradition draws on Simmel's (1908) concept of cross-cutting social circles to examine how social cohesion is affected by consolidation—the extent to which social categories overlap within a given context. In their structuralist work, Blau and Schwartz (1984) demonstrate that intermarriage is less prevalent in US cities characterized by a high degree of consolidation across social attributes. However, the mechanism underlying Blau and Schwartz's consolidation effect is primarily "mechanical": In consolidated contexts, relational segregation along one attribute inherently translates to segregation along other correlated attributes. Beyond this mechanical effect, Kroneberg et al. (2021) show that structural consolidation is related to the ethnonational identification of minority members, suggesting stronger perceptions of ethnic boundaries. Zhao (2023) emphasizes the close connection between consolidation and Allport's (1954) contact theory to argue that the conditions for positive intergroup contact are less likely to be met when ethnicity overlaps with other dimensions of social differentiation, such as class. In such contexts, contact "does *not* dispel prejudice; it seems more likely to increase it" (Allport 1954, p. 251, italics in original). Therefore, structural consolidation reduces the likelihood of successful intergroup contact even beyond the by-product mechanism, while simultaneously fostering intragroup-oriented behavior and organization.

In summary, drawing on diverse theoretical perspectives encompassing economic and political interests, social networks, and intergroup contact, this tradition argues that structural consolidation—the alignment of various dimensions of social differentiation with ethnicity within local contexts—creates conditions conducive to the development of stable ethnic group identities and tight networks among immigrant minorities. Except for Okamoto's (2006) investigation of pan-Asian organizations, however, this argument has never been empirically investigated for the crucial domain of organizational infrastructures.

Hypothesis 4a (homogeneity).—*Immigrant communities characterized by internal sociostructural homogeneity exhibit denser ethnoreligious infrastructures.*

Hypothesis 4b (consolidation).—*Immigrant communities characterized by sociostructural consolidation, wherein ethnicity overlaps with other salient social categories, exhibit denser ethnoreligious infrastructures.*

Studying Ethnoreligious Infrastructures in Germany

Germany provides a strategic research site for investigating the factors that shape the organizational landscape of immigrant communities. This allows us to systematically account for two additional factors that have been suggested

as important for the formation of immigrant organizations. First, the historical settlement process of immigrant communities and the associated shares of native-born community members may impact the demand for ethnoreligious infrastructures (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005; Bloemraad et al. 2022; Wiedner et al. 2022). Second, political opportunity structures, shaped by Germany's unique history and federal structure, may favor or suppress the formation of dense ethnoreligious infrastructures (Koopmans et al. 2005; Vermeulen 2013). While these dimensions of variation often cross one another, two key structural factors allow for a composite analysis of settlement process and political opportunity structure as racialized and discriminatory contexts of reception: (1) the legal distinctions between EU and non-EU immigrants, which often overlaps with racialization of the latter; (2) the sociopolitical differences between East and West Germany, with the former exhibiting a much more recent settlement process of immigrant communities, less institutionalized support, and greater far-right mobilization.

Large-scale immigration of non-Germans to West-Germany commenced in the 1960s due to guest worker agreements with majority-Christian (Italy, Spain) as well as Muslim (Turkey, Morocco) countries. These guest worker programs were discontinued in the 1970s, but immigration from these countries continued through family reunification. The reunification of East and West Germany in 1990 initiated the settlement of notable numbers of immigrants, particularly refugees fleeing the Balkan wars, also in the former East. Since then, people from a large variety of other countries have made Germany their home. This diversity includes immigrants from neighboring Western European and from poorer, but culturally and phenotypically similar, Central and Eastern European countries, as well as refugees and asylum claimants from African, Middle Eastern, and Asian countries (BAMF 2020). The 1992 introduction of EU citizenship further solidified the privileged status of immigrants and their descendants from EU member states. This privileged status grants them the unrestricted right to reside and work in Germany, access to social benefits, and protection against discrimination based on nationality. At the same time, many non-EU immigrants and their descendants in Germany experience racialization. Immigrant-origin minorities in Germany are thus heterogeneous with respect to the length of their history in Germany, legal residence status, religious and cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic position and educational level of their members, original dominant motive for migration, and phenotypic distinctiveness from stereotypical Germans.

Today, Germany is home to immigrant minorities representing a variety of religious traditions, including Christianity and Islam. Islam, in particular, has emerged as a salient group-structuring identity in the European context (Drouhot 2021). Our preceding theoretical discussion suggests that this prominence is due to three interconnected mechanisms. First, Muslims

experience particularly high levels of discrimination and hate crimes, resulting in strong motivations to establish dedicated organizations that provide support and protection in the face of hostility. Second, Islamic traditions often emphasize communal practices—such as prayer, charitable giving in support of community organizations, the study of religious texts in structured settings—generating a demand for distinct organizations and services, such as mosques and community centers. Finally, research indicates that Muslims in Europe often hold distinct moral outlooks and religious lifestyles (Pfündel, Stichs, and Tanis 2021), reducing the likelihood that existing nonethnoreligious organizations like neighborhood bars or butchers will adequately serve the halal needs of Muslim communities. In Germany, organizations belonging to certain recognized religious denominations—such as Catholic dioceses, Protestant *Landeskirchen*, or Jewish congregations—enjoy a special quasi-public legal status. This status grants them privileges including state collection of church taxes from registered members and facilitated access to public institutions, for example in the provision of religious education. While Muslim communities have increasingly received state subsidies for youth work, refugee support, and conflict prevention, their recognition and access to funding bodies like "integration funds" vary across federal states (Muckel et al. 2018; Sachverständigenrat 2020). Securing stable funding and navigating the eligibility criteria for state support—especially restrictions on foreign funding—remain a significant challenge for newer religious organizations, especially Muslim communities (Muckel et al. 2018).

Regional disparities also exist. State funding for Christian institutions is higher in the south (Baden-Wurttemberg and Bavaria), while northwestern states (Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg) and Rhineland-Palatinate have been more accommodating of Muslim rights, such as wearing hijabs in public institutions (Carol 2018). Generally, East German states tend to offer less or no funding and regulatory support for integration and religious accommodation (Sachverständigenrat 2020). This situation coincides with a significantly higher prevalence of far-right mobilization in East German states (Weisskircher 2020). In summary, there is significant variation in the types of reception contexts provided by different German states. This variation is largely clustered along an East-West divide, providing the compelling analytical opportunity to conduct a compound analysis of how these differing reception contexts shape minority communities. Leveraging this unique historical division allows for an examination of contextual effects central to our research questions.

