

# Immigration Attitudes: Trends, Impact & Public Opinion

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## Introduction and Conceptualization of Attitudes Toward Immigration

Attitudes toward immigration represent a complex and multifaceted area of study within social psychology, political science, and sociology, serving as a critical barometer of intergroup relations and societal cohesion. These attitudes are defined as relatively enduring evaluations--positive or negative--that individuals hold concerning immigrants, immigration policies, or the overall impact of migration streams on the host society. Unlike simple opinions, attitudes are theorized to possess affective, cognitive, and behavioral components. The affective component encompasses emotional reactions, such as fear, sympathy, or resentment; the cognitive element involves beliefs and stereotypes about immigrants (e.g., beliefs regarding their economic burden or cultural contributions); and the behavioral component predisposes individuals toward specific actions, such as voting for restrictive policies or engaging in welcoming behaviors. Understanding these attitudes is paramount, as they directly influence public policy debates, electoral outcomes, and the success or failure of integration efforts in increasingly diverse nations. The sheer scale and velocity of global migration in the 21st century have intensified scrutiny of these attitudes, making their study central to understanding contemporary political polarization and social identity dynamics.

The object of the attitude itself is often highly ambiguous and heterogeneous, contributing to the complexity of measurement and analysis. Individuals rarely hold a singular attitude toward "immigration" but rather differentiate their evaluations based on specific migrant characteristics, including origin country, legal status (e.g., refugees versus economic migrants), skill level, and perceived cultural distance from the native population. For instance, research consistently shows that attitudes are significantly more hostile toward groups perceived as culturally or religiously distant, or those whose arrival is associated with perceived dependency on state resources. Conversely, highly skilled migrants or those sharing linguistic or historical ties often elicit more favorable responses. This differentiation highlights that attitudes are not merely reactions to the abstract concept of demographic change, but are deeply rooted in the specific intergroup dynamics and the perceived congruence between the immigrant group and the host nation's established social hierarchy and norms. Therefore, any robust analysis must account for the specific context and the characteristics of both the perceiver and the perceived group when evaluating the underlying drivers of acceptance or rejection.

Furthermore, attitudes toward immigration are typically characterized by ambivalence, meaning individuals often hold simultaneously positive and negative evaluations. This ambivalence arises because immigration can activate conflicting values within an individual. For example, a person might genuinely value humanitarian principles and openness (leading to positive affect) while simultaneously harboring concerns about economic competition or the strain on public services (leading to negative cognitions). This internal conflict makes attitudes less stable and more susceptible to influence by political rhetoric or media framing. The degree of ambivalence is often high in democratic societies where norms of tolerance and equality clash with self-interest and

group protection motives. Recognizing this inherent conflict is crucial, as ambivalent attitudes are less predictive of behavior than consistently polarized attitudes, yet they are highly relevant in understanding how public opinion shifts rapidly in response to external events, such as economic crises or security threats.

## Theoretical Frameworks of Attitude Formation

The academic literature draws upon several established theoretical frameworks to explain the origins and maintenance of attitudes toward immigration, moving beyond simple prejudice to incorporate motivational, cognitive, and intergroup dynamics. One of the most influential frameworks is the **Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)**, which posits that negative attitudes arise primarily from perceptions of threat, categorized into two main forms: realistic threats and symbolic threats. Realistic threats involve perceived competition over tangible resources, such as jobs, wages, housing, or access to public services, aligning closely with economic concerns. Symbolic threats, conversely, involve the perceived challenge to the ingroup's culture, values, traditions, language, or national identity. ITT suggests that symbolic threats are often more powerful predictors of anti-immigrant sentiment than realistic threats, especially in post-industrial societies where cultural maintenance is highly salient. The theory emphasizes that these threats are subjective perceptions, meaning the objective reality of the threat is less important than the psychological belief that the ingroup's well-being is endangered by the presence of the outgroup.

Complementary to ITT is **Social Identity Theory (SIT)**, and its extension, Self-Categorization Theory, which explain anti-immigrant attitudes through the lens of group membership and identity maintenance. SIT proposes that individuals derive self-esteem and a sense of belonging from their affiliation with an ingroup (e.g., the national majority). When the ingroup identity is salient or perceived as threatened--often by the presence of a distinct outgroup like immigrants--individuals tend to enhance the positivity of the ingroup while derogating the outgroup. This mechanism, known as ingroup bias, serves to protect and elevate the ingroup's distinctiveness and status. Immigration often makes national identity highly salient, prompting comparisons that can result in discriminatory attitudes aimed at maintaining the perceived superiority or purity of the native group. Furthermore, the perceived cultural distance of the immigrant group exacerbates this effect, as greater differences make the outgroup a more potent threat to the ingroup's normative structure and cultural boundaries.

