

Social Rights for Foreigners: Attitudes & Impacts

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Introduction: Defining Social Rights and Attitudinal Complexity

The study of attitudes towards granting social rights to foreigners represents a critical intersection within political psychology, sociology, and migration studies. Social rights encompass the entitlements necessary for full participation in society and include access to public services such as healthcare, education, housing subsidies, and unemployment benefits. The extension of these rights to non-citizens, particularly those residing legally or irregularly, is a highly contested issue globally, reflecting fundamental tensions between national solidarity, humanitarian principles, and perceived resource scarcity. Analyzing public attitudes is crucial because these sentiments often dictate the political feasibility and ultimate success of integration policies, influencing the overall social climate and the lived experiences of immigrant populations within host societies. These attitudes are not monolithic; they vary significantly based on the type of right considered, the perceived deservingness of the recipient group, and the socio-economic context of the host nation, necessitating a nuanced approach to their systematic investigation.

Historically, the welfare state was conceptualized primarily as a mechanism of national solidarity, designed to protect citizens against market risks and ensure a basic standard of living, thereby linking access to rights intrinsically with national membership. However, global migration trends, coupled with international human rights frameworks, have challenged this nation-centric model, forcing states to grapple with questions of universal provision versus selective access. Public attitudes often reflect this tension, oscillating between a moral commitment to human dignity, which suggests universal access to basic necessities, and a pragmatic concern regarding fiscal sustainability and the potential for welfare magnet effects, which drives restrictionist sentiment. Understanding this dynamic requires examining how psychological processes, such as in-group favoritism and threat perception, interact with structural factors, including economic inequality and institutional policy settings, to shape individual support or opposition to immigrant access to social provisions.

The complexity of these attitudes stems from the fact that they are often rooted deeply in affective responses rather than purely rational cost-benefit analyses. Research indicates that attitudes towards social rights for foreigners are often more negative than attitudes toward immigrants generally, suggesting that the perceived economic burden and the challenge to established notions of national belonging are particularly potent drivers of opposition. Furthermore, these attitudes are highly susceptible to political rhetoric and media framing, which frequently link immigration to issues of fiscal strain, cultural erosion, or security threats. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis must move beyond simple measures of support or opposition, delving into the underlying motivations--be they humanitarian, economic, or rooted in social identity--that collectively determine the contours of public opinion regarding the inclusion of non-citizens into the host society's social safety net.

Psychological Determinants of Restrictionist Attitudes

A significant body of psychological research points to the centrality of threat perception in explaining restrictionist attitudes towards the social inclusion of foreigners. This perception is generally categorized into two distinct, yet often interrelated, forms: **realistic threat** and **symbolic threat**. Realistic threat concerns the fear that immigrants drain limited economic resources, such as jobs, public funds allocated for social services, and housing, thereby directly harming the material well-being of the native population. Individuals who perceive their own economic situation as precarious or who live in areas experiencing high levels of economic competition are typically more likely to oppose the extension of social rights, viewing it as a zero-sum game where resources granted to foreigners are resources taken away from citizens. This perception is often amplified during periods of economic downturn or high unemployment, suggesting that macro-economic conditions powerfully mediate individual psychological reactions.

In contrast, symbolic threat relates to the perceived danger that immigrants pose to the dominant culture, values, traditions, and national identity of the host society. This form of threat is less about material loss and more about the perceived erosion of the in-group's normative framework. Attitudes shaped by symbolic threat often manifest as opposition to rights based on the belief that foreigners have not adequately assimilated or do not share the reciprocal duties expected of citizens who benefit from the welfare state. For instance, opposition may be particularly strong against rights that are seen as central to national identity, such as language education or cultural subsidies, even if the financial costs are minimal. These attitudes are closely linked to measures of ethnocentrism, nationalism, and adherence to traditional societal values, indicating that the desire to maintain cultural homogeneity plays a decisive role in welfare restrictionism.