DATA AND METHODS

To test our hypotheses, we constructed a dataset of ethnoreligious infrastructures in Germany. This dataset, made public with this article, contains

the number of ethnoreligious organizations for the 61 largest immigrant minorities—defined by their national origin—in each German county (Wiedner et al. 2026*a*; replication files can be found at Wiedner et al. 2026*b*). We define minority members as immigrants from a country plus the number of German-born individuals with at least one parent born in that country. Counties are the smallest administrative unit above the municipality level, with a median population size of 154,899 and a median surface area of 797.54 km^2. Due to the unavailability of county-specific statistics in the federal state Saarland and because county-level census data are lacking for seven minorities (people from Kosovo, Eritrea, Czech Republic, Somalia, Philippines, Cameroon, Sri Lanka), our analysis encompasses 54 minorities across 394 counties. Minority-county combinations constitute our basic unit of analysis, resulting in 20,751 unique local communities with at least one member. While our descriptive analyses are based on the full sample of organizations, data protection regulations necessitate a focus on minority communities with at least 40 observations in the census sample in multivariate analyses, corresponding to a minimum of about 400 members in the population. Our multivariate analytic sample consists of these 4,912 communities, which together make up 80% of the minority population with roots in one of the 54 focal origin countries. Online appendix E.9 replicates the descriptive analysis for this reduced sample and discusses characteristics of the reduced compared with the full sample.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the cross-classified multilevel data structure. Reflecting the outlined theoretical approaches, our predictors are measured on the local community level (structural intersectionality and sociodemographic consolidation), the minority level (inherent cultural traits, cultural distance, legal status precarity), and the county level (societal rejection). Online appendices A, B, and C detail the operationalization,

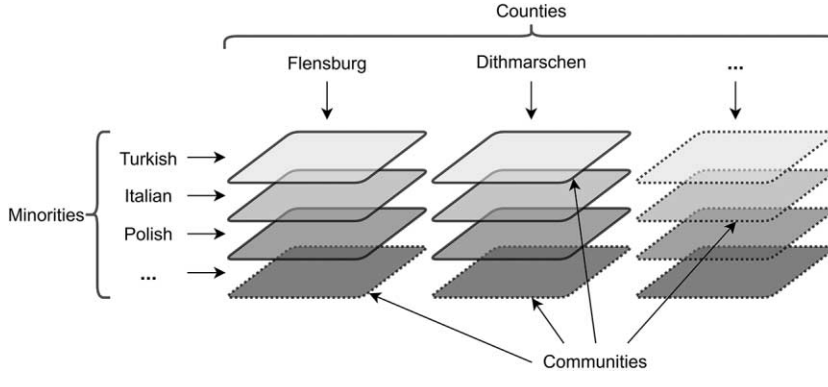

FIG. 1.—Cross-classified multilevel data structure

descriptive distributions, and data sources of all dependent and independent variables, respectively.

Dependent Variable: Ethnoreligious Infrastructures

Our dependent variable is the number of formally registered ethnoreligious associations, places of worship, and grocers per minority community. These data were gathered from four sources.

Association data were sourced from the German Trade Register, digitized and made public by the Open Knowledge Foundation (2021), reflecting registrations as of 2017. Registering an association in Germany is relatively easy: The minimal requirements are at least two members, a name, a short statement on common public interest, a place of main activity, a short formal statute, the name of a head person, and the payment of a fee of currently 100 €. Compared to other administrative matters, it thus poses only moderate bureaucratic hurdles even to little-established newcomers. Registration confers independent legal capacity, which is necessary for many day-to-day activities of associations, for example, renting properties and equipment or selling food and drink at festivities. We used various search terms for each minority, including stemmed names of countries, major cities, historical leaders, and subnational regions. Five coders then classified whether an entry represented an association serving the target minority based on the association's name and a web search. Associations with names referring to broader (e.g., "Latin American") or narrower (e.g., "Anatolian") categories than a country of origin were coded as serving all eligible minorities. We identified 3,457 religious associations based on indicators like "ditib" (Diyanet İşleri Türk İslam Birliği, a Turkish Sunni umbrella organization) or "orthodox" in their names. These were classified as places of worship and excluded from the association count. Intercoder reliability for nationality coding, assessed using Fleiss's kappa on a random sample of 189 entries, was 0.82. This procedure identified 12,910 unique associations, resulting in 19,741 total associations available to minorities after accounting for those serving multiple minorities.

Minority grocery data were obtained using Google's commercial Places API. In 2021, we queried the API with search terms combining "groceries", country of origin, and county (e.g., "Italienische Lebensmittel in Köln"). Additionally, we queried "Afro", "Asia", and "Arab" grocers to capture the panethnic offering of some minority grocers. Two coders then manually verified that the identified locations were indeed grocers serving the target minority, using the same procedure described for associations. This resulted in 4,875 unique grocers, or 22,597 after accounting for those serving multiple minorities.

Finally, data on *places of worship* were gathered from four sources. In addition to entries from the trade register, we used (1) lists of foreign-language

services provided by the Catholic dioceses in Germany, obtained from their webpages or through individual enquiries; (2) lists of places of worship provided by ethnoreligious umbrella organizations (e.g., "Verband der Islamischen Kulturzentren e.V."); (3) the crowd-sourced database "moscheesuche.de." Two coders applied similar hand-coding procedures as described for associations. Foreign-language services were coded as catering to all minorities in whose country of origin that language is regularly spoken. All other entries were coded based on indicators in their name (e.g., "uiazd", Union of Islamic-Albanian centers in Germany), or background information on the umbrella organizations listing them (e.g., "VIKZ", Verband der Islamischen Kulturzentren, which caters to Turkish-origin Muslims). Religious organizations without clear country affiliation were matched to all countries where at least 30% of the population adheres to that religion (app. E.4 provides alternative estimates excluding these organizations). This procedure resulted in 7,332 unique places of worship. After matching to relevant minorities, this figure expands to 65,330 places of worship with a broad country affiliation and 6,217 with a clear country affiliation. These data were also collected in 2021.

Our data collection protocol ensures the consistent sampling of a wide range of organizations catering to minorities of various sizes. However, given its focus on formal and registered organizations, it should not be regarded as a complete census of all, and particularly not of informal, organizations.

Predictors

To assess *essentialist arguments*, we measure the poststratification weighted average number of different organizations (e.g., churches, sports clubs, environmental organizations) in which individuals in the respective country of origin are members. Based on the World Values Survey, a major cross-national survey of human beliefs and values encompassing topics like religiosity, gender values, political outlook and behavior, or the importance of various life domains (Haerpfer et al. 2024), this measure captures the overall prevalence of associational life within a given society.

To test the importance of *cultural distance*, we employ three measures, each capturing a different facet of cultural distance between minorities' countries of origin and German society. We use countries of origin as the unit for determining cultural distance, although selective migration and post-migration experiences may result in differences between migrants and the population in their countries of origin. Yet our approach avoids issues of reverse causality between cultural orientations and integration experiences and thus provides a more robust foundation for assessing the importance of cultural distance. First, we use the cultural fixation index (Muthukrishna et al. 2020), a measure of cultural distance based on all opinion questions in the World Values Survey. Second, we introduce a novel measure of differences

in culinary practices, which captures differences in typical ingredients used in origin countries as documented in the United Nations Farming and Agriculture Organization's supply utilization accounts (FAO 2024). Based on the 2018 consumption figures for the 69 food items (e.g., "wine", "potatoes", "wheat and meslin flour", "cabbages") for which consistent information exists for all countries of origin, we compute culinary distances as the Jensen–Shannon divergence between the respective food baskets. This measure provides a concrete indicator of cultural distance rooted in everyday dietary practices and overcomes concerns associated with survey-based measures. Third, we use Pew (2015) data on origin countries' religious demography to measure denominational differences to Germany's secular and Christian-dominated mainstream society.