A third major framework, **Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT)**, provides a more direct focus on competition for limited resources. RGCT argues that when two groups are in actual or perceived competition for scarce resources, intergroup hostility, and negative attitudes naturally emerge. While often overlapping with the realistic threat dimension of ITT, RGCT emphasizes the structural conditions that create competition, such as high unemployment rates or severe housing shortages. Although early formulations of RGCT focused on objective conflict, contemporary applications

recognize that perceived competition is often sufficient to drive negative attitudes, even if statistical evidence does not support the claim of resource depletion by immigrants. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing attitudes in contexts where high levels of economic inequality or austerity measures make resource scarcity a dominant theme in political discourse. These theoretical lenses collectively demonstrate that attitudes toward immigration are not monolithic but arise from a dynamic interplay between cognitive appraisals of threat, emotional responses, and the fundamental human need for positive group identity.

## Economic Determinants of Attitudes

Economic factors represent a primary, though often contested, driver of attitudes toward immigration. The core hypothesis suggests that individuals who perceive immigrants as competitors in the labor market or as a fiscal burden on the welfare state will exhibit more negative attitudes. This perception is particularly strong among low-skilled native workers who fear that immigrants, often willing to work for lower wages, will depress their earnings or displace them from their jobs. Empirical research examining the link between individual economic status and anti-immigrant attitudes yields mixed results, however. While some studies confirm that those in precarious economic positions or sectors exposed to immigrant labor are more hostile, others find that economic anxiety is often mediated by subjective perceptions rather than objective labor market statistics. For example, perceived job insecurity, even if not statistically grounded, can be a stronger predictor of negative attitudes than actual unemployment status, suggesting that the psychological interpretation of economic risk is highly influential.

Beyond direct labor market competition, concerns regarding the fiscal impact of immigration are highly salient in determining public attitudes, particularly in nations with generous welfare systems. Nativists often argue that immigrants consume more in public services (e.g., healthcare, education, social security) than they contribute in taxes, leading to a net fiscal drain on the host nation. This argument often intersects with perceptions of legal status and dependency; attitudes tend to be significantly more negative toward refugees or asylum seekers, who are often viewed as immediate consumers of state resources, compared to highly skilled economic migrants, who are typically perceived as net fiscal contributors. The perception of fiscal burden is often amplified by political messaging, which frequently highlights instances of welfare misuse or dependency, regardless of the overall economic contribution of immigrant populations. This focus on fiscal strain is a powerful cognitive shortcut that allows individuals to rationalize exclusionary attitudes without resorting to overt prejudice.

However, the relationship between economics and attitudes is moderated by several factors, including the type of economy and the level of globalization. In highly diversified, knowledge-based economies, the perceived economic threat may shift from low-skilled competition to competition for high-end professional jobs, though this tends to affect a smaller segment of the population.

Furthermore, the economic argument is often intertwined with cultural fears, meaning that purely economic self-interest rarely explains the full variance in anti-immigrant sentiment. Many studies utilizing advanced econometric models find that once sociotropic concerns (concerns about the nation's economy rather than one's own) and cultural threat perceptions are controlled for, the direct effect of individual economic vulnerability diminishes. This suggests that while economic concerns provide the initial rationale, they are often leveraged and amplified by symbolic concerns about national identity and cultural integrity, transforming economic anxiety into sociopolitical hostility.

## Sociocultural and Identity Threats

Sociocultural concerns, revolving around the preservation of national identity and cultural homogeneity, are consistently found to be the strongest predictors of negative attitudes toward immigration. These threats manifest as the fear that the influx of foreign populations will erode the host country's established values, language, religion, and way of life. This fear is not necessarily directed at the physical presence of immigrants but rather at the perceived long-term consequences of demographic change on the definition of "who belongs." High levels of perceived cultural distance--for example, differences in religious practice or adherence to gender norms--significantly heighten these symbolic threats, leading to more exclusionary attitudes than economic concerns alone. The concept of **symbolic boundaries** is critical here, referring to the conceptual distinctions people make to categorize objects, people, and practices, which ultimately define who is inside and who is outside the ingroup. Immigration challenges these boundaries, prompting defensive reactions aimed at re-establishing cultural separation.

The emphasis on cultural maintenance often drives demands for assimilation rather than integration. Individuals who prioritize national homogeneity tend to view immigrants' adherence to their native traditions as a deliberate rejection of the host society, interpreting cultural difference as an act of defiance or a sign of unwillingness to adapt. This perspective frames cultural diversity not as an asset but as a source of fragmentation and social disorder. Research utilizing measures of nationalism and patriotism frequently demonstrates that exclusionary forms of nationalism--those emphasizing ethnic purity and strict boundary maintenance--are strongly correlated with restrictive attitudes toward immigration. Conversely, civic forms of patriotism, which define national identity based on adherence to shared political institutions and democratic values, tend to be associated with more welcoming stances, provided immigrants are perceived as willing to adopt those civic norms.