Furthermore, the concept of **perceived deservingness** acts as a powerful psychological filter through which individuals evaluate claims to social rights. This assessment is not objective but is heavily influenced by stereotypes and cognitive biases regarding the immigrant group's characteristics, including their perceived effort, control over their situation, and moral character. Foreigners who are perceived as being hardworking, skilled, and contributing economically, such as high-skilled labor migrants, are often viewed as more deserving of certain rights than those perceived as relying solely on state support, such as refugees or irregular migrants. This moral heuristic allows individuals to reconcile their egalitarian values with their restrictionist policy preferences by rationalizing exclusion based on perceived behavioral deficiencies or lack of contribution, thereby maintaining a sense of fairness within the perceived boundaries of the national community.

The Role of Social Identity and Intergroup Relations

Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) provide foundational

frameworks for understanding why attitudes towards social rights are so strongly differentiated along lines of national membership. These theories posit that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-esteem and identity from their membership in social groups, leading to a fundamental tendency toward **in-group favoritism** and out-group derogation. In the context of the welfare state, the national community serves as the primary in-group, and the welfare system itself is often viewed as a tangible benefit reserved for those who belong, reinforcing the boundary between citizens and non-citizens. This mechanism transforms the debate over resource allocation into a symbolic defense of national identity and exclusivity.

The psychological mechanism of social exclusion operates by defining the recipient group--foreigners--as outside the moral community entitled to state resources. When social rights are extended to non-citizens, it can be perceived by the native in-group as a dilution of their exclusive benefits and a challenge to the distinctiveness of their national identity. This boundary maintenance function explains why even individuals who might otherwise support generous welfare policies for citizens often adopt highly restrictive positions when the beneficiaries are migrants. The opposition is less about the abstract costs of welfare and more about maintaining the symbolic integrity and material exclusivity of the national collective, often viewing social rights as a marker of full societal membership that should be reserved for citizens.

Moreover, the quality and frequency of intergroup contact significantly modify these identity-based attitudes. According to the **Contact Hypothesis**, positive interactions between members of the host society and immigrant groups can reduce prejudice, decrease perceived threat, and increase empathy, potentially leading to greater support for immigrant social inclusion. However, negative or infrequent contact, or contact framed by competition, can solidify negative stereotypes and reinforce the perception of foreigners as an out-group undeserving of shared resources. Furthermore, the political salience of immigration, often heightened by populist rhetoric emphasizing the cultural divide, can activate these negative social identities, transforming general skepticism into concrete opposition to policy measures granting social rights.

Economic Anxiety and Perceived Resource Competition

Economic factors are arguably the most frequently cited drivers of opposition to welfare access for foreigners, rooted in the rational choice perspective that citizens seek to maximize their material self-interest. The perception of resource competition is multifaceted, encompassing concerns over tax burden, labor market effects, and the sustainability of public services. Public opinion often reflects a fear that immigrants, especially those with lower socioeconomic status or larger families, will disproportionately utilize public services while contributing insufficiently to the tax base, leading to a net fiscal drain on the host nation's resources. This concern is particularly acute in countries with generous welfare systems, where the perceived opportunity for "welfare shopping" by potential migrants is often politically emphasized, despite empirical evidence often suggesting

otherwise.

The intensity of economic opposition is often moderated by the perceived economic profile of the immigrant group. When migrants are viewed primarily as low-wage competitors in the labor market, native workers, particularly those in similar economic brackets, exhibit stronger restrictionist attitudes due to perceived realistic competition for jobs and wages. Conversely, if migrants are perceived as filling labor shortages and contributing to economic growth, attitudes may soften. However, even when economic contributions are acknowledged, opposition to social rights can persist if the native population believes that welfare provisions act as a disincentive for immigrants to integrate fully into the labor market, thereby violating the norm of reciprocity inherent in welfare state contract theory, which demands contribution in exchange for benefits.