Figure 2 visualizes the correlation patterns between our cultural indicators across minorities. Except for the share of non-Muslim and non-Christian

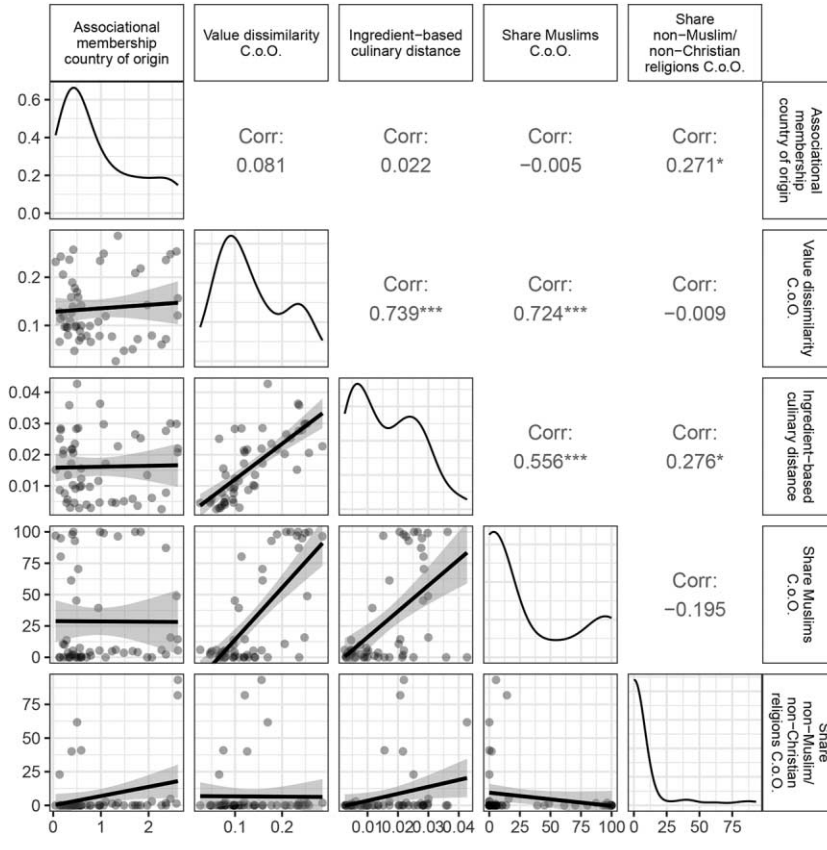

FIG. 2.—Associations between cultural indicators

religions, our measures of cultural distance, although based on very different data sources, are highly correlated, indicating that countries where people tend to hold values different from those of mainstream Germans also tend to have different culinary traditions and adhere to different religious beliefs. By contrast, our indicator of essentialist arguments is hardly correlated to the indicators of cultural distance.

To capture the multifaceted nature of *societal rejection*, we construct measures at both the regional and minority level. Regional far-right mobilization is operationalized as the combined county-level vote share for the far-right Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) parties in the 2017 German parliamentary elections. To assess the typical (in)security of minority members' legal status, we use information on immigrants' residence titles, distinguishing between those granting permanent residency and temporary residency (often linked to work or education) and those lacking a secure right to stay (e.g., [rejected] asylum seekers). Finally, we construct a minority-level indicator differentiating between minorities with roots in EU countries and those with roots in non-EU countries, serving as a composite proxy.

We measure a *community's local sociodemographic consolidation* using the 2011 census (RDC of the Federal Statistical Office and Statistical Offices of the Länder 2011). Specifically, we investigate consolidation by age (measured in brackets of 17 and under, 18–29, 30–49, 50–64, 65 and over), gender, and occupation (measured as International Standard Classification of Occupations [ISCO] main codes, where the small groups ISCO1 and ISCO2 [managers and professionals] and ISCO6 and ISCO7 [skilled farmers and skilled craftspeople] are combined). To identify the overlap of ethnicity with age, gender, and occupation, we use Allen et al.'s (2015) small-sample bias-corrected index of dissimilarity. Unlike previously used consolidation measures like Cramer's V, this measure has the key advantage of composition invariance, being unaffected by large differences in group size between minorities and the majority. Following Okamoto (2006), we report results for the consolidation of ethnicity and occupation in the main article. Online appendix E.5 reports additional results based on consolidation of ethnicity with age, gender, or combinations of age, gender, and occupation. Moreover, we also explored minorities' structural overlap across these dimensions vis-á-vis other local minority communities instead of the native majority. Results are consistent with those reported in the main article.

To measure a local community's *internal diversity* in age, gender, and occupation, we use the small-sample corrected Herfindahl–Hirschman index (Hall 2005). Figure 3 shows the distribution of internal diversity and consolidation indicators across the 4,912 communities in our analytical sample. Gender diversity shows little variation, with most communities approaching parity (values near .5). Age and occupational diversity exhibit greater variation,

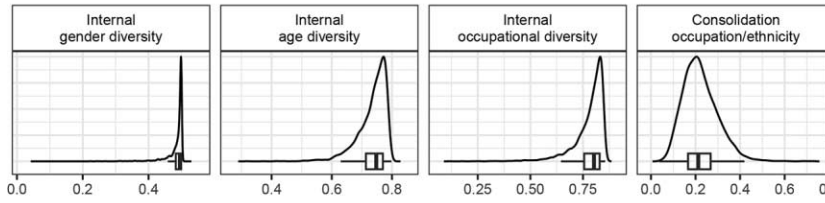

FIG. 3.—Distribution of communities' internal diversity and occupational consolidation

with some communities displaying noticeable concentration (values below .8). Local communities' occupational consolidation, finally, displays the greatest variability, ranging from near perfect evenness to strong consolidation (values above .4).

Estimation Strategy

We test hypotheses using negative-binomial regression with a log-link to predict the count of organizations y_{jk} for minority j within county k. We incorporate several strategies to address potential confounding and model-specification dependency. First, to account for the influence of population size on organizational counts, we employ generalized additive models with cubic regression splines $f(.)$ that flexibly control for potential nonlinearities in the relationship between minority community $e^{f(n_{jk})}$ and county overall $e^{f(n_k)}$ population sizes and organizational counts (Rohr and Martin 2024). Since we adjust for community size in all analyses, we focus our interpretation on infrastructure densities, the number of organizations relative to community population. Appendix B.1 describes our approach to estimating minority communities' population sizes from official data, and appendix E.6 presents results that are similar in conclusion from models using more parsimonious log-linear terms for county and community populations instead of splines.