Furthermore, the perception of sociocultural threat is heavily influenced by the majority group's historical narrative and sense of entitlement regarding the national territory. In countries with a strong, long-standing ethnic majority, rapid demographic change can trigger a sense of **group relative deprivation**--the feeling that the ingroup is losing its rightful status, power, or cultural

dominance relative to the outgroup. This feeling of displacement, often termed "cultural backlash," is a powerful emotional driver that fuels populist and anti-immigrant political movements. The psychological distress caused by perceived cultural loss often outweighs the distress caused by tangible economic loss, demonstrating the fundamental importance of identity protection in shaping public opinion. Thus, effective policy interventions must address not only the economic realities of migration but also the deeply held identity concerns of the native population.

## Psychological Mechanisms and Intergroup Contact

Underlying the economic and cultural frameworks are fundamental psychological mechanisms that facilitate the acceptance or rejection of immigrants. Two prominent mechanisms are **Authoritarianism** and **Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)**. Authoritarianism, particularly Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), reflects a tendency to submit to perceived legitimate authorities, aggress against outgroups sanctioned by those authorities, and adhere rigidly to social conventions. Individuals high in RWA tend to view immigrants as threats to social order and stability, leading them to favor strict, punitive immigration policies designed to restore perceived order and homogeneity. SDO, on the other hand, reflects an individual's desire for group-based hierarchy and inequality. People high in SDO generally believe that some groups are inherently superior to others and should dominate, leading them to oppose policies that promote equality or resource redistribution, such as integration programs or refugee aid, viewing them as undermining the established social hierarchy.

Prejudice, defined as a generalized negative attitude toward an outgroup, serves as a crucial mediator in anti-immigrant attitudes. While contemporary prejudice is often expressed subtly--termed modern or symbolic prejudice--it remains a potent force. Modern prejudice often involves expressing opposition to policies that would benefit immigrants (e.g., affirmative action, state support) under the guise of adherence to traditional values like individualism or meritocracy, thereby allowing individuals to maintain a non-prejudiced self-image while still supporting discriminatory outcomes. This mechanism explains why individuals might deny feeling personal hostility toward immigrants yet strongly oppose their presence or integration. Analyzing these subtle forms of prejudice is essential for understanding contemporary anti-immigrant sentiment, which rarely relies on overt racial slurs but often utilizes coded language emphasizing cultural incompatibility or rule-breaking.

Conversely, the **Contact Hypothesis**, originally formulated by Gordon Allport, offers a psychological mechanism for mitigating negative attitudes. This hypothesis posits that under specific optimal conditions--such as equal status between groups, shared goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support--direct, positive contact with members of the immigrant group can reduce prejudice and anxiety, leading to more favorable attitudes. Extensive meta-analytic research confirms that contact is generally effective in fostering positive intergroup relations.

However, the quality and nature of the contact are crucial. Superficial or negative contact can reinforce stereotypes and increase hostility. Furthermore, while direct contact is highly effective, even indirect forms of contact, such as extended contact (knowing someone who has an immigrant friend) or mediated contact (exposure through positive media representations), have been shown to reduce generalized threat perceptions and foster empathy toward immigrant populations, offering scalable solutions for improving intergroup harmony in diverse societies.

## Political and Institutional Influences

Attitudes toward immigration are profoundly shaped by the political environment, including institutional policies, party rhetoric, and media framing. Political elites often play a critical role in defining immigration as either a threat or an opportunity. When political parties, particularly those on the right, adopt anti-immigrant platforms, they legitimize and amplify existing negative sentiments among the public. This process of **elite cueing** suggests that voters look to trusted political leaders to define their stance on complex issues like immigration. When mainstream parties adopt nativist rhetoric, it can shift the Overton window, making previously extreme anti-immigrant views acceptable within public discourse. Conversely, when political leadership emphasizes the economic necessity or humanitarian duty associated with migration, public attitudes tend to soften.

The institutional context, particularly the design and implementation of immigration and integration policies, also exerts a strong influence. Policies that emphasize multiculturalism and inclusion tend to signal institutional support for diversity, which can encourage positive intergroup contact and reduce feelings of threat among the native population. Conversely, highly restrictive or punitive policies, such as aggressive deportation measures or barriers to citizenship, can institutionalize anti-immigrant sentiment, reinforcing the idea that immigrants are inherently unwanted or dangerous. The perception of whether the government is "in control" of its borders is also highly influential; public anxiety often spikes when the political system is perceived as failing to manage migration flows effectively, regardless of the actual numbers of arrivals.