It is crucial to differentiate between actual economic impact and perceived economic threat. Psychological studies consistently show that **perceived threat**, which is often magnified by political discourse and media reporting, is a far stronger predictor of restrictionist attitudes than objective economic indicators such as local unemployment rates or actual fiscal costs. Political narratives often strategically leverage economic anxieties, framing social rights for foreigners not merely as a cost, but as an unfair transfer of wealth from deserving citizens to undeserving non-citizens. This framing transforms a technical policy debate into a moral and identity-based conflict over the legitimate distribution of national resources, making rational policy dialogue extremely difficult.

Political Ideology, Populism, and Policy Preferences

Political ideology serves as a fundamental organizing principle for attitudes towards social rights, with the left-right spectrum consistently predicting individual policy preferences. Individuals identifying with the political left generally espouse universalistic principles, emphasizing solidarity, equality, and human rights, which translates into greater support for inclusive social policies extending rights to all residents, regardless of citizenship status. Conversely, individuals on the political right tend to prioritize **national sovereignty**, fiscal conservatism, and the principle of restricted access, viewing the welfare state as a limited resource primarily reserved for citizens who have demonstrated loyalty and contribution to the nation-state. This ideological divide is often amplified in policy debates regarding welfare access.

The rise of **populist political movements** has significantly exacerbated the polarization of attitudes regarding immigrant social rights. Populist rhetoric often employs a stark division between a virtuous, homogenous "people" (the in-group) and a corrupt, external "elite" or "other" (including foreigners). By framing social rights for immigrants as a betrayal of the national interest orchestrated by liberal elites, populist leaders effectively mobilize restrictionist sentiment rooted in identity and economic anxiety. This rhetoric often relies on highly emotive language and simplified narratives that bypass complex policy analysis, directly appealing to underlying feelings of

resentment and perceived unfairness regarding resource distribution, thereby heightening hostility toward inclusionary policies.

Furthermore, the specific policy framework of the host country mediates the ideological expression of these attitudes. In countries with highly corporatist or residual welfare regimes, where access is already heavily conditional, restrictionist attitudes may focus on tightening existing eligibility requirements. In contrast, in universalistic welfare states, where the principle of inclusion is stronger, opposition may center on preventing the perceived erosion of the universal standard through the inclusion of non-contributing populations. Political parties, through their platforms and coalition strategies, play a crucial role in institutionalizing and legitimizing certain attitudes, transforming latent public opinion into actionable policy constraints that dictate the feasibility of integration measures.

Policy Specificity: Differential Attitudes Across Welfare Domains

Attitudes towards social rights are rarely uniform across all domains; they exhibit significant variation depending on the specific type of benefit being discussed. Research consistently shows that public support is generally higher for rights related to basic human necessities and investment in human capital, such as emergency healthcare and primary education for children, even if the beneficiaries are non-citizens. These rights are often perceived through a **humanitarian lens**, aligning with universal moral obligations and the principle that all residents should have access to fundamental services, particularly those concerning child welfare or immediate life safety. The perception of control is critical here: individuals are seen as less responsible for needing emergency healthcare or basic education, thus increasing their perceived deservingness.

In sharp contrast, attitudes are significantly more restrictive regarding contributory or discretionary benefits, such as unemployment insurance, housing subsidies, or long-term social assistance. These benefits are often viewed as entitlements earned through long-term labor market participation and tax contribution, reinforcing the concept of **reciprocity** central to the national welfare contract. Opposition to extending these specific rights is fueled by the fear of resource depletion and the belief that non-citizens might be seeking to exploit the system without having fulfilled the necessary duties of contribution. This differentiation highlights the public's implicit hierarchy of rights, where non-contributory, universal rights are more acceptable than contribution-based, selective rights for non-citizens.