Second, recognizing that even small communities may have access to infrastructures when they share a supranational panethnicity (e.g., Arab) or religion (e.g., Buddhist), we further adjust for the local size of panethnic $e^{\beta_j \times \text{Pan-Ethno}_{j,k}}$ and coreligious $e^{\beta_j \times \text{Pan-Reli}_{j,k}}$ populations. We allow the coefficients for these terms to vary across minorities within a random-slope framework as indicated by the j subscript to β.

Third, to address potential unobserved confounding and selection bias, we use fixed-effects specifications. When examining country-level variables, we incorporate minority fixed effects e^{q_j} (eq. 1) and vice versa e^{q_k} (eq. 2). Similarly, when assessing community-level variables, we incorporate both county and minority (two-way) fixed effects (eq. 3). This strategy allows us to partial out the influence of unobserved heterogeneity at each respective level. Whenever we omit county/minority fixed effects, we instead replace

them with a county/minority random effect e^{u}. Appendix E.3 presents results using various less restrictive specifications, yielding similar conclusions. Equations 1–3 present our models with the three distinct fixed-effects/random-effects specifications:

$$y_{jk} = e^{\alpha} \times \prod_{1}^{m} e^{\beta_m X_k} \times \prod_{1}^{p} e^{\beta_p X_{j,k}} \times e^{f(n_k)} \times e^{f(n_{jk})} \times e^{\beta_j \times \text{Pan-Ethno}_{j,k}} \times e^{\beta_j \times \text{Pan-Reli}_{j,k}} \times e^{q_j} \times e^{u_k}, \tag{1}$$

$$y_{jk} = e^{\alpha} \times \prod_{1}^{l} e^{\beta_l X_j} \times \prod_{1}^{p} e^{\beta_p X_{j,k}} \times e^{f(n_{jk})} \times e^{\beta_j \times \text{Pan-Ethno}_{j,k}} \times e^{\beta_j \times \text{Pan-Reli}_{j,k}} \times e^{q_k} \times e^{u_j}, \tag{2}$$

$$y_{jk} = e^{\alpha} \times \prod_{1}^{p} e^{\beta_p X_{j,k}} \times e^{f(n_{jk})} \times e^{\beta \times \text{Pan-Ethno}_{j,k}} \times e^{\beta \times \text{Pan-Reli}_{j,k}} \times e^{q_j} \times e^{q_k}. \tag{3}$$

In these equations, e^{α} represents the grand mean of organizational density across all counties and minorities. The terms $\prod_1^m e^{\beta_m X_k}$, $\prod_1^l e^{\beta_l X_j}$, and $\prod_1^p e^{\beta_p X_{j,k}}$ represent the coefficients of county-level, minority-level, and community-level predictors.

Fourth, to further address potential confounding and selection bias, we incorporate a range of covariates in our models. At the local community level, we control for occupational structure using the share of members who are employed, the share in professional or managerial positions, and the share in lesser-skilled occupations using the definitions described above. We also include controls for the share of minority members with tertiary education. To account for communities' different settlement histories (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005; Bloemraad et al. 2022), we further include the share of community members belonging to the first generation, the mean age in the community, and a measure of members' families' average duration of stay. This information comes from the 2011 census. At the county level, we adjust for surface area, local GDP per capita, and the share of people receiving social assistance using official data. As indicators of political opportunity structures, we control for location in East or West Germany and include the density of choirs and musical societies, gathered from the trade register, which proxy for the general strength of voluntary association–based civil society. While including covariates as shares and densities in models already adjusting for their denominators is controversial, the large variation in municipality and minority sizes makes counts too volatile and often hinders model convergence. Appendix E.7 presents less stable results using count-based controls, which support our main conclusions.

To mitigate endogeneity concerns arising from conditioning on potential mediators, we present results in three different covariate specifications. All

specifications contain the full set of county-level covariates, fixed effects permitting. In specification 1, we only include baseline community covariates (local minority community, supranational and coreligious population sizes, average age, duration of stay, and share belonging to the first generation) alongside the respective variable of interest. In specification 2, we additionally include measures of community socioeconomic structure (e.g., share employed in professional occupations). In the full specification, finally, we further add all variables of theoretical interest simultaneously. We report all coefficients as incidence rate ratios, which represent the estimated multiplicative change in the number of organizations associated with a one-unit increase in the predictor. Below we focus on visual representations of model results, but full numerical results can be found in appendix D.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings on the variation and drivers of ethnoreligious infrastructure density in Germany. We first detail descriptive patterns across regions, minorities, and local communities, before proceeding to multivariate analyses designed to test the competing theoretical perspectives outlined earlier.

Descriptive Patterns of Ethnoreligious Infrastructure

The geographic distribution of ethnoreligious infrastructures across Germany reveals distinct patterns. As depicted in panel A of figure 4, organizations are concentrated in urban centers such as Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, the Ruhr area in North-Rhine-Westphalia, the Stuttgart area in Baden-Wurttemberg, and the Frankfurt and Hannover regions. This pattern reflects the historical trajectory of labor migration to Germany, with western urban centers serving as primary destinations for guest workers. Conversely, rural regions, particularly in East Germany, Bavaria, and Rhineland-Palatinate, exhibit a lower prevalence of immigrant organizations.

These patterns of an East/West and urban/rural divide are further corroborated by panels B and C. Panel B illustrates the wide variation in ethnoreligious infrastructure density and stark East/West differences, with a median density of 2.32 organizations per 1,000 minority members in the East compared to 4.67 in the West. This descriptive pattern is consistent with the stark differences in settlement history and political opportunity structures between the two regions, with the East having more recent immigrant communities and less institutionalized support. This reveals the limitations of equating minority population size with ethnic enclaves and ethnoreligious infrastructure, a simplification frequently found in quantitative research. Our analysis demonstrates considerable heterogeneity in immigrant organizing

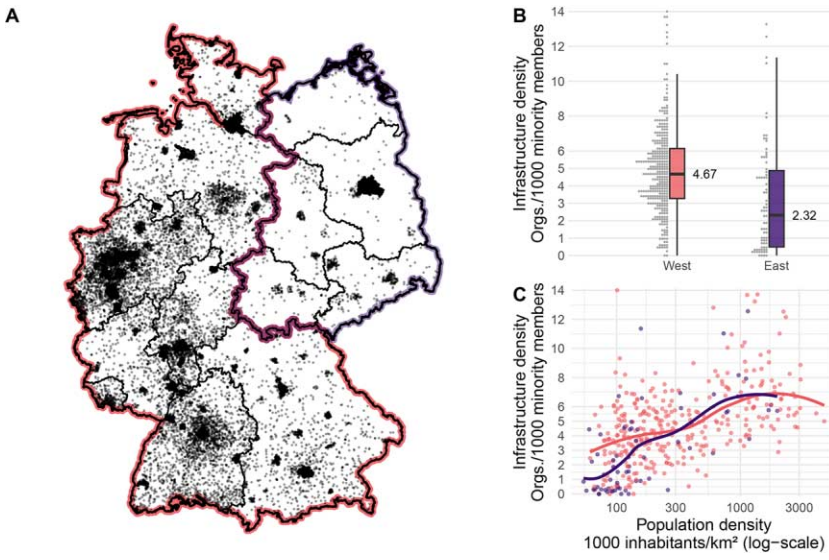

FIG. 4.—Spatial distribution of ethnoreligious infrastructure in Germany. Panel A maps the raw immigrant organization data. Panel B displays the ethnoreligious infrastructure density for each county. Characteristics of the regional distributions are visualized as box plots, where the central bar gives the median (annotated) and the upper and lower end of the box the first and third quartile. Panel C plots the infrastructure density of every county against that county's population density alongside a LOWESS smooth. Seven counties have their densities truncated at 14 to ease visual interpretation in panels B and C.

that is not attributable to population size but varies by region and other factors detailed below.