The role of the media in framing immigration narratives is also critical. Media outlets often rely on dramatic or conflict-driven narratives, frequently linking immigrants to crime, economic burden, or security threats. This negative framing, especially when focused on specific subgroups like refugees or undocumented migrants, reinforces negative stereotypes and elevates the perceived level of realistic and symbolic threat among the audience. Studies show that exposure to media narratives emphasizing the cost and danger of immigration leads to significantly more negative attitudes and support for exclusionary policies. Conversely, media coverage that humanizes immigrants through personal stories, or emphasizes their contributions to society, can foster empathy and mitigate prejudice. The selective amplification of negative stories thus serves as a powerful mechanism through which institutional actors and media organizations shape the

psychological landscape of immigration attitudes.

## Measurement and Methodological Challenges

Measuring attitudes toward immigration accurately presents significant methodological challenges, primarily due to the sensitivity of the topic and the prevalence of social desirability bias. Most research relies on explicit measures, such as survey questions asking respondents to rate their agreement with statements regarding immigration levels, immigrant contributions, or policy preferences. However, respondents may be reluctant to express overtly prejudiced views due to social norms against racism or xenophobia, leading to an underreporting of negative attitudes. To address this, researchers employ techniques such as list experiments or randomized response techniques, which allow respondents to provide sensitive answers anonymously, often revealing higher levels of anti-immigrant sentiment than direct questioning.

To bypass conscious control and social desirability, researchers increasingly utilize **Implicit Measures** of attitude. The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is a common tool that measures the strength of automatic associations between the target group (immigrants) and evaluative attributes (good/bad). Implicit measures often reveal negative associations even among individuals who explicitly report positive or neutral attitudes, suggesting that unconscious biases play a significant role in judgment and behavior. The correlation between explicit and implicit measures is typically weak to moderate, indicating that they capture different aspects of the attitude structure. Explicit measures tend to predict deliberate, controlled behaviors (like voting choices), while implicit measures are better predictors of spontaneous, nonverbal behaviors (like non-contact or subtle discrimination).

A further challenge lies in ensuring cross-cultural comparability when conducting international research. The term "immigrant" carries vastly different political and historical connotations across countries. For example, in the United States, debates often center on undocumented migration and border security, whereas in many European nations, the focus is on cultural integration and the legacy of post-colonial migration. Researchers must carefully tailor survey instruments to account for these contextual differences, often by specifying the type of immigrant being referenced (e.g., "immigrants from Muslim countries," "highly skilled workers"). Failure to specify the target group can lead to ambiguous results, as respondents may be reacting to a generalized, often stereotyped, image rather than a specific demographic reality, thereby limiting the utility of comparative attitude studies.

## Policy Implications and Future Research Directions

The comprehensive understanding of attitudes toward immigration holds profound implications for policy design aimed at fostering social cohesion and effective integration. Since attitudes are

driven more by perceived cultural and symbolic threats than by objective economic reality, policies should focus heavily on reducing intergroup anxiety and promoting inclusive national identities. This involves moving beyond economic arguments for immigration (e.g., focusing solely on GDP growth) and instead emphasizing the shared values and civic contributions of migrants. Policy interventions should strategically utilize the Contact Hypothesis, creating structured, equal-status opportunities for interaction, such as mandatory community service projects or integrated public schooling, rather than relying on passive proximity.

Policy makers must also recognize the influence of political rhetoric and media framing. Strategies to counter negative attitudes should include proactive communication campaigns that challenge misinformation, humanize immigrants, and provide accurate data on their economic and social contributions. Furthermore, addressing the underlying psychological mechanisms, such as RWA and SDO, requires policies that promote social equality and reduce feelings of systemic vulnerability among the native population. When citizens feel secure in their economic standing and their national identity is defined inclusively, the psychological fertile ground for anti-immigrant sentiment diminishes considerably. Effective integration policies, therefore, are not merely about immigrants adjusting to the host country, but about the host society adapting institutionally and psychologically to diversity.

Future research in this domain must focus on longitudinal studies to better understand the stability and evolution of attitudes over time, particularly in response to major sociopolitical shocks (e.g., refugee crises, economic recessions, or terrorist attacks). There is also a growing need to investigate the role of digital communication and social media algorithms in shaping and polarizing attitudes, as these platforms often create echo chambers that amplify extreme views and limit exposure to counter-attitudinal information. Finally, research should continue to explore interventions that effectively bridge the gap between implicit and explicit attitudes, developing innovative strategies that reduce automatic biases and promote deliberate, reasoned acceptance of diversity. Understanding the dynamics of immigration attitudes is not just an academic exercise; it is essential for safeguarding democratic values and ensuring social stability in the face of continuous global mobility.