

Social Identities and Political Participation of Immigrants and their Descendants in Europe

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Abstract

Public engagement, participation and trust are key tenets of a healthy democracy, with members of society feeling they have power to influence the political decision making through democratic processes. As a result of migration, many European countries have experienced an increase in social and cultural heterogeneity; feelings of belonging and willingness to engage politically are therefore particularly important when understanding the factors which drive social cohesion and create robust democratic systems. We study migrants and their descendants to better understand wider trends and patterns in their cultural, social and political identities, and political participation in European societies; determine factors that promote or hinder migrant inclusion, social integration and cohesion, and develop policies to support heterogeneous population groups in our societies. We use data from the European Social Survey (ESS) to explore feelings of trust in political bodies and processes, and political engagement through formal and informal participation, comparing natives, immigrants (1G) and their descendants (2G). Results suggest that immigrants are more satisfied with democracy than the native population and express higher trust in a country's parliament. However, immigrants' higher satisfaction with democracy and trust in government do not translate into their voting behaviour or informal political engagement. These findings suggest some degree of disenfranchisement among migrants which may be due to personal perceptions of their ability or right to participate, or due to structural barriers which inhibit participation for some migrant groups.

Keywords: Immigration, Europe, political engagement, political trust, democracy

Background

In recent decades, European countries have experienced increased immigration streams (Castles and Miller, 2009). While large-scale migration to Northern and Western European countries dates back to the decades directly following WWII, Southern European countries only became an immigration destination region at the turn of the century (González-Ferrer et al., 2017; Kulu et al. 2017). In contrast, Eastern European countries experienced large emigration streams after the fall of Communism and in the following decade (Raymer et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2012). Recently, some Eastern European countries have become immigration destinations, attracting migrants from further east and other parts of the world. This so-called 'migration transition' from emigration to immigration is a response not only to labour market needs, increased wages and living standards, but also due to the reception of war refugees (Okolski, 2012).

The Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 also prompted the mass movement of people within Europe as refugees fled Ukraine (Kulu et al., 2023). This displacement of Ukrainians has resulted in refugees dispersed across Europe, with most concentrated in neighbouring countries. As of mid-2025, the UN estimates that Poland and Germany have received the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, with over a million individuals recorded in each country (UNHCR, 2025). There has also been an increase in migration from the rest of the world to Europe, with conflict and political instability important drivers of migration to Europe in recent years, with war and violence in countries such as Syria and Afghanistan resulting in increased migration into the EU.

Much migration research has investigated immigrant and ethnic minority economic and social integration in Europe inspired by the notions of assimilation and segmented assimilation – the debate between the ideas of convergence and divergence (Alba and Nee, 2003; Portes et al., 2009). In this report, we focus on attitudes and perceptions among immigrants and their descendants, as well as behaviours related to social belonging and political participation using data from the European Social Survey.

Data

This study uses data from the European Social Survey (ESS). Established in 2001, the ESS is a cross-national survey covering over thirty nations across Europe. For the purpose of this research, we focus on the fifteen countries from across Europe which have participated in every round of the survey since it began. These countries represent nations from across European regions: Northern Europe (Sweden, Norway, Finland, UK and Ireland), Western Europe (Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, France and Switzerland), Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Slovenia), and Southern Europe (Spain and Portugal). We also analyse the largest population subgroups: the native population (native-born with two native-born parents), immigrants ('1G' includes both individuals who arrived as adults (1G) and those who arrived as children (1.5G)) and their descendants ('2G' includes both individuals with two migrant parents (2G) and those with one migrant parent (2.5G)). We also disaggregate migrants based upon time since arrival, comparing those who arrived within 10 years to those who have lived in the country for more than 10 years.