Panel C shows that in both the East and West, organizational densities are low in rural areas but rise with increasing urbanization, suggesting that sparsely populated rural areas are not conducive to ethnoreligious infrastructure formation. In highly urbanized areas with more than 1,500 inhabitants per square kilometer, we find no further increases.

Figure 5 adds minority-level variation to the geographic distribution. Local sociostructural configurations and cultural distance imply that different communities' ability and desire to form infrastructures can vary within the same region. Vice versa, members of the same minority may have different experiences across regions due to local differences in the degree of racialized exclusion. Figure 5 reveals substantial variation in infrastructure densities across local communities. While 46% of communities have no infrastructure, 30% have access to at least 10 organizations per 1,000 members. Both location and national origin clearly matter for infrastructure density, as evidenced by the uneven gradient from low-infrastructure minorities in low-infrastructure regions (bottom left) to high-infrastructure minorities/regions

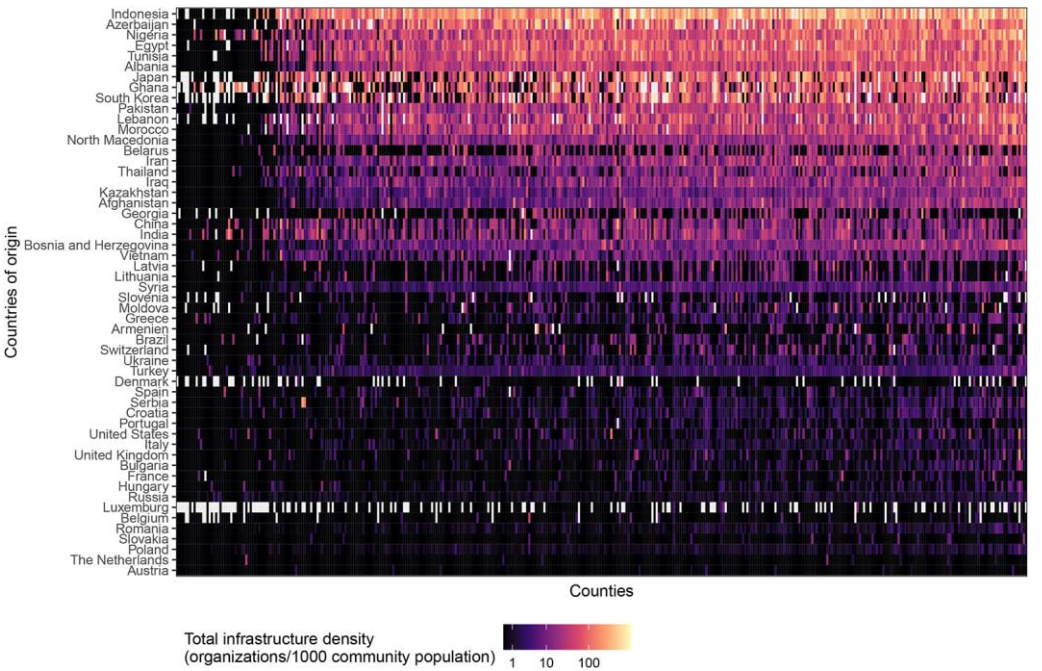

FIG. 5.—Community-level variation of ethnoreligious infrastructures. Heatmap of 20,751 local communities' infrastructure densities. Each column represents a county, each row a minority, and each tile a local community. White tiles indicate the absence of a minority in a county.

(top right). However, considerable within-minority and within-region variation is also apparent. For example, Vietnamese communities exhibit infrastructure densities ranging from 0 to 100 across counties. This heterogeneity underscores the need for analyses that account for the complex multilevel interplay of national origin, location, and community-level factors.

However, figures 4 and 5 only allow for limited conclusions about the group formation tendencies of minorities. To address this, we turn to the rigorous statistical framework introduced above. Each marker in figure 6 represents the infrastructure density of a local community, net of supranational pooling, nonlinear scaling, and county-level confounders. Figure 6 further displays key statistics of the resulting distributions for every minority using box plots, illustrating both within- and between-minority variations in infrastructure densities. All values are expressed as relative densities, with 1 representing the grand average across all minorities. For instance, the median Indonesian, Nigerian, and Albanian communities exhibit access to approximately five times the number of organizations expected based on their population size. Conversely, Austrian, Belgian, and Dutch communities typically establish less than 10% of the organizations anticipated, underscoring again the limitations of relying solely on population size as a proxy for ethnoreligious infrastructures.

Figure 6 further distinguishes between EU and non-EU immigrant minorities, broadly reflecting differences in contexts of reception related to legal status and racialization, which shows a clear pattern: EU minorities generally establish fewer organizations than expected based on their population size, while non-European and predominantly Muslim minorities tend to establish more. This trend is most pronounced for places of worship among predominantly Muslim minorities. In line with theories emphasizing societal rejection, these findings suggest that legally privileged minorities may be less reliant on ethnoreligious infrastructures. Finally, considerable within-minority heterogeneity persists even after accounting for pooling, scaling, and county selection, suggesting that minority-level factors, while important, can offer only a partial explanation.

Multivariate Analysis of Infrastructure Density

To disentangle the factors driving this variation, we now turn to multivariate negative-binomial regression models (see eqs. 1–3). We first discuss the role of control variables before testing the core hypotheses derived from our theoretical framework.

Our multivariate analyses confirm key insights of prior research (see full results in app. D.1): Attesting to the importance of settlement history, longer-established and socioeconomically advantaged communities in more urbanized regions exhibit greater infrastructure density. Moreover, a strong