The distinction between different types of migrants also interacts powerfully with policy specificity. For example, attitudes towards granting rights to refugees or asylum seekers are often complex; while humanitarian considerations may drive support for immediate basic needs like shelter and medical care, concerns about fiscal costs and potential long-term settlement often lead to strong opposition regarding long-term integration support or unemployment benefits. Conversely, highly-

skilled economic migrants are generally viewed as deserving of rights linked to employment, such as occupational insurance, but may still face opposition regarding access to general social assistance if their stay is perceived as temporary or conditional, demonstrating that the perceived function and permanence of the migrant group heavily influence attitudinal support.

The Influence of Media Framing and Policy Communication

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes towards social rights for foreigners by determining which aspects of the issue are highlighted, how different groups are represented, and what narratives dominate the public discourse. **Negative framing**, which emphasizes immigrants primarily as a burden, a threat, or a drain on resources, significantly reinforces restrictionist attitudes. Such narratives often employ episodic framing, focusing on individual cases of alleged welfare abuse or fraud, rather than thematic framing, which would discuss the structural contributions of migrants or the systemic costs of exclusion. This selective presentation of information validates existing anxieties and hardens opposition to inclusionary policies.

Political communication strategies frequently capitalize on this media environment, utilizing specific linguistic devices to mobilize support for restrictive policies. For instance, the use of terms like "welfare tourism," "illegal access," or "uncontrolled borders" activates feelings of realistic threat and moral outrage, linking the extension of social rights directly to issues of national security and fiscal irresponsibility. Conversely, **humanitarian framing**, which emphasizes the moral obligation to protect vulnerable populations, is used by advocates of inclusion to counter restrictionist arguments, often relying on evocative imagery and personal narratives to foster empathy and solidarity among the audience.

The effectiveness of policy communication is also dependent on the perceived credibility of the source. When policy details regarding immigrant contributions or costs are presented by trusted, non-partisan sources, such as academic studies or national statistical offices, they can sometimes mitigate the effects of highly emotive political framing. However, in increasingly polarized information environments, citizens often engage in selective exposure and confirmation bias, choosing information that confirms their existing ideological predispositions. This makes it exceptionally challenging for factual, evidence-based communication to significantly alter deeply entrenched attitudes rooted in social identity or symbolic threat perception, necessitating strategies that appeal to shared values rather than just statistics.

Conclusion: Implications for Democratic Inclusion and Social Cohesion

Attitudes towards social rights for foreigners reflect deep-seated tensions within modern democratic societies regarding the boundaries of belonging, the principles of justice, and the sustainability of the welfare state. The complex interplay between psychological drivers, structural

factors, and political mobilization results in a highly varied and often polarized landscape of public opinion. Understanding these attitudes is not merely an academic exercise; it has profound implications for the political stability and social cohesion of multicultural societies, directly impacting the integration outcomes and overall well-being of non-citizen residents who rely on these provisions for their fundamental security and successful participation in host nations.

Moving forward, policy interventions aimed at fostering greater inclusion must address not only the factual economic concerns but also the underlying psychological drivers of restrictionism. Strategies should focus on enhancing positive intergroup contact, promoting narratives of shared contribution and interdependence, and ensuring transparent communication regarding the fiscal realities of migration and welfare provision. Furthermore, the design of social policies must carefully balance the need for fiscal prudence with the moral imperative of human rights, perhaps by prioritizing universal access to fundamental services while linking other benefits more clearly to residency duration, contribution, or specific integration milestones, thereby addressing the perceived fairness gap and the concerns over **welfare reciprocity**.

Ultimately, the trajectory of attitudes toward social rights for foreigners will determine the future shape of the welfare state--whether it evolves towards a more cosmopolitan model based on universal residency rights and human dignity, or retreats into a more exclusive, nation-centric framework defined by restrictive citizenship boundaries. Continued research must focus on longitudinal studies tracking the effects of policy changes on public attitudes, the role of digital media in attitude formation, and cross-national comparisons to identify institutional designs that successfully mitigate friction and maximize social cohesion while sustaining public support for inclusive policies in an era of increasing global mobility.