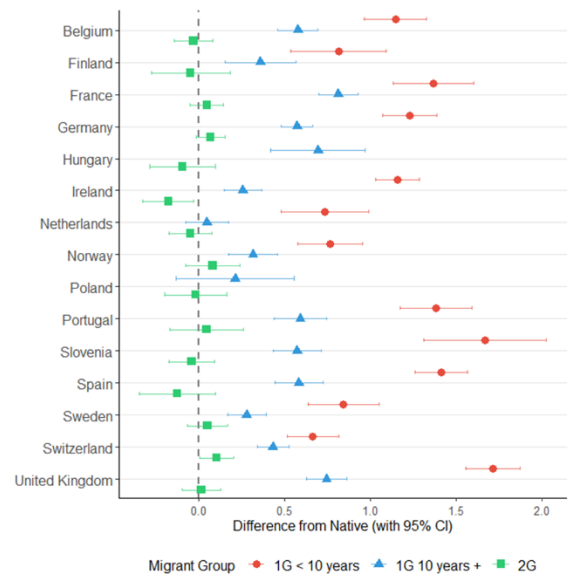
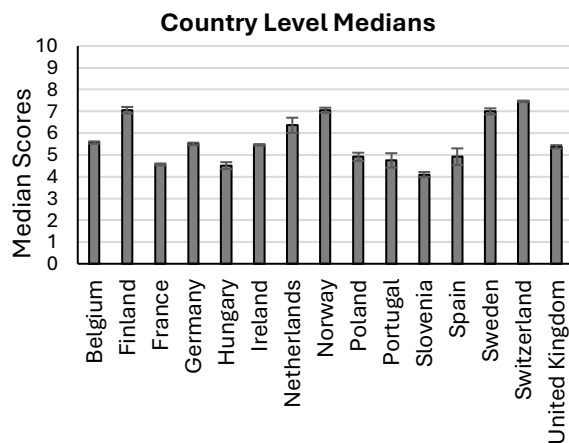
Methods

In order to explore how identity and political participation vary between migrant groups and between countries, we utilise a range of statistical methods. We use descriptive statistics to examine the distribution of responses by each migrant group. Given the nature of a response variable, we either calculate the median of the variable or proportions. We adjust both median and proportions to individual age and wave. We use quantile regression and binary logistic regression, accordingly. The descriptive statistics are thus adjusted to possible age differences across migrant groups and countries and survey waves. We also calculate adjusted means for ordinal variables using linear regression; the results did not differ from those obtained using quantile regression. As the median trust, satisfaction, and probability of political participation varies considerably by country, we standardise differences between generations, focusing on the difference in average scores between migrants and descendants, and natives.

Selected Results

In this section, we present selected results from our analysis, focusing on individuals' satisfaction with their country's democracy and electoral participation. Figure 1 shows differences in feelings of satisfaction in democracy, first, between countries, and then by migrant group. We can see that satisfaction varies substantially by country, with highest levels of satisfaction in Nordic countries, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and lowest in Slovenia and Hungary. When looking at differences by migrant group, we see a consistent pattern across most countries, with highest levels of satisfaction among 1G, with more recently arrived migrants reporting higher levels of satisfaction compared to more established migrants. We find no differences between 2G and natives (represented by the dotted line) in any country. In the UK, we see the largest differences between migrant groups, with newly arrived migrants having an average satisfaction score of over 1.5 points higher than natives and descendants.