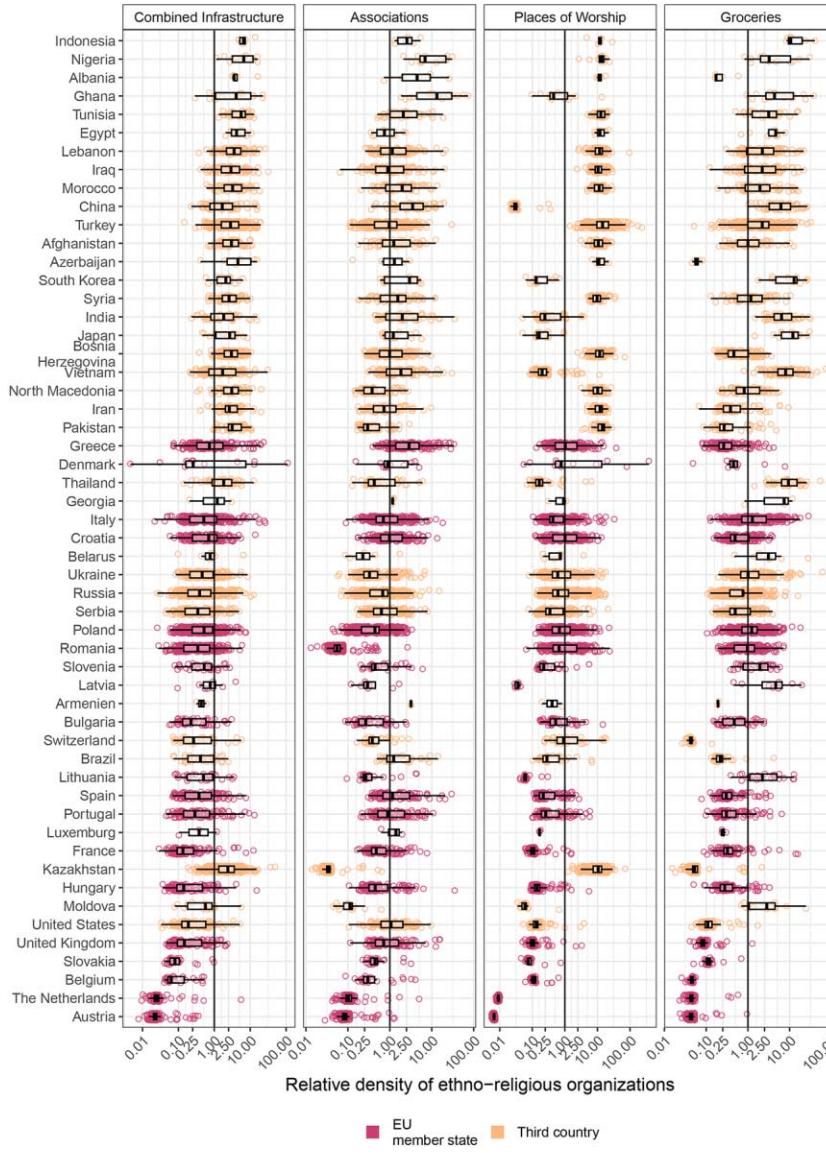

FIG. 6.—Model-based estimates of infrastructure variation between and within minorities. Estimates are based on the sum of the best linear prediction of the minority-level random effect in eq. 2 with minimal controls (panethnic and religious community size, community population, and county fixed effects) and the community residual. Box plots show the first, second, and third quartile of minorities' relative density estimates. $N = 4{,}912$.

correlation exists between the density of (majority-society) musical societies and minority infrastructures, suggesting similar spatial opportunity structures for both ethnic and nonethnic associations.

In the following, we first discuss results relating to theories emphasizing more universal minority characteristics and cultural factors, before turning to explanations centered on societal rejection and specific local structural conditions.

Figure 7 presents the core regression coefficients (as incidence rate ratios) for our primary predictors of interest, organized following the conceptual spectrum from universal/minority-level factors (cultural arguments, rejection) to local sociostructural conditions. All estimates are shown for baseline, intermediate, and full specifications (see "Estimation Strategy"). Continuous predictors are standardized within their respective levels (community, minority, county).

We first examine *arguments rooted in cultural factors*, differentiating between essentialist claims about inherent traits (hypothesis 1) and relational arguments about cultural distance (hypothesis 2). The top row displays estimates of transnational continuities in organizational behavior, an approximation of the importance of inherent cultural traits. Contrary to essentialist expectations (hypothesis 1), it shows that the prevalence of associational membership in sending countries does not predict immigrant community infrastructures. Appendix E.1 presents additional analyses using an indicator of cultural traits hypothesized by essentialist accounts to be conducive to immigrants' establishment of organizations—the importance of friends and leisure—which are likewise not robustly related to infrastructures. Overall, the evidence does not support essentialist arguments.

Turning to relational cultural arguments (hypothesis 2), the results provide consistent support for the role of cultural distance and the implied demand for alternative goods and resources. Here distance from mainstream society, rather than specific cultural content, is hypothesized to drive immigrant organizing. An initial test using a comprehensive measure of cultural distance based on World Values Survey data (second row of fig. 7) reveals that minorities originating from culturally distant countries exhibit significantly denser infrastructures. This finding holds after controlling for community-level socioeconomic and demographic composition, suggesting that the cultural processes underlying infrastructure creation are largely independent of economic attainment, particularly for organizations serving material and spiritual needs (e.g., grocers and places of worship). Even after additionally adjusting for other minority-level variables in the full specification, cultural distance remains a robust predictor among all infrastructure types, except for associations.

Figure 8 further explores the relationship between cultural distance and infrastructure density. The first row replicates the full-specification estimate

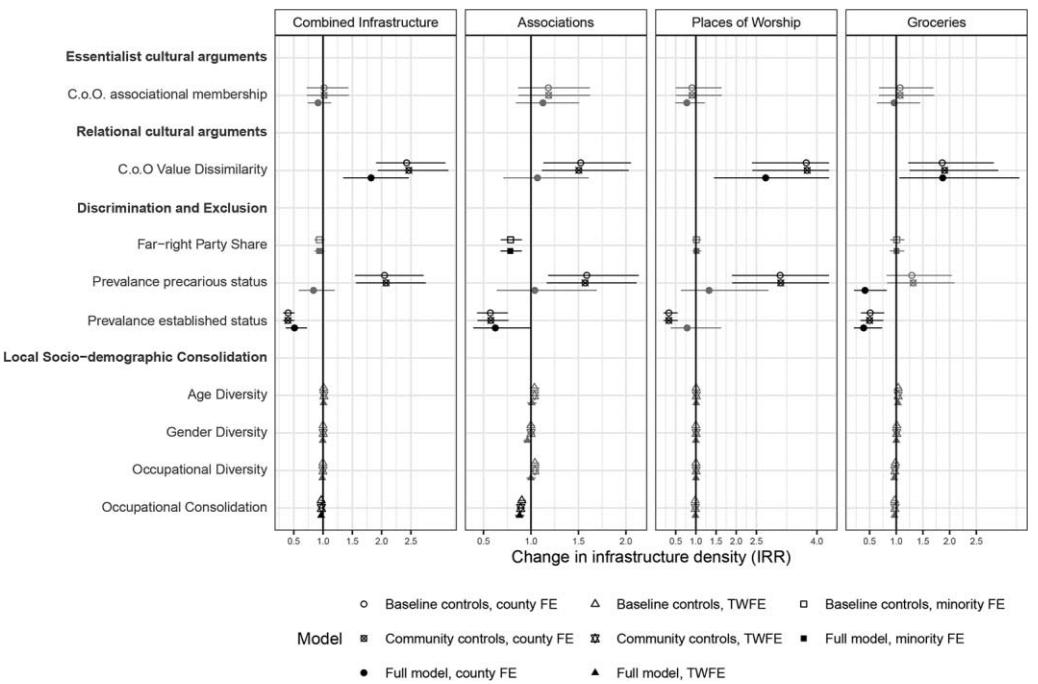

FIG. 7.—Cultural, societal, and local sociostructural correlates of ethnoreligious infrastructures. Coefficients represent multiplicative change in the expected count of organization type (combined infrastructure, associations, places of worship, or groceries) for a one standard deviation change in the predictor variable. $N = 4{,}912$. Full model results are presented numerically in tables D.1–D.8 in online app. D.

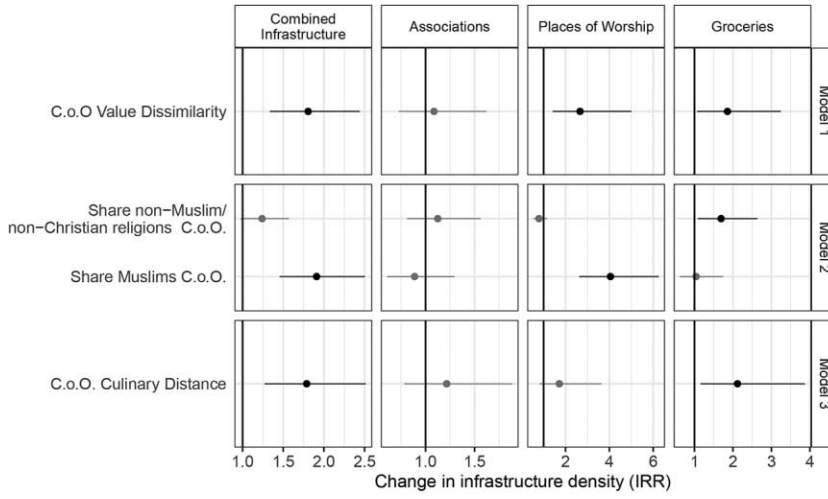

FIG. 8.—Cultural needs and ethnoreligious infrastructures. Coefficients represent multiplicative change in the expected count of organization type (combined infrastructure, associations, places of worship, or groceries) for a one standard deviation change in the predictor variable. $N = 4{,}912$. Full model results are presented numerically in tables D.9–D.12 in online app. D.

of cultural distance from figure 7. Replacing the composite cultural distance indicator with the share of adherents of non-Christian religions in the origin country (row 2), a proxy for minorities' unmet spiritual needs, reveals that the share of Muslims strongly predicts mosque density but not other infrastructure types. However, the combined share of adherents of non-Muslim and non-Christian beliefs does not predict places of worship, suggesting that spiritual needs are most impactful among Muslim minorities. Finally, substituting the global cultural distance indicator with a measure of culinary distance (row 3), based on differences in the typical ingredients of national cuisines, also aligns with demand-driven explanations. Culinary distance predicts ethnic grocery density but not nonreligious associations or places of worship. Appendix E.2 replicates this finding using a taste-based culinary distance measure that captures differences in the taste profiles (salty, spicy, sweet, etc.) of typical dishes. Taken together, the results in figure 8 considerably strengthen the case for cultural distance arguments operating through demand mechanisms. Not only does a value-based measure of cultural distance predict infrastructure presence generally, but different domain-specific measures selectively predict the presence of domain-specific organizations.

Moving from cultural origins to the host society context, we next test hypotheses suggesting infrastructures develop as a protective response to *societal rejection* (hypothesis 3). We find contrasting results in figure 7. Hypothesis 3a predicted denser infrastructures in response to anti-immigrant

mobilization. However, our results show the opposite. Contrary to (segmented) assimilation and boundary-making claims, residing in more xenophobic areas diminishes minority associational life, even after controlling for a wide range of other regional characteristics. This finding, while contrary to reactive-formation models, is consistent with a political opportunity structure perspective, which posits that hostile political contexts suppress organizing by closing off resources and increasing the costs of mobilization (Koopmans et al. 2005). Yet, regarding legal status (hypothesis 3b), the findings are nuanced. Assimilation theories posit that restrictive legal frameworks and insecure residency status promote the formation of ethnoreligious infrastructures to compensate for the lack of legal access with intraethnic organizational resources. Figure 7 aligns with a refined interpretation: Although precarious legal status may increase reliance on coethnic infrastructure, the challenges of organizing within volatile communities facing legal hurdles appear to counteract this effect; the relation between precarious legal status and infrastructure density is fully explained by their correlation with other indicators. However, there is clear agreement with the assimilation theory conjecture that the long-term perspectives afforded by secure residency shift socializing and opportunity seeking away from ethnic enclaves.

Finally, we test structuralist arguments emphasizing local conditions (hypothesis 4), examining whether *community homogeneity and sociostructural consolidation* relative to the majority population foster organizational density. Despite theoretical expectations (hypotheses 4a and 4b), all corresponding estimates in figure 7 are close to zero and overwhelmingly insignificant. If anything, there are fewer associations in minority communities whose internal sociodemographic composition is homogeneous or highly distinct from that of native Germans. Further analyses show that these conclusions are identical using alternative definitions of consolidation, or less restrictive fixed-effects specifications (see apps. E.3 and E.5).

Exploring Effect Heterogeneity Across Contexts

Immigrant organizing may still be contingent on local constellations, as structuralist and contextual arguments also imply that the importance of minority- and country-level factors might vary depending on the specific local or minority context. To probe the scope for such processes, figure 9 examines how the importance of the central minority-level factors identified above vary over regions and vice versa. Importantly, by using random slopes, this approach does not require that the sources of this variation be explicitly measured. Panel A visualizes the full variability of cultural distance coefficients over all counties, demonstrating that the association is rather constant across regions and does not even differ between the highly dissimilar contexts of East and West Germany. Even the most extreme outliers are less

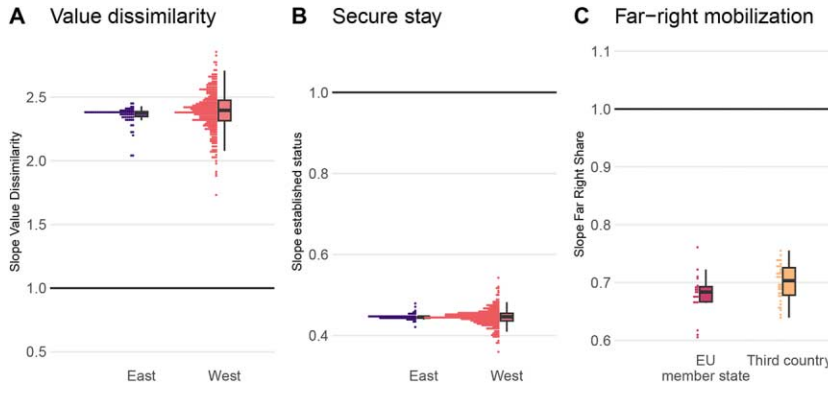

FIG. 9.—Interregional and interminority variability of central mechanisms. Random slope coefficients from models allowing the coefficient of the specified predictor (A: value dissimilarity; B: secure stay coefficient; C: far-right mobilization coefficient) to vary across counties (panels A, B) or minorities (panel C). Each point represents the estimated coefficient ("effect") of that predictor within a specific context (county or minority). $N = 4{,}912$. Full model results are presented numerically in table D.13 in online app. D.

than 20% from the overall coefficient. Cultural distance appears to operate relatively independently of local conditions.