Figure 1: Satisfaction in Country's Democracy

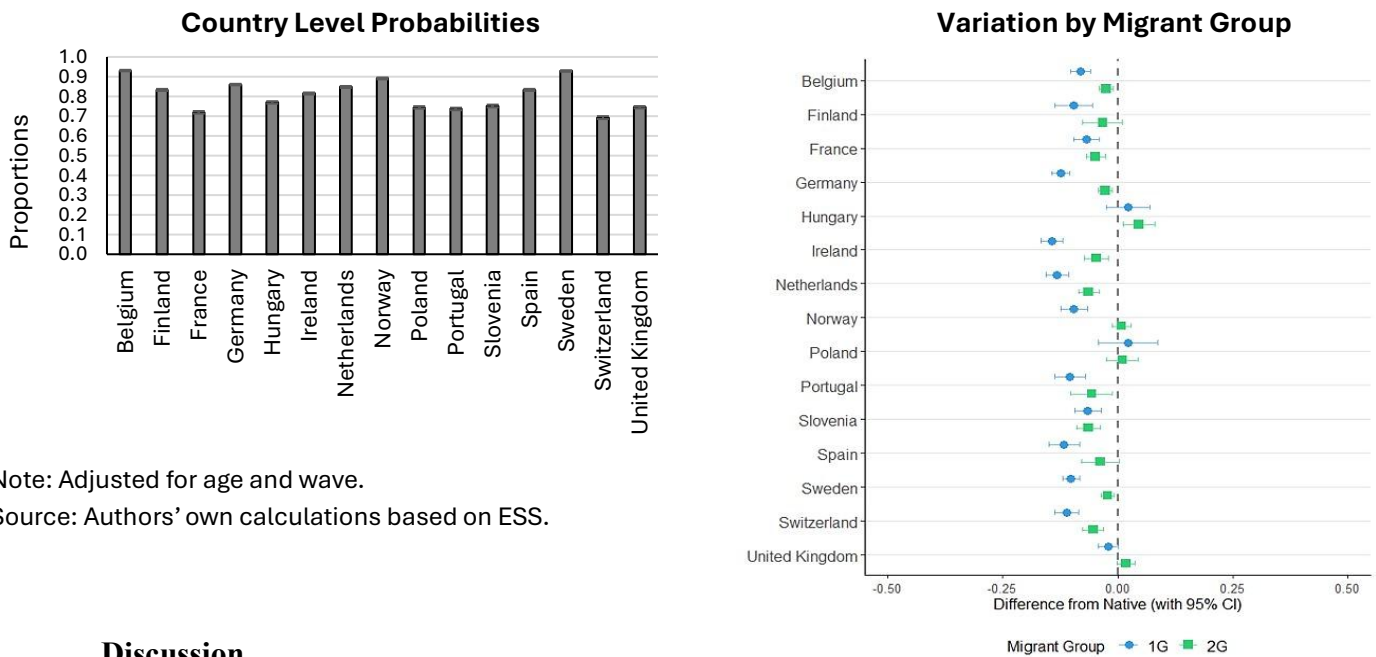


Note: Adjusted for age and wave.

Source: Authors' own calculations based on ESS.

Figure 2 shows variation in the likelihood of voting in the country's last national election by migrant group. In this analysis, we limit our sample to only those who are citizens of their country and are eligible to vote. When looking at differences between migrants and natives, we can see that in most countries, migrants were less likely to vote compared to natives. The only exceptions to this are in Hungary and Poland where we find no difference between migrants and natives. The picture for descendants is more mixed. In countries such as the UK, Spain, Norway and Poland, descendants were as likely to vote as natives but in France, Germany, Switzerland in Slovenia, descendants were less likely to vote than natives. Hungary is the only country where descendants were more likely to vote compared to natives.

Figure 2: Probability of Voting at Last National Election



Note: Adjusted for age and wave.

Source: Authors' own calculations based on ESS.

Discussion

Overall, we find that migrants appear to be more satisfied and trustful in political institutions and processes compared to natives and migrants' descendants. However, we do find differences between migrants who arrived more recently to those who have lived in their country for over a decade. Over time and across generations, levels of trust and satisfaction appear to decline and become more similar to natives. Finally, despite this higher level of trust and satisfaction, this does not translate into participation, with migrants less likely to vote compared to natives. Our results support findings of previous research which also found migrants to be more trustful of political bodies compared to natives (Belabas & Migchelbrink, 2025; Röder & Mühlau, 2012). This has been attributed to the dual frame of reference effect which describes the process whereby low expectations of governments formed in their country of origin results in higher feelings of trust in the government in the host country as they exceed these low expectations, however this effect has been found to decrease over time and across generations (Quaranta, 2025). This can also be understood as a selection effect whereby migrants decide to leave their country due to dissatisfaction or a lack of opportunities and select their destination country based upon their perception that it will be better. This may change over time as a result of their lived experiences following migration. Variation in voting behaviour could be due to a variety of reasons including difficulties navigating a new system or perceptions that they are less knowledgeable about national issues compared to others. This is an area which would greatly benefit from future research. While we only provide selected results in this paper, we also explore other aspects of feelings of belonging and political engagement including informal methods of participation (e.g. attending protests, signing petitions), exploring feelings of trust and comparing levels of trust in national and supranational (EU) institutions. We also aim to expand our analysis to focus on specific migrant groups by country of origin in order to more fully understand how trust, satisfaction and political participation varies by migrant background.

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