Panel B reproduces this analysis for the importance of the share of minority members with secure residence titles. Again, the importance of members with a secure legal status is rather constant and similarly strong in East and West Germany. Panel C finally visualizes the importance of local far-right mobilization across minorities, recognizing that these typically target racialized minorities but not predominantly white EU citizens. As before, however, the importance of far-right mobilization is all but constant and suppresses minority organizing among both EU and non-EU origin minorities similarly. Taken together, figure 9 is testament to a strikingly constant, rather than locally dependent, importance of minority- and regional-level factors. In conclusion, neither the narrow interpretation of sociostructural contingency arguments, which focuses on explicit measures of sociostructural homogeneity and consolidation, nor a wider interpretation, highlighting the variation of more general explanatory mechanisms over individual communities, finds empirical support in our analysis.

CONCLUSION

This article opened with the question why some immigrant communities build robust organizational infrastructures while others do not. Based on an unprecedented analysis of over 25,000 registered and formal organizations across 4,912 local communities in Germany, an analysis that avoids groupist selection bias by sampling minority communities rather than their

organizations, this study challenges prevailing assumptions about ethnic group formation. We demonstrate that demographic size is an unreliable predictor of community organization and that the formation of ethnoreligious infrastructures is driven more consistently by cultural distance from the host society than by the local structural conditions emphasized in much contemporary work. While specific local mechanisms are certainly decisive in select cases, our results indicate that on a general level, cultural distance is a more consistent and powerful predictor of organizational infrastructure. Taken together, this study reveals three major insights.

First, our article provides solid empirical evidence for the idea that a demographically sizable minority does not necessarily form a group. For example, while some minorities, such as Albanians and Nigerians, have a disproportionately high number of organizations relative to their population size—sometimes 10 times as many as expected—others, like the Dutch and British, have significantly fewer—sometimes less than 10% of what their population size might suggest. Importantly, even within minorities like Albanians and Nigerians, some communities have virtually no organizations. This demonstrates that immigrant associations are not a necessary feature of immigration, contrary to prominent arguments (Moya 2005). Overall, our analysis reveals considerable variation in immigrant organizing both within the same minority across different locations and across different minorities within the same location. This evidence supports a long-standing theoretical critique within ethnicity studies and highlights a crucial methodological problem: The frequent proxying of ethnoreligious infrastructures with population sizes in quantitative studies of immigrant community effects on immigrant integration is problematic. Our approach, and the data we make available alongside this article, offer a means of addressing this issue.

Second, the factors responsible for this variation largely track cultural differences between origin and destination societies. A general measure of cultural distance predicts the overall presence of organizational infrastructure relatively well, while more specific measures, such as religious or culinary distance, selectively predict the presence of corresponding organizations (e.g., places of worship and grocery stores, respectively). This finding challenges both essentialist perspectives, which emphasize the transnational continuity of associational behavior, and prevailing constructivist accounts, which emphasize the strong dependence of ethnic group formation on local processes. We find no support for claims that some minorities are inherently more or less inclined to form associations. Instead, cultural differences between origin and destination societies incentivize organizational proliferation by stimulating demand for ethnically specific goods, services, and activities, much as anticipated by assimilation theories. Spiritual and cultural needs arising from Muslim faith emerge as an important driver of ethnoreligious infrastructures. While the substantial regional variation in immigrant organizing

within specific minorities seems to support constructivist accounts, the importance of cultural distance remains remarkably consistent across German regions, with no significant difference observed even between East and West Germany, despite the stark divide in contexts of reception and political opportunity structures. Furthermore, our data provide no evidence that consolidation or within-group heterogeneity at the local level affects the establishment of ethnicity-focused organizations. This contrasts with a burgeoning literature focusing on friendship networks among students and Okamoto's work on panethnic Asian organizations, which merge a constructivist perspective on ethnic group formation with structuralist arguments about local consolidation processes. Differences might stem from a broader range of organizations covered in our study, including panethnic and religious organizations, across thousands of immigrant communities with origins from all continents, offering a comprehensive design with greater statistical power to detect robust associations. Moreover, our focus on organizations rather than adolescent friendships offers a particularly suitable setup for testing theories of consolidation and the importance of contextual circumstance for ethnic group formation. Yet, despite evident local heterogeneity, we find that the drivers of ethnoreligious infrastructure formation operate relatively uniformly across different locations and minorities. This perhaps unexpected finding challenges current theoretical trends. It suggests that future research into immigrant ethnic group formation would benefit from considering origin-cultural sources of immigrant minorities' group making.

Third, our results offer a nuanced understanding of how societal rejection vis-à-vis political opportunity structures influences organizational development among immigrant minorities. Consistent with assimilation theories, a higher proportion of members with secure permanent residence is associated with lower infrastructure density. This suggests that as legal discrimination diminishes and immigrants can confidently build their futures in Germany, socializing and opportunity-seeking shift from the enclave to the mainstream. However, contrary to the implications of arguments about racialized contexts of reception and blocked acculturation, areas with pronounced far-right mobilization, indicating local hostility and racism, exhibit markedly lower levels of immigrant organizing. Our results thus suggest that rather than uniformly fostering defensive enclave building to counterbalance imposed disadvantages, local far-right mobilization and associated forms of societal rejection can function as closed political opportunity structures that suppress and discourage immigrant organizing.

We believe these are three important insights but acknowledge that they are limited by the correlational and cross-sectional nature of our investigation. Future research would benefit from a dynamic investigation over time, but currently data on the foundation date of organizations are not systematically available. Furthermore, transnational dynamics, including

state support from origin countries, and societal factors such as political-economic regimes, citizenship laws, and state accommodation of civil society potentially influence the mechanisms we examine. Similarly, our models do not account for geographical proximity, which may allow minorities from neighboring countries to access resources across the border, a potential avenue for future research (Waldinger 2017). Finally, the scope of this study is restricted to formal and registered ethnoreligious infrastructures; incorporating informal activities—often organized via social media—remains a crucial task for future research. We hope to convince readers that despite these limitations our approach is a considerable step forward.

Questions about ethnic group formation and community making rank among the most important ones that scholars of immigration study, yet so far, they have remained difficult to answer because social scientists have lacked a comprehensive methodology that also measures the organizational dimension of groupness. The methodology we propose has allowed us to tackle long-standing research desiderata in a large-*N* approach. We hope this approach and the insights we gained based on it will inspire scholars to advance this field further.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Replication materials for this article can be found in Wiedner et al. (2026*b*), in the Harvard Dataverse, https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/JTITB9. Primary data on ethnoreligious organizations can be found in Wiedner et al. (2026*a*) in the GESIS research data repository, https://doi.org/10.7802/2900.